

ABORIGINES AND FIRE IN THE LOWER HUNTER REGION

BY

BORIS SOKOLOFF

PART II: IMPORTANCE OF FIRE (continued)

Manufacture of Implements:

Besides the use of fire in the construction of their canoes and weapons, the aborigines of the lower Hunter region used it in the fashioning of the thread or cord from the fibrous bark of the kurrajong (*Hibiscus heterophyllus*), native hemp (*Commersonia fraseri*) or cabbage tree (*Livistona australis*) (see H.N.H. Vol.7, p.231):

The women twisted this fibre to the required thickness and length by rolling it on the front part of the thigh with the hands. Where the line was rolled the skin of the operative was hardened by the application of hot ashes, and in time became calloused, smooth, and as hard as dried leather.
(Scott, p.18)

It is possible that heat was used in the shaping of fish hooks from suitable shells: rock oyster (*Crassostrea commercialis*), turban (*Ninella torquata*), earshell (*Notohaliotis ruber*), and mud oyster (*Ostrea sinuata*). Only Threlkeld gives an idea of the method:

...their own native ones being made of a shell ground down on a stone until it became the shape they wished...
(p.54)

This process may have included the weakening of the centre of the shell blank, to facilitate the piercing of the centre, and grinding to the required shape, by the application of the heated ends of smouldering sticks. (See Roth, pp.324-5.)

Signalling:

From time to time the tribes desired to communicate with each other. This was accomplished by sending a messenger who announced his approach by the aid of his fire-brand:

...if they wish to assemble together, it is only to despatch a messenger, who sets fire to the grass on his route, by which means the tribes know, when, and where to congregate.
(Threlkeld, p.133)

Depending on the weather conditions and the state of the vegetation, this may have had an adverse effect on the vegetation cover.

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Such a practice may have contributed to uncontrolled bushfires. Another method was more elaborate and less haphazard:

The signals were made in a simple fashion. A fire was lighted at a prominent coign of vantage, probably a recognized spot for the purpose of one looked to regularly by members of the tribe far afield. When the blaze was glowing merrily green branches would be piled on the flames which would soon disappear in a cloud of smoke. Across the billowing cloud of blackish-grey smoke another heavy leafy branch would be interposed at definite intervals, so that there ascended a series of eddying puffs, visible at great distances.

(Scott, p.34)

Initiation:

As in the corroboree (see Part I, H.N.H. Vol.10), fire played a part in the initiation ceremony. However, it was more significant than as a source of illumination—there was symbolic meaning in the activities.

Holding the lads firmly, the men ... began a mad, wild dance about the fire, working themselves up to a pitch of terrific excitement until they suddenly sprang on the blazing coals and began to stamp them out ... until the fire was completely obliterated.

(Scott, pp.26-27)

The old men who took the boy away bring him back at a run towards the fire, the other men following, clattering their boomerangs, but not speaking or shouting. The men form a ring around the fire.... The fire has by this time burned down to red coals, and the men, including the novice, extinguish them by jumping on them with their feet.

(Boydell in Bennett, p.15)

In the centre of this circle there was a fire of moderate dimensions and attended by one of the men. Shortly there was a stir when a detachment entered the circle, and with dancing, yelling and gesticulating, and brandishing of arms at intervals, all made a rush at the fire, yelling, and jumping on it until extinguished, when they retired.

(McKinley in Bennett, p.19)

Enright witnessed an additional use of fire in the initiation process:

At the conclusion of their ablutions they singe the hair off the bodies of the novices, and then cover the whole of the

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party from head to foot with pipeclay before resuming their journey to the women's camp.

(Enright, 1899, p.122)

These were part of the ordeal the boys had to undergo as part of their initiation to manhood, as well as an act of purification, which enabled the boys to rejoin the normal tribal life, but with increased status. (See H.N.H., Vol.8, pp.199-203 and 260-265 for fuller accounts.)

Burial:

Fire, too, was employed in the disposal of deceased natives in the following procedure:

When one dies a natural death, the corpse shrouded in pieces of bark, is laid on the ground and four small fires are lighted at the head and feet and on either side: a grave is scratched up in the ground and another fire lighted in the hole, which is allowed to burn out; the body is then laid upon the ashes, with any little property which belonged to him - his club, his spear, his clothes - and the earth is heaped over all. But if the person fell in war, or his blood is shed by murder or chance-medley, his body is not buried, but burnt to dust.

(London Missionary Society Deputation: Hunter's River, 1824, in Threlkeld, p.339)

On my return from one of these excursions [of ministering], I was informed that the natives had burned [a woman].... I went about two miles in the bush to ascertain the fact. The column of smoke ascending from the rem[e]nant of the pile guided us to the spot, where under two immense trees, amidst the smoking embers, the Skeleton of the woman presented a disgusting spectacle...

(Threlkeld, p.99)

Apparently these practices may have been confined to the Awabakal as there is no record of such an occurrence among the Worimi.

Mourning:

It was a common custom among the Worimi (see H.N.H. Vol.9, p.90) and Awabakal for grief to involve the use of fire:

When any death occurs, the female relatives of the deceased not only put on mourning [pipeclay]... but they further testify their concern, by burning with a firebrand the front of the thigh, tying over the wound a piece of soft tea-tree bark.... There are few women without scars, arising out of this practice....

(Dawson, p.316)

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Many of the women have a scar on the out side of their thigh halfway between the knee and hip, it is about three inches long and is occasioned by the application of a fire brand at several times on the death of a brother or other relation.
(Threlkeld, p.86)

Fishing:

One method of catching fish involved the use of fire:

Spearing fish by torchlight was a device often practised... and in Port Stephens, when the tribes were numerous, I have seen a number of canoes in which the gins hold the flaming firesticks while they darted their muttocks (or three or four pointed fish spear) at the fish attracted to the light (such as mullet, whiting, bream and flatheads).
(Palmer, p.95)

...(though less common) by going off in their canoes along still water, by night, and holding a lighted torch of bark or wood over the surface; on the fish coming up, attracted by the light, they strike it with either spear or waddie.
(Harris, p.88)

Hunting:

As well as an aid in fishing, the firebrand was used as a means of securing food when hunting on land.

...when the sun is fully up, the whole tribe prepares for the hunt by taking their spears, throwing sticks, hatchets, and fire-brands, proceeding to the hills...
(Threlkeld, p.46)

The firebrand was used to set fire to the vegetation, as noted by Dawson on one of his excursions:

...on ascending a gentle acclivity we saw the grass had been burnt before us as far as the eye could reach, and so recently that the dead trees and logs of wood, which always lie scattered in abundance, were still smoking...

it sometimes happens that the grass is consumed for many miles when the weather is very dry, and the wind favours the fire.... In a few minutes he (Bill) discovered numerous footsteps of men and children on the burnt ground. They ... showed that a pretty large number of natives had passed over the ground...
(pp.118-9)

This served a number of purposes. The natives followed up soon after the fire to take advantage of the toll taken of the smaller wildlife by the flames and smoke from which they were unable to

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escape. Alternatively, the fire may have flushed larger animals, like kangaroos, into the path of the waiting marksmen. This would not have been as reliable as employing a battue:

They form themselves in a line, and move forward, shouting and driving the kangaroos before them: the two extremes of the line are gradually drawn in, until the kangaroos find themselves enclosed in a nook, with the bend of a river, or some other obstruction in front of them. The natives then closing upon them, the slaughter commences; the greater part, if not the whole of their game is secured.

(Dawson, p.119. See also Ebsworth, Threlkeld, pp.46, 54, 90, 190-1.)

One of the ceremonies of initiation involved setting fire to the country, hunting the kangaroo and feasting only on the shank bone.

Pasture Improvement:

Another way that fire assisted in securing food was in the improvement of pasture as a result of firing the vegetation:

We descended into a small valley at the foot of the hills, where there was a large flock of kangaroos feeding upon the young and tender grass which had sprung up after the fires of the natives.

(Dawson, p.214)

We returned home by the valley to the south-east, in which were some very rich undulations between two high ranges, watered by a small river that ran through its centre. We saw here abundant traces of the wild natives: the smoke from their fires and from the grass which was burning in various directions amongst the hills, frequently ascended in thick clouds at a distance on all sides of us.

Immense quantities of kangaroos were feeding on the young grass...

(Dawson, Nov. 21, 1826, p.218)

References and Further Reading: see Part III, H.N.H., November, 1978.

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APPENDIX:

Readers are referred to the following books for excellent pictorial depiction of the aborigines, in similar environments as in the Hunter region, making use of fire:

Angas, George Fife. *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, London, 1847. (facsimile: Adelaide, 1969)

Frontispiece: Native Corroborry.

Brough Smyth, R. *The Aborigines of Victoria, with notes relating to the habits of the Natives of other Parts of Australia and Tasmania*. Melbourne, 1876. (facsimile: 1972)

Collins, David. *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*. London, 1789-1802. (facsimile: Adelaide, 1971)

Vol. I. Yoo-long Frah-ba-diang No.2 [camp fire]
Burning a Corpse (facing p.608).

Vol. 2 A Night Scene (frontispiece) [camp fire, singing,
implements and weapons]

Camp fire scene (p. x) [camp fire, dancing, night
fishing]

Natives sheltering in storm (shield, water container)

Dutton, Geoffrey. *White on Black: The Australian Aborigine Portrayed in Art*. Melbourne, 1974.

Colour:

Plate I: Thomas Watling: A group on the North Shore of Port Jackson [cooking fish]

II: " " A Native Going to Fish with a Torch and Flambeaux [while his wife tends the camp fire]

XIII: S.T. Gill: Native Corroboree at Night.

Black and White:

Plate 2: Thomas Watling: Native man standing in an attitude... [camp fire and fish]

" 12 & 13: Philip Gidley King: Native family of New South Wales [fire brand]

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- Plate 15: Philip Gidley King: Natives cooking fish
 " 16: Capt. J. Wallis: Corroboree at Newcastle.
 " 21: R. Browne: Natives fishing in a bark canoe [hearth in canoe]
 " 30: J. Lycett: A family of Aborigines taking shelter during a storm [camp fire]
 " 31: " Fishing by Torchlight.
 " 46: W.H. Fernyhough: Corroboree.
 " 58: W.F.E. Liardet: Corroboree on Emerald Hill, 1840.
 " 120: G.B. Nerli: Corroboree.

Edwards, Robert. *Aboriginal Bark Canoes*. Adelaide, 1972.

Aborigines at Port Jackson around campfire (p.7).

Tied bark canoes in use at Port Jackson [hearth in canoe] (p.8).

Flower, Cedric. *The Antipodes Observed: Prints and Print Makers of Australia, 1788-1850*. South Melbourne, 1975.

Illus. 6 & 7: Sydney [shows natives in canoe with hearth] engraving after C.A. Leseur from "Voyage de decouvertes aus Terres Australes."

Illus. 13: A Family of New South Wales by William Blake from John Hunter's *Historical Journal*, 1793. [firebrand carried by native boy]

Illus. 20: Smoking out the Opossum from *Field Sports of the Native Inhabitants of New South Wales* by J.H. Clark, London, 1813. [clubbing possums as forced out by smoke]

Illus. 23: Repose from *Field Sports...* by J.H. Clark. [camp fires of encampment]

Illus. 29: Newcastle, in New South Wales with a Distant View of Point Stephen, by I.R. Brown, 1812. [campfires in foreground and distance]

Plate 9: Habitations Terre de Diemen by Jules Ferrario from *Le Costume ancien et moderne...* after Nicholas Petit, 1812 [Tasmanian natives around campfire]

Illus. 43: Cabanes from *Le Costumes ancien et moderne...* by J. Ferrario (1822) after Nicholas Petit and C.A. Leseur [campfire] [also dwellings, spears, shield]

Illus. 45: Vue ... de Sydney by Duparc after C.A. Leseur in *Voyage de decourtes aux Terres Australes*, 1807. [starting a campfire]

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Plate 18: A View of Sydney Cove, New South Wales, by Edward Dayes, 1804. [campfire, cooking fish, dwelling]

Illus. 57: Sydney from Parramatta Road by John Carmichael from *Select Views of Sydney, New South Wales*, 1829. [natives around camp fire, game brought to it]

Plate 28: Panoramic View of King George Sound by Lt Robert Dale, 1834 [campfires, firebrand]

Plate 30: Capt. Cook's Tablet at Cape Solander, Botany Bay by John Lhotsky [campfire at base of cliffs]

Illus. 77: The Patti Dance by G.F. Angas from *South Australia Illustrated*, 1847 [corroboree]

Gill, S.T., *The Australian Sketch-book*, Melbourne, 1864. (facsimile: 1974)

Plate 3: Attack on Store Dray

Plate 10: Bushman's Hut [N.B. natives assisting settler]

Plate 14: Corroboree

Gleeson, James, *Colonial Painters 1788-1880*. Dee Why West, 1976.

Plate 5: Philip King: Natives Cooking Fish.

Plate 7: Philip King: Native Family of New South Wales.

Plate 15: James Wallis: Corroboree at Newcastle, 1817 [detail and notes: see p.90]

Hackforth-Jones, Jocelyn. *The Convict Artists*, Melbourne, 1977.

Illus. 4: Richard Read, 1820. View of Sydney Cove. [natives in canoes]

Illus. 19: W. Reston after John Eyre. Botany Bay Harbour, *Views of New South Wales*, 1813 [natives fishing; families]

Illus. 23: I.R. Browne: View of Hunters River Near Newcastle [numerous campfires/bushfires]

Illus. 25: I.R. Browne: Natives Fishing.

Illus. 26: W. Preston: Newcastle in New South Wales with a Distant View of Point Stephen [campfires/bushfires]

Plate 9: J. Lycett: Fishing by Torchlight, 1819. [also cooking their catch]

Plate 10: J. Lycett: Native Family [fish and firebrand]

Illus. 53: Thomas Watling: North-west View Taken from the Rocks Above Sydney, 1792-4. [building or repairing bark canoe]

Illus. 58: Charles Rodius: View from the Government Domain, 1833. [natives fishing]

Aborigines and Fire...Appendix (cont.)

- Hunter, John. *An Historical Journal (1787 to 1792)*. London 1793
(facsimile: Sydney, 1968)
Title page: Sheltering in gunyah [fireplace]
Plate 15: A Family of New South Wales [firebrand, fish hooks, fish spears, net]
- Lycett, J. *Views in Australia*. London, 1824 (facsimile: Melbourne)
Plate 10: Botany Bay [cooking fish]
Plate 21: The Sugarloaf Mountain [vegetation cover]
Plate 22: Lake Patterson, near Patterson's Plains, on the River Hunter [vegetation cover]
- O'Shaunessy, P. (et al) *The Restless Years*. Milton, 1970.
p.36 Augustus Earle: Australian Natives [campfire]
p.40 " " A Native Campfire of Australian Savages near Port Stephens.
- Phillip, Arthur. *The Voyage ... to Botany Bay*. London, 1789.
(facsimile: n.d.)
Plate 2: View of Botany Bay [native in canoe]
Plate 4: View in Port Jackson [hearths in canoes]
Plate 6: Natives of Botany Bay [excellent bark canoe, paddles, fishing line]
Plate 9: View of Hut in New South Wales [bark hut, fish spear, barbed spear, wommera]
Plate 13: Axe, Basket, and Sword [excellent detail]
- Threlkeld, L.E. *Australian Reminiscences and Papers*, ed. Neil Gunson, Canberra, 1975.
Vol. I: Corroboree at Newcastle by Capt James Wallis (p.40)
Vol. 2: 'A Native Family of New South Wales, sitting down on an English Settlers Farm' by Augustus Earle (p.289)
'A Native Camp of Australian Savages near Port Stevens New South Wales' (p.v).
- White, John. *Journal of a Voyage to N.S.W.* London, 1790
(facsimile: New York, 1971)
Frontispiece: Night fishing.
Fish hooks of New South Wales.
Implements.

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White, John. *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*. Sydney, 1962.

Frontispiece: Surgeon General White at Botany Bay [campfire]

