

# ABORIGINES AND FIRE IN THE LOWER HUNTER

BY

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## PART 1: IMPORTANCE OF FIRE FOR THE WORIMI AND AWABAKAL

The earliest observation of the aborigines' use of fire in the lower Hunter region was when Lieutenant James Cook sailed up the east coast of Australia in May, 1770:

"We saw several smooks a little way in the Country rise up from the flat land, by this I did suppose that there were Lagoons which afforded subsistence for the natives such as shell fish..." (p.314)

James Grant noted in 1801:

"The fires of the natives and many individuals of them were to be seen on the side of the harbour opposite to Ash Island." (p.155)

Also when thirty miles up the Williams River:

"We had hitherto seen none of the natives, but discovered places where they had been, by the marks of their fires." (p.161)

Bushfires are an ever present aspect of the Australian landscape, partly as a consequence of climatic factors and the kind of vegetation which has evolved over a long time period, and partly as a result of the influence of the long occupation by man. In the Raymond Terrace district Emily Caswell wrote:

"This country is very warm and we are subject to hot winds in summer ... and there are so many fires around us..."\*

It had been stated, with some astonishment, by the early settlers and visitors, that the vegetation cover in much of the Hunter Valley gave the appearance of an Englishman's park:

"The forest was everywhere open and grassy and free from brushwood...it was thinly studded with single trees, as if planted for ornament..." (Dawson, pp.15, 108)

\* See Robert Browne's "View of Hunters River near Newcastle" and "Newcastle... with a view of Point Stephens," engraved by W. Preston, in *Convict Artists* by J. Hackforth-Jones. These give visual evidence of camp fires or bush fires about 1813.

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## Aborigines and Fire...(cont.)

"The hills are everywhere clothed with wood, with constant verdure beneath it, unaccompanied by any Brush or Underwood..." (Ebsworth, p.51)

There seems to be a connection between the original inhabitants of the lower Hunter, the occurrence of bush and grass fires, and the open-forest vegetation cover. This article and the next will investigate these links, as well as establish the importance of fire in the life style of the aborigines in the lower Hunter region.\*

It has already been shown that the Worimi used fire for a multiplicity of purposes, including cooking, pasture management, warmth, manufacture of weapons and canoes, as well as in ceremonies. (See *H.N.H.* Vol.7, 113-5; 182-8; 231-6; Vol.8, 31-7; 198-203) The following extracts from early sources will extend our appreciation of the role of fire in the aborigines' subsistence economy.

### Cooking:

As with the Worimi, most food was cooked in the same fashion by the Awabakals before consumption. This food included marsupials, lizards, snakes, birds, fish, shellfish and plants.

"Cockles were the everyday dish on the lake. These are roasted and eaten, squeezing them first in the hand to press out the superfluous liquor contained within them, but are a touch morsel." (Threlkeld, p.55)

"These stems (of the Gigantic Lily) are roasted, and eaten by the Aborigines, who cut them for this purpose when they are about a foot and a half high, and thicker than a man's arm. The Blacks also roast the roots, and make them into a sort of cake, which they eat cold: they likewise roast and pound the seeds of *Zamia spiralis* [known as Burrawang, Macrozamia or Blackfellows Potatoes], and then place the mass for two or three weeks in water, to take out the bitter principle, after which it is eaten." (Backhouse, pp.380-1)

### Light:

This requirement was provided at night for individual and collective purposes: torches in the former case and camp fires in the latter.

\* The tribes concerned in the lower Hunter region were the Awabakal and Worimi, whose respective territory centred around Lake Macquarie and Port Stephens with the Hunter River a common boundary between. (See Map.)



## Aborigines and Fire...(cont.)

## (a) Torches

Besides the practical aspect of aiding vision at night the natives derived comfort from the light in warding off evil influences.

"The people attach a great regard to the efficacy of fire as a propitiatory offering; and when travelling, frequently place a firebrand in a tree adjacent to the spot selected for their resting-place during the night, with a view to excite the attention and propitiate the favour of Kon.\*" (Threlkeld, p.41)

"The aborigines are dreadfully afraid of being out after dark, and should they happen to be overtaken by the evening shades, they instantly furnish themselves with a fire stick which they carry in their hands during the remainder of their journey until they arrive at the encampment to which they may be going." (*ibid.*, p.62)

"I observed when the sun went down McGill collected some bark from the trees, with which he soon made a torch, and carried it lighted the remainder of the journey—which I have reason to suppose originated in their superstitious dread of travelling, or being alone, in the dark. The presence of fire seems to relieve them from some measure of this apprehension. It was the more striking in this case, because he must have known that at the period the sun set we had but two or three miles further to go, arriving there in fact, before the daylight had quite disappeared." (G.W. Walker, in Threlkeld, p.125)

"As we passed along, winding through the trees, a black would occasionally dart across our way with a lighted torch, imparting to the whole a dreary, wild and savage appearance; several fires surrounded by troops of natives lay along our path." (Ebsworth, p.38)

"On a sudden I was met by three or four men with flaming torches of dried bark.... I saw a host of them [natives] running towards me with lights of the same description." (Dawson, p.77)

## (b) Campfires

As well as torches, that were portable sources of light, campfires of various magnitudes provided illumination.

\* Kon: a spiritual being with multiple manifestations. See Threlkeld (ed. Gunnson) pp.62-3.

## Aborigines and Fire...(cont.)



A Family of New South Wales

(after the engraving by William Blake of Philip Gidley King's sketch)

Note the firebrand carried by the boy.

## Aborigines and Fire...(cont.)

"The Aboriginal Camp has a strange appearance during night; you are encompassed by twenty or thirty fires, each of which is attended by four or more natives, according to the number of the family. The blaze of some, reflecting upon the savages within their influences present a wild and terrific sight, whilst others, by the feeble light emitted by their dying embers practically illumine the surrounding objects..." (Ebsworth, p.58)

"The Native camp which surrounded our habitation gave a cheerfulness to the scene at night in consequence of the number of fires kept up by the families at the front of their respective sleeping places, which were erections of boughs of trees, or sheets of bark placed upright supported by stakes." [See R. Browne's "Native Camp at Newcastle"] (Threlkeld, p.45)

"They live in Camps made by sticking three sticks in the ground and covering them with bark for protection against rain and cold. The fire is made in front." (Caswell)

## Firebrand

Although the natives were very capable in the art of making fire by friction (see *H.N.H.* Vol.7, p.114), they preferred to carry a firebrand with which a camp fire could be made swiftly:

"She immediately scraped a few leaves and some scattered pieces of dry bark together and lighted a small fire, before which they both immediately squatted..." (Dawson, p.248)

or applied to a pipe:

"They broke their spears, gave specimens of a sham fight, and as the exalted personage approached their camp, they squatted down at their fires, without noticing in the least the messenger among them. One person told him to sit down, at a respectful distance, by a log, where he applied the firebrand which they mostly carry with them, and gravely lit his pipe, but spoke not a word." (Threlkeld, p.98)

Evan borrowing a flame was known:

"When we were looking out for a good spot, the blacks observed a light at some distance on the opposite shore [of the lower Myall River]. 'Black fellow fire...We get it fire-stick (fire-brand) to make fire when we nangry (sleep)'...as we approached the sandy bank, we saw a group of men, women and children squatting before a blazing fire, which had a curious effect by night." (Dawson, p.77)

## Aborigines and Fire...(cont.)

## Corroboree:

Illumination was a necessity for social gatherings held at night, involving dancing, music and singing known as corroboree. At these times the fires were the greatest so there would have been a large quantity of timber required for stoking through the long hours. The conduct of the Worimi has already been recounted (*H.N.H.*, Vol.8, pp.198-199). Below is the version for the Awabakal:

"Nine of the Aborigines formed a semicircle, before a large fire. It was dark night by the time they were ready.... striking their instruments together in time with their leader and bounding forward, whilst a melancholy cadence, over the fire.... Many of the women were employed during the performance in making up the fires to illuminate the scene. After some considerable discussion on the merits of the song, and accompaniment, the party broke up and retired to rest around their respective fires in the bush." (Threlkeld, pp.56-7)

There is an excellent painting of a corroboree which was held at Newcastle which is reproduced in *H.N.H.* Vol. 8, facing p.278, and the accompanying text on the following page of that article.

"...it appears that some one died some time since, afterwards appeared to a person in the woods, and taught him song and movement, directing that it should be made known to the tribes in the various districts. [Hence natives from Port Stephens were in attendance.] Nine of them formed a semicircle round a fire which threw sufficient light just to observe their movements. A stick was held in each hand, which they swang [sic] backwards and forwards, striking them as they swang [sic] them in time with one who stood beating two sticks to regulate their movements. They held their heads downwards in a melancholy posture, and the curling long black locks hanging over their faces and shoulders, smeared with red ochre, and striped with pipe-clay, gave a romantic appearance to the scene. Those who sat round the fire kept time with their hands about thrice a second, the women who had cloth, used that in their hands, and two were placed stooping at the last man of the semi-circle and striking the hollow of the knee in the same time with the others. Their words were monotonous, and they ended by turning sharply round on the heel, throwing up the arms and striking with a shout. The next movement was different, green boughs of trees were woven and held by each one, as a garland at arm length; one stood before them chanting [sic] a solemn strain. Their motion was raising the garland very slowly up level to their heads, and down as low as they could bowing their bodies at the time, and all joining in the

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This concluded with a shout, throwing up at the same time all the boughs, as they turned round on the heel. The women employed themselves in supplying the fire with sticks to keep up the blaze. They appear highly delighted with the exhibition." (Threlkeld, p.191)

It is interesting to note the romantic tone creeping into the descriptions, with the fire light and darkness lending themselves to such presentations.

"As soon as I signified to them that they might do what they pleased, they made an immense fire of dried wood.... They are perfectly naked, as they always are, and in this state they began to corrobbery, or dance." (Dawson, p.60)

"A corrobbery was repeated at night round a blazing fire. In these cases, their painted bodies, white teeth, shock heads of hair, their wild and savage appearance, with the reflection of the fire in the dark, would have formed a terrific spectacle to any person coming suddenly and unexpectedly upon them." (Dawson, p.63)

### Warmth:

The campfire was a source of warmth as well, especially in winter and during inclement weather.

"They sleep before their fires frequently, in a circle, with their heads upon each other's hips, without any covering in summer; but in winter, or rainy weather, they cut large sheets of bark, which they either sleep under, or set up in the shape of a half-cone, supported by sticks at different angles. (Dawson, p.68) [See Ebsworth, p.81]

"How pitiable was the condition of the aborigines when the equinoctial gales, or other stormy weather set in, for days then were they found sleeping around their fires in any bushy spot as a shelter from the storm, suffering hunger..." (Threlkeld, p.56)

On hunts, too, warmth was needed in periods of relative inactivity:

"We...proceeded to ascend another mountain; we halted, and in about a minute half-a-dozen fires were blazing around, and the party warming themselves, sides, backs, and fronts alternately; a few minutes elapsed, when the chase commenced again. One of the party carried a stick of fire; it is an universal practice." (Threlkeld, p.191)

## Aborigines and Fire...(cont.)

## Canoe Hearths:

Portable fires were carried in bark canoes, despite the apparent grave risk of imminent conflagration, for warmth and cooking the meal while engaged in fishing.

"In the centre, a hearth is made of earth upon which a fire is always kindled when they go upon the water. When fishing it not only serves to warm their feet and hands, but is principally used to roast the bait, whether cockles, or the flesh of the star, or any other, besides which the fire is useful to cook the fish as soon as caught..." (Threlkeld, p.191)

"It was a pleasing sight on a calm summer's evening to see a number of the native canoes on the glass-like surface of the lake, sending up their strait columns of smoke from the centre of the Barques..." (Threlkeld, p.191)

"They always put a flat stone or two in the centre of the canoe, and place upon it several fire brands, with which they warm themselves when the weather is cold, and they also cook their fish and roast oysters for their subsistence while in the canoe." (Dawson, p.315)

"On our passage down it (the Hunter), we saw several natives with their canoes.... In many of them we saw fires..." (Grant, pp.162-3)

## Manufacture of Composite Weapons, Implements and Canoes:

Heat was required in the construction of these composite weapons and implements: spear, spear-thrower, and stone axe, as outlined previously for the Worimi (*H.N.H.*, Vol.7, pp.182-187), as well as the canoe (*H.N.H.* Vol.8, pp.32-33). The point of the spear was fire hardened; the bent stem used for the shaft was straightened with the assistance of heat. As the structure of the spear involved a number of separate pieces, these were bound together with cord and fused with the universally useful grass-tree gum:

"The joints (of the composite spear) are cemented together with gum resin which exudes from the grass-tree.... The ends of the grass-tree are charred in the fire, fitted one into the other with the melted rosin infused, the joint is tied with a filament of bark, and a lump of the gum is wrapped round the joint.... It is roasted over the fire, and as it is softened by the heat the softened gum is put into shape by the wetted fingers.... The hard wooden skewer like end is sharpened to a very fine point, charred in the fire and covered whilst hot with melted gum, and in some instances

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bone barb is fastened at the point, in the same manner as the joints are made to adhere together." (Threlkeld, p.61)

"The fish-spear ... is made from the stem of the grass-tree, at the end there are four pieces of hard wood, about two feet long, [which] are fastened with a bark-thread covered with the grass-tree gum, heated in the fire until at melting point, when it is worked round the thread fastening it.... The point of each skewer is hardened in the fire, by charring; and when hot, covering it with a coating of the grass-tree gum, fastening at the same time a barb of bone at the point. The hunting spear ... is likewise made." (Threlkeld, p.67)

Similarly, heat was used with grass-tree gum for binding the upright end of the spear-thrower and for making secure the stone head to the withe of the hafted stone axe. (See *H.N.H.* Vol.7, pp.182-186.)

In the construction of the bark canoes, heat was used in the following fashion:

"A fire is then made upon the bark and being heated the steam of the sap softens it so as they can crumble up each end like a folded fan..." (Threlkeld, p.54)

Leaks were repaired thus:

"Our black operative took two soft pieces of Tea-tree-bark... formed it into a bolster like shape, applied one bolster to the rent, as a pad, over the leak, and then sewed it to the canoe, through and through, applying the end of the thread to a stick of fire, burning the end to charcoal in order to harden it and thus form a substitute for a needle. The shank bone of a Kangaroo, ground to a point, pierced the bark, and was used in the stead of an awl. The grass tree gum was melted by the application of the fire-stick, and smeared over the holes and stitches...." (*ibid.*, p.54)

In the second part of "Aborigines and Fire" (Effects on the Environment), the extent of the environmental change resulting from the aborigines' use of fire in the lower Hunter region will be assessed.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING:

N.B. Below is a basic list for this article. A more extensive one will follow Part Two.

A = Awabakal

W = Worimi

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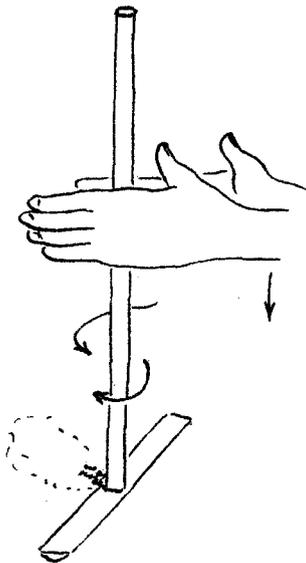
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Fire by Friction (after Roth)