

A NATIVE BURIAL GROUND ON CHARLTON
ESTATE, NEAR ROSS. (PLATE V.).

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(Read August 10th, 1908.)

The customs observed by the Aborigines in disposing of their dead relatives and friends have been most carefully described in Ling Roth's book on the Aborigines of Tasmania (1). But in perusing this compilation anyone must be struck by the rather conflicting accounts given by different observers.

The earliest, and probably the most trustworthy description of a native grave is given by Peron (2). The corpse was burnt, the ashes covered with a layer of grass arranged in connective rings, forming a low cone, and this was held in position by small wooden wands crossing one another at the top of the cone, their ends being pushed in the ground and held in position by a large flat pebble. Above this was erected a curious tetragonal pyramid of wooden poles, covered with bark and tied together at the top. This structure covered a quantity of ashes, and Peron is most explicit to explain how he extracted the bones from this grave.

Peron's description is accompanied by a sketch, copied in Ling Roth's book in which three graves are seen—a complete one, another opened in front, and a third one showing only the central cone without the outer pyramid of bark.

As Peron states that "the monument," as he calls it, was the only one found by him, it is obvious that the sketch is not an exact representation of what he has observed, but rather a reconstruction based on actually observed facts.

Peron's description is rather emotional, attributing to the Aborigines feelings that he, the sentimental Frenchman of the 18th century, may have had, but

(1) Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, 2nd ed., Halifax (England), 1899, pp. 116-122.

(2) Peron and Freycinet, *Voyage de Decouvertes aux Terres Australes*, Paris, 1807-1816.

which it is safe to say were hardly those of the Aborigines of Tasmania. This touch of sentiment rather mars his otherwise clear description, and he has on account of this probably overlooked certain facts which would be of the greatest importance to us were they recorded.

The account given by A. Cottrell (1) refers rather to the customs observed than to the grave itself. According to him the corpse was burnt, and the relatives, having collected the ashes, besmeared their faces with it, and tied the remainder up in a piece of kangaroo skin, which they wore about their person. According to West, the skull of an infant was taken up from the ashes, wrapped up in a piece of kangaroo skin, and worn by a female, probably the mother. There cannot be the slightest doubt that fragments of human bones, tied up in a bit of skin, were highly prized as amulets or charms by the Aborigines. However interesting that may be, it does not bear on the question at issue, viz., the disposal of the dead bodies.

It is certain that the Aborigines burnt their dead, but there is a considerable difference as to the disposal of the ashes. If the practice referred to by Backhouse, Cottrell, and West had been extensive, there would have been hardly any ashes left. On the other hand, Peron's statement is so explicit that it is safe to assume that always a considerable quantity was left, which was eventually covered in the way described by Peron. It is therefore very probable that it was customary to burn the dead, and some of the remains were worn as charms or amulets by the relatives, who probably besmeared their faces also with the ashes (3).

(3) I quote from Ling Roth. It seems that a good deal of G. W. Walker's statements are based on information given to him by A. Cottrell.

(4) This fact throws a curious sidelight on a custom referred to by the Bible—extreme grief was expressed by going in sack-cloth and ashes. It is natural to ask, why ashes? If we assume that this custom, used by later generations without knowing its real meaning, was based on the custom of early mankind to besmear their faces with the ashes of a deceased relative, we have probably the true explanation of anotherwise strange custom. To besmear the face with the ashes of the deceased expressed the greatest grief for its loss, and after mankind became more civilised they no longer used the deceased's ashes, but simply put any kind of ashes on the head.

Some writers also refer to the custom of placing a dead body in an upright position in a hollow tree. As far as I can see this was only done in cases of emergency, when there was no time to burn the body at once; but they were certainly subsequently burnt.

And now a very curious question arises: Did the Aborigines dispose of their deceased on the spot where death took place, or did they carry them to certain places habitually used for the purpose of cremation? It is pretty safe to assume that death mostly took place on the camping ground; some may have died while travelling, while others may have been killed at odd places in their internecine wars.

It is very strange to find that not a single one of all observers noticed whether the Aborigines had regular burial grounds or not. The only reference I can find is Braim (4), who states: "Whenever they approached places where any of their countrymen had been deposited, they would on all future occasions avoid coming near such spots, and would rather go miles round than pass close to them." The same authority states that "other tribes, again, when it was not convenient to carry off the dead body to some place of interment would put it into some hollow tree."

These two statements would imply (a) that there was a regular burial ground, (b) that the dead body was carried to it. Now, we know that the names of the deceased were never mentioned again by their relatives—in fact, they seem to have had a superstitious fear of the spirits of their departed, and from this fact alone we may conclude that the dead were not indiscriminately buried. It is hardly probable that if anyone died at a regular camping ground they disposed of the dead body then and there in the way described by Peron and others. It is more probable that there existed certain areas, well known and to be avoided, where the remains of the dead were deposited. The question, however, is, Do such burial grounds exist? As already stated, no author but Braim mentions a burial ground; but if they

(1) Braim, Thos. H., *History of New South Wales from its settlement to the year 1844*. II., p. 267, London, 1846. (I quote from Ling Roth, p. 62.)

exist, the traces left behind must be very fragmentary. It is evident that the wooden superstructure described by Peron cannot have stood for any length of time. It is equally certain that the grass covering soon rotted away; in fact, the second grave mentioned by Peron seems to have been in this dilapidated condition, and the first one, so minutely described, must have been of very recent origin. We can safely assume that after a few years nothing remained of the rather elaborate structure but a low earthy mound, in which a few stones were embedded, and even these relics were very perishable. We can only regret that Peron, led away by his emotions, did not make a closer examination of the two localities where he discovered the graves; if he had, the question whether the Aborigines used regular burial grounds or not would have been settled. Had he seen such little mounds of earth covered with a few stones, there could have been no further doubt that this place had been used as a regular burial ground.

A discovery which I lately made on Charlton estate, near Ross, seems to settle this question in favour of the existence of a regular burial ground. Mr. E. Cameron, of Mona Vale, informed me that a so-called native burial ground existed quite close to Charlton house. Following the fence behind the house in an eastern direction for about half-a-mile, we came on a most remarkable spot. The hill is apparently covered with sand, and right on the top the sand has been blown out for a length of about three hundred feet to a depth of over four feet. The remains of the covering layer of sand can still be seen towards north, and they are well marked in the photograph. The hill commands a fine view all round, and the photograph gives only a poor impression of the large area that can be overlooked.

On the loamy soil, about seventy to eighty little mounds of earth, irregularly covered with more or less rounded stones, can be seen. These mounds are about three feet in diameter, and very low; in fact, most of them are hardly raised above the ground. I opened several of them, but, except an irregular layer of whitish tenacious clay, covered by the ordinary reddish loam, I found nothing. There were not the slightest traces of bones. Fragments of stone implements were not un-

common, lying scattered about among the bigger stones.

Though no bones were found, I have not the slightest doubt that this place has been used as a regular burial ground by the Aborigines. There is no agency to which we could attribute the heaping up of a number of little mounds of earth in which large stones are embedded but to human beings. It is not very probable that these mounds represented fireplaces; if so, why should the whitish clay be invariably covered under a layer of red loam, in which rather heavy stones are embedded? The only way to account for these little mounds is to assume that they are graves of Aborigines, and, if this be so, they must be of great age. There is no doubt that these graves were some time ago covered by a deposit of blown sand, measuring not less than four feet in thickness, and in that way perfectly concealed. They became only exposed when the sand, instead of being deposited, was again blown away. Both the covering and the blowing out must have taken some time, and we know nothing about the length of the interval between, which may have amounted to a considerable number of years. It is therefore hardly surprising that no bones were found. The larger fragments had been taken away by the relatives; the smaller fragments, already much calcined by the fire, soon disintegrated into dust, and in course of time the ashes turned into a whitish clay.

The numbers of mounds exposed proves that this place was regularly used for the disposal of dead bodies, and this proves Braim's statement as to the existence of regular burial grounds to be correct.

We may assume that not too far from the regular camping grounds a spot commanding a good view was selected for depositing the remains of the dead, but it still remains an open question whether they carried the corpses to such places in order to burn them there, or whether they cremated on the place of death, and carried the ashes to the regular burial ground, where they were interred in the manner described by Peron.

Braim's statement, above referred to, seems to indicate that the bodies were carried to the burial ground;

but I feel inclined to think that this view is not correct. We know that the Aborigines shirked all kind of labour, and carrying a corpse, perhaps for some miles to the nearest burial place, would mean a good deal of hard work. Further, if this had been so, it would have been surprising that no such procession had ever been seen or witnessed by a European. We might perhaps assume that this was done during the night, but all accounts agree that the Aborigines had a great dislike for travelling at night, and this, coupled with their dread of the deceased, makes such an assumption very improbable.

If we consider all the evidence that has been handed over to us, together with the evidence which the Charlton burial ground affords, we can form the following view as to the disposal of dead bodies.

When a death occurred, a pile was erected, and the body cremated on the spot. Probably while the burning was going on the relatives who attended to it used to smear their faces with some of the ashes, and, after the burning had been completed, the fragments of the larger bones were used as amulets or charms, wrapped up in a piece of kangaroo skin, and worn by the relatives or friends. The remainder of the ashes were scraped together, and carried, in a kangaroo skin (?) or a basket (?)—to the nearest burial ground, where they were deposited in a shallow hole scraped in the ground by means of a sharp stone (?). After being covered with a little earth, the grass cone and bark pyramid described by Peron were erected, and the place hereafter avoided as much as possible.

It would be very interesting to know whether similar burial places exist elsewhere in Tasmania. Mrs. Burbury, of Charlton, informs me that a similar, though much more extended place, exists near Fonthill, and Mr. Henry Foster, jun., has told me that another one is found on Darlington Park. As I have not seen either of these places, it is impossible for me to venture an opinion about them, but, to judge from the description given to me, they must exactly look like the Charlton burial ground. If this be so, the fact that the Aborigines had certain places set aside for the regular disposal of their dead bodies is beyond further doubt. The only

question which has not quite been settled yet would be whether the dead would have been carried bodily to the burial ground, or only their ashes. From all we know about the habits of the Aborigines, the latter view is more probably the correct one.

It may appear that I have gone at some length in discussing a rather trifling question. The conclusions we may, however, draw from this as to earlier history of mankind are of the greatest importance. We may conclude that early man disposed of the dead bodies by cremation, and that the custom of burying the corpse is of much later date. It is therefore not to be wondered at that the remains of diluvial and pre-diluvial human beings are so extremely rare. If archæolithic man died, his relatives disposed of his body by cremation, and only under such fortunate circumstances, when it was impossible to get hold of the corpse, which was also protected against animals, was there a chance that the remains would be preserved. The few remains of diluvial man, the famous Spy-Cro-Magnon race, have been found under circumstances which indicate that these former owners must have come to a rather sudden end while sitting in front of their cave, by being killed and covered by a sudden fall of rocks from above. If diluvial and tertiary man disposed of his dead bodies in a similar way as the Aborigines, and there is no reason to assume a different view, the old burial grounds must have long become entirely obliterated, and the same fate is certain to happen to the Tasmanian burial grounds before long.



NATIVE BURIAL GROUND, Charlton.

Dr. Noetling, Photo.