

Observations on Visits of the Tasmanian Aborigines to the Hunter Islands

By

A. L. MESTON, M.A.

(Read 30th September, 1935)

The Hunter Islands lie off the north-western extremity of Tasmania and cover a considerable area. The principal islands of the group are Robbins, Hunter or Fleurieu, and Three Hummock. In addition there are many smaller islands, islets, and rocks, the chief of which are Trefoil, Bird, Stack, Steep, Penguin, Walker, the Petrels, and Albatross. This group of islands was discovered and named by Flinders in 1798, when he and Bass circumnavigated Tasmania in the sloop *Norfolk*. Landing on Three Hummock, they were surprised to find upon the shore 'several deserted fireplaces strewed round with the shells of the sea ear'. (Flinders, 1814.) This puzzled Flinders, for he thought that the natives were entirely ignorant of the art of navigation.

In August, 1934, Mr. Roy Harvey, of Devonport, made it possible for me to visit the group in his fishing-boat. On both Hunter and Three Hummock I found abundant traces of aboriginal visits.

Hunter, or Barren Island, as Flinders named it, is separated from the mainland of Tasmania by a strait 3 miles wide. It is a narrow island, $14\frac{1}{2}$ miles long, running north and south, and has an area of 21,000 acres. The northern part is very barren, but in the south the soil is better, and the hills are wooded. All around the coast I found small heaps of shells, the remnants of many an aboriginal meal. On the western side, in a sheltered corner in the southern part of Cuvier Bay, there were some well-grassed middens. At Reynard Point, on the east coast, there is a large cave in a slate cliff. This cave is 20 yards wide at the entrance, runs back into the cliff for about the same distance, and is everywhere lofty. It is perfectly dry, provides excellent shelter in all weathers, and is well lighted. From the entrance there is a splendid view to the south. The abundance of shell remains and two deserted fireplaces, a large one in the centre of the cave, a smaller one not far from the end, give ample evidence that this was a favourite haunt of the aborigines.

I purposed to visit Stack Island, where a few years ago the complete skeleton of an aboriginal woman was found, but the wind veering to the east with that disconcerting suddenness which is characteristic of the region, we were forced to run across to Three Hummock Island and lie there. The easterly weather continued for three days, when the wind suddenly chopped round into the north-west and blew a hard gale, forcing us again to run for shelter. The continuance of rough weather made a visit to Stack utterly impossible.

Three Hummock Island lies to the eastward of the northern portion of Hunter Island, from which it is separated by a passage 2 miles wide, with depths from eight to twenty fathoms, deep water extending very close inshore on both sides. Three Hummock is roughly oval in form, and is much more fertile than Hunter. Its area is 23,000 acres. Open downs run out to a well-wooded ridge in the east, which rises into three conical-shaped hills, the highest of which, that in the south, reaches 784 feet. It is from these hills that the island takes its name. Here, as on Hunter Island, I found the relics of many aboriginal feasts. In the sand-blows, bones of marsupials and birds were associated with shells, and shell heaps here and there all round the coast were common.

On both islands game is plentiful, and there is an abundance of fresh water. But, as Flinders pointed out, the small size of the islands renders 'the idea of fixed inhabitants inadmissible', for a permanent occupation would soon exhaust the game and deplete the supply of shell-fish. It was, however, not the abundance of wallaby, opossum, crayfish, and shell-fish that induced the aborigines to visit the islands, but the mutton-bird rookeries. On both Three Hummock and Hunter, as well as on the smaller islands, mutton-birds breed in great numbers. Flinders has left us an account which reveals, in no uncertain way, the vast numbers of these birds at the western end of Bass Strait in 1798, at a time when the aborigines roamed freely throughout Tasmania.

As the *Norfolk* lay at anchor off Three Hummock Island a stream of mutton-birds came from the southward. This stream Flinders reckoned was 300 yards or more in breadth and from 50 to 80 yards in depth. For a full hour and a half the flight continued. The birds were not scattered, but were flying as compactly as a free movement of their wings seemed to allow. 'Taking the stream to have been 50 yards deep by 100 yards in width,' he writes, 'and that it moved at the rate of 30 miles an hour, and allowing 9 cubic yards of space to each bird, the number would amount to 151,500,000. The burrows required to lodge this quantity of birds, allowing a square yard to each burrow, would cover more than 18½ square miles of ground'.

Mutton-birds (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) arrive at the islands towards the end of September. The nesting burrows are first cleaned out, then the birds leave for sea again, returning on or about the 25th

November, when the laying season begins. Only one egg is laid. This takes about eight weeks to hatch. The young birds are unable to fly before the end of April.

To-day mutton-birding is an important industry on the islands at both ends of Bass Strait. The young birds are taken, salted, and exported in thousands to Hobart, Launceston, and Melbourne, where they find a ready sale as an article of food. When salted, the flesh of the bird may not appeal to all tastes, but fresh, it is delicious. The habits of the mutton-bird would be as well known to the aborigines as to us. No wonder, then, that they sought to avail themselves of this bountiful food supply. Once at the rookeries they had no difficulty in getting as much food as they required with little effort. Not only were they able to get the food easily, but the eggs and the flesh of the nestlings provided a pleasant change from the usual diet of shell-fish and marsupials.

As mutton-birds do not breed on the mainland, the aborigines were obliged to cross to the islands. This is no easy matter. Although only 3 miles separate Weber Point, the southern tip of Hunter Island, from Maundy Point (Woolnorth), the crossing bristles with difficulty, and to make it requires sound seamanship. Through this waterway there is a tremendous tide-rip. At springs it attains a velocity of 5 knots, and 3 knots at neaps. At no part of the seaway between the islands and the mainland is there less than a 2-knot current. Nor does the tide ebb one way and flow another. The top half sets westward and the bottom half eastward. In other words, the west-going or flood stream begins at four and a half to three and a half hours before high water, the east-going or ebb stream begins from three to three and a half hours after high water. So strong is the tidal stream, that near the great number of rocks, reefs, and sunken banks heavy races are formed, and in the channel many swirls and eddies. Even a slight breeze causes a steep, ugly sea, and demands expert seamanship. And it must be remembered that in this vicinity calm weather is rare.

It is sometimes maintained that the aborigines crossed from the mainland to these islands by swimming, but I regard this as an impossibility. Often have I watched the tide setting through the strait, but never, even on a calm day, have I seen conditions favourable for swimming the 3-mile waterway, even by a very powerful swimmer. To get across, a serviceable boat is necessary.

It is well known that the aborigines crossed to Maria and Bruni Islands; and Flinders relates that, as the *Norfolk* passed between the Maatsuyker Islands and the mainland, he 'saw with some surprise, for it is three miles from the main, that its grassy vegetation had been burnt'. As many artifacts have been found at Tasman Island, it is clear that the aborigines also visited it, and, from the nature of the coast-line, this would entail a voyage of six or seven miles.

When James Backhouse, visited Macquarie Harbour, in June, 1832, he was informed by the pilot at the Heads that the aborigines 'cross the mouth of the harbour on floats in the form of a boat, made of bundles of the paper-like bark of the swamp Tea-Tree, lashed side by side by means of tough grass. On these three or four persons are placed, and one swims on each side, holding it with one hand'. (Backhouse, 1843, p. 58.) He was told also that, three months earlier, five boats had gone across in this way, and among the party were several children. (Walker, 1902.) This method of propulsion is eminently suitable for short stretches like the entrance of Macquarie Harbour, where, at slack water, the crossing could be speedily made, but it would not suit the Hunter Passage, which steam-driven vessels can use only with the utmost caution.

Many of the early visitors to these shores and a number of the early inhabitants saw native boats, but very few took the pains to describe them.

In his diary, under the date 21st June, 1804, the Revd. R. Knopwood, telling of Mr. Collins' return from the Huon, where he saw many natives, writes: 'He see three of their cattemerans or small boats made of bark that will hold about six of them'. In 1827 a party, of whom Jorgen Jorgensen and Clement Lorymer were the leaders, journeyed down the west coast of Tasmania. At the mouth of the Pieman they 'saw a number of catamarans, on which the aboriginals are in the habit of crossing the river'. West (1852) reports that Lieut. Gunn found at Maria Island, and preserved for several months, a catamaran sufficiently tight and strong to drift for 16 or 20 miles; each would convey from four to seven persons. Although the term 'catamaran' is used on many occasions to describe the Tasmanian aboriginal craft, the name is not of much service to us, for it is indiscriminately used for log rafts, outrigger canoes, or primitive reed or bark floats.

From the various descriptions given, the Tasmanians apparently constructed two different kinds of craft. For the best description of one kind we are indebted to Freycinet, who was with Baudin's expedition which visited D'Entrecasteaux Channel in 1802. 'We have seen and measured several of them', he writes, 'which were of the same size and put together in the same fashion. Three rolls of Eucalyptus bark form one body. The principal roll or piece was 4 m. 55 cm. [14 ft. 11 in.] long by 1 m. [3 ft. 3 in.] broad, the two other pieces being only 3 m. 90 cm. [12 ft. 9 in.] long by 32 cm. [12½ in.] broad. These three bundles which bore a fair resemblance to a ship's yards were fastened together at their ends: this made them taper and formed the whole of the canoe. The scarfing was made fairly compact by means of a sort of grass or reed. So completed the craft had the following dimensions: length inside 2 m.

¹Lieutenant-Colonel Collins, the Governor of the Colony.

95 cm. [9 ft. 8 in.]; outside breadth 89 cm. [2 ft. 11 in.]; height 65 cm. [1 ft. 3½ in.]; depth inside 22 cm. [8½ in.]; thickness at the ends 27 cm. [10½ in.]. Five or six savages can get into these canoes but generally the number is limited to three or four at a time. Their paddles are simple sticks of from 2.50 m. [8 ft. 1 in.] to 4 m. [13 ft.] or even 5 m. [16 ft. 3 in.] long by 2 cm. [¾ in.] to 5 cm. [2 in.] thick. Occasionally when the water is shallow they make use of these sticks to propel themselves as we do with poles. Generally they sit down when working their canoes, and make use of a bundle of grass as a seat; at other times they keep standing. We saw them crossing the channel only in fine weather. . . . They always place a fire at one end of their canoes, and, in order to prevent the fire from spreading, they place underneath it a sufficiently thick bed of earth or cinders'.

At Maria Island he saw more canoes of the same shape. The only difference was 'that instead of the bark of the eucalyptus trees they used nothing but a kind of reed which grows in abundance at Oyster Bay'. (Freycinet, 1816.) The construction of such boats shows considerable ingenuity in utilizing unpromising material. The grass and reeds used to caulk the gap between the two upper bark rolls and the lower one must have been quite effective, for, as Freycinet tells us, the boat was sufficiently watertight to carry a live fire. Notice, too, how skilfully the bark was streamlined into boat shape, so that the craft was sharp at bow and stern, or, as Calder expresses it, 'something like a whaleboat'. Such boats were first constructed many thousands of years ago, and the knowledge of building them was brought to Tasmania by the aborigines as part of their acquired skill when they migrated hither. The earliest evidence we have of such a canoe comes from Egypt, where we find them figured on painted jars of the Middle Predynastic period, that is, between 4000 and 4500 B.C. Similar boats are still used on Lake Tana in Abyssinia, on Lake Chad in Tropical Africa, in South Africa, and in Peru. Bonwick (1870, p. 51) quotes the description of Mr. Roberts, formerly of the Bruni salt works: 'They were of thick bark interlaced like a beehive with Corrijong bark string, and were strong enough not only to carry men across that stormy sea, but even, on the Southern Ocean, to De Witt and other islands which were visited by the Natives on sealing excursions. The head and stern were raised high above the water like horns. Each boat would hold from four to six men. Long sticks or spears, or bark paddles¹ plied first on one side, then on the other, supplied the place of oars and propelled this rude contrivance as quickly as an English whaleboat'.

Labillardière (1800), who visited Tasmania with D'Entrecasteaux in 1792, thought such craft as fit only for crossing tranquil water.

¹ Paddles were no doubt acquired from the English.

Freycinet was of the same opinion: but they were giving utterance merely to what they thought. The seaworthiness of such craft is attested by an old whaler, who told Bonwick that 'he had seen one of them go across to Witch Island,'¹ near Port Davey, in the midst of a storm'.

The other form of boat is that described by Amasa Delano (1817), the American skipper and owner of the whaler *Pilgrim*. Delano, who visited the Derwent in March, 1804, afterwards wrote an account of his voyages and travels, and made some observations on the Tasmanian aborigines. In the course of his remarks he says, 'I observed at the same time that they had three or four small rudely constructed and ugly shaped canoes with them with two outriggers each'.² Delano was a seaman who had sailed round the world and had poked into many odd corners. When he said 'outriggers' he knew what he was speaking of, and what he saw must have had some resemblance to the outriggers seen in the islands of Indonesia. That the Tasmanians had a knowledge of so advanced a type of boat as a canoe with the double outrigger is, to say the least, highly improbable. Lieutenant Charles Jeffreys, however, gives a description which is illuminating: 'The natives selected two good stems of trees about 30 ft. long and placed them about 6 ft. apart, parallel with each other. Cross pieces were laid on these and secured to the stout stem by bark ropes. In the middle a cross piece stronger than the others was securely fastened. The whole was then more or less covered with wicker work. In this way a raft 30 ft. long, able to hold from 6 to 10 persons, would be constructed. By means of paddles it could move on the surface of smooth water with amazing rapidity and safety'. (Jeffreys, 1820.) 'Wicker work' is no doubt a euphemism for a rough interlacing of thin, pliant tree stems, but the general idea is quite clear. What he described was an improved raft made of two logs, placed parallel to each other at a distance apart, with a platform laid on cross-poles between them. This platform did not necessarily cover the whole space between the poles either lengthwise or longitudinally. Jeffreys, it must be noted, says '*more or less* covered with wicker work'. The platform not completely filling the space between the logs would form the 'rudely constructed and ugly shaped canoe' of Delano, and the two parallel logs the floats of the outriggers.

Mrs. Meredith (1852) writes of similar craft: 'They were formed of many little bundles of gum tree bark, tied with grass, first separately, and then bound together in the required form, thick and flat, without any attempt at the shape of a boat or canoe, and not keeping the passenger above water when used, but just serving to float him on the surface. In, or rather on, these the natives sat and paddled about with long sticks or drifted before the wind and tide; and in

¹ This is de Witt Island, the largest of the Maatsuyker Group.

² Ling Roth does not mention this description.

calm weather frequently crossed over from the mainland to Maria Island; but on such occasions they provided a little raised platform on the raft, on which they carried some lighted fuel to kindle their fire when they arrived there'. The last sentence throws much light on the apparent inconsistencies in the various accounts of native craft. The natives built to suit their purpose. If a narrow waterway, such as a river, was to be crossed, they used a log or a rough and ready structure of bark or reeds; but, when the occasion demanded, they built something really seaworthy.

The different accounts of native craft prove conclusively two things. First, that the native craft, whether we think of the raft or the canoe, could remain afloat for a long time, and secondly that the natives could drive them along at a fast rate.

That they could make the extremely difficult crossing between the mainland and the Hunter Islands proves them expert and fearless seamen. But it would seem that they were accustomed to perform an even more dangerous voyage. Eight miles north-west of Cape Keraudren, the northern point of Hunter Island, lies Albatross Island, a steep rocky mass. Since the natives named this Tangatema, and left larger islands unnamed, it would appear they sometimes visited it. Here, no doubt, they hunted seals, which frequented this rocky islet in such great numbers that Bass had to fight his way through them when he landed there in 1798. This island, like the Maatsuyker Group, is exposed to the full force of the Southern Ocean. On account of the great swell which breaks upon its rocky shores almost continually, and the strong tide-rips off both ends, it is very rarely visited even by men of our own race in modern craft. Landing there is almost always hazardous, and one must be prepared to slip away at a moment's notice.

In face of such seamanship it seems idle to demand a land bridge for the migration of the aborigines to Tasmania. Even at the present time a boat could leave Wilson's Promontory and cross Bass Strait to Tasmania without once being out of sight of land. The greatest gap, that between Deal Island and Flinders Island, is less than 30 miles. When we remember that Bass, Flinders, and a boy sailed from Port Jackson and explored the coast to the southward in a little vessel 8 feet long, surely we must allow it possible for natives in a boat nearly 2 feet longer to cross from Australia to Tasmania, using the islands as stepping-stones, and having, at most, to make an unbroken run of 30 miles. And the probability is, that when they crossed, the greatest gap was considerably less. Moreover, at each stopping-place there is a permanent supply of fresh water. Had the urge been there, their descendants, the aborigines known to the early settlers, in boats such as Freycinet described, could easily have managed such a voyage.

REFERENCES.

- BACKHOUSE, JAMES, 1843.—A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies.
- BONWICK, JAMES, 1870.—Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians.
- CALDER, J. E., 1875.—Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c., of the Native Tribes of Tasmania.
- DELANO, AMASA, 1817.—Narrative of Voyages and Travels.
- FLINDERS, MATTHEW, 1814.—Voyage to Terra Australis, 1801-03.
- FREYCINET, LOUIS, 1816.—Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes. Vol. II. Péron's Voyage rédigé par Freycinet.
- JEFFREYS, LIEUTENANT CHARLES, 1820.—Geographical and Descriptive Delineations of the Island of Van Diemen's Land.
- JORGENSEN, JORGEN, 1828.—Colonial Advocate.
- LORD, CLIVE, 1928.—Notes on the Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood. *Pap. Roy. Soc. Tasm.* 1927 (1928). pp. 78-155.
- LABILLARDIERE, J. J., 1800.—Relation du Voyage à la Recherche de la Perouse, t. I.
- MREDITH, MRS. C., 1852.—My Home in Tasmania during a Residence of Nine Years. Vol. II.
- WALKER, J. B., 1902.—Early Tasmania.
- WEST, JOHN, 1852.—The History of Tasmania. Vol. II.

HUNTER ISLANDS

Soundings in Fathoms Heights in Feet.
FROM ADMIRALTY CHART NO. 5057

