

THE ABORIGINES

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Reliable historical records of aboriginal people on the Central Plateau are sparse, but illuminate in places the bare evidence of the middens which fringe the numerous lakes and streams.

George Augustus Robinson records in his diaries some names for the people who occupied this area: GORE.RER.PUN.MAIR.IN.NER.PAIR.EN.NER and elsewhere LUG.GER.MAIR.RER.NER.PAIR.RER. with an alternative name NOE.BER.RER.KOWN.YER.PAIR.RER.NER.

These are not the names used by the people for themselves but descriptive titles from people of other tribes. The suffix MAIR.IN.NER.PAIR.EN.NER qualifies a general name with "many of them." It is likely that there were many small groups roaming this area who were loosely described by a collective title.

The vegetation on the Plateau can be described broadly as moorlands on the north and west with sclerophyll forest elsewhere (Davies 1964), supporting a diverse fauna for the aboriginal diet including kangaroo and wallabies, possums, bandicoot and kangaroo rat, wombat and many birds notably duck, swan and other waterfowl and marsh birds frequenting the lakes and marshes. Many of these birds migrate to the Plateau and, during spring and summer, their eggs added a relished item to the menu.

Hiatt (1967, 1968) noted that the Tasmanian plants offered relatively little to the aboriginal diet, in contrast to the 70 - 80% vegetable component of some Australian aboriginal groups (Meggitt 1967). The 'cider gum', *Eucalyptus gunnii*, is notable for its use by the natives who, within a generally simple technology, utilized natural fermentation to provide a stimulating beverage. This tree was common along the southern margin of the Plateau and, in early summer, sap was allowed to drain from cuts made through the bark for collection in a natural cavity in the butt of the

tree or in a clay-lined pit in the soil. Here it fermented to produce a sweet, palatable beverage akin to cider. Robinson observed that most of the 'cider gums' had been tapped by the natives. The reservoirs accumulated upwards of a quart of juice and were protected from animals by stones piled over them. In some cases when only a small access hole was available, the fluid was sucked through a reed or a twist of bark. The aborigines were fond of this drink which sometimes produced drunkenness. Apart from fresh water, the only other beverage recorded was fresh blood taken from kangaroo. Lacking fabricated containers and the shells and kelp used on the coast, the aborigines were unable to carry water far in this area so generally camped near a supply of it.

Eels were abundant in the lakes and could have been caught by hand but, like snakes, no record has been found of their being eaten. Stone fish traps, similar to those used by the Australian aborigines, have been reported from the Great Lake. None have been described accurately and it appears reasonable to associate them with European settlement.

The hunting techniques of the Tasmanians were based upon flaked stone tools which were used to manufacture spears and clubs; to chop toe-holds in the bark of trees when climbing after possums; to dismember the carcasses of the animals killed and to dress their skins. The production of these implements required a supply of stone with a glassy texture which could be flaked easily to provide a clean sharp edge. Sutherland (1972) recorded several outcrops of hornfels around the Great Lake and the Lagoon of Islands which were utilised as quarries by the aborigines.

The implements themselves, used and discarded, provided a durable record of aboriginal occupation around the lakes and rivers on the Plateau, though many of these middens now have been stripped by collectors or covered by dammed lake waters.

From spring to late summer, the Central Plateau provided a food resource for the aboriginal groups who wandered through it but, even in mid-summer, it was prone to sudden and severe weather changes, even snow storms. While these conditions might be endured by the agile and strong, they could be fatal to the infants and the aged included in the family groups. The plateau generally exceeds 3000 ft. (910m) in altitude with a maximum annual rainfall of about 48 inches (122 cm). There is usually a ground frost on 145 days each year and, in July, the average

maximum and minimum temperatures are 40°F (4°C) and 29°F (-2°C) respectively. Under these conditions, only temporary occupation during the warmer months would be feasible and, even then, the capacity of the aborigines to withstand exposure to severely cold conditions is noteworthy.

They generally were totally naked and, while no relevant Tasmanian data is available, it is appropriate to note some physiological studies of Australian aborigines living under low temperatures in Central Australia, suggesting a similar capacity to reduce body heat loss and shock from exposure by a reduction in body temperature and general metabolic rate (Hicks 1964, Hammel 1964, Scholander 1958).

The aborigines adopted several measures to ameliorate the effects of this cold climate. They covered their bodies with animal fat (sometimes combined with natural pigments) producing a water-repellent coating. They also used short cloaks of kangaroo hide more frequently in cold areas.

Sleeping shelters, made with branches wedged into the ground and sheathed with slabs of bark, formed a curved, sloping wall for protection against wind and driving rain. A fire on the lee-side of this shelter completed the aboriginal camp. On 28th November 1831 G.A. Robinson described "... numerous native encampments, consisting of four to five huts..." which he saw during a morning walk near Lake Echo. Each "hut" probably sheltered a family of, say, eight people huddled together for mutual warmth. "The trees along the verge of the forest in all parts had once been stripped of their bark by the natives for the purpose of constructing their huts" Robinson wrote on the previous day.

The smooth interior surface of the bark in these shelters sometimes were decorated by the aborigines with charcoal drawings "... some resembling trees, men and women, also numerous circles of different diameter..." (G.A. Robinson, 6/12/1831). The concentric circles were drawn by using suitably sized twigs like a pair of geometrical compasses. These patterns also were applied to rock surfaces by engraving and to their own bodies by incision. To date, rock engravings have not been reported from this area.

Fire was essential for the survival of the aborigines in this cold, damp climate. The leader of each group, sometimes others as well, always carried a smouldering brand of rolled bark

or dry wood as he moved to a new camp. On 28 December 1831, Robinson asked Mannalargenna what happened if his fire was extinguished and was told that the party then had to eat raw meat while they searched for the nearest people with fire to re-kindle their own. This exchange was never refused, even between enemies, though fighting might occur once the transfer of fire had been completed. Fire was regarded as a divine gift. Some fire-drills have been attributed to the Tasmanians but their authenticity has not been confirmed and, in any case, their effectiveness under Tasmanian climatic conditions is questionable.

Moorlands and forest were burnt by the aborigines as they passed. Their motives, recorded by a variety of remarks, included a wish to keep the under-story scrub reduced for easy walking and lower the hazard of snake bite; an open demonstration of their presence to allied groups who may join them or a sign of honest intentions to rival groups having territorial rights to the area and, finally, possibly to ensure a reserve of fire in the bush itself.

The regular routes of the nomadic hordes could be identified by the clearings produced by their fires. These paths were numerous in the Central Plateau which, as shown above, was occupied seasonally by many small groups. The only party counted numbered 26 and this appears to be a reasonably typical unit. On the plateau, these groups could wander freely among the four thousand lakes and tarns. Their main access routes appear to be from the east and south, identifying the tribes occupying the Macquarie/Isis River plain and the Ouse/Clyde River valleys as the parent bodies.

It was these tribes who probably suffered the impact of European settlement most violently and who reacted most vigorously against it. Two contemporary remarks by Europeans may illustrate this without additional comment:

On 12 January 1823, a young settler Robert Thirkeld, wrote to his parents
 "... the Natives here are of much trouble one Sunday I went out on Horseback and took my dogs thinking to get some of the kangaroo. I fell in with a mob of them at there fire cooking there Vituals I road up an cracked my whip and shouted and they all run I overtook 3 of them and made them return with me home. there has been 4 or 5 men killed by them lately but chiefly stock keepers that lies a long way back where the Inclosed Lands is very thin...."

A more cautious view was expressed by Roderic O'Connor on 10 November 1827

"...We arrived at the Hut about five minutes after the Natives had robbed it of all the Blankets etc. and were in the act of carrying the flour off, when they were seen by the Men who had gone to protect Mr. Forbes Hut at the opposite side of the River, their fires in all directions. It is rather alarming living in a Tent, surrounded by a set of Wretches who value our lives as little as they do the Kangaroos or Opossums. We had been obliged to leave our firearms at home for the protection of our Properties, now our lives are endangered, and an inglorious death awaits us, our Brains to be beaten out with Waddies by such Ourang Outangs, disgrace would it be to the human race to call them Men...."

From this encroachment of settlement over the aboriginal hunting lands emerged a racial conflict not exceeded in savagery elsewhere in the world. Today, the Plateau bears no visible signs of this bitter fighting, indeed little sign remains of its first occupants.

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