

SOME NOTES ON THE TRIBAL DIVISIONS
OF THE ABORIGINES OF TASMANIA.

BY JAMES B. WALKER.

THE estimates of the aboriginal population of Tasmania before the advent of Europeans vary very considerably. G. A. Robinson always maintained that, in 1804, the number of the aborigines was from 6000 to 8000. Captain Kelly, in his evidence before Colonel Arthur's Committee in 1830, estimated the native population at 5000; but he supposed that the number was still very great in the unsettled parts of the colony, which we now know was not the case. On the other hand, Backhouse put the number as low as 700 to 1000. Dr. Milligan says: "Assuming that the number of tribes and sub-tribes throughout the territory was about twenty, and that each mustered, of men, women, and children, 50 to 250 individuals, and allowing them numbers proportioned to the means of subsistence within the limits of their respective hunting-grounds, it does not appear probable that the aggregate aboriginal population did materially, if at all, exceed 2000."

A like uncertainty exists as to their tribal divisions. G. A. Robinson, in a speech made in Sydney in 1838, shortly after he had left Flinders Island, states "that he had necessarily learnt four languages to make himself understood by the natives generally. But, as regarded nations, he could truly say that the island was divided and subdivided by the natives into districts and contained many nations. Their divisions he intended at some future time to point out, as he intended to execute a map of the island on aboriginal principles, with the aborigines' names for mountains, rivers, and districts."

Unfortunately, this map—if ever made—has been lost with the rest of Robinson's papers on the natives, and the information available is not sufficient to enable us to determine with any accuracy either the total number of the aborigines or the limits of the respective tribes.

In considering the question of their numbers, it must be borne in mind that the parts of Tasmania capable of affording subsistence to a hunting people were limited in area. The West Coast is shut off from the Centre and East—for long the only settled parts—by a wide region

of mountain and forest, extending throughout the whole length of the island. In the dense forests covering a large part of this region, the heavy timber is tangled with an almost impenetrable undergrowth, in which scarcely any animal or bird is found to disturb the silence. Where the forest gives place to bare mountain peak or to so-called "plain," the "button-grass"* or the stunted scrub constituting the sole growth, is not much more favourable to animal life. In places, wallaby and kangaroo are to be found, but, as a general rule, the "badger" (*i.e.* wombat) is the only game. It will be seen, therefore, that the native population was mainly confined to the sea coast, where they could obtain an abundant supply of shell-fish and crayfish, and to the lightly timbered and open lands of the central valley and of parts of the east and north-east, where opossum, wallaby, kangaroo, emu, and other game were more or less plentiful.

It appears that the blacks were accustomed to take considerable pains, by means of periodical burnings, to keep down the scrub and promote the growth of grass on their favourite hunting-grounds. Many open plains, especially in the north, which were formerly known as favourite resorts of the blacks, subsequently became overgrown with forest through the discontinuance of these annual burnings.

They usually roamed the country in small groups or parties, probably composed of nearly related families living together. Their camps rarely contained more than 30 or 40 individuals—men, women, and children. At certain seasons of the year, however, large hunting parties were formed, in which the whole tribe, or possibly more than one tribe, joined forces to surround and drive the game. Such was, doubtless, the gathering of the Oyster Bay natives at Risdon in 1804, which was attended with such an unfortunate result. The number of natives, men and women, then engaged in driving the kangaroo was variously stated at from 300 to 500, though it is probable that even the smaller number was an exaggerated estimate. Captain Kelly, in his evidence before the Committee, says that he saw a mob of 300 at Brown's River in 1806, and about a dozen instances of

* The "button-grass" is a species of sedge (*Gymnoscoenus sphaerocephalus*—Nat. Ord. *Cyperaceae*).

mobs numbering from 150 to 300 are reported between 1804 and 1826 ; but all these statements must be taken with considerable allowance for exaggeration.

The natives were in the habit of visiting the coast in the winter, it is said between June and October, though some of the tribes in the interior may not have had access to the sea. Certain tribes must have lived on the coast almost constantly. Knopwood says that he had understood that the natives cross the country from east to west in the month of March ; this would apply to the East Coast tribes only. Upon a consideration of the scanty available evidence and all the surrounding circumstances, we may reject as exaggerated the conjectural guesses of 7000, or even 5000, as the original number of the natives. We may accept, as the best approximation to the truth that we are likely to obtain, Dr. Milligan's more moderate estimate that the total aboriginal population of Tasmania did not at any time exceed 2000 souls.

Of the tribal organisation of the aborigines practically nothing is known, and the limits of the tribal divisions cannot be laid down with any approach to certainty. G. A. Robinson and other writers use the word "tribe" with a good deal of laxity. Sometimes it is used to designate a small sub-tribe living in one community—*e.g.*, the Macquarie Harbour tribe, numbering 30 souls only—sometimes to indicate a whole group—*e.g.*, the Oyster Bay and Big River tribes, which included several sub-tribes and a considerable population. As the whole group in some cases took its name from a prominent sub-tribe (*e.g.*, Oyster Bay) it is often doubtful whether the group or the sub-tribe is intended.

G. W. Walker says that the members of the same "tribe" spoke of each other as "brother" and "sister." Kelly, in his Boat Expedition, 1815-16, says that the chief, Laman-bunganah, at Ringarooma Point on the North-East Coast, told him that he was at war with his "brother" Tolo-bunganah, a powerful chief at Eddy-stone Point, on the East Coast. The term translated "brother" must therefore have had a wide application, being used with relation to tribes or sub-tribes which were hostile, as well as to those which were friendly.

In 1830, Robinson stated that he had been in communication with sixteen "tribes." As this was long after

many of the native hunting-grounds had been invaded by the whites, and the original tribal organisation had consequently been much disturbed, it is probable that the number of tribes was originally greater. As we have seen, Milligan conjecturally puts the number at twenty. Although Robinson dignifies the tribes with the name of "nations," they were known to the settlers by the designation of "mobs." This conveys a more correct idea of their numerical strength, which in many tribes was as low as 30, and probably in no case exceeded 200, or at most 250.

These "mobs" or sub-tribes group themselves into several broad divisions, more properly deserving the name of "tribes." In these larger divisions separate languages or dialects were spoken, the vocabularies of which were widely different, as appears from Milligan's Vocabulary. Minor differences of dialect must have been numerous, for Robert Clark, the catechist, states that on his arrival at the Flinders' Settlement in 1834, eight or ten different languages or dialects were spoken amongst the 200 natives then at the establishment, and that the blacks were "instructing each other to speak their respective tongues."

Robinson, as already cited, says that there were four main languages. Of these Milligan gives us the vocabularies of three; viz. :—(1) South; (2) West and North-West; and (3) East Coast. To these we may add (4) North-East tribes.

We may now proceed to consider these four main groups more in detail.

1. SOUTHERN TRIBES.

"Tribes about Mount Royal, Bruné Island, Recherche Bay, and the South of Tasmania."—*Milligan's Vocabulary.*

These tribes occupied both shores of D'Entrecasteaux Channel and the coast of the mainland as far as South Cape. The French voyagers in 1792, and again in 1802, had opportunities of observing these natives in their primitive state. They found them friendly and well-disposed. Labillardière and Peron have preserved many interesting particulars respecting them. In the more

southerly part of the district the mountains, heavily wooded, nearly approach the shore, and here the blacks must have been mainly dependent on the sea for their food. Further north, towards the mouth of the Huon, at Port Cygnet, North-West Bay, and North Bruny, the country was more open and favourable for game. The banks of the Upper Huon were too heavily timbered to afford much subsistence. The Bruny blacks were numerous, especially on the lightly wooded northern part of the island, which was a favourite hunting-ground. It seems to have been visited by the mainland natives, who crossed the channel in canoes. The natives were numerous on the west bank of the Derwent—at Blackman's Bay, Brown's River, &c. At the latter place 300 were seen in 1806. In all this country wallaby, kangaroo, and opossum would be fairly plentiful. It cannot be determined how far these tribes extended to the northward. They may possibly have occupied the present site of Hobart, and even further up the western shore of the Derwent, but it is also quite possible that this country was claimed as a hunting-ground by the Big River tribe. There is nothing in the features of the ground to forbid either alternative, and there is no evidence to decide the point. Kelly (Evidence, Aboriginal Committee) says that the Southern natives were a finer race than those in the interior, and also that they "took no part" with the latter.

2. WESTERN TRIBES.

"North-West and Western Tribes."—*Milligan's Vocabulary.*

The natives on the west of the island must have been mainly confined to the sea coast, where they could draw their support from the sea, the country inland being generally unsuitable for game. Kelly, whose boat voyage was made at midsummer, 1815, found natives at various places all along the coast, from a point opposite the Maatsuyker Islands off the south coast to beyond Cape Grim in the north-west. From the nature of the country we may conclude that those to the east of South-West Cape belonged to the Western tribes rather than to the Southern group established at Recherche Bay. They were bold enough to cross to the Maatsuykers,

which lie three miles out from the main, for Flinders in 1798 noticed with surprise that the scrub on the largest island had been burnt. There was a small tribe at Port Davey, and another at Macquarie Harbour, which (according to Stokes and Backhouse) numbered some thirty souls only. The latter had canoes of bark in which they crossed the harbour. They made an attack on Kelly's party.

At Trial Harbour, near Mount Heemskirk, there are very large extensive shell mounds. Further north, on the Pieman and Arthur Rivers, there were either one or two tribes, probably near the coast, though here there are occasional tracts which would support game. In 1832 Robinson speaks of four tribes, numbering collectively 100 souls, between Port Davey and Cape Grim. It is not clear whether he meant to include the Cape Grim natives. The latter were a strong and fierce tribe. In 1815 Kelly fell in with a mob of 50 on the largest of the Hunters' Group, *i.e.*, Robbins Island. They made a fierce attack on his party. It is said that the natives visited all the islands of the Hunters' Group by swimming, no doubt with the help of logs or canoes. They probably reached Albatross Island, seeing that they had a name for it, *Tangatema*. Though the mainland is in many places densely timbered, there are open downs at Woolnorth and other spots where game would be fairly plentiful.

There were tribes at Circular Head and at Emu Bay. Most of the hinterland was covered with dense, almost impenetrable, forest, but the high downs of the Hampshire and Surrey Hills and Middlesex Plains were favourite resorts. Other patches of open country at intervals would probably afford to these tribes the means of inland communication with their kinsmen on the west, as well as the more circuitous route by the coast. These open spaces were formerly more numerous, being kept clear by burning. Many of them have become overgrown with timber since the removal of the natives.

Hobbs (Boat Voyage, 1824) says that the natives travelled along the coast between Circular Head and Port Sorell, keeping the country burnt for that purpose. This group of tribes may possibly have extended as far east as Port Sorell, though the Port Sorell blacks were more probably connected with the Port Dalrymple tribe.

Kelly (Evidence, Aboriginal Committee) states that the West Coast natives were a finer race than the tribes in the interior, and had no intercourse with them. The southern and western groups appear to have been quite isolated from those on the eastern side of the island.

3. CENTRAL TRIBES.

“Tribes from Oyster Bay to Pittwater.”—*Milligan's Vocabulary.*

The interior and eastern parts of the island were occupied by two powerful tribes—the Oyster Bay and the Big River. Their northern boundary may be roughly described as an irregular line beginning on the East Coast south of St. Patrick's Head, passing along the ranges to the south of the South Esk River to a point at St. Peter's Pass (north of Oatlands), and thence to the Great Lake. It was these two tribes who were the most implacable enemies of the settlers, and it was against them almost exclusively that Colonel Arthur's “Black Line” operations were directed.

(a)—*The Oyster Bay Tribe.*

The Oyster Bay tribe or group of tribes occupied the East Coast, and extended inland to the central valley. They took their name from Oyster Bay (Great Swanport). The long extent of coast, following the inlets and peninsulas from north of Schouten Main (Freycinet's Peninsula) to Risdon on the Derwent, abounds in crayfish and in oysters and other shell-fish, affording an abundant supply of their favourite food. On the East Coast the hills lie some distance back from the sea, and the country yielded a supply of game. Here the natives were numerous, especially at certain seasons. It is said that as many as 300 have been seen in one mob. Robinson mentions two tribes on the coast—the Oyster Bay proper and the Little Swanport tribes. Their canoes were seen at Schouten and Maria Islands. The latter was a favourite resort, and here Baudin's expedition (1802) fell in with a large mob, who showed themselves decidedly hostile. Marion came into collision with them at Marion Bay in 1772. They roamed as far south as Tasman's Peninsula, resorting to a spot near Mount Communication to obtain “flints.” Tribes

belonging to this group occupied the country behind the East Coast Tier—Eastern Marshes, Native Plains, and Prosser's Plains. They were numerous in the Pittwater district—comprising Coal River and Richmond, Sorell, and South Arm. Mobs of 100 were seen at South Arm and also at Kangaroo Point (opposite Hobart), and 300 at Risdon, in 1804. To this same group of tribes doubtless belonged the natives who occupied the fine hunting country in the Jordan Valley, about Bagdad, Green Ponds, and Lovely Banks, towards the great central divide. The names Hunting Ground, Native Corners, Native Hut River, and others, indicate some of their ordinary resorts. Brodribb (Evidence, Aboriginal Committee) says that the eastern natives did not go further west than Abyssinia, near Bothwell.

(b)—*The Big River Tribe.*

The country to the west of the Central and Jordan Valleys was occupied by the Big River tribe. They took their name from the Big River, the early name of the river, now known as the Ouse. They occupied the valley of the Derwent,—with its tributaries, Ouse, Clyde, and Shannon,—and the elevated plateau of the Lake Country, 2000 to 2500 feet above sea level. They travelled westward to Lake St. Clair and Mount King William, and probably still further west beyond Mount Arrowsmith. All this district abounds in game—kangaroo, wallaby, and opossum. At Split Rock (near the Great Lake), at the London Marshes (near Marlborough), and at the Native Tier, on the River Plenty, they found stone suitable for their rude implements. From the great central plateau they seem to have made descents into the district between Bothwell and Oatlands. We cannot determine the boundary between them and their eastern neighbours, the Oyster Bay tribes. Brodribb (Evidence Aboriginal Committee) says that he considered the Oyster Bay and Big River natives were one tribe, though the eastern natives did not go further west than Abyssinia. When harried by the whites the two tribes made common cause against the strangers, and finally the Oyster Bay natives took refuge in the Lake Plateau, where Robinson captured them, not far from Lake St. Clair or Mount Arrowsmith. It cannot,

however, be concluded that they were not originally distinct tribes. They were hostile to the Northern tribes. Gilbert Robertson (Evidence Aboriginal Committee) states that either the Stony Creek or Port Dalrymple natives had killed many of the Oyster Bay natives.

4. NORTHERN AND NORTH-EASTERN TRIBES.

There remain to be considered the tribes of the North and North-East. The language of the Ben Lomond tribe is described as a distinct dialect by Kelly, Walker, Backhouse, and others. Kelly (Boat Voyage, 1815) states that Briggs, the sealer, could speak the language of the North-East Coast tribes fluently. We may infer that this was the fourth language of which Robertson speaks, and it may have been common—with more or less variation—to the North-East Coast and Ben Lomond natives. It is difficult to determine the relationship of the tribes of the North Centre, the Port Dalrymple, and the Stony Creek tribes. The balance of probabilities inclines us to the belief that they were related rather to the North-Eastern group than to their Southern neighbours of the Oyster Bay tribe (with whom we know they were at feud), or to the tribes of the North-West. There is no mention of these tribes using canoes.

(a)—*The Stony Creek Tribe.*

The pastoral district now known as "The Midlands," lying in the centre of the Island, to the north of the Oyster Bay and Big River natives, was occupied by the Stony Creek tribe. They took their name from a small southern tributary of the South Esk, near Llewellyn, to the north of Campbell Town. They occupied the Campbell Town and Ross districts, going south to Blackman's River, Salt Pan Plains, and Antill Ponds, and up to the foot of the Western Mountains, probably including the valleys of the Macquarie, Isis, and Lake Rivers. A mob of 200 were seen on the Macquarie River in 1819. It is stated that about 1829, under their Chief Eumarrah, they frequented Norfolk Plains on the Lake River. If so they must have been allies of the Port Dalrymple natives. The country they occupied abounded in game, being lightly timbered and well grassed. They

had excellent "flint" quarries at Stocker's Bottom and Glen Morriston, to the south-east of Ross. In the Tasmanian Museum there is a fine collection of stone implements procured at Glen Morriston by the late Mr. Scott. It is said that the Oyster Bay natives also obtained "flints" from the same localities. The Stony Creek natives were a strong tribe and gave much trouble to the settlers. Part of their district was included in the "Black Line" operations.

(b)—*The Port Dalrymple Tribe.*

The country to the north of the Stony Creek natives—including the neighbourhood of Perth, Evandale, Launceston, the North Esk, and probably both banks of the Tamar—was occupied by the Port Dalrymple tribe.* They are said to have mustered in large numbers on various occasions. Once 200 of them proceeded from the neighbourhood of Launceston, by way of Paterson's Plains (Evandale) to the Lake River. Native Point, near Perth, a favourite haunt. Here they got stone for their implements. They probably roamed westward as far as Longford and Westbury, if not further. The districts they occupied are some of the finest in Tasmania; in its native state, a well grassed country with abundance of game. Their relation to other tribes is uncertain. They appear to have been in league with their Southern neighbours—the Stony Creek natives—and were, probably, also related to the North-Eastern group. The tribes as far as Port Sorell, and even as far as the Mersey, may have belonged to this group. But there is no evidence to show how far to the eastward the North-Western group of tribes extended. Possibly, the boundary may be placed in the forest country on the west bank of the Mersey. But it is uncertain to which group the Mersey and Port Sorell natives belonged. The evidence of language is not of much assistance. The Tamar was *Ponrabbel*; the Mersey was *Paranapple* or *Pirinappl*. The variation is hardly sufficient to establish either difference or consanguinity.

* The settlements on the Tamar were at first known under the name of Port Dalrymple.

Kelly (Evidence Aboriginal Committee) states that the tribes of the North and East take part with the tribes in the interior. He probably means that the Port Dalrymple natives (North) were in league with those of Stony Creek; and the Oyster Bay natives (East) with those of the Big River.

(c)—*The Ben Lomond Tribe.*

The Ben Lomond natives occupied the fertile valley of the South Esk, abounding in game. Their neighbours to the west were the Stony Creek tribe. They may have had access to the sea coast at Falmouth, by St. Mary's Pass, though this was a dense forest. They took their name from the great Ben Lomond range, rising to an elevation of over 5000 feet. The valleys of the mountain were probably too densely wooded to afford much game, but that they roamed over the highlands is shown by their having given the name of *Meenamata* to the lagoon on the plateau at the summit of the mountain. Perhaps the strongest proof of the separateness of the North-Eastern tribes—or, at least, that of Ben Lomond—is afforded by the variation in the word for "river." The South Esk was *Mangana lienta*. Elsewhere the word was *linah*: e.g., Huon, *Tahuné linah* (South); Jordan, *Kutah linah* (S. interior).

(d)—*North-East Coast Tribes.*

We find mention of tribes or sub-tribes along the whole stretch of coast from George's Bay, on the East Coast, to the entrance to the Tamar (Port Dalrymple), on the North. On various occasions mobs were met with at George's Bay and George's River; at the Bay of Fires and Eddystone Point; at Cape Portland, in the extreme north-east; at Ringarooma Point; at Foresters River; at Piper's River; and on the east side of the mouth of the Tamar. In 1806, a mob of 200 natives came to the first settlement at George Town, just within the entrance to Port Dalrymple, on the east bank of the Tamar. In the north-east part of the island the country is, in many places, open for some miles inland from the coast, and in such places there would be game. The interior is mountainous and heavily timbered, and, very probably, was not occupied by the natives.

In conclusion, to sum up the result of our enquiry, we find, (1) That the aboriginal population probably did not exceed 2000 : (2) that there were four main groups of tribes ; viz.—(a) South ; (b) West and North-West ; (c) Central and East ; (d) North and North-East : (3) that these groups were divided by strongly marked differences of language : (4) that the Southern and Western tribes were completely isolated from those on the eastern side of the island, and that a similar separation existed between the North and North-Eastern tribes on the one hand, and those of the Centre and East on the other : (5) that within the groups each tribe and sub-tribe probably occupied a definite district which was recognised as its special territory : (6) that the tribes within each group, though generally leagued together, were at times at feud with each other : (7) that in later years, after the European occupation, the tribes—especially those of the east and centre of the island—laid aside their differences, and made common cause against the white intruders.
