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Royal Society of Tasmania Archives: RS 19/6

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Copy of a letter of Mr J E Calder upon the existence of natives in unexplored parts of Tasmania in 1847.

Westbury Aug 13 1847

Sir,

Having lately heard that it is the intention of the government to restore to freedom the original inhabitants of this island, I take permission in the most respectful manner to address you on the subject with a view of offering information of an interesting nature of what I have observed to be passing in some of the remote districts which I conceive may deeply concern the future well being of this people.

In my numerous rambles through the unsettled western districts many circumstances have led me to believe that there still exists at large at least one tribe of natives who have never been in captivity. Assuming this is a fact which I will proceed to show is much more than merely probable, permit me very respectfully to enquire if it may not be feared that a revisitation of their old haunts and renewal of acquaintance with these members of their old community may not in some measure be destructive of those amicable feelings which a long course of kind and considerate treatment has possibly encouraged in our unfortunate primitives and whether some contamination may not take place from connection with the few who have had the [address towards the general] doom of their race.

My belief in the existence of a tribe of uncaptured blacks is founded chiefly on circumstances falling accidentally under my own observations, and partly on the statements of a gentleman who may confidently be relied upon.

I will premise by stating that their complete withdrawal from the mainland was universally believed to have taken place in about 1833 or 1834, and the feeling of serenity which followed was not much disturbed by the appearance of a few on the Dee in March 1840 who were actually taken and conveyed in a cart to within a mile of Marlborough, where they encamped leaving their spears with their captor as the sole testimony of their achievement. These persons (10 or 12 in number) passed into the possession of Mr Clark the District Constable of Marlborough, with whom I saw them a few months after.

In December of the same year, I was instructed to cut a track to Macquarie Harbour. When I had proceeded about 20 miles from Lake St Clair, I came to a small plain where

I found a native encampment comprising of two wigwams (sufficient for 6 or 8 persons) which had evidently been deserted only a few days. Any person who has once seen the terribly bleak weather of the jungles of Tasmania will be at no loss to distinguish their very primitive erections from those of every other class of beings. The foot prints about them, though lately obliterated by recent rains left no doubt of their being those of persons not troubled with boots. That they had been lately occupied was also to be inferred from the appearance of the fire place, from pieces of kangaroo flesh which were lying about only partly decayed etc.

Soon after this as I was examining this quarter of the island when crossing a low open ridge which lay between two rather extensive plains, I picked up a native's spear, which judging from appearances must have been dropped there very lately. This I took to Marlborough and left it with Mr. D. C. Clark.

I had opened the track as far as the lower ridges of the Frenchman when some circumstances which I forgot recalled me to Lake S. Clair. I went with my confidential man John Thomas, leaving the rest of the party seven in number, to open the track through the dense jungles of the Frenchman which I had previously marked out. On returning from the lake we were overtaken by night at the foot of this mountain. Flagged by a long summers days march and the carrying of heavy loads we were most unwilling at such an hour to tackle the long and steep ridges which lay between us and the rest of the party. As it was growing dusk we proceeded to set up our little tent for the night, which we did in a thicket a score or two yards away from our marked track. While we were employed in preparing our quarters my attention was called off by the sound of several voices of persons approaching us. At first I thought it was only some of our men who had come down from the camp on the Frenchman, though I could not conceive why they should do so or what inducement could tempt them down this excessively steep eminence only to go up it again. I was the first to hear them and said to Thomas - "Why here are some of our fellows: what brings them here I wonder? I'll stop them however and see what they want". By this time they were very close, and we both heard them distinctly. I called out pretty loudly to them, fearing they might go by. All was still in an instant. After waiting a few seconds I repeated the call: still there was no reply. In a moment the recollection of the newly dropped spear and the native's huts came across my mind. The same with Thomas, whose words are still in my recollection very freshly. "Its never our chaps, I know: depend upon its, its, its the natives". To snatch up a gun and cock it was an instants work, and I ran out on to the track, followed closely by Thomas with a tomahawk, who is an excellent fellow to have with one at such a time. But whoever they were they had stolen off and the darkness of the

hour gave them every facility to escape. After a few moments absence we returned to the tent where we stayed the night. Decisions of having a look around us before joining our party, we went after morning broke to a low open rise at the base of which we had encamped: and here our suspicions of the presence of natives were at once confirmed by finding another of their huts which they no doubt were about visiting for the night when I interrupted them. In an hour or so I rejoined my men, none of whom had been away from their encampment. Had I in the first instance noticed who the voices procured from I might have easily [satisfied myself] about the matter by keeping quiet, for we had not yet lit out fire. So there was no smoke to scare them away.

I may mention that during my examination of the western districts I was often led to the top of very high land which I used to visit to acquire knowledge of the country and the best routes to follow. On these occasions I more than once saw smokes in quarters which left no doubt in my mind of their procuring from the encampment of some solitary horde of these barbarians.

Those unacquainted with these districts may suppose that such might be the work of white people, but I beg very respectfully to say that they present no temptation to any one to visit them. Their wild and forbidding character - the ruggedness of the numerous hills and mountains - the [thickness] of the forests where these rigours occurred - the inaccessibility, and above all the coarse and worthless nature of the herbage of their vast morasses, all invite to repel rather than invite visitors and to tempt them for aught but the occasional invite of wandering tribes.

Similar evidence to the last, of there being natives yet at large in the island, I gathered in 1845 when I had been sent by the Lieut. Governor to examine the unsettled country between the widely separated stations of Deloraine and Emu Bay. I then on one occasion ascended the mountain known as Roland's Repulse looking from thence in a southerly direction I saw several fires in a part of the country which is quite uninhabited and has never been visited till lately, except by the surveyors of the V.D.L. Company in the early days of the colony - the [gullies] I allude to has recently been entered by some gentlemen from Bothwell, under the guidance of an expert bush traveller, Mr Lascelles. From this gentleman, whom I have alluded to in the earlier part of this letter, I learned that in going across country from the 19 Lagoons to the head of the Forth River, they saw several native huts and other indications of the present occupation of that country by their people. So apparent were these that the party with him felt the necessity of keeping a sharp lookout for them while they were beyond the settled districts. He also told me that a short time preceding his own visit a person of the name

of Pitt of the Hunting Ground (who has a sheep station at the 19 Lagoons) had made the same journey and that in reaching either the Mersey or the Forth observed numerous prints of naked feet on a small sand beach of the river. In endeavouring to collect some information as to their number by comparing the foot marks, Mr. Pitt was led to infer that there must have been 10 or 12. Not knowing who Mr. Pitt was I enquired if he was given to exaggerate when I learned that his statement might be confidently depended upon as he was a strictly correct young man.

Since looking through the draft of this letter I have read in a late number of the Hobart Courier that a party of men who had just visited from Launceston reported that then had a short time since seen 8 natives on the West Coast.

It is here necessary to notice that since the date of my visit to the Western Country a few were taken somewhere about Cape Grim, I think in 1843. These it may be said were the same whose huts etc I saw. But this is altogether uncertain, for we know absolutely nothing of what is passing in the Western half of the island. But without forgetting the late capture, still the subsequent observations of Mr. Lascelles and Pitt in 1845 x 1846 are strong proofs that some yet remain at large. Yet again to bring forward the report of the recent appearance of 8 already mentioned, it must remember that of the inland parts of the Western half of the island scarcely any one has ever had scarcely even a sight. Then who is to say that no native in not now to be found there? My own observations goes far to prove the country.

Mr. Calder goes on to express his belief that the captured blacks will return to those not captured and recover their old spirit with the added powers of doing harm learnt from white people - that the kangaroo hunters and many stock track keepers are a most degraded race and that [intrigues] will begin again.

The Lieut. Governor did not concur in the conclusions of Mr Calder, and there the matter ended.