AN EXCERPT FROM *SOME TIMBER STORIES OF THE HASTINGS*

Elaine van Kempen for Hastings Council, 2003

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS USING TREES AND TIMBER

The northern coast of New South Wales supported a substantial number of Aboriginal Australians. As J.G. Steele told in *Aboriginal Pathways*, the Tweed River district was able to muster 500 warriors. That means a population of about 2500 in an area of 1900 square kilometres – approximately 1½ people to the square kilometre. So the whole rich strip from the Camden Haven to the border and the coast west to the Great Dividing Range – 30,000 square kilometres – might well have nourished 45,000 people.

As everywhere else in Australia, they farmed the country with fire. At the time of the British settlement, the land was a wondrous mosaic of grassland and open forest, occasional belts of thick eucalypt forest, rainforest of varying width along the creeks and rivers, and coastal heath. The many rivers, creeks, lakes, swamps and lagoons made it easy to control the spread of fire. The entire coast and eastern slopes were burnt in small patches at periods ranging from a few months to several years.

The coastal people had a much easier time of the drastic climate changes of between thirty thousand and twelve thousand years ago than the inland people did. But they had to make drastic changes seven thousand years ago when the seas rose by about one hundred and fifty metres. The coastal fringe where they had previously caught fish and gathered shellfish is now about 250 kilometres out to sea. All the coastal middens now known have been made in the last seven thousand years although some older ones exist along waterways, away from the coast.

Women on the north coast of New South Wales fashioned deep, boat-shaped water carriers out of the leaves of the Bangalow Palms by bending the main rib of the long, pinnate leaf to the shape they wanted, tieing the ends together with a cord handle, then lacing the pinules in such a tight weave that no water seeped through them. These water carriers were traded. All over Australia, people with special foods and special tools or special plants like pituri traded them for their own needs. Well-used trade routes connected all areas of Australia. Widespread trade took place with Papua New Guinea. One route ran from Watam at the mouth of the Sepik River on the north coast of Papua New Guinea south by canoe and walking tracks through the centre of the island, then by boat and overland routes through coastal districts as far south as present Sydney Harbour.

An important article of trade from coastal heaths was glue made from the yellow resin of *Xanthorrhoea* species, sometimes from natural exudations, usually by beating the leaf bases on a sheet of bark or in a coolamon. The resin, collected as a powder, was then heated, mixed with fine sand or the carbonaceous structures made by Trigona bees, and rolled into balls. This glue, traded west, met glue from various species of Spinifex, *Triodia*, traded east.

The people indigenous to what is now defined as the Hastings area are members of the Birpai or Biripi Nation (it is spelt differently in Port Macquarie district and Taree district). As in other regions, they had names for each natural feature, each waterway, perhaps each part of each waterway. Their names for their country and its features were not recorded by the British who first came into the area. Instead they bestowed new names, often in honour of some distant dignitary with no connection to the country. In 1818, when John Oxley named the Hastings River in

honour of his good friend the Viceroy of India, he did not know, in that time of slow communication, that Warren Hastings had died six months earlier.

The Birpai people lived in settled villages along the river banks and around the lakes. Fire was a valuable tool in restraining the rampant rainforest that grew along the riverbanks and in deep gullies and ravines. It prevented it from creeping across the open grasslands that were so valuable for hunting. Large trees provided shelter for many species of animals and birds, and vantage points for those hunting them for food.

The nuts of the *Lepidozamia* and *Macrozamia* that grew on the mountains were an important food. They knew the different methods of getting rid of the poison in the flesh and the extreme poison in the kernel. A treatment that allowed them to eat the chestnut-flavoured fruit was insufficient to render the kernel safe. One method of preparing the kernels was to soak them for days in running water, wrap them in the papery bark of a Melaleuca until they fermented and then roast them. In 1889 the renowned botanist, J.H. Maiden, recorded the processing of *M. fraseri* seeds: *The whole seeds were collected in the month of March, soaked for several days and then buried in rush-lined holes dug in dry sand.*

In 1819 Phillip Parker King commented on the use of trees by the local people:

> *The canoes were merely sheets of bark, with the ends slightly gathered up to form a shallow concavity, in which the natives stood and propelled them by means of poles... The native huts were more substantially built and contained 8 or 10 persons. They were arched over to form a dome with the opening on the land side, enabling them to be screened from the cold sea winds, which were generally accompanied by rain.*

These dwelling places were built of timber and bark, with special huts being built for particular purposes. A birthing hut was prepared for the coming of each baby. The hollow inside it in which the mother would lie to give birth was lined with eucalyptus leaves and the hut smoked in preparation. A new coolamon made from a nearby tree was lined with ti-tree bark ready to receive the baby and more layers of the bark were placed under the baby. It was replaced regularly and the soiled bark burnt. The mother remained in the birthing hut until she healed.

The kino of the Red Bloodwood was applied to cuts to assist with healing, it was also used as a remedy for diarrhoea. For the latter treatment, the kino was carefully wrapped inside a piece of food so that it did not come into contact with the mouth. Gum resin from several species of *Acacia* was also used to treat diarrhoea.

When canoes for fishing, shields, woomeras and weapons were cut from trees, great care was taken to cut from only one side: no tree was ringbarked. The scars healed, often with an overgrowth of bark around them, and the life of the tree was not diminished.

Indigenous Australians in this area had experienced considerable loss of life from the early waves of smallpox, they had barely recovered when the British arrived to establish the settlement at Port Macquarie. The Birpai Nation's draft history, drawn from oral records passed down by Elders, records that their people experienced loss of life very soon after European 'settlement' (1820s/30s). In c1840 they endeavoured to fight back, enlisting the help of the neighbouring Thungutti Nation but, as a result of the superior weaponry of the new arrivals, many were killed near a place subsequently known as Blackman's Point. Cedar getters, as obsessed by 'red gold' as those who later suffered 'gold fever', brooked no interference in their quest for the magnificent old trees. Cedar Creek is, for Birpai people, a site of death.

History is written by the victors and its veracity often accepted unquestioningly. Some question the authenticity of oral history handed down from generation to generation and, as a consequence, the number of Indigenous people killed in massacres or multiple murders has become a matter of violent debate in Australia. Those who seek to reduce criticism of the colonists by minimising the number of Aboriginal deaths might turn to John Donne: *...Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind...'*

Between 1840 and 1900 as the colony grew, the Birpai people were systematically dispossessed of their land and placed on to local reserves under the control of the Aboriginal Protection Board. Between 1900 and the 1940s they were moved away from the Hastings area to reserves at Purfleet, Taree and Burnt Bridge, Kempsey.

Thomas Dick of Port Macquarie took many hundreds of photographs of Indigenous people during the early years of the twentieth century. Dick hoped that his work would 'produce scenes described by the early explorers such as Oxley' and his concern for the losses sustained by these people through European usurpation is evident in the photographs and their captions.

At the time the photographs were taken, the Birpai had suffered nearly a century of major dislocation resulting in physical and mental deterioration. In view of this, the physique and demeanour of the people shown in these photographs surprises. It is suggested that Thomas Dick had to go farther afield to find Indigenous people in less populated areas who had not yet suffered the same dislocation, bringing them to the Port Macquarie area to pose for the photographs. This does not, however, detract from the value of the photographic record Dick made. Nor is the authenticity of his work diminished because it occurred a hundred years after contact. In an essay entitled 'Thomas Dick's Photographic Vision', Isobel McBryde says:

> *...Dick's deep local knowledge, his long association with his informants, and their readiness to share knowledge with him, have given his record an authenticity and range rarely found in the work of others. He created a full series of stages of production, and recorded in detail everyday subsistence activities, activities indeed often ignored by observers, including contemporary ethnographers. Building on his own knowledge and that of his associates, he attained to a considerable degree the solid ethnographic record he saw as secondary to his re-creative aim. Given the history of contact in northern New South Wales, by 1915 such a record could only have been achieved by the methods Dick attempted. Its images offer an interpretation of Aboriginal life that was a unique co-operative creation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students of the Aboriginal past.*

Dick's photographs are the best visual record we have of traditional activities of Birpai people and their use of trees and plants for timber and food.

In 1830 Deputy Surveyor General Samuel Perry wrote in his journal

> *Honey Gathering*
> *The agility with which the natives climb the trees is surprising. A liane with a noose at one end is all the assistance they have except a tomahawk with which they cut notches in the bark and by this means - twisting the right leg to one end of the liane and holding the other in the left hand they almost run up the tree.*

Birpai elders Aunty Pat Preece and Aunty Lois Davis confirm the continuation of honey gathering from the tiny, black native *Trigona* bees:

> *Our parents and grandparents climbed trees for native bee honey – this honey was used to treat for all colds and coughs, especially whooping cough – we called it 'honey bull' when mixed with water.*
>
> *To find the hive, they used to catch one little bee, put a dab of sap on it and stick on a white feather. That way they could see it and it would lead them to the hive.*

Surveyor Perry also recorded two ceremonies that he was fortunate enough to attend.

> *15th A week ago I was amused with a Savage dance – a dance of the most savage description. It usually takes place by firelight. The dancers paint their bodies with white and red in different forms, i.e. on their faces and down their breasts arms and legs. They assemble with all their war implements and perform certain dances (which have no great variety) to the time beating on a shield with a womera – and a dull sort of song. To-day I was called to witness a funeral which is interesting enough and performed with some ceremony. The body enveloped in several sheets of teatree bark was lying beside the grave when we arrived. Several blacks were at that moment coming with branches of the gum tree, with the leaves of which they strewed the bottom of the grave. They then carefully unfolded the bark in which the body was enveloped and examined the corpse always preventing it from exposure for more than an instant. Enough bark being drawn to line the grave it was completely lined with it. The Kangaroo skin was then taken off and smoothly spread on the bark at the bottom of the grave. This being done the body was then lowered and covered over with some remaining soft sheets of bark, that which was first put in folded over and then another covering of leaves. After all this was performed one of the blacks probably a sort of chief, knelt on the body and addressed it – the bystanders seeming to join in parts of the address, probably only intimating their intention of revenging some injuries the deceased might have received from other tribes, also desiring him to lie quiet and not to jump up again – for it was observed that his different wounds were examined, particularly one inflicted by a spear last week. The speaker then came out of the grave and gave directions for filling in with earth... on the completion of which the surface was carefully swept with boughs. Thus ended the ceremony.*

Perry was obviously interested in and intrigued by these ceremonies. But the intelligence and ingenuity of Aboriginal Australians was most often grossly underestimated. Government Surveyor, Clement Hodgkinson was an exception. In 1843 he appealed for greater understanding of the skills and dignity of the local people. He told of an 'Aborigine in the Hastings Valley' who exhibited a dexterity in carpentry and in the use of tools *which a white man could not acquire unless he practised for a long time.*

The technique used to make a boomerang differed little from techniques used by white men to create timber implements: select a curved branch, chop it off, split the timber, smooth the timber, shape it, polish or decorate it.

Use of trees by the Birpai people was benign and, with the exception of planned fire, usually non-invasive. They used trees for shade, too. Aunty Pat Preece points out, with a wry smile, that they still do:

> *you never see a Koori sitting out in the sun, even at the beach they sit in the shade, and they walk slowly, they can walk all day because they walk slowly.*

During the early part of the twentieth century many Kooris were directed to land clearing under instruction from the Aboriginal Protection Board. Aunty Pat's father, Cecil Davis's experiences were typical of his generation and his race. During the 1930s he cleared 87 acres of land at Rollands Plains and, like many others, he was told that if he cleared it, fenced it and made it arable it would be his. He would be given a lease. But his daughters say that whoever went to arrange the lease on Cecil's behalf put the lease in his own name. Much farming land was cleared by Kooris who were tricked in this way.

Many of them, Cecil and his brother Sam included, worked for the farmers from 6 am until 6 pm (8 pm in summer) for little or no pay. They lived on the property and were given some rations. If they were lucky they got some meat when the farmer killed a beast. They cut timber and cleared scrub. Aunty Pat says:

> *often they would find a good big one and fell it into the group so that it would take down the others. If a group of trees was laced together with vines that helped...*

In 1937 the Davis family moved to Rossglen and Cecil went cutting timber on Middle Brother mountain. They moved then to North Haven where he worked on building a section of the breakwalls. Married men got 2 weeks work at a time and then were laid off for 2 weeks, single men 1+1, to give everyone a chance to get some work. During the lay-off periods Cecil and his brother Sam used to go out sleeper cutting on Middle Brother. Like other Kooris throughout the district they had sleeper-cutters' tickets and a quota from the railways.

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Thomas Dick photographs are held by:
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