

Natives of Morton Bay, 1823.¹

by

John Uniacke, with contributions from John Finnegan and Thomas Pamphlett.

... this gave me an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the natives, who are both in their dispositions and manners far superior to those in the neighbourhood of Sydney, and indeed to any that I had yet seen.

The principal station of the tribes, with whom we found these poor men [Finnegan and Pamphlett], was about two miles higher up the Pumice-stone River (so called by Captain Flinders, from the immense quantities of that substance found on its banks) than where the vessel lay; but as they depend principally on fish for their support, they have several huts, at a distance of three or four miles from each other, to which they migrate from time to time as the fish become scarce. Their huts are built of long slender wattles, both ends of which are stuck into the ground, so as to form an arch about three feet and a half or four feet high. These are strongly interwoven with rude wicker-work, and the whole is covered with tea-tree (*Melaleuca armillaris*) bark, in such a manner as to be quite impervious to the rain: thus forming a spacious and commodious hut, capable of containing from ten to twelve people. In their journeys the women are obliged to carry heavy burthens, consisting of whatever rude utensils they may possess, together with a large quantity of fern-root, which forms a part of their daily food, and not unfrequently two or three children besides. The men carry nothing but a spear, and perhaps a fire-stick; and their only employment consists in catching fish; this they do very expertly with a kind of hoop-net, which they use in the following manner: They go out in equal parties of four, six, or eight, each man having two nets. They then walk along the beach till they perceive the fish near the shore, which (from constant practice) they are enabled to do at a depth of four or five feet. As soon as this takes place, a little boy, who accompanies each party, creeps towards the water on his hands and knees; the party then divide, forming two lines, one on each side of the boy, at a distance of two or three yards, and as soon as the fish are sufficiently near, the boy throws among them a handful of sand, so as to distract their attention, when the men instantly rush into the water, forming a semicircle round the fish, each man standing between his two nets, which he then draws close together. In this manner they are seldom unsuccessful, and frequently catch more than they can consume. As they never travel without fire, the moment the fish are out of the water, they commence roasting and eating them, which they do without cleaning or any other preparation; and when they have satisfied themselves, should any remain, they carry them home for their women and children, who have been employed during the day in procuring fern-root, which they call *dingowa*, and a part of which they give the men in exchange for fish.

1. Excerpted from his "Narrative of Mr. Oxley's expedition to survey Port Curtis and Moreton Bay, with a view to form convict establishments there." *Geographical memoirs on New South Wales*, ed. by Barron Field. London: John Murray, 1825, pp. 27–86.

When Pamphlet arrived among them, they had no more idea that water could be made hot than that it could be made solid; and on his heating some in a tin pot which he had saved when wrecked, the whole tribe gathered round them and watched, the pot till it began to boil, when they all took to their heels, shouting and screaming; nor could they be persuaded to return till they saw him pour the water out and clean the pot, when they slowly ventured back, and carefully covered the place where the water was spilt with sand. During the whole of our countrymen's stay among them, they were never reconciled to this operation of boiling.

The women weave a strong neat kind of net with rushes; with one or two of these each native is furnished to carry fish, *dingowa*, or any thing else they may pick up. The nets used for fishing are made by the men from the bark of the kurrajong (*Hibiscus heterophyllus*), a shrub which is vary common in the swamps. It is difficult at first sight to distinguish them from nets made of hemp. They have also nets of a much larger size, which they use in taking the kangaroo.

Both sexes go perfectly naked; nor are the females at all abashed at appearing in that state before a stranger. They do not seem to have any ornaments, though they were much gratified with strips of red cloth and bunting, with which we decorated their heads; and some of the scarlet tail-feathers of a black cockatoo, which I gave them, had nearly produced a quarrel among them. Several articles of clothing were also given them, but they were invariably taken off and hidden as soon as they arrived at their camp; nor did we see ever any article again after they once became possessed of it.

Each individual of this tribe above the age of six years had the cartilage of the nose perforated, and many of them (especially the children) wore large pieces of stick or bone thrust through it, in such a manner as completely to stop the nostrils. This operation is always performed by the same person, whose office is hereditary, and confers some privileges, such as receiving fish, &c. from the others. It was held in this tribe by a fine intelligent young man, who was called the Doctor by our men. His father held a similar situation in another tribe on the south side of the river.

These tribes are distinguished from each other by the different colours they use in painting their bodies. Those on the north side blacken themselves all over with charcoal and bees' wax, which, with wild honey, they procure in abundance; and those on the south side paint themselves with a sort of red jasper, which they burn and reduce to a powder. Other tribes make use of a white pigment, with which (having previously blackened themselves) they daub various parts of their body. Their chief appeared to possess an unlimited authority over them; he was a tall, middle-aged man, with an intelligent countenance. He had two wives, which (though it sometimes occurs) does not seem to be common among them. However, only one of them lived with him as a wife; the other was employed, while he ate or slept, in going among the other huts and collecting from their inhabitants fish, fern-root, &c.—a tribute which was daily paid to him without murmuring, although the rest of the tribe in consequence occasionally fell short themselves. The chief possesses nets both for fish and kangaroo, but seldom uses them except for

his amusement. Neither does his head wife ever go out to gather fern-root with the rest of the women. The same practice of scarifying themselves with sharp shells prevails here, as at Sydney; but most of these Indians were cut more deeply, and all with great regularity. The women here, as at Sydney, all lose the first two joints of the little finger of the left hand; but the men do not extract a front tooth on their approach to puberty, as is invariably the case in the vicinity of Port Jackson. The amputation of the finger is performed by the same person who bores the noses.

Pamphlet and Finnegan, while among the Indians, were regularly painted twice a day, and were frequently importuned to allow themselves to be further ornamented by scarifying the body and boring the nose; but on their signifying that they did not wish it, the natives always desisted; nor was any violence used against them during their whole residence.

On only one occasion, during our stay, did the Indians show the least inclination towards pilfering, although they were constantly begging for every thing they saw. Our men had been employed on shore all day cutting timber, and several natives had been with them in the afternoon. Upon returning in the evening, it was found that somebody had stolen the best falling axe we had: this, as we had originally but two, we could ill spare; and, on Mr. Penson's informing me of the circumstance, I resolved to recover it if possible. I accordingly took the jolly-boat, and, with Mr. Penson and Bowen, pulled up to their encampment. On landing, several of them came out to meet us, and to them I endeavoured to make known our loss by signs. They soon teemed to understand me, and signified that they would accompany me to the place where it was hidden, which several of them accordingly prepared to do. However, I observed that they dropped back one by one, so that by the time I had advanced half a mile, there were only one old man and one young man left with me; one of these I was determined to secure till the axe was restored. I had some difficulty in making them keep up with me, as they were continually foaming pretences to get into the bush; but I at length succeeded in bringing them opposite the vessel, Here the old man made signs that he and I should stop till the young man brought the axe, and we accordingly halted while the other was soon out of sight in the wood. I then happened to take my eye a moment off my companion, when he darted into the bush with amazing celerity, and was out of sight in an instant. We now supposed that our friendly intercourse with them was at an end, and that we should not again see the axe; but at eight o'clock next morning we found a number of them on the beach, abreast of the vessel, shouting and elevating the axe, which, on my going on shore, was delivered to me by the old man who had shown such speed the evening before.

So this incident, instead of interrupting our good understanding, rendered our mutual confidence more strong; for several of the natives ventured on board that day for the first time, whereas they had always before refused to do so with signs of fear. From this time forward not a single day passed, on which we had not ten or twelve of them on board at a time. They seemed very curious, inquiring the use of every thing they saw, but it was longer before we could persuade them to eat any thing with us. However, when they once began, it was by no means an easy matter to satisfy them. Our rats and goats struck them with particular

astonishment. We could not prevail on them to approach the latter, of whose horns they seemed to have a great awe. They were, however, continually caressing the cats, and holding them up for the admiration of their companions on shore.

I could not ascertain that these people had any idea whatever of religion. They do not stand in awe of either good or evil spirits; nor did the Englishmen we found with them ever observe any thing like religious ceremony or prayer among them, during all the time of their residence.

The women are far more fortunate than those in the neighbourhood of Sydney, where they are abused in the most cruel way by the men; and where the marriage ceremony consists of seizing the bride and beating her till she is senseless. Pamphlet assured me that, during his residence among these natives (nearly seven months), he never saw a woman struck or ill-treated except by one of her own sex. Indeed, save among the women, he never saw a quarrel in that or any other tribe he was with. The women that I saw were far superior in personal beauty to the men, or indeed to any natives of this country whom I have yet seen. Many of them are tall, straight, and well formed; and there were two, in particular, whose shape and features were such as no white woman need have been ashamed of.

This tribe amounted in number to about thirty men, sixteen or seventeen women, and about twenty children. Their quarrels with neighbouring tribes are frequent, and often end fatally. As some of them were witnessed by Pamphlet and his companion, it may not be uninteresting to insert here the description which they gave me of two, at which they were present, and which I took down at the moment. That which Finnegan describes may be considered as the most faithful, as he witnessed it only two days before we found him, and the particulars were then strongly impressed on his mind; I give it nearly in his own words.

Account of a fight among the Natives of Moreton Bay, witnessed by John Finnegan.

“The natives at Pumice-stone River having a quarrel with another tribe, at the distance of five-and-twenty miles to the S.W., they were about to set off for the latter place in order to decide it; and as I was then living with the chief of the Pumice-stone River tribe, he insisted on taking me with him. We accordingly set out early one morning, travelling from ten to fifteen miles daily. Our party consisted of ten men, eight or nine women, and fourteen children, the king, his son, and myself. The men carried the nets, and the women were loaded with fern-root, &c.; all parties, men and women, being armed with spears.”

“On the third day we halted, and all the men went out fishing. After eating a hearty meal, they commenced painting and decorating themselves with feathers. The king himself covered me all over with charcoal and bees’ wax; and, when all were dressed, we again went forward, and in a short time arrived at a number of huts, which had been erected for the occasion. They were so numerous that I could hardly count them; and each tribe (for there were many tribes assembled to see the fight) appeared to have their huts distinct from the other. On our arriving within a small distance of the encampment, we all sat down; and as soon as we were

perceived, the assembled multitude began to shout, and immediately my companions were visited by several of their friends, and all began to weep piteously. Shortly afterwards the chief of the tribe on whose ground we were came to us, and having conversed for some time with our chief, he pointed out a place on which we might build huts for ourselves. The women of our party then immediately commenced building, and in less than two hours had finished five or six commodious huts, in which we all rested that night.”

“The next morning a large party, including our chief and several of his men, went out kangaroo hunting. They were not, however, very successful, having only caught one large kangaroo. They, however, gave me a great piece of the hind quarter, of which they made me eat very heartily; and here I will observe, that at all times, whether they had much or little, fish or kangaroo, or any thing else, they always gave me as much as I could eat. The same evening at sunset, the whole party, carrying fire-sticks, went away about a mile and a half to where the battle took place the next day, the chief leaving me with his wife and two children in the hut. He however returned some time in the night, for I found him at my back when I woke in the morning.”

“The next day, after breakfast, the ceremony of painting was gone through afresh, and we marched in regular line, our tribe having been joined by several strangers, all of whom seemed much rejoiced at my accompanying them. We shortly arrived at a level piece of ground, in which had been dug a circular pit about forty feet in diameter. I was now left in care of the chief’s wife at a short distance from this pit; but being anxious to view the fight, in spite of her endeavours, I went up towards it. She, however, followed me, calling out and weeping; upon which one of the men of our tribe came to me, and taking my hand, led me up to the pit. I there saw a woman of my tribe, and one of another, fighting desperately with sticks. The battle did not, however, last long, as they appeared to be quite in earnest; and in five minutes their heads arms, &c. being dreadfully cut and swelled, our woman was declared the conqueror, and other not being able any longer to oppose her. The victory was announced by a loud shout from all parties, and the amazonian combatants were immediately carried away by their respective friends. The man who had brought me to the pit still continued to hold my hand, and I observed his whole body tremble like an aspen leaf. The chief’s wife now came again to me, and endeavoured by every means in her power to force me away; but finding I still refused, she went for her husband, who immediately came, and taking away my spear, forced me out of the crowd. He then called several other chiefs around me, and showed me to them. This caused great talking and laughing among them, from surprise at my colour and appearance. The king then addressed them at some length, apparently asking them not to hurt me, which they gave me to understand by signs that they would not. I was then delivered up to our chief’s wife once more, who led me back to the place where we were left before. I had however a good view of the pit, round which the whole crowd still remained.”

“I now found that, while I had been engaged with the chiefs, another fight had taken place in the pit, for I presently saw a man carried out by his friends, who were of our tribe, bleeding profusely at the side from a spear-wound. He was

brought down to where I was, and place on two men's knees, with some kangaroo-skins spread over him; the men, women, and children howling and lamenting, much in the manner of the lower Irish. They supplied him with water from time to time, but his wound was evidently mortal, and in less than an hour he expired. The chief's wife then took me away a short distance from where he by, and the whole party set to work immediately to skin him; but from the distance at which I stood, I could not perceive the maimer in which they did it. In the mean time two more men had entered the ring to fight; and here it may not be amiss to observe, that previous to each fight the same ceremony is used that is described by Thomas Pamphlet in the combat which he witnessed."

"The third fight was now going on, while our party were engaged in skinning their deceased companion; when it appeared, from a tremendous shout, that some unlooked-for event had happened in the pit. I afterwards learned that the spectators judged that foul play had taken place between the combatants. The crowd upon this drew away from the pit; and our party, accompanied by those tribes that were friendly to them, formed themselves in a line, while their adversaries did the same opposite to them. The battle then became general. Several from each side would advance, and having thrown their spears, again retire to the line, in the manner of light infantry. Others would get behind the trees, and there watch an opportunity to burl their spears with greater effect. In this manner the fight continued upwards of two hours, during which time many retired from the line severely wounded, and another man of our party was killed. What number may have been killed on the other side I had no means of ascertaining. Our party now began to give way, which being observed by the women and children with whom I was, they made signs to me to accompany them; and with the exception of those who were employed in skinning the body, we made off. Not being able, however, to run as fast as the rest, I was soon in the midst of the opposite party, who, however, notwithstanding my fears, did not attempt to hurt me, but merely laughed and pointed at me as they passed by, showing the same marks of wonder as the chiefs had done in the morning. I then walked back to the huts which we had left that morning, but found nobody there. However, I sat down by the fire, and towards evening they began to return, a few at a time. Just before dark I saw a large crowd approach, who (it seems) were bringing the bodies of the two men who had been killed. They had them down about twenty rods from the huts, and began a great lamentation over them. The first body was completely flayed, but they had not yet had leisure to don the other. I attempted to approach, but was immediately prevented by all hands, and forced to return to the fire. Shortly afterwards our chief and his wife came back, and instantly commenced packing up their nets, &c. in order to depart. Two large fires were lighted where the bodies lay, in which, as I judged from the noise as well as the offensive smell, they were both consumed. Immediately after this our whole party decamped; and having travelled more than half a mile, we stopped for the night."

"Very early next morning we again started, and travelled all day with great expedition, without ever halting or eating any thing. Among our party were four women and three men wounded, the latter very severely. They however contrived,

though with difficulty, to keep up with us. I had observed, during this day's march, two men, one of whom belonged to our tribe, and another to a tribe which was friendly to us, each of whom carried something on his shoulder, but did not keep the same path with us, walking through the bush at a little distance abreast of us. Being curious to know what it was they carried, I attempted several times to approach them; but as soon as this was observed, I was invariably brought back by the others, who made signs to me not to go near them. We travelled that day about eight or ten miles, and towards evening arrived at the edge of a large swamp, where we halted, and huts were instantly erected by the women, who were afterwards obliged to go out and procure fern-root for the whole party, the men never providing any thing but fish or game. I lodged as usual with the chief, at a little distance from whose hut I observed the two men hang up their burthens, which I again attempted to approach, but was (as before) prevented."

"Here we remained two days, during which a large fire was kept constantly burning underneath the trees on which these mysterious burthens were hanging. On the evening of the second day, I once more attempted to find out of what they consisted, though I strongly suspected they were the skins of the two men who had been killed. The old chief, on seeing me go near them, ran after me, calling loudly to me to return; but I persevered, and at last reached the place. I now saw that my conjecture was right: the two skins were stretched each on four spears, and drying over the fire. The skin of the head was divided into two parts, and hung down with the hair on it. The soles of the feet and palms of the hands were also hanging down, and the nails still attached firmly to the skin. Several of the men and women were sitting round the fire under the skins, and now invited me to sit down with them, which I did. They then gave me some kangaroo-skin to decorate my arms and head, and seemed to wish me to sing to them; but on my making signs that it was not proper to do so while the remains of our friends were not buried, they seemed surprised, and afterwards told me by signs that they were much pleased at my refusal. After sitting with them about half an hour, the chief's wife came and brought me back to the hut. Shortly afterwards, all the men dressed themselves in kangaroo-skins, and one of them in an old rug jacket which I had, and with one or two of the women, held a consultation round the fire, each person having a fire-stick in his hand. After conversing about half an hour, two of the party separated from the rest, and having taken down the skins, set off at full speed through the bush; the rest followed, shouting and making much noise. After this I saw nothing more of the skins, nor do I know what became of them. In about three-quarters of an hour the party returned; and the man who had taken my old jacket gave it me back. The next morning we returned towards the Pumicestone River by the same path which we had travelled to the fight, and the natives followed their usual occupations of fishing and hunting as if nothing had happened."

The fight which Pamphlet described as having been witnessed by him was not fortunately so sanguinary; and as the termination was very different from that above described, I shall insert it here.

Account of a fight witnessed by Thomas Pamphlet.

“About the time of our first arrival at Pumice-stone River, the young native whom we called the Doctor, and who used to bore the noses and scarify the skins of the rest of the tribe, had been wounded in the knee with a spear, while out on a hunting expedition, by a native of another tribe, at a distance of fifty miles to the northward. As the spear had broken in the wound, there was a good deal of inflammation in his leg, when he applied to me to cure him. This I effected by extracting a large splinter from his knee, and in a short time he was quite recovered. As soon as his cure was effected, and he was able once more to go out fishing and hunting, he sallied forth, accompanied by several of his tribe, in order to take satisfaction of the man who had wounded him; and having a great liking for me, on account of my having cured him, he insisted on my going with him.”

“The spot appointed for the combat was a small ring, about twenty-five feet in diameter, about three feet deep, and surrounded by a palisade of sticks. The crowd assembled to see the fight amounted to about 500 men, women, and children; and the combatants, followed by those who were friendly to them respectively, approached the ring in single file, and drew up in a regular manner on opposite aides of the circle. The whole assembly were well armed, many of them having five or six spears each. The two combatants then entered the ring, and having laid down their spears in opposite rows; point to point, began walking backwards and forwards, talking loudly to each other and using violent gestures, as if to inflame their passions to a due height. The women had previously been driven away, and the most profound silence reigned in the rest of the assembly. After about ten minutes spent in this way, they commenced picking up their spears with their feet, keeping their eyes fixed on each other, so as to prevent either from taking advantage of the other's stooping. In this manner they proceeded till they had each three spears, which they stuck in the ground, ready for immediate use. At the moment when they commenced thus picking up their spears, a tremendous shout burst from the spectators, who immediately relapsed into their former silence. All now being ready, one or two of the friends of each party spoke across the ring for a few minutes; and as soon as they ceased, the Doctor threw his spear with all his force at the other, who, however, succeeded in warding it off with a kind of wooden shield called an *elemong*, into which, however, it penetrated three or four inches. The other then threw in his turn; but his spear was also warded off in the same manner. The third spear which the Doctor threw penetrated quite through the shoulder of his adversary, who instantly fell, when one or two of his friends, jumping into the ring, pulled out the spear, and returned it to its owner; and the tournament concluded with loud huzzas from all parties. They all then retired to huts, which had been erected for the occasion, and the next day they again met at the ring, in order to give the friends of the wounded man an

opportunity to avenge his quarrel. But it appeared that no one wished to do so, as each had now wounded the other, and a reconciliation took place between the two tribes, which was announced by shouting, dancing, &c.; and a parcel of boys were selected from each party, and sent into the ring to wrestle: after which both tribes joined in a hunting expedition, which lasted a week; but my feet being sore, I was consigned to the care of the women.”