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THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL ABORIGINAL HISTORY IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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Introduction

I would like to focus on the history and culture of the Aboriginal people in the Manning Valley of New South Wales to show how material that is localised in nature can be used in a school program of studies. Such material helps to reveal the local or regional nature of Aboriginal culture, as well as aspects that are related to the whole of Australia. The common factors of Aboriginal culture have tended to have been over emphasised in the past and little mention has been made of the local or regional scene.

The local history of a particular Aboriginal tribal group is usually fragmented and incomplete, not only because of the paucity of written documents but also because of the deliberate lack of mention of the presence of Aborigines. While the written records are incomplete, a jigsaw picture of the local Aboriginal past can usually be constructed through the co-operative endeavours of local historians, Aborigines and teachers. Such is the case with the Birpai people of the Manning.

CASE STUDY: The Birpai of the Manning

Some understanding of the history of the Birpai can be gleaned from the diaries of explorers and early settlers; from comments about them in contemporary local newspapers; from the records of amateur and professional anthropologists; and from the official government and church records. Such documents are typically from a European viewpoint; rarely have the Aboriginal people themselves spoken through what has been written down. Oral history is therefore an important tool, especially as a way of compensating for the European bias of the written or printed document.

It is intended to examine two aspects of the Aboriginal people of the Manning: their traditional culture and how the invasion of the white man affected their way of life.

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The Aborigines had been on the Manning for thousands of years when the first few European settlers began to invade the Valley in 1827 to reap the potential commercial harvest from the Valley's natural resources. The Aborigines sought to maintain their traditional way of life with as little alteration to the Valley's environment as possible. The collision of interests and eventual accommodation between the invading European civilization and the old Aboriginal civilization is an important historical issue.

The Birpai tribe were the original inhabitants of the Manning River Valley. For many centuries they hunted, fished, and gathered food there. Their pattern of activity and movement was dominated by the two main seasons: summer and winter. In the summer the fish were plentiful, varied and relatively easy to catch, and the shellfoods were there for the gathering. The Birpai in the summer lived in the lowlands close to the river or its tributaries or close to the sea. In the early winter they began to migrate to the highlands of their territory in search of game, wild vegetables and fowl. They built shelters of wood and bark to protect them from the cold nights.

Before the Europeans came, the natural foods of the Aboriginal were plentiful in the region. There was an abundance of fish on the sea coast and in the salt water parts of the river, along with a plentiful summer harvest of rock and mud oysters, pippies, cockles, crayfish and crabs. The forests of the lower Manning abounded with koala, possum, emu, kangaroo, pademelons and wallabies. In the fresh water streams herring, perch, catfish and mullet were plentiful. While the Birpai men hunted and spear-fished, the women gathered shellfood and fruit and roots of a large variety of native plants. The Birpai diet was healthy. The Birpai occupied an extensive area of the Manning River Valley - well to the north of the Manning River, west to the Gloucester River and south to Forster.

Because of the non-permanent nature of their material culture, there is very little physical evidence of the many centuries of Birpai occupation. The remaining material evidence are the kitchen middens along the estuaries of the Manning and the Bora rings for tribal initiation rites. The kitchen middens were piles of shells from shellfish and oysters that had been eaten over the centuries. Many kitchen middens along the rivers have been since ploughed out by the European settlers. The material from middens was used in the building of pathways. Some kitchen middens remain. A large kitchen midden can be still found on

Mitchell's Island. Occasionally broken shells and Birpai artifacts are ploughed to the surface on farms along the Manning River.

European invasion and settlement in the Manning River Valley brought a very rapid transformation of the landscape and ruined the ecological balance which was the basis of the Birpai economy. The Birpai's hunting, food gathering and fishing domains were destroyed forever in their traditional sense. The tribe became alienated from their traditional lands by the 1860s. But fragments of the Birpai way of life survive and more will be rediscovered. One European noted down their methods of cooking:

Possums and roots undergo a curious culinary process. An ant-hill is scooped out, in which a fire is lit, and left burning until the place is almost red-hot. The fire is then pulled out, and a few stones are laid on the bottom of the "fireplace". The 'possum or bear, unskinned (just, in fact, as it was killed) is wrapped in some large leaves, or Ti-tree bark, and placed in the hollow. The hole is then closed up. In a very short time the "tasty morsel" is thoroughly cooked, without loss of gravy - the secret of cooking being a condensation of steam.

Some other knowledge of the traditional foods of the Birpai has been preserved. J.W. Walker of Dingo Creek remembered that, in the mid-nineteenth century, 'Cowac' was a rare root delicacy favoured by the Birpai people. He frequently witnessed the Birpai eating roasted possum. 'Sugar bag' or bees' nest was a popular sweet among them. The Birpai frequently mixed honey with water in a fashioned bark bowl or container. The mixture was known as 'Bull'. Pieces of porous bark were dipped into the mixture and then sucked 'with evident relish'.

Some of the Birpai place names and their meanings have not been lost forever: Kundibakh means 'wild apples' or 'where the wild apples grow'; Nabiac means 'wild fig tree'; Taree comes from Tareebit, which means the fruit of the wild fig tree which grew there in profusion. These terms have been corrupted linguistically and their meanings may not be exact but at least they have been maintained.

The Birpai used bark canoes for fishing; crossing the river and gathering shellfish. These were made out of a single sheet of bark taken from either a swamp mahogany, a river gum, or a stringy bark. A cylindrical sheet of bark about twenty feet high

was cut, then pried from around the tree. To make the bark pliable, it was heated over a long open fire, then each end of the bark piece was bound together by rush-fibre or a strip of vine passing through holes punctured in the bark with a sharp-pointed hardwood stick. The sides had to be strengthened with stems of acacia or eucalyptus sapling bound along the inside of the gunwale with bark-fibre cord passed through holes punctured in the bark. An additional piece of vine or sapling was bound across each end to further strengthen the frame. A couple of wooden pegs were set up on one end to hold fishing spears or paddles. A large slab of stone or thick layer of mud was placed in the middle of the floor to form a hearth on which a small fire was set. The fire gradually stiffened and strengthened the bark sheet. Gum, mud or clay was used to patch any holes that developed in the canoe. These canoes usually lasted about twelve months. The men made the canoe, but it was used by both the men and the women.

Each family had one or two canoes. The women used them for gathering oysters and cockles on the mud flats or shoals. The men used them for spear fishing. One man paddled in the stern; the hunter sat in the bow with spear and woomera ready.

To the early white settler canoes of this type were a familiar sight. As the nineteenth century progressed they gradually went out of general usage.

The Birpai men in their traditional state wore a belt made of possum fur strung around the waist, with a pubic tassel of native cat skin cut into strips. They wore nothing else except a hair net, knitted from fine string dyed red with ruddle, on their forehead. Their hair was tightly wrapped around a pad of Ti-tree bark covered with tussock grass. The women were entirely naked and wore their hair long and uncut. At ceremonial times they painted their bodies with ruddle.

The Birpai spears were made of the stem of a small grass-tree which grows in sandy areas near the coast, or long thin stems of the "brown Kurrajong". The spears were pointed with fire-hardened ironbark about 18 inches long, fitted into the shaft with kurrajong string covered with grass tree gum. There were five or six barbs in each spear used in hunting animals such as kangaroos. The fishing spears were much longer and had three points of ironbark fire-hardened. The hunting spears were called 'Gummi' and the fishing spears 'Mutti'.

From the beginning of black-white contact in the Valley the Birpai were considered to have no land rights, and their traditional way of life was heavily restricted though the changes made to the landscape by the European settlers. There was a very rapid intrusion into the tribal territory of the Birpai between 1824 and 1850. By the end of that period most of their territory in the lowlands had been taken from them by pastoralists and agriculturalists. The Australian Agricultural Company, in 1824, was the first to set up pastoral activities on the southern side of the river on their huge land grant, but others were soon to follow. By 1848, the pastoralists had started to encroach on the higher land. The whole Birpai system of seasonal migration was almost completely broken down. The Birpai were both directly and indirectly excluded from their tribal land by fences and the clearing of the land. The process was one of detribalisation.

The white settlers generally saw their own culture to be superior to that of the Birpai. The Birpai were relegated to 'black camps' near to the major white settlements. Soon most Birpai people were dependent on the whites, although some vigorously maintained their independence and consequently fell foul of the white man's law. Such was the case with a 'wild black-fellow' captured at Johnston's Peak above Wingham. He lived by himself and followed a traditional way of life. He was described as 'a powerful native, exceedingly wild, and when captured was stark naked'. It was thought that he had speared cattle several times and it had been decided to apprehend him. Nothing was proved against him and so he was released. Soon after he disappeared entirely. He was a solitary, defiant warrior who would not give in to be dependent and yet remain on the fringe of white society.

By 1890, five major 'black camps' had developed on the fringe of the European settlements in the Valley: Brown's Hill near Taree, Saltwater, Larry's Flat, Kimbriki, and No. 1 Station. 'Black camps' developed their own distinctive cultures based on group living and shared alienation. Many Birpai in these 'black camps', gave up their old ways of hunting and food-gathering, which had been made more difficult or impossible by the alteration of the landscape. Fishing survived better than hunting or food gathering, and the fish-spears were modified by replacing the hardwood points with three steel spear prongs.

The issuing of 'Government' blankets to local Aborigines on an annual basis became symbolic of the paternalistic attitude of the whites. The law courts and the police were responsible for

their receipt and issue. In June 1863, 125 blankets were required for Aborigines living more or less permanently in the 'black camps' of the district.

Some individual Aborigines gained the respect and admiration of the white man. Harry Combo of Dingo Creek, famed for his outstanding skill as a buck jumper at rodeos and as a horse-breaker. Billy Johnson was born at Curricabakh. He shifted to the Clarence and became an outstanding black tracker for the police. On an unused reserve for Aborigines at Killawarra, near Wingham, he set up a family residence in the early 1880s and attempted to grow two acres of maize, potatoes and tobacco. He was one of the few Aborigines to attempt the cultivation of cash crops. Tommy Boomer, a full-blooded Birpai, was born at Dingo Creek in about 1864, and brought up by Sergeant Coady of the Taree police. He received white man's schooling at Taree public school, then worked for many years for the Manning police as a tracker. On the 11th August 1926, a Wingham party, under the guidance of Tommy Boomer, went out in search of an old Bora ring or ground in between the Dawson River and the road to Cedar Party near Woola where he had been initiated by the elders. Tom Boomer was a good beach fisherman and lived at the Saltwater 'black camp' in the winter. In December 1928 Tommy Boomer was accidentally killed while walking along the railway line near Mount George. He was deaf and did not hear the train whistle in the embankment until too late, and when he did he became confused and ran the wrong way. He died on the way to Taree station aboard the train. He was one of the last of the initiated and full-blooded warriors of the Birpai tribe.

For the early settlers the Birpai were a ready supply of cheap labour. They were cedar cutters in the 1830s and 1840s, and path finders and clearers of land for settlers. Many became expert axemen and horse breakers. The 'black camps' provided labour for casual and itinerant work. This meant that the Birpai men had to leave the camps for extended periods to obtain work, especially in the timber industry. Their payment in the colonial period was usually rations, tobacco and, occasionally, a few shillings. Other Aborigines caught and bartered fresh fish or honey with the white man for tea and flour rations. During the harvest season the Birpai pulled maize and cut millet for the agriculturalists. This work was not well paid.

In 1883 the Aboriginal Protection Board was established by the New South Wales Government. The Board placed Aborigines on

reserves and provided them with some form of housing, schooling, rations, medicine, equipment and clothing. The 1909 Aborigines Protection Act had power of controlling all movement of Aborigines in New South Wales. The idea behind the Board's work was the segregation of Aborigines to protect them from the bad effects of white society. Station Aborigines were to be under the control of a white manager, and Christian missions were to care for and provide European education.

The Purfleet Station was established in 1900 on eighteen acres about two miles from Taree. At the time there were about 78 people at the Aboriginal camp: 37 children and 49 adults. Of these, 21 adults and 21 children were receiving full rations, clothing and medical comforts. The rest of the people were supporting themselves through their own labour. By 1902, dwellings for families and a school building and church had been built at Purfleet. Purfleet grew into the centre of Aboriginal life in the Valley. From out of Purfleet various seasonal tasks were available for the black labour force: millet cutting, corn pulling, hunting for skins, and railway construction. By this time, these occupations were better paid but they were mainly seasonal. In the winter the Purfleet men used to snare possums to sell in Tinonee for the Sydney market. The population of the Purfleet Mission was very subject to seasonal fluctuation because of the work patterns of its people.

The NSW Department of Public Instruction appointed a teacher for the Purfleet Station school in 1903. Aboriginal children could attend other State schools if there were no objections by white parents. Most of the Valley's Aboriginal children attended the Station school instead.

The Aboriginal Protection Board, under the 1909 Act, had a duty to provide for the custody, maintenance and education of children of Aborigines. This included power to indenture any child under an apprentice scheme. Girls were allocated domestic service jobs and boys were given general farm work.

Under the 1909 Act there was a prohibition on Aborigines drinking alcohol and a clause against white people associating with Aborigines. The Board could force Aboriginal men to accept work when and where it was available.

The great Depression caused a dramatic deterioration in employment for Aborigines. At Purfleet the population and welfare needs increased. The Board's policy changed. A manager

was appointed in 1932 with new powers. The Aboriginal people were now not allowed to leave the reserve without permission. The Aborigines had a greater trust and respect for the missionaries, who had shown much kindness. Relations with the new Board managers were always uneasy. The manager also occupied the role of the teacher even though he was untrained for that role.

The Aboriginal Protection Board was replaced by the Aboriginal Welfare Board with a new policy of assimilation in 1941.

During the Second World War a boom in Aboriginal employment was enjoyed because of shortages in the labour force. In 1944, 96.2 per cent of able-bodied Aborigines were in steady employment. In the period following the war a high level of employment quickly became a high level of unemployment.

The 1943 Aboriginal Protection (Amendment) Act allowed some Aborigines some participation in decision-making at the Purfleet Station. It also introduced 'Exemption Certificates' for selected Aborigines, allowing them to 'roam freely on the land that their fathers once owned'.

In 1960 electricity and stoves were installed in the houses and a 'save the children fund' preschool was opened. The Gilla-warra gift shop was also opened that year. Mrs Ella Simon, a local Aboriginal leader, born in 1902, managed the gift shop for ten years. She was made a Justice of the Peace in 1962. The profits from the gift shop helped to finance several self-help and improvement schemes over the years, especially in the area of educational scholarships. These scholarships aided the education of Aborigines at the local high school and technical college.

The biggest change in the decade was the 1967 Referendum which supported the idea that Aborigines should at last be granted Australian citizenship rights. The long reign of Purfleet Station managers ended in 1968. The Purfleet Aboriginal Advancement League was set up in 1971 to administer the Purfleet community's affairs and act as their official voice. The League was made up of nine Aborigines elected from the community.

In December 1977 there were 305 people living at Purfleet. About 50 per cent of this population were under the age of 15 and only 2.3 per cent were over the age of 65. This distribution was a large burden on the Purfleet community's resources in terms of child rearing and educational expenses. There were only a few elders to guide the young.

Inadequate housing was still a major problem at Purfleet. The average occupancy of each dwelling, most of which were constructed in or prior to, 1948, was over six people. The caravans were an emergency band-aid approach to the problems of housing. In 1980 there was an unemployment rate of 87 per cent.

The most serious health problem in Purfleet is the mental and physical deprivation caused by alcohol abuse, associated with the problem of high unemployment. The people of Purfleet are an alienated community - the outcome of their history. What the future holds is difficult to assess. There are encouraging signs that things can change for the better, but there is no miracle cure. The Birpai youth centre at Purfleet is a recent move in the right direction and the City of Greater Taree Council's appointment of an Aboriginal liaison officer is another. Aboriginal elders, like Bert Marr, are working hard to re-establish traditional knowledge and skills among the young so that once again they can take pride in their own culture.

(Adapted from John Ramsland's book *The Struggle against Isolation - A History of the Manning Valley*. Library of Australian History and the Greater Taree City Council, 1987)

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RESOURCE KIT - *Women's Gathering and Hunting in the Pitjantjatjara Homelands.*

A slide kit has been compiled by Suzy Bryce with much assistance from the Pitjantjatjara and Alice Springs peoples, as one result of a nutrition program which was set up by the Pitjantjatjara Ngaanyatjara Health Service at Kalka, in the north-western corner of South Australia. This is a most valuable teaching resource for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners.

The program was designed by Aboriginal people who saw the need for a nutritional program to start with bush food, and the slide kit is the outcome of many trips gathering, hunting and preparing bush food in season with the Aboriginal women. There is one slide set dealing with *malu*, the red plains kangaroo, which the men hunt and prepare.

The slides have been shown to audiences, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, children and adults, on the coast and in Central Australia. They have been approved by Aboriginal people and are of interest to children and adults. Whilst they are specifically about food and culture, the slides have been used to stimulate general discussion in the area of "Aboriginal Studies" and also as an aid to language learning.

The kit consists of two sets of notes, lists and a summarising chart, illustrated with slides and line drawings.

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