

Notes on the Fraser Island aborigines. I. Early encounters with Europeans. Qd. Nat. 19:53-55.

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NOTES ON THE FRASER ISLAND ABORIGINES

I. EARLY ENCOUNTERS WITH EUROPEANS

By F. S. COLLIVER, M. HAWKEN and E. N. MARKS

The native people of Fraser I. are commemorated by Captain Cook's naming of Indian Head "on account of the number of Camp Fires and Indians seen" as he sailed past it in 1770.

Mathew Flinders (9), sailing up the coast in the "Investigator" in 1802, noted 50 natives on the north side of the opening of Wide Bay (i.e. the southern end of Fraser I.) and, between there and Sandy Cape, observed that "smokes arose from many parts". His illustration "Part of the Great Sandy Peninsula taken July 28, 1802 at eight a.m." shows Indian Head and points north of it, with a smoke rising. Landing later to the west of Sandy Cape, he made friends with the natives (cf. Pl. 1, Figs 1-3) and wrote, "These people go entirely naked, and otherwise much resemble the inhabitants of Port Jackson in personal appearance; but they were more fleshy, perhaps from being able to obtain a better supply of food with the scoop nets, which are not known on the southern part of the coast. I noticed in most of them a hard tumour on the outer knuckle of the wrist, which, if we understood them aright, was caused by the stretcher of the scoop coming in contact with this part in the act of throwing the net." He also recorded that "my native friend, Bongaree" was unable to converse with them in his own language and in desperation tried broken English; they did not know how to use Bongaree's womerah.

Armitage (3) gives a glimpse of the reverse picture of these visits, in stories handed down as corroboree songs. He says that the blacks seen at Indian Head had followed the "Endeavour" from the south end of the island in their excitement at the first ship they had ever seen. They likened it to a crab in the way it disappeared from their view.

Another song refers to the landing of one of Flinders' boats at Wathumba Creek. The natives were frightened away by gun fire. Woomingela, who stayed in hiding and watched, described to his friends how the strangers took away some fresh water and how they killed some of the numerous wildfowl with their loud-sounding weapons. Armitage says "It seems that the first impulse was to receive the strangers in a friendly manner, but evidently the crew of the boat, few as they were, could not trust in their good intentions, and fired guns to scare them off."

(A death-wail translated by Armitage includes "Where shall the bora be? At Yidney. Where is the camp ground? At Booyum-gan [=Poyungan].") He says Yidney is the corruption of Yenningee, a well-known bora ground.)

Although it is likely that convicts who escaped from the Moreton Bay penal settlement and lived with the blacks visited Fraser I., the next report of its people followed the wreck of the "Stirling Castle" in 1836. This was the ship, incidentally, in which Andrew Petrie and his family had earlier come to Australia. There are many versions of the story of this wreck and of what befell its survivors (see p. 61), and it seems impossible now to distinguish the facts from the subsequent embellishments in the telling. There is even no agreement on the site of the wreck nor between accounts by Mrs. Fraser herself in 1836 and 1837 (14). We are concerned here with that part of the story that involved the Fraser I. aborigines. The following outline is based mainly on the 1836 accounts quoted by Russell (14).

The brig "Stirling Castle" left Sydney on 15 May 1836 and was wrecked about 900 miles north, on "Eliza Reef" (possibly Swain Reef) on 21 May. The ship's company set sail for Moreton Bay, Captain and Mrs. Fraser, Brown the Chief Officer, Baxter the Second Mate

and some of the crew in the long-boat, the rest in the pinnace. On 30 May they landed and spent three days on an unknown island. Soon after putting to sea again the boats became separated. The pinnace grounded north of the Clarence River and one man, Hodge, reached the Macleay settlement. The long-boat, after two or three weeks, put ashore on Fraser I.

On 26 June a great number of natives appeared and Captain Fraser suggested giving themselves up quietly. Various groups apportioned the men between them and took them away but left Mrs. Fraser on a sandbank. Next day some old women and children came to the beach and she was made to travel with them, carrying a child on her shoulders, and sharing their tasks. The women derided her for her clumsiness.

The group that took Captain Fraser put him to dragging loads of wood. Three weeks later, when Mrs. Fraser chanced to meet him, he was so weak he could hardly move his load. She was too frightened to help him and soon after found him dying from a spear-wound. She reported that the natives buried him.

Brown apparently rebelled at the death of his captain and eight days later was killed by the process of burning his legs. According to Mrs. Fraser's second and more lurid account, Brown in his struggles hollowed a grave in the sand in which he was buried, and a fine looking sailor, James Major, was stunned and beheaded, his head being preserved and affixed to a canoe. However Baxter on his rescue in 1836 recorded Major as one of the pinnace party. Bracewell, the escaped convict, who at this time lived with Eumundy's tribe near Lake Cootharaba, later told Russell that Brown was killed and eaten at Double Island Point.

Some of the crew of the long-boat who had travelled overland and were found by a survey party about 50 miles north of Brisbane, reported that the blacks had stripped them but in other respects had been friendly. Lieutenant Otter took two whaleboats to look for the rest of the survivors and with the aid of a convict, Graham, who had lived with the blacks, rescued two sailors at Noosa, Baxter at the southern tip of Fraser I. and Mrs. Fraser from the Lake Cootharaba area where she had been taken by Eumundy, who had abducted her from the Fraser I. tribe when she was brought to the mainland for a "show" at a great corroboree. Bracewell helped her to reach her rescuers on 17 August 1836 and the party reached Brisbane on 22 August.

It is by no means clear how many of the above events actually took place on Fraser I. or involved the Fraser I. aborigines. And although these castaways had a terrifying experience, they may not have been harshly treated by tribal standards. Again, Mrs. Fraser appears an unreliable witness. At least it seems certain that of the uncertain number originally in the long-boat, two died and seven survived in the hands of their captors. The two who died could have been suspected of treachery, Captain Fraser because he talked to his wife and Brown because it does appear that he was plotting something.

Watson (17) points out that when Petrie wished to climb Mt. Bauple, Davis, whom he had just reclaimed from living with the blacks, told him they would attack in revenge of their friends poisoned at Kilcoy Station, which was 80 miles south. Watson suggests the deaths of Fraser and Brown may have been incited by some such action by white men far from the scene of the tragedy.

In May 1842, Andrew Petrie (13) took a party (including H. S. Russell) by boat to explore Wide Bay. On 8 May they entered Hervey Bay by the south passage, sailed down it about six miles and camped on "Fraser's Island". On 10 May they landed again and Petrie ascended some high land from which he discovered what is now called the Mary River. He says the rest of the party "tried all they could

to persuade one of the natives to accompany us across to the river, but were not successful. They appeared afraid of us, more especially of Mr. Wrottesley's red shirt." After exploring the river, on 16 May they returned to their former camp on the island. They showed a native "how far our guns carried, which appeared to astonish him". On this trip Petrie had gathered in two escaped convicts who had been living with the blacks, Bracewell and Davis. Next day he got them to ask "a great many natives, who were fishing at the mouth of the passage" where the bones of Fraser and Brown were buried. They pointed round the point about two miles. Petrie and Wrottesley landed and went along the beach to a camp but learned from the blacks that the dilly of bones shown to them there were those of black men. Their owner told Davis that the white men's bones were about ten miles away on the main beach. Petrie noted "The blacks are very numerous on Frazer Island; there is a nut they find on it which they eat and the fish are very plentiful."

In 1857 the "Seabelle" sailing south from Port Curtis to Sydney disappeared without trace. Two years later Captain Amard, having heard reports of survivors of the "Seabelle" being held on Fraser I., made a search from Maryborough in the "Coquette". He finally found the natives at Sandy Cape and two young white girls with them. They had all but forgotten their own language but the elder, Kitty, who was 17, said the ship had sunk on Breaksea Spit and that all had reached shore but the men had been murdered. The girls had been disfigured, their noses flattened and their mouths cut about in some manner. They were taken to Sydney and placed in an institution.

In 1864 a sailing ship, the "Panama", was wrecked at Rooney Point. The passengers and some of the crew camped on the beach but returned on board when 12 natives entered the camp at night and took everything. Later 200 natives tried to come on board but were bluffed by the sailors' cutlasses. They later brought "fine big fish" and held a corroboree on the spot but did not attack again. A small green clinker containing two men sailed by the wrecked "Panama" and next day one of the sailors found a man murdered, lying on the beach by the clinker five miles from Sandy Cape. This man Piggot, known as "Yankee Jack", was a timber-getter. His mate Barry was bashed on the head but managed to make his way back to the timber-getters' camp at what is now Yankee Jack's Creek. A black named Charlie, who exchanged Piggot's gun for flour from the "Panama", said they showed fight on landing and they were attacked and that they were "black-birding", but Barry stoutly denied this when questioned.