

THE ABORIGINES OF THE MALLEE

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The Background

The first white man to see the Mallee was Sturt, who skirted its northern boundaries on his voyage of discovery down the Murray R. in 1830.

The first white man to penetrate it was Eyre. He believed that the Wimmera R. of Mitchell was the Lindsay of Sturt, and he thought that by following the Wimmera's north-westerly course he would reach the Murray R. Acting upon this reasoning, he drove a herd of cattle from Port Phillip to the northern Grampians, and having reached the Wimmera, followed its course northwards, and thus discovered and named L. Hindmarsh. This was in May 1838.

Having reached this lake, and realizing his mistake about the Lindsay, he spent the next three weeks searching for a way to the Murray; but, being unable to find feed and water for his cattle in the dense scrub which enveloped him on all sides, retraced his steps. He eventually reached the Murray by travelling north on a more easterly route.

The report of good feed and water on L. Hindmarsh soon led to the occupation of it and the surrounding district, and by 1847 the fringe of the Mallee was completely taken up.

In August of that year, J. M. Clow discovered and occupied 'Pine Plains', the present L. Wirrengreen, which was the innermost point of the Mallee then reached by white man. This 'lake' is at the termination of the run of the Wimmera water after it passes through L. Hindmarsh and L. Albacutya. The Outlet Ck, which runs north from L. Albacutya, has a deep and well-defined channel, here and there widening into grassed plains. At flood times these plains are inundated and become lakes. However, floods seldom occur and the channel and the lakes are normally dry. L. Wirrengreen, the last lake of the series, has not had water in it since 1853. Clow took sheep there in May 1848, but he had to remove his flocks by November of the same year owing to lack of water. The flooding of the plains entails the loss of the grass, and it is doubtful which of the two evils was preferred by the squatters, the lack of water or too much of it.

Prior to his 'Pine Plains' venture, Clow had already occupied (May 1847) a stretch of country about 30 miles W. of L. Hindmarsh, on which were some 'shallow swamps of tenacious clay'. These swamps were known to the natives as **Belarook**, Porcupine Grass, and this name Clow bestowed on his newly-occupied run. Belarook is of interest to us because Clow found it occupied by an aboriginal family, and his references to this family are the only descriptions we possess of Mallee aborigines.

The next important date in the exploration of this region is 1849. During that year, Assistant Surveyor E. R. White started his survey of the South Australia-Victoria boundary line. Beginning from a point 124 miles N. of the mouth of the Glenelg R., where the survey had been terminated by his predecessor, White

worked his way northwards, pegging out and surveying as he went, until he reached the Murray. After this arduous and somewhat hazardous feat, he undertook a number of independent journeys through the Mallee, sometimes entirely alone. He crossed and recrossed this inhospitable region in all directions during a period of three years, his last journey through it being at the end of 1851.

It is a remarkable fact that, in all of his travels through this region, he did not fall in with one single native, although he often found evidence of their having frequented the water-holes.

At the beginning of 1852, White sent the following report on the general character of the Mallee to the Surveyor General, and it is here given as probably the best extant description of this region as it originally was:

'From the southern edge of the scrub, to a distance of about 60 miles, the country consists of sand hills and heath, with occasional patches of scrub of *Eucalyptus dumosa* in the lower grounds. The highest of the sand hills does not exceed an elevation of 200 feet above the general level of the desert. In this portion of the scrub there are clumps of pine at various distances, averaging about 15 miles apart, covering 2 or 3 acres of ground, and most frequently water is to be found in a native well at each, with a little grass. Beyond this to the Murray there are no native wells, and but few places that will retain surface water for any length of time. Some of these wells, though none exceeds 3 feet in depth, yield a sufficient supply of water for two or three teams of bullocks throughout the summer, others are soon exhausted.

The next portion, extending about 60 miles farther north, is covered with a heavy and dense scrub of *Eucalyptus dumosa*, through the greater portion of which it would be necessary to cut for the passage of drays; the sand is yellow and firmer, having apparently more clay mixed with it; the only features of any consideration are two or three grass plains of a few miles in extent, and some salt lakes, and though this portion of the scrub is in general more level, there are, to the eastward some high sand hills, one, laid down on the plan near some salt lakes, is about 250 feet above the general level of the desert, the view from which embraces a considerable area, but with the exception of the Salt Lakes and some small flats in the same direction, nothing can be seen on all sides but a sea of scrub.

The remaining space of 20 or 30 miles to the Murray, is also covered with *Eucalyptus dumosa*, but, though tall, is much more open, and scattered throughout with small salt-bush or grass flats, upon which the cattle from the river feed during the winter.'

The high sand hill referred to by White is now Mt Jesse, and the Salt Lakes are the Pink Lakes.

As well as the generally inhospitable nature of the country, the sharp pointed Porcupine Grass, which was found almost everywhere except on the heathy country, was a great hindrance to the traveller.

The Mallee and the Aborigines

The Mallee can be said to have been 'back country' to the tribes bordering on it, and it was only visited by groups from these tribes at various times of the year for the purpose of obtaining seasonal foods. It is certain that eventually some groups did settle on it, at places where water was more or less permanent. These groups were necessarily small, and it is possible that they originated from couples who had eloped, or from fugitives from tribal justice.

One such group in the making was referred to by Clow as being in possession of Belarook when he occupied it. Clow stated that:

'I found the sole occupants to be a man of great muscular strength and proportions, his three women, and two children . . . although this native . . . was apparently in the best terms with his tribe, yet they hinted that it was his prowess, not right, that maintained him in possession of such a large tract of territory, and more than his share of the women.'

This man was later speared by a party from L. Hindmarsh, and his wives appropriated. However, there is little doubt that, had he been able to survive the ire of his tribe, in a couple of generations his descendants would have been accepted as another division of it.

The Rev. Mr Hartmann, of the L. Hindmarsh Mission, gave the following names of divisions and the territory they occupied:

Lail-buil	Between Pine Plains and the R. Murray
Jakel-baluk	Between Pine Plains and L. Albacutya
Kromelak	At L. Albacutya
Wanmung-wanmungkur	At L. Hindmarsh
Kapun-kapun-barap	On the Wimmera R., S. of L. Hindmarsh
Duwin-barap	W. of the Wimmera R.
Jakal-barap	W. of the last
Jarambiuk	On Yarriambiak Ck
Whitewurndiuk	Between L. Coorong and L. Tyrrell
Kerabial-barap	At Mt Arapiles
Murra-murra-barap	About the northern Grampians.

All these divisions were said by him to be one and the same tribe, although they did not have a common name for all. The Murray River natives referred to them as **Malleegunditch**, literally Mallee-ites. Howitt generally agrees with the above list, with the exception that he wrongly reversed the habitat of the **Jakel-baluk** and the **Kromelak**. The native name for the outlet between L. Hindmarsh and L. Albacutya was **Kromelak**, while the name for the outlet N. of L. Albacutya was **Tyakil-ba-tyakil**. L. Albacutya was known as **Ngelbakutya**—Sour Quandong. Howitt placed all the above divisions within the **Wotjobaluk** Nation. The correctness of this placing is proved by the similarity of the language spoken at Pine Plains, at Mt Arapiles, and on the Avoca River.

Native wells in the Mallee were either clay-pans, which contained water in winter, or else soaks. The latter occur in poor sandhill country, and are probably clay-pans filled with drift sand. The natives sank shallow conical holes into these and thus obtained a fairly plentiful supply of water. The holes were kept covered with sticks, to minimize evaporation and to protect the water from kangaroos and wild dogs. In some places water was also obtained from crab-holes.

When travelling from one water-hole to the other, aborigines carried water in possum skins which had the leg-holes tied with string. The fur was turned inside, and any solids in the water adhered to it, so that, even if it started off by being muddy, the water was reasonably clear after two or three hours in the skin.

There are occasional references in the few accounts of the exploration of the country to rock water-holes. E. R. White, for instance, has an entry in his journal to the effect that he found 'at two clumps of pines some holes in rocks containing about 100 gallons of water'. These rocks are outcrops of red sandstone, no other stone being found throughout this region.

Every place which was likely to hold water was known to the natives, and it was given a distinguishing name by them. As an instance it can be cited that the well which was sunk by Clow on Pine Plains (the **Wirring** of the natives) to a depth of 20 ft was immediately christened **Koortiup** by the aborigines. **Koortiup** means Rock and refers to the fact that the well was sunk chiefly through sandstone.

Other recorded aboriginal names of wells are:

Buchan-buchan	W. of the Wimmera R.
Kinganga	SW. of L. Hindmarsh
Corran	W. of Lake Hindmarsh
Calkaki	W. of L. Albacutya
Koochi	SE. of L. Wirrengreen.

Water was also obtained from the roots of some of the eucalypts, which the natives called **Weir-mallee**. They are recognizable by the comparative density of the foliage. These trees have long horizontal roots only a few inches below the surface of the soil. After digging them up the natives broke them into short lengths, and up-ended them, making sure that the end farthest away from the tree was at the top. Good, clear water soon dripped out from them, a root of 15 to 20 ft yielding between a pint and a quart.

Another source of water was the Mallee-oak. When the trunk of this tree obtains a diameter of over 6 inches, it becomes hollow and holds water, which drains down into it from the branches. To obtain the water, the natives tied a bunch of grass to the end of a spear and dipped it into holes at the junction of the branches with the trunk. The grass acted like a sponge.

A similar method was used in getting water from crab-holes; or if reeds were available, water was sucked up through them.

Food presented no problems. Roots and bulbs were obtained on the plains and seeds of various plants, including the honeysuckle, were eaten. Possums, bandicoots, kangaroos, emus, wild dogs, as well as small birds, were found in the vicinity of water. Lizards and snakes were found everywhere.

Small birds of various kinds, which fed on the blossom of the honeysuckle and other plants, were captured by means of a running noose. A hole was scooped out of the sand, large enough for a man to sit in comfortably. Over the hole was built a shelter of green boughs. A stiff stick with a running noose at the end of it was held by the hunter, who endeavoured to call the birds to him by imitating their chirping. When, after some trouble, a bird came near enough, it was secured by slipping the noose over its head. The bird was then tied to the shelter by means of a string attached to one of its legs. It would thus act as a decoy, and it has been stated that a bag was in this way easily and quickly secured.

Mallee-hen eggs were available in season. Another seasonal but important food was the sweet, white excretion from the pupae of *Psylla eucalypti*. This manna-like food, known to the aborigines as **Lerp**, was obtained in large quantities during the summer months. It was eaten alone, or as a garnish to various kinds of animal food.

Beal was the name of a mildly intoxicating drink which was made by immersing the flowers of the honeysuckle (*Banksia ornata*) in water. To this was added the crushed seeds from the ripe cones of the plant. This infusion was greatly enjoyed by the natives.

The need for trade, as well as the search for food, forced the natives to brave the rigours of the Mallee. It is known that the Murray River natives met those of the Avoca and Wimmera R. during the winter months of each year. One meeting place was Pine Plains. The Murray people reached it by way of Gayfield, the Hattah Lakes, and Tiega (**Teeregee**), and brought with them such commodities as reeds for making reed-spears, lumps of red ochre for decoration, fresh water mussel shells to be used as knives and spokeshaves, small cut-reed and Murray lobster-claw necklaces, and possum-fur armlets. The southern tribes brought saplings for spear-shafts, certain swamp reeds for spear heads, axe-stone blanks to be fashioned into axes, and sandstone blocks to be used as grinders. Other material possessions, such as fur cloaks and weapons, were also exchanged. The journey of approximately 55 miles between Gayfield and Pine Plains was made in less than two days.

Another point of contact was L. Coorong (**Yarak**). The northern tribes reached it by way of Chinkapook and Tyrrell Downs (**Mortwara**), and met the people from

the northern Grampians, who had followed the Wimmera R. (**Burr**) to L. Hindmarsh (**Guru**), and the Outer Channel to L. Albacutya or the Yarriambiak Ck to L. Coorong.

Chinkapook was known to the northern tribes at **Chinkibook**, Red Earth or Red Ochre, as there was an important deposit of oxide of iron there. L. Tyrrell (**Taril**) is a salt lake, but a good native well existed to the west of it, near the present Nyarrin.

Stone axes also came to L. Hindmarsh from a diabase quarry on Charlotte Plains, now known as Moolort Plains, not far from Maryborough, in **Jajawurong** country; and spear reeds were brought from the Tatiarra country, over the South Australian border.

There is no question that the aborigines travelled all over the Mallee. It is recorded that a man was killed at L. Hindmarsh, and his murderer was followed and eventually speared at Nhill.

Another recorded incident is that of a man from the Tatiarra country (in South Australia) who carried off a girl from the Wimmera R., where he was on a visit. Although pursued, he was able to escape with her back to his own country.

The L. Hindmarsh people were in the habit of travelling to the Tatiarra country to obtain reeds from a water plant growing there, with which to make the heads of their spears.

The only records dealing specifically with the language and the social institutions of the aborigines of the Mallee which are known to me are short lists of words, a note on a burial, and a description of the Initiation Ceremony.

The description of both the burial and the Initiation Ceremony agree with similar practices among the Wotjobaluk, as described by Howitt and others. The language lists also agree with those from the Avoca and Richardson R., and even from those as far as Swan Hill. This being the case, we can assume that the social institutions and the material culture of the Mallee aborigines were similar to those of their neighbours to the east, the Wotjobaluk, of which tribe they probably formed a part. Due allowance, however, must be made for changes in food acquisition methods, and also possibly in some aspects of their material culture, which may have been dictated by the differences in the habitat.

Only the salient points of the way of life of these people, in so far as they have been recorded, are repeated here. For further details the student is referred to the bibliography at the end of this paper. The section on initiation, and the one on burials, are adapted from Bulmer and Wright respectively, and pertain to the aborigines of the Wimmera R.

Tribal Government

The oldest man of each group was its Head and, when more than one group of the tribe were present, the elders of each totem represented formed a council, the oldest man present being its Head for the time being.

When more than one totem were present in any one group the members of each totem obeyed the directions of the oldest man present on general matters. When their own totem was concerned they only recognized the authority of its oldest member present.

The Family and Marriage Rules

The tribe was organized on the two-class system, with descent through the female, in which the men from one class married women from the other. A man did not usually take more than one wife, and he could not marry any woman

from the same locality as his mother. Children of brothers were considered to be brothers and sisters. Marriage was by exchange of sisters, and was arranged by the fathers of the girls concerned on behalf of the sons, and with the concurrence of the elder brother (or cousin) of the girls involved in the exchange. No one had prior access to the bride, and strict fidelity was expected from her. Wives were not lent to friends or visitors. If found guilty of misconduct a wife could be speared in the thighs by her husband, or he may give her over as common property to all the men in the camp. The co-respondent would have to make presents of possum fur rugs and of weapons to the husband for reparation.

In the case of elopement, if the couple were of the right classes to marry, and if caught, the elopees would be brought back to camp, the girl having first become common property to all her pursuers. When back at camp the man would have to stand up to a trial with spears, which were thrown at him by all the girl's relations. The girl was attacked and beaten by her relatives. If the couple stood up to these trials they were allowed to marry, but the man had to find a 'sister' to give in exchange.

If they were not of the right class to marry, and if caught, the girl was first possessed by all her pursuers, and then killed. The man was speared and his thighs and upper arms roasted and eaten. The rest of his dismembered body was left where he had fallen.

Birth and Childhood

When her time was approaching a woman retired to a secluded spot, generally accompanied by an older woman. When the baby was born this woman rubbed it with dry grass or fine sand. The umbilical cord was cut. The mother rejoined the camp within a couple of days. Children were named after the locality in which they were born, or after a nearby tree or rock. If an animal made its appearance at the time of birth, the baby was named after it. Children had a great deal of freedom, but obedience was demanded, and they were checked by threats of visits by wicked spirits.

Infanticide

If a newly born infant was not wanted it was killed by knocking it on the head. If allowed to live for a few days it was kept. In most cases the dead infant would be cooked, and eaten by its older brothers and sisters. It was believed that this food would make them strong.

Initiation

When considered old enough, i.e. when whiskers began to appear on his chin, the boy was taken away to a new camp by two of his sisters' husbands. In some tribes he was first ceremonially 'roasted' before a large fire. When he arrived at his new camp, which was some distance away from the main camp, he was dressed in full corroboree outfit. This consisted of a kangaroo teeth chaplet, a cut-reed necklace, possum skin armlet, a possum fur cord from which a fringe of strips of possum hide hung back and front, and he was anointed with red ochre and fat. Lastly, a ligature of kangaroo sinews was tied around his forearm. The boy had to remain at this camp for about three months, and during this period he was not allowed to eat the flesh of any male animal, nor was he allowed to do anything for himself.

Religion

These tribes believed that the earth and all upon it was made by a being called **Bunjil**, but generally referred to as **Mani Ngurak**, Our Father. **Bunjil's** son,

Gargomitch, in the guise of a good spirit, supervised his Father's creation. The spirit in man was called **Gulkan-gulkan**, and when the body died it went to a place beyond the sky, which was full of **Lerp** and honey. The Medicine Men, called **Bangal**, were believed to be able to communicate with the dead, to be able to fly, and to cause the death of their enemies by magic, by means of magically burning any object or matter which had once belonged to the intended victim over a fire lit for the purpose.

They also used an instrument, called a **Yulo**, which consisted of a pointed bone made from a human fibula, to which was attached a loop made from the sinews of the kangaroo. The Yulo could be pointed at a victim from a distance, or used as a strangling cord by passing it around the neck of a sleeping person.

Another instrument used in magic killing was known as **Guliwil**. This consisted of three or four spindle shaped pieces of wood, tied together with some object which had once belonged to the victim. The whole was smeared with human kidney fat and slowly burnt.

Rain Making

The office of Rain-maker was an important one in this dry region and was distinct from that of Medicine-man. The Rain-maker made a ball from his own hair and soaked it in water. With gesticulations and incantations he sucked the water from this ball and squirted it towards the west. He then squeezed the remaining water from the ball while he held it over his head, and let the water rain over himself.

Another method was to place human hair in running water. A third was to burn human hair at a specially lit fire.

Division of Food

All game killed was parcelled out in certain portions according to the relationship to the hunter of those present in the camp, and according to the animal killed. With a kangaroo, for instance, the old men were given the body; the head and forequarters went to the hunter's wife's parents; the tail and one hind leg to the men, and the remainder to the young people.

Certain foods were forbidden to the uninitiated and to all females unless they were old and grey haired.

Burials

The dead were buried in a flexed position, the knees drawn up to the chin, the arms crossed over the knees. The body was tightly corded. The grave, oval in shape, was lined with furs and bark, and more of these materials were placed over the body. After the grave was filled in logs were placed over it, as a protection against dingoes, and a space about 30 ft by 15 ft was carefully cleared around it. A fire was lit by the grave, so that the spirit might warm himself when issuing from the grave. The locality was then left by the group for a period of several months.

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