

**AN EARLY NOTE ON THE ABORIGINES OF SOUTHEAST QUEENSLAND:
A TRANSCRIPTION OF A G.K.E. FAIRHOLME MANUSCRIPT**

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes when researching a project, one discovers relevant unpublished written material. Recently, while researching the use of trees and their products in Aboriginal society I came across some fading photographs of a manuscript about Aboriginal social life in southeast Queensland which dated to 1844 (Love 1982:110-114). The manuscript was written by G.K.E. Fairholme and it is a contemporary descriptive account of some aspects of the Aboriginal societies of the Darling Downs and Moreton Bay region. Often such finds are simply noted and perhaps cited in part; they are seldom quoted in full. In this case, because the description is relevant to our fuller understanding of Aboriginal life in Southeast Queensland and the archaeological record there, it was considered worthwhile to publish a full transcription.

Thus, the original text, unedited save where textual restoration has been attempted, is presented below. Where fading and textual damage had impaired interpretation of the text recourse was made to other parts of the text so as to present as accurate a transcription as possible.*

The author of this 1844 article, George Knight Erskine Fairholme, was the second son of George Fairhome and "the Honourable Caroline Elizabeth, (she was the daughter of 17th Lord Forbes)" (Devitt 1982:1). Fairholme was "born in 1822 was educated at Rugby School" (Devitt 1982:1). He came to Sydney in 1839 as a seventeen-year-old under the care of Ernest Dalrymple and the Leith-Hays brothers, family friends from Scotland. Their party overlanded sheep, cattle and supply drays from Guyra to the Leslie brothers' 40,000 ha. Crown squatting leases "Canning Downs" and "Toolburra" on the Darling Downs (Evans 1982:24-29). Subsequently, members of the overlanding party themselves took up squatting leases on the Darling Downs. Fairholme was initially associated with "South Toolburra" (Tulburra) and later with "Bromelton".

* Text restoration appears thus: [?Be] yond; beyond

George K.E. Fairholme remained in Australia until 1853/1854 when he returned to Scotland. In 1857 he married Baroness Pauline Von Poellnitz of Frankenberg Castle, Bavaria. They built a house in Austria on Lake Constance and divided their life between there and "Old Melrose" in Scotland which Fairholme inherited from his uncle who died in 1853 (Devitt 1982). He returned to Australia for the last time in 1859 for the purpose of selling "Bromelton" his property near Beaudesert, in what by then had become southeast Queensland rather than New South Wales.

During his residence in Australia, G.K.E. Fairholme not only sketched people and places on the Darling Downs and at Moreton Bay (the Mitchell Library holds some of these sketches), but also wrote articles about what he saw in those places. The Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London for 1856 includes three articles by him. Fairholme also belonged to the Royal Geographical Society. Because publications by that society for the period 1850-1860 were inaccessible, I was not able to determine whether or not he had published other Australian articles through that Society.

Unfortunately many of the Fairholme family papers were lost during the Irish troubles of 1922, when fire destroyed the Fairholme family residence (Devitt 1982).

The article transcribed below concerning the Aborigines of the Darling Downs and Moreton Bay was prepared by Fairholme in 1844 whilst at "Toolburra" (Tulburra) southeast Queensland.

"SKETCH OF THE ABORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF NEW SOUTH WALES
(Ms. by G.K.E. Fairholme, "Tulburra", Moreton Bay, N.S.W. 1844)

The Australian Blacks have often & with much truth been found the lowest in the scale of human beings; and next [?to] the African Bushmen I believe that they certainly are so. [?Be] yond their personal wants they have no care whatsoever, having [?no] thought of providing for the future, but depending entirely on their daily hunting for their daily food. Tho- this may [?see]m to be a very precarious mode of living, yet I have no [?reas]on to suppose that they suffer much from lack of food, [?ex]cept in such parts of the country where white men have [?gal]ined a footing & from which in consequence, a great [?num]ber of animals on which they depend for food are [?driv]en away - In the districts of Moreton Bay and Darling (Do)wns where most of my observations have been made, [?th]ere are great tracts of scrub or brush (especially in the [?form]ler and other un-occupied country), so that their chief (ex)ist-ence is not interfered with by the whites, or by sheep and cattle. Nor are the blacks themselves molested, except when they have committed some aggression or murder, or have otherwise interfered with the settlers.

The blacks about our country are generally 5ft 8. inches in stature: many, however, are taller & very strong & well made, especially those on the sea coast. The boys sometimes appear to be mere skeletons but they fill out afterwards considerably. Their features are good & very pleasing. The men are in general better looking than the women, their complexion is a clear, brown, but they often appear darker from dust & from their favourite custom of rubbing themselves with fat and charcoal. Deformities are rather common amongst them, but mostly from accidents by falls from trees, or else by fire. The men are covered with the scari-fications common to all the blacks of the colony, when they rise to a very large size, they are very proud of them. They are made chiefly on the back, breast and shoulders. The membrane of the nose is pierced &

in this by way of ornament is carried (tho- rarely) a spritsail yard, made of the small bones of some animal & sometimes even their pipe. Their ornaments are not numerous & consist of the following, - a necklace of small portions of seed, cut & strung (this is either wound round the [?nec]k or in the hair) - a small piece of pearly shell hung by a string on the breast - the tail of a native dog tied round the forehead ? & [whilch much improved their appearance. Sometimes their hair [?is] tied in a knot or peak behind, or on the top. When [?full] dressed they are smeared or striped with red or yellow (och)re mixed with fat, on the breasts, thighs or cheeks, [?the] hair is then ornamented by sticking either the small red (fea)thers of a parrot all over it, or pieces of white down, or by [?stick]ing the crimson tail feathers of the Macaw upright as a head(dre)ss. They also give their limbs & body a much cleaner (app)earance by singeing of the hair, with small lighted [?bough]s of pine. They have a great aversion to having their hair (cu)t imagining that some evil will come upon them, that [?stolnes will fall on them from the sky -

The favourite haunts of blacks are places where creeks & [?scrub]s are both near as this enables them most probably [?to] get wallaby (a kind of small kangaroo,) from the scrub, & water & fish from the creek. But in the summer when [?the] honey bees work, they wander far from water in search of (ho)ney. In ordinary fine weather, they sleep without hut or (co)vering, except a blanket or opossum cloak & with a small [?fir]e close to them. On the approach of rain, or in cold windy (w)eather, they strip sheets of bark, & make a sloping hut, with the open side to leeward, & their small fire in front. This hut, like a Dutch oven, collects the heat, & throws it on them. In case of a change of wind, the whole affair is very easily shifted. I have seen 8 or 9 huts, all facing different ways, when I presume, the blacks had expected some enemy.

In frosty weather, the bark will not easily come off the trees & they are then obliged to make a frame of sticks & to use reeds, leaves or small fragments of bark, to cover it. The natives are very dexterous in stripping bark; the sheets of it are from 4 to 7 feet high & from 2 to 5 feet wide, but by white people, the smaller sheets are rejected for huts. The bark of the Box or other stringy barked trees is considered the best.

The natives delight in an atmosphere of smoke. A family generally share one hut, while the young men sleep apart & in the outskirts of the camp. They all sleep rolled up like hedgehogs, so that a very small blanket will cover them while sleeping. They lie down after sundown unle(s)s they have been excited by a Corroboree or extra feed of beef. They rise early & disperse in parties in different directions in search of food. If on the move, they all meet at sundown by appointment. In starting they each carry a small firestick with which to warm their [?bod]ies, till the heat of the sun increases.-

Cloaks are used by the men only at night, but the (wo)men wear them all day, except in very warm weather. [?The]y are generally made of opossum skins; but sometimes (of) kangaroo or wallaby skins. Some tribes are to indolent (to) keep their skins & depend on getting cloaks from thos (na)tives who make them, by barter. Each skin is softened & rendered pliable by tines or furrows, which operation is (pe)rformed by doubling the skin & scraping the edge with [?a] shell or knife. The skins are sewn together with (si)news of kangaroo tail.

The blacks are in the habit of carrying fire with them [?at] all times, but if they have it not, it is always in their (p)ower to get it

with the stalk of the grass tree. A piece (o)f this stalk, which is very dry and spongy in the interior, is taken about a foot long. In the mid-dle of this, a hole (i)s cut. This piece is placed on the ground, & held down (b)y the feet. Another portion of stick, pointed, is placed in this hole & quickly turned between the palms of the hands. A little charcoal powder being added, the dust (s)oon catches fire from friction and falls on a small heap [?of] stringy bark placed below it, which is blown into a (f)lame.-

In some parts of N.S. Wales, blacks have an objection to camping in one spot for more than one night. When the camp is shifted the gins old & young, have to carry all the property, [?and] when loaded, present the most ridiculous figure possible. A stranger seeing 5 or 6 loaded gins coming towards him, would be somewhat puzzled to make out of what they consisted. Their legs are often so thin & their load so large, that they look like great moving heaps of skins & rubbish supported by two sticks. Their property consists - 1st of a number of nets made of stringy bark called currajong & about the size of a sea fishing line. The string is two stranded & is made very quickly with the palm of the right hand on the thigh by being twisted or rather rolled. - (The meshes of their nets are about 4 inches square & the nets are from 20 to 40 yds long, & when staked out, are 3¹/₂ feet high. They are used for catching wallaby, being placed along the edges of patches of scrub, known to be full of these animals. Some of the blacks watch behind the nets, & spear the wallaby, as they reach the net. If they miss, the animal turns & tries to get out somewhere else, being beat up by the other blacks.)

2d A number of coolimons or water buckets. These are all shapes and sizes being the knobs or excrescences of trees (cu)t off & hollowed by fire. Some will hold 2 gallons of (wa)ter & are very thin and light. Any small crack or hole (i)s filled up with a sort of resinous gum, much used by (al)l the blacks & which I shall describe hereafter.-

3d The blankets, cloaks, old shirts &c, all very valuable property.-

4th The grubbing sticks, the points of which are sharp & hardened by fire, for the purpose of grubbing in the soft loam of the swamps for wild yams, & a great variety of other roots eaten by the blacks.-

5th All the spears, boomerangs, waddies, tomahawks, & other utensils except those that the men are carrying for present use.

6th A number of small nets, or net bags containing a variety of articles such as a piece of red & yellow ochre, [?ba]lls of string, old pipes & pieces of tobacco, bones made [?in]to thin needles or other marlin spikes for sewing:- (c)harms consisting of rock crystals with a quantity of string [ro?]lled round them.- da, de, da. -

7th Perhaps a child borne on the shoulders above all this load.

The only dress worn by the women besides the opossum cloak or blanket is a girdle made of opossum hair string, from the front of which hang a number of pieces of the same sort of string. This is only worn by the young girls before marriage.

The blacks in all this part of the country are ignorant of the use of the Wommerah, or "throwing stick" with which the blacks down the country can throw the spear so well. Our blacks hold the spear in the middle javelin fashion. The most formidable spear is the rough and apparently temporary one, with which they spear cattle. Their full dress or war, spears are sometimes made 16ft of rosewood and smoothed and hardened by fire.

The well known power that the blacks possess, of throwing the Boomerang to return to them, is of no use to them, but merely an amusement. When using the Boomerang for aggression, they throw it along the ground with prodigious force, making it rebound off the ground against the object. the old fashioned stone tomahawk is seldom seen now being entirely superceded by iron ones, or by fragments of iron wedges made into hatchets with the assistance of the gum, without which the blacks would be at a great loss, for many reasons. This gum is very tenacious and insoluble in water. It is found in large masses on some species of Eucalyptus. To make a handle for a wedge, they bend 2 or 3 pieces of some bough over the butt & cover the whole of the part that joins the iron, with this gum. To the black the tomahawk is the most useful of all his implements for most of his food is found in the hollows of trees. If it be an animal he must make a hole right through the hard timber to get at it after having ascertained where the animal is. For this purpose, he prefers a hatchet with a thick round & wedge like point, setting no value on our broad flat hatchets. The tomahawk is of course used for cutting the notches used for climbing, which is done very quickly, but the climbing by the vine is a much easier & more rapid process & must, I think, be peculiar to these districts. The climbing vine is a piece of one of the strong rope like lianes that abound in all the bushes, about 10 or 12 feet long - one end has a blag woven or hoisted on it. The other is left plain, so as to be held according to the size of the tree to be compassed. For climbing the vine is passed round the tree & one end held in each hand. The body is now thrown back & the feet being against the tree at every step the vine is jerked higher. If a black wishes to cut a hole in the tree he places the plain end of the vine under his knee & by doubling that joint can remain resting on one leg, holding by the other & one hand.- With the other hand, he pulls his tomahawk from his waist band, or his head and cuts, as he requires, into the tree. The vine can be much used only on those trees that are clear of branches, though sometimes it is passed round a branch, & used above it. For climbing iron bark trees, the surface of which is in rough ridges, affording support both to foot & hand, the black requires no assistance either from vine or hatchet.

Scarcely a tree in the bush of N.S.W. is entirely free from hollows. The main bole of almost all trees is more or less hollowed out, in the first instance from the root upwards by termites & also by another sort of boring ant. These termites form cells of earthy matter right through these excavations, but as the weather is admitted from above (by the following means) they retreat & the hollows are taken possession of by opossums, grubs, bees & birds. The upper hollows are made by dead branches breaking & thus admitting the rain which gradually makes its way to its centre (an injury which in Great Britain it is necessary to guard against where trees are so valuable.) The dead branches that have fallen are often found to have been killed by the young of a species of Locust. These grubs eat upwards into the heart of the wood till their excavations enable the first winds to break off the branch. A black on seeing a branch freshly blown down, will go up to it & soon discover a grub at the broken end. These grubs are considered delicious eating, even by some white people.

The hollows in many of the smaller branches, are often taken possession of by honey bees. These are very similar to our house fly, & do not sting. The summer is the season for honey by which time the bees have collected their store for the winter. In early spring the blacks

seeing bees at work do not meddle with them, knowing that probably the nest is not filled enough to be worth taking - These nests sometimes occupy many feet of a hollow branch, which will be round filled with honey. The blacks perceive the bees going in and out, at a height at which few white men wo(ul)d see them. He then mounts the tree & cutting the whole branch off, lets it fall to the ground where its contents are (shar)ed with his companions.

To [?fi]nd the opossum the blacks inspect the bole of the tree & tho- it may be covered with the scratches of opossum claws, yet they can almost tell to a certainty whether the animal has descended or not. If not, he is found in some hollow in the tree. The acuteness of blacks in this & every other kind of tracking is incredible & far surpasses any account we have of the powers of the American Indians in this respect.

The forest Kangaroo & the Emu, are, I believe, seldom obtained by the blacks. The time and trouble of stalking them, or watching for them, is too great, as at the same time other food can be procured much more easily. The Wallaby or Kangaroo rat, is however killed in immense numbers. It is a small Kangaroo which inhabits the hollows of logs. Bandi-coots, fish, mud-mussels, guanas, Emu & other eggs, snakes & grubs, all form food for the blacks. They show much sagacity in finding the latter. For instance, they will perceive a very slight turning in the leaves of a sapling which a white man would fail to notice. Knowing the cause of this a black will give the sapling a smart push when it instantly breaks, discovering a grub at the fractured part. The women are much employed in digging for various kinds of roots in the swamps.

Their style of cooking is very simple. The opossum is [?actu]ally plucked like a fowl before being cooked, as the hair [?is] found to come off very easily - It is then scorched in [?the] fire. With a large Kangaroo they find it necessary to (he)at stones which are put into the interior of the body. (T)he cobborra is considered a great delicacy. It is only found [?in] salt or brackish water, in which very few sorts of timber [?can] be used for wharfs &c, without being in time destroyed (by) it. It is a long white worm, with a small bivalve shell [?at] one extremity. With this boring apparatus it eats the timbers [?thr]o in every direction. It is of the genus (blank space here - Love.) (w)hich is found also to bore into the Portland Stone in (E)ngland.-

Like most coloured people, the blacks take to smoking from their childhood. As yet they have not taken to (po)tent spirits but no doubt in many years, many of (th)em will fall victims to its pernicious effects.

I have been so often assured by the blacks themselves that [?can]nibalism exists among them, that I should have no doubt of it, even if I had no other evidence. But all (w)hite men who have been brought in after many (yea)rs residence among them, describe the most horrid [?practis]es of anthropophagism. The blacks are not accused of murdering in cold blood for the sake of procuring the victim's flesh, but they eat those who are killed in battle & occasionally, some who die. The young men deny that they now join in these feasts, but say that the old men delight in them. Some victims, however, are not eaten but are buried in various ways. Sometimes the body is hung up in a tree, or on a sheet of bark between two trees; sometimes it is buried upright in the ground, the head uppermost. The mounds that cover bodies have been often pointed out to me by blacks. The bones of some bodies that have been eaten, are put into a dilly & passed from tribe to tribe. These dillies are bags of all sizes, very beautifully plaited of a kind of strong grass and are also used for carrying provisions &c.-

As to the language of the blacks, it is well known that it varies in different parts of the country. [?In] these districts (Moreton Bay) the language of each tribe 50 or 70 miles apart, is very different, but on meeting they have a language in common, a fact of which I have been assured by the natives themselves. There is a sort of gibberish spoken to the blacks by the lower orders of people which [?consists] of some words from blacks far down the country and other (wo)rds of corrupted English. The men think this is black's (lan)guage, & no doubt the blacks consider it as our language! The language of all our blacks, instead of being harsh, (gu)tteral & unmusical, are as graceful & elegant when fluently (s)poken as any language I have ever heard not excepting our (m)ost liquid European tongues.

THE KANGAROO

The Forest Kangaroo & the Red Kangaroo are found in the (o)pen forest only & never frequent scrubs except when hard (p)ressed by dogs. The female will run far with a young one [?about] the size of a rabbit in her pouch & will only drop it when [?the] dogs are gaining rapidly upon her. This operation is per(for)med by giving her body a sudden jerk sideways when the (y)oung one is safely deposited (o)n some grassy spot, or (am)ong (bu)shes, or in any place where the cautious mother thinks he is most likely to escape the eye of her pursuers. The (M)acropus or Forest Kangaroo is a very formidable adversary [?for] two powerful dogs. The male or Old Man will seldom [?go] far but will either go to bay in some dry waterhole or against a bank or perhaps take to water if any is at hand. While at bay he stands in an attitude of defence every now and then putting his hands down & snatching at the dogs trying to get them into his embrace, when if he succeeded he would instantly rip them up, with his powerful middle claw of his hind foot. He has, in his face, at this time such a vacancy & want of animation as to appear almost ridicu-lous & I have often felt inclined to laugh at him, but a nearer approach put all such ideas to flight, for he will always leave the dogs un-noticed to make at a human being. When in the water, they also make a formidable resistance, either by ripping the dogs with the hind claw, or by continually sinking them with the forepaws. In either of these cases, the dogs generally require the assistance of a man, but when they over-take him while running & overthrow him by jumping at his throat, he is more easily killed by them, tho- not without a very severe struggle. The female is generally killed while thus running; & from their great speed, they are commonly called "Flyers".-

Any of the Kangaroo tribe are easily reared and tamed. I have kept a young one in a flannel bag till it was able to jump about. On placing his head near the entrance [?he] would instantly dive in, head foremost, turning on his back. The flesh of the Kangaroo is rather coarse and tasteless, (hav)ing no vesitge of fat on any part. The Forest Kangaroo [?travells] in troops of from 3 to 10 or 12. They are very [?shar]p sighted. In leaping or jumping, the tail does not touch (the) ground but while standing erect, they use it as a (sup)port. The skin makes very good thin leather & is much (us)ed in this colony. The sinews of the tail are very [?strong] & numerous and are used by the blacks for sewing [?together] the skins of the opossum.

(G.K.E. Fairholme
Australia 1844.-)"

SUMMARY

George K.E. Fairholme shows more than a passing interest in the land to which he came in 1839. The Aboriginal people he saw were different from the land acquiring British settlers then spreading northward along to the Australian east coast. His description of the Aborigines appears to be partly influenced by the prevailing English thought which placed human beings on a comparative unilineal scale of cultural achievement. Yet he recognised the uniqueness of the Australian Aboriginal way of life. He notes that alcohol may become a future problem! He observes their technical ability, the grace and elegance of their languages and their general adaptability to the Australian landscape.

He refers to the animals of the continent comparing them with those of the Old World. He sees them as being different and yet useful to the hunter/gatherers of Australia.

From the material available it appears that Fairholme wrote, sketched and painted a variety of subjects based on his his Australian observations. The quality is such that I can only echo the hope expressed by Mr. Ian Fairholme (1982) that perhaps other such discoveries as the above will be made and published in the future (Fairholme 1982).

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