

Daisy Bates Papers

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Series 5: 'Notes not for legends or included in Aborigines: Odd notes only'

Series V, 2. Manuscript Record of service for the Aborigines of Central Australia to be placed among the Government House Archives Adelaide 1944 by kindly favour of his Excellency.

(transcribed by J. Walkley)

At my last Western Australian camp near Eucla (border of SA and WA where I had been for some two years 1912-14 I was able to contact with the aborigines of the South Coast from Esperance (WA) and the head of the Australian Bight (SA) and also the remnants of Boundary Dam area and Musgrave and Everard Ranges, SA.

The first horde that arrived in Australia, the Bibbulmun of the S.W., I traced through the boomerang and dialect, to have had ancient connections with Egypt and India: the boomerang to Celebes, Kattywar [India] and as far as Theban Egypt and the dialect to the Dravidian people of India.

Sir George Grey first observed the similarity (pronominal) of the Dravidian and SW Australian dialects. The first hordes were not cannibals. These first hordes were all uncircumcised people with well-defined marriage and social laws and with similarity of dialect (with local changes) from about Geraldton to Esperance.

The second horde also entered from the north – a circumcised people who also brought their marriage laws, social customs and dialect with them. Their laws and social customs are fundamentally the same. It was among the remnants of these distinct hordes that I made my first investigations at the Roman Catholic Trappist Mission at Beagle Bay, N.W. Australia in 1900 at the invitation of and in company with Bishop Gibney and Dean Martelli, Bishop and Dean of Perth and Bunbury, who were also visiting the Trappists for the first time.

Four months stay at this mission gave me a full working knowledge of their simple yet effective marriage and other laws obtaining among the remnants surviving along the North West coast and I saw the working of these laws during my stay at Beagle Bay Mission. The Trappists were French and Spanish with no knowledge of English. They lived for ten years, unremembered by their coreligionists in the South, giving the natives example only and obeying their own rigid Trappist vows. Neither hand nor voice was raised by any Trappist towards the groups whose group area was to become a source of supply of meat, vegetables, fruit, sugarcane etc etc through the years. My chief recollection is the banana garden, 8000 banana trees and thirteen varieties of bananas.

The Trappists had been entered (at first unknown to them) into one or other of the classes I knew the entire social system so that I obtained firsthand knowledge of the four divisions and the intermarrying pairs within these divisions. A breach of any of these marriage laws meant death.

The Trappists lived their own rigid lives and allowed the natives to live their own lives and keep their own marriage laws or punish any breaches of such laws but there were many breaches of such laws through the centuries especially the marriage laws and I found that practically the whole Central Area was occupied by lawbreakers from the north and northwest and west and east and south east and as the centuries and years went on, runaways from native justice fled to Central areas. All and every Central native is an "outlaw", their ancestors fled from their groups stealing a 'sister', father's

sister or daughter, mother's sister as wife etc etc and settled down at some permanent water beyond pursuit.

They dropped all marriage laws and social laws and became little local mobs, through the centuries killing and eating each other, taking daughter or sister or mother to wife within their own little group as occasion offered. In the whole of Central Australia today there is not one true native married group. Taboos were thrown aside. It is amongst the remnants of these outcasts from their original groups that my years in South Australia have been spent. These circumcised hordes in their wanderings sought the sea coast always east, south or south west. They had reached within 20 miles of Geraldton (W.A.) in the early years of this century but at Twilight Cove on the south coast they had reached the sea. The Great Nullarbor Plain was never crossed north to south by any native until an old white man took some remnants from the Bight Head, direct north towards a native water called Murgaroo gabbi sometime after the telegraph line between Perth and Adelaide had been in use. There was water [...] in the Eucla area and near the Bight Head (Ilgamba water) and on the east, west and northern edges of the Plain and at the head of the Bight. Little groups had lived and fought and eaten and been eaten through the centuries. Only 3 of this group were left when I made my first investigations in S.A. territory. Little mobs still travelled round the plain's edge from N. and N.E. and N.W. points to get to the sea. The centre of the plain was a kangaroo and emu reserve. They had found four or five descents along the cliffs of the Great Bight but the whole area of the Plain was inhabited by a giant snake - Ganba - who killed and ate every native who ventured further than a few miles from its edge. The great blowholes were the Ganba's breathing holes from which he emerged from or entered the sea.

At Ilgamba Water the ancestors of the three living Ilgamba natives saw Eyre and his assistant and the two Lincoln natives tramp on towards the west but they hid themselves from the strange natives and told me the Lincoln natives had been killed and eaten by their group. The Eucla district native, the last of his group, died in 1913 but these remnants of the Central and northern outcasts are dead. I found one member of Howitt and Fison's Dieri group (Cooper Creek and Diamantina areas, Queensland), amongst a newly arrived mob at my Ooldea camp in 1918. In 1914 I was camped in the Eucla area with these poor remnants, when an invitation came to me to attend the British Association Congress Group of Scientists who had been invited to visit Australia. I had had the honour of being elected a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Society (Sydney) by its founder Dr Allan Carroll in 1905 or 6 and the invitation came from the Founder's Branch. I accepted the invitation and arrived in Adelaide on August 4th, the day war was declared with Germany.

I took much native literary and other matter with me as I had been corresponding for some years with Andrew Lang, Dr Reade [...] and other anthropologists (university men) in England and visited three states - S.A., Victoria and Qld[...] with the members of the Association. We were welcomed in each state and had many discussions and interchange of views on Aboriginal subjects. During my stay in Adelaide I spoke and lectured on the Central Area natives and some W.A. groups.

Ooldea Water is about 100 miles north of the Great Australian Bight and was known to every group in N., S., E. or W. for hundreds of miles. There must have been many long drought periods in Central Areas and at these times every group started for Ooldea. All were cannibals and killed and ate each other on every journey they made and on their arrival they stopped some distance away and lighting a fire to announce their arrival. Some Ooldea group members went to the camp and gave permission

for the new arrivals to sit down N., S., E. or W. from whatever direction they had arrived. None came direct from the south coast but journeyed round the edge of the great Nullarbor Plain, those on the western edge of Nullarbor Plain arriving via the Boundary Dam area (native name Wardargana). The eastern coastal men travelled on the eastern edge via B..dinga [?] and other non-permanent waters en route[?]

No native ever crossed the plain direct or went further over the plain than about 20 miles from its edge. It was supposed to be inhabited by a great magic snake Ganba who killed and ate every native that ventured to camp on its territory. The great blowholes were its entry to sea or plain.

After the telegraph line from Adelaide to Perth was laid, a telegraph repeating station was erected at Eucla with some six telegraphists, 3 from Adelaide and 3 from Perth. To this spot came a quiet gentle elderly Englishman - tubercular - and made the area his home. The natives were quickly attracted to this kind old man and they lightened his loneliness greatly by their confidence in him and their respect for his character.

The Great Nullarbor Plain, the old sea bed of ancient times [was] practically a kangaroo and emu sanctuary as the natives could only chase these animals for some 20 miles on the plain and the whole plain was an enormous Reserve for them. The old white man, a man of private means, bought a buggy and camels and travelled over the Plain shooting kangaroos – getting the natives to skin these and purchasing food and clothing for them from the sale of these dried skins. He was the kindest, quietest best white man they had ever known and they accompanied him on all his kangaroo trips over the plain. He heard from them of a water called Murgaroo on the northern edge of the plain, west of Ooldea water and he decided to travel direct across the Bight to this Water. He told me of this journey and of the fear in the faces of all the natives as they crossed this Ganba (snake) Country for the first time. They woke continually from fear and at night and thro' the day they clung by him but he went on killing kangaroo and emu and having it cooked for them and they made their first fire in the centre of the Plain with the dry rank herbage. The sound that came from the blowholes scattered over the plains centre were the roars of the angered Ganba and they clung round the camel wagon and their Protector thro' day and night but the old man went quietly over the plain with them and neither reproached nor ridiculed their fears.

And early one morning they discerned natives north of them long before the white man could see them. Their fears increased but the camel truck went steadily on and the northern natives and the southern men came within recognising distance of each other and suddenly both groups gave a joyful cry and rushed into each other's embrace and roared their relief from the evil magic of their crossing. The two groups had known each other and had visited each other for centuries but they travelled round the Plain's edge to their various [me...?] and other ceremonies.

I must chronicle this great exploit of that elderly English gentleman as he was the first man who [induced?] the natives of the area round the plain's edge to cross the plain direct from north to south. He was, to them, a greater being than the huge Ganba who had kept the plain to himself for so long and they were good and peaceful and gentle to their women and children because of his quiet influence over them and his abundant kindness and generosity towards them. When he died they wept for his memory until they too passed on to his spirit-home. He left his camels and dray to their elders and gave money to the Eucla storekeeper to continue feeding them but their numbers quickly lessened after his death.

He must have his place in this record for he was one of God's good men, a quiet gentle Englishman whom they loved and guarded from the noise of their own quarrelling and among the few natives who were still living and who had accompanied him over the dread Ganba country where none of their kind had ever dared to enter. It would always be made known to me in my Eucla area camp that some of his black friends had returned to die and their keening for their beloved dead "Boonari", "Master" – "food giver", "Great man" – was sincere and heartfelt purity.

His like in purity of mind and heart were the little Trappist missionaries who lived and died during their ten years residence at Beagle Bay Trappist Mission from 1890 to 1900 and whom I visited and sojourned with for some four months in 1900.