

Observations on Aboriginal people in the early period of contact

John Hunter – journal kept on board the Sirius during a voyage to New South Wales, May 1787 – March 1791, Manuscript DL MS 164

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John Hunter sailed with the First Fleet as second captain on board HMS Sirius. Once at Port Jackson, Hunter made surveys in the harbour and around the coast and records in his journal his surprise at the size of the indigenous population which belied the notion of terra nullius. In October 1788, the Sirius, under Hunter, returned to the Cape of Good Hope to buy emergency supplies for the colony returning in May 1789. Hunter returned to England on the Waaksamheid in March 1791. In England he was court martialled for the loss of the Sirius and honourably acquitted. In February 1795 he was appointed Governor of New South Wales to succeed Phillip though he did not return to the colony to take up his new position until September.

Transcript

A few days after my Arrival with the transports in this Harbor, I sett off with a Six oard boat & small boat, intending to make as a good a Survey as circumstance wou'd admit, I took to my assistance Mr. Bradley (1st Lt.) Mr. [indecipherable] the master, & a young Gentleman of the quarter deck. During the time we were Employ'd on this business we had frequent meetings with different parties of the Natives, whom we found at this time very Numerous, which I confess I was a little surprised to find, after what had been said of them in the Voyage of the Endeavour, for I think it is observ'd in the Account of that Voyage, that at Botany Bay they had seen very few of the natives and that they appear'd a very Stupid & incurious people. **We saw them in very Considerable numbers & they appear'd to us to be a lively & inquisitive Race; They are a Straight, thin, but well made people rather small in their limbs but very active,** they Examin'd with the utmost attention & [indecipherable] great astonishment at the different

Coverings we had on, for they certainly consider'd our Cloaths as so many different Skins, and the Hatt a part of the head; they were pleas'd with such trifles we had to give them, and always appear'd Chearfull & good humour'd, they danced & sung with us, & imitated our Words and Motions as we did them; they generally appear'd arm'd with a Lancet & short stick which [indecipherable] in throwing it; this Stick is about three feet long, is flattened on one side, has a hook of Wood at one end, & a flat shell let into a split in the Stick at the other, & fastend with Gum; Upon the flat side of this Stick the lance is laid, in the upper end of which is a small hole into which the point of the hook of the throwing stick is fixd, this [indecipherable] the lance on the flat side of the stick, then [indecipherable] the Lance thus fixd in one hand with the forefinger & thumb over it to prevent its falling off sideways, Holding fast the throwing stick they discharge with considerable force & in a very good direction to the Distance of about sixty and twenty yards * Their Lances are in general about [*Note in margin - I have seen a strong young fellow throw the lance full ninety yards which till then, I did not believe possible I measurd the distance –]

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about ten feet long. The Shell at one end of the throwing Stick is intended for Sharpening the point of the Lance & for varying other uses I have seen this Weapon frequently thrown, & think that a Man upon his guard may with much care either parry or avoid them altho it must be granted they fly with astonishing Velocity.

Whilst employ'd on the Survey of the Harbor, We were one Morning early in the upper part of it and at a Considerable distance from the Ship, going to land in order to take a few Angles, when we were a little surprisd to find the Natives here in greater Numbers than we had ever seen them before in any other place, we naturally Conjectured by their Numbers that they might have been those who inhabited the Coves in the lower part of the Harb.r & who upon our Arrival had been so much alarmd at our Numbers as to have judgd it necessary to retire farther up; they appeard very hostile, vast Numbers of Arm'd Men appeard upon the Shore wherever we approached it, and in a threatening Manner, seemd to insist upon our not presuming to land; they were during the whole time we were Were near them, hailing each other thro' the Woods untill their Numbers were so much encreas'd, that I did not Judge it prudent to attempt making any acquaintance with them at this time, for as I have already observd we had only a Six Bord Boat & a Smaller, our whole Numbers leaving one Man in each Boat amounted to Ten Seamen three officers & myself with only three Musquets – We therefore for the present, Contented ourselves with making Signs of friendship, & returnd to the Ship. In two days after We appeard again in the same place better arm'd & prepard for an interview; their Numbers were not now so many, at least we did not see them, altho it was probable they were in the Wood at no great distance, but having occasion to put ashore in order to Cook some provision for the Boats Crews, I chose a Narrow projecting point of land for that purpose, which we could have defended against some Hundreds of these people, I orderd two Marine Centinals upon the Neck in order to prevent a surprise, & immediatly set about making a fire

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We soon heard some of the Natives in the Wood on the opposite shore, We call'd to them & invited them by Signs & an offer of presents to Come over to us, the distance was not more than 100 yds across in a short time Seven Men Embarkd in Canoes and Came over, they land'd at a Small distance from us, & advanced without their Lances, I went up to meet them & held up both my hands to Show that I was unarmed, two officers also advance'd in the same manner, We mett them & shook hands, but they seemd a good deal Alarm'd at four or five Marines under Arms by the Boats, upon which they order'd to ground their Arms & stay by them, they then came up with great Chearfulness & good humour and seated themselves by our fire amongst us, where we eat what we had with us, & invited them to partake, but they did not relish our food or drink -

I was one day in another part of the Harbor, on shore making friendship with a party of Natives, when in a very short time their Numbers increase'd to about Eighty or Ninety Men all Arm'd with Lance & throwing stick, & many with the addition of a Shield made of the Bark of a tree, some are in shape an Oblong square others are Oval, these were the first shields we had seen in the Country *

[*A] - Our numbers at this time were those I have already mention'd, & no better arm'd (only three Musquets) one of which I carried, they were very Noisy, but did not appear dispos'd to quarrel, We gave them such little presents as we had with us, with which they seem'd very well pleased, altho' we afterwards had much reason to believe, that such trifles only pleas'd as baubles do Children, for a Moment, for at other times we had frequently found our presents laying dispos'd upon the beach, altho' Caught at by these people with much apparent Avidity at the time they were offer'd - Whilst we were Employ'd with this party, we Observ'd at a distance a Number of their Women, who were peeping from their Concealments, but durst not gratify their Natural Curiosity by appearing before & Conversing with us

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With us, for the Men appear here to be very absolute, I Signified to the Men that we had observ'd the Women, & that I wish'd to make them some presents if they might be permitted to Come forward & receive them, the Men seem'd unwilling to suffer them to advance, for we had generally observ'd that they took particular Care upon every occasion to keep the Ladies at a distance, & I believe wholly from an Idea of danger, they desird to have the presents intended for the Women & they woud Carry & deliver them, but to this proposal I positively refus'd to agree, and made them understand, that unless they were allow'd to come forward they shou'd not have any, finding I was determin'd, an old man who seem'd to have the principal Authority, directed the Women to advance, which they did immediatly, with much good humour, and during the whole time that we were decorating them with Beads, rags of white linnen & some other trifles

Trifles, they laugh'd immoderately altho` trembling at the same time from an Idea of danger –

Most of those We saw at this time were Young Women I Judge from Eighteen to twenty five Years of Age, they were all as perfectly Naked as when first born - The Women in general are Well made, & not quite so thin as the Men, but rather smaller limb'd.

As soon as these women were orderd to approach us, about Twenty Men whom we had not before seen, Sallied forth from the Wood, Completely Armed with Lance and Shield, & were painted with Red & White Streaks all over the face and body, as if intended to strike terror by their appearance, they drew themselves up on the beach in a line *

[* B]

& each man had a green bough in his hand as a sign of friendship, their disposition was as regular as any well disciplin'd troops could have been, that party I apprehend was intended wholly for the defence of the Women if any insult had been offer'd then: We also Observ'd at this interview that two

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very stout Men Arrive'd, were placed upon a Rock near to where our Boats lay, as Centinals, for they never Mov'd from that Station untill we left the Beach, I therefore supposd they were orderd there to Watch all our Motions; We left these people after a Visit of about four hours, both parties apparently well pleas'd with all that pass'd. In the different opportunities which I have had of getting a little acquainted with the Natives who reside in & about this Port, I am I confess dispos'd to think that it will be no very difficult matter in due time, to conciliate their friendship & Confidence, for although they generally appear Arm'd on our first Meeting, which will be allow'd to be very Natural, Yet whenever we have laid aside our Arms & have made signs of friendship, they have always advance'd unarm'd with Spirit & a degree of Confidence Scarsely to be expected, from that appearance of a friendly disposition I am inclin'd to think, that by residing for some
Some time amongst or near them. they will soon discover that we are not their Enemys, a light in which they no doubt Considerd us on our first arrival.

The Men in general are from 5 feet 6 inches to 5 feet 9 high, are thin but very straight & Cleanmade Walk very erect & are active, the Women are not so tall nor so thin, but are generally well made; their Colour is a rusty kind of Black something like that of Soot, but I have seen many of the Women almost as light as a Mulatto, We have seen a few of both sexes with tolerable good features, but in general they have broad noses & thick lips, & their Countenance altogether not very prepossessing, & what makes

them still less so is, that they are abominably filthy they never Clean their Skin, it is generally Smear'd with the fatt of such Animals as they kill, & cover'd with every sort of dirt, sand from the Sea beach, & the ashes from their fires, all adhere to their greasy skin which is never Wash'd but when

Accident or the want of food Obliges them to go into the Water.- Some of the Men wear a piece of Wood or bone thrust thro' the Septum of the Nose which

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Which by raising the opposite sides of the Nose, widens the Nostril & spreads the lower part very much, which no doubt they Consider as a beauty, Most of those we hitherto mett, Want, (of the two foremost teeth of the upper Jaw,) the right one, and many of the Women want the two lower Joints of the little finger of the left hand, which we Cannot yet discover the reason or meaning of - for this defect in the little finger we have observ'd in Old Women and in Young Girls of 8 or 9 Years Old, in Young Women who have had Children, & in those who have not, and the finger has appear'd perfect in individuals of all the above ages and descriptions*,

[*Note in margin - They have very good teeth in general, their hair is short, strong and curly, but they seem to have no Method of Cleaning or Combing it, it is therefore filthy & matted - the men wear their beards which is short & Curly like the hair of the head.]

the Men Women & Children go intirely Naked as described by Captain Cook, they seem to have no fix'd place of residence, but take their rest wherever Night overtakes them; they generally Shelter themselves in such Cavities or hollows in the Rocks upon the Sea Shore as may be Capable of defending them from the Rain, and in order to make their apartment as Comfortable as possible, they Commonly make a good fire in it

in it before they lay down to rest, by which Means the Rock all round them is so much heated as to retain its Warmth like an Oven for a Considerable time, and upon a little grass which is previously pluck'd & dry'd, they lay down in a huddle together *

[*C]

If they retire back from the Water side a flake of Bark taken off a tree, bent in the Middle & sett upon its ends thus - with a piece sett against that end on which the wind blows, serves them as a habitation, & will Contain a whole family, for when the Weather is Cold which is frequently the Case in Winter, they find it necessary to lay very Close for the benefit of that warmth which they Mutually Contribute their share of - All the Natives (Human) that we have seen since our arrival here, appear to live chiefly on what the Sea affords, & Consequently we find the Sea Coast more fully inhabited than the interior, or that part of the Country, which we have had an opportunity of Visiting More remote from the Sea; the men fish with a Spear or fish Gig, in the use of which we will

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readily allow they may be, & are very dextrous, It is in length something more than the War Lance, but they Can according to the depth, increase its length by a Variety of Joints, Some have one, some two, three or four prongs, pointed & bearded with fish or other animals bone - We have sometimes in fine Weather seen a man laying across a Canoe with his face in the water, & his fish Gig immers'd ready for darting; in this Manner he lays Motionless, & by his face being a little under the Surface he can see the fish distinctly which were his Eyes above, the tremulous Motion of the Surface occasion'd by every Air of wind, wou'd prevent, in this manner he strikes at the fish with so much certainty that they seldom miss their Aim - The Women are Chiefly employ'd in the Canoes with lines & hooks, the line appears to be Manufactur'd from

the Bark of Various trees which we find here of a tough Stringy Nature & which after being beat between two stones for sometime, becomes, very much like and of the same Colour

as a quantity of Oakham made of old rope, this they spin & twist into two strands, I never saw a line with more than two; their hooks are Commonly made from the inside of Mother of Pearl, of different Shells, the Tallons of Birds, such as the Hawke they sometimes make this use of, but the former are Considered best - in this necessary Employment of fishing We frequently see a Woman with two or three Children, in a Miserable boat, the highest part of which is not 6 inches above the Surface, Washing almost in the edge of a Surf, which it would frighten an Old Seaman to Come near in a good & Manageable Vessel – The Youngest Child if very young, commonly lays across the Mothers Lap, from whence altho she is fully emply`d in fishing it cannot fall, for the Boat being very shallow she sitti in the bottom with her Knees up to her breast, between her Knees & body the Child lays perfectly secure –

The men also dive for Shellfish which they take off from the rocks under water, we frequently see them leap from a Rock into the Surf or broken

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Broken water, and stay surprisingly long under, when they rise to the Surface, whatever they have gather`d they throw on shore, where some person attends to receiving it and has a fire already kindled for Cooking; they have no other Method of dressing this food than that of broiling, Boiling water they have no Conception of, as appeard very lately when one of our boats was hauling the Seine, some of the people had put a pot on the fire ready to drop some fish, which when caught some were put into the Pot then boiling, several Natives being by who wish`d to have more fish than had been given them, seeing those which had been put into the boiling water not watch`d, put his hand into the Pot to take them out & was of Course Scalded and astonish`d –

With respect to Religion, we have not yet been able to discover that they have anything like an Object of Adoration

Neither ye Sun, the Moon, or the Stars seem to take up or occupy more of their attention, than they do that of any of the other Animals which inhabit this immense Country - their Dead they certainly burn & that I have been well Convinc`d of lately when Employ`d on the Survey of a distant Branch of Port Jackson; Some of my boats Crew having when on shore discover`d a little from the Water side upon rising ground, what they Judg`d to be a fresh Grave, I went up & orderd it to be open, When the Earth was remov`d we found a quantity of White Ashes which appeard to have been but a very short time deposited there, amongst the Ashes we found part of a human Jaw bone & a small piece of the Skull, which altho` it had been in the fire, was not so much injur`d by it as to hinder our knowing perfectly what it was; We put the Ashes together again & Coverd it up as before; the grave was not Six inches under the Surface of the Ground, but the Earth was raised the height of our graves

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in Europe – In the Months of March & April we found the Natives to decrease in their Numbers considerably, We have no reason to suppose that they retire back into the interior parts of the Country, for in all the excursions which have been made inland, very few if any have been seen; the Sea Coast we have every reason at present to believe is the only part of this Country which is inhabited by the Human Race, the Land seems to afford them but a very scanty Sustenance, We have seen them broil & Chew the Fern roots, & there is a small fruit here, which is about the size of a Cherry,

it is Yellow when half grown, & when ripe it is almost black. it grows upon a tree which is not tall but very full and bushy at the Top, of this fruit we have seen them eat, it has a good deal the taste of a Fig, & the Pulp or inside very much resembles that fruit, But the Sea is their principal resource, Shell and other Fish are their chief Support, they frequently attend our boats when hauling the Seine, and are very thankful to the officer for any fish he may give them, for in Cold Weather the Harbor is but thinly stock'd. When we Arrived here it was full, we caught as many fish as cou'd be used, but in the Winter they seem to have quitted our Neighb'hood.* I have no doubt that the people who inhabited Port Jackson when we first enterd it, are gone far to the Northward, and that it is their constant Custom as the Cold Weather approaches to seek a Warmer Climate by following the Sun, & that in this practise they have another very powerful encitement, as well as the Comfortable Warmth of the Sun, which is that the fish incline to the Northward as the Cold Wr. comes on, this Conjecture seems in some degree to account for Captain Cooks having seen so very few of the Natives whilst he lay in Botany Bay, & that it appear'd to him that the Sea Coast was very thinly inhabited, for I think it was