THEME 2 : THE ABORIGINES

Margrit Koettig

Dungog Shire was occupied by Aboriginal people up to about forty thousand years before the European invasion. Unfortunately, very little ethnohistoric evidence of Aboriginal occupation in the area is available. In her recent review of the source material for the whole Hunter Valley area, Brayshaw noted that:

Unfortunately few Europeans took time to record anything of the Aborigines who before 1830 had ceased effective resistance and whose society and very persons had suffered irreparably.

The tribal affiliations of the Aboriginal people inhabiting the area of Dungog Shire cannot be clearly defined. Howitt, writing of the tribes of south-east Australia in 1904, concluded that the people inhabiting the Williams and Paterson River valleys belonged to one "tribe" though there appeared to be some difference between them:

Their (Gringais) territory extended up the valley of the Williams and its tributaries to their sources and southwards for about 8 miles below Dungog. There were 'Nurras' (local groups) all over the district, at convenient distances apart, each of which consisted of 6-9 huts or families. In the 1840's the blacks of this tract of land numbered about 250 all told. They intermarried with the people of the Paterson River and those of the Gloucester River.

Brayshaw included the people of this area with the Worimi who were centred in the Port Stephens area. There is a report of people from the Dungog area fighting with the Port Stephens group. The relationships between the Aborigines living on the coast with those living in the Dungog area is not clear.

Other references to the Aborigines of the general Dungog area referred to campsites, exchange of goods, limited aspects of diet, initiation grounds and burial practices. These are tabulated in Table 1. A great deal more information is available for Aboriginal people who lived in the Port Stephens area which is environmentally very different to the
Dungog Shire area in terms of landforms, availability of foods etc. Information about people from the west is very scant, and this area was inhabited by another "tribe" (the Geawal). At a general level all Aboriginal groups shared certain behaviours, in terms of their nomadic lifestyle, their complex ritual life, the types of material culture items used, e.g. spears, clubs, wooden vessels, digging sticks, bark huts etc. Where information is available in other parts of Australia, it has been shown that the specifics of these aspects (i.e. the form of the ceremonies undertaken, designs to decorate the material items, the precise range of objects used etc.) varied from group to group. This variation was related to both cultural causes as well as the different available raw materials. Hence it would not be valid to suggest that the specific information available for the customs and material culture of people living in the Port Stephens area could be used to describe people living away from this coastal strip, even though it is suggested that they may have been the same tribe.

Exchange of goods was recorded between the Aborigines of Port Stephens and "inland". Threlkeld reported that in the winter of 1826 Biraban, his Aboriginal assistant, 'went to the mountains with upwards of 60 spears to exchange for opossum chord made of the fur''4 This suggests differential resource exploitation of the Aborigines living in these two different types of environmental areas.

On the Karuah River which runs parallel to the Williams River, slightly to the east of the present study area, Dawson noted the location of Aboriginal campsites:

At the foot of one of these hills, and at the margin of the brook, we met with a native encampment, consisting of eight or ten gunyers. We...ascended a small rise, on top of which we found an encampment...the gunyers were exactly the same..."5

The Karuah lies in country similar to that of the Williams and lower Paterson Rivers. The size of the encampment is similar to those noted by Howitt for the Dungog area. It is also of interest that these camps were located on rises, as this is the only reference to the
type of landscape in which sites could be expected to occur.

Table 1: Early observations of Aborigines in the Dungog Shire area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>COMMENT</th>
<th>DATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Williams River</td>
<td>We saw several traces of the natives, both young and old, and passed some canoes, which are small and rudely put together. (Brayshaw Table B.2)</td>
<td>8/July/1801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams River 30m up river</td>
<td>We...described some of them at a distance, who fled at our approach. We came to a spot, which they had just quitted and observed the marks of children's feet. The ground was covered with the shells of fresh water fish, of the sort found in the rivers of England and Scotland and called the horse muscle, having sometimes small pearls in them. (Brayshaw Table B.2)</td>
<td>July/1801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungog area</td>
<td>Fern root (Bungwall) eaten. It was roasted in the ashes and pounded to a paste between two stones. (Brayshaw 5.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallaroba (south of Dungog)</td>
<td>One of the blacks brought our host a small species of Kangaroo, called in this Colony a Paddy-melon; it is about the size of a hare, which it is said to resemble when roasted. (Backhouse 1843:401)</td>
<td>July/1836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungog area</td>
<td>In the Gringa tribe individuals fought a personal quarrel with any weapons at hand, but in cases of serious offences...the offender had to stand with a shield, while a certain number of spears, according to the magnitude of the crime, were thrown at him. (Howitt 1904:343)</td>
<td>1840's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungog area</td>
<td>In the Gringai country there were places where numbers of blacks were buried, at least since the year 1830 and it was probably a continuation of the old system. The dead were carried many miles to this place. (Howitt 1904:364)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The number of references to Aborigines and their lifestyle in the Dungog area did not increase after European settlers were established there, and those which are available are in the form of reminiscences or local histories sometimes based on the earlier information referred to above.

Brian Brock (1957) provides an interesting account of the Aborigines and the origin of the name for Dungog:

'Munni' is the Aboriginal name for the locality and it means 'a good hunting ground'. The Aborigines found kangaroos, wallabies, possums and other game here in plenty and so there were several camps in the locality. 'Dungog' is an Aboriginal name too, meaning in Awabakal dialect, the place of the thinly wooded hills/ Tunkok or Tungog.6

Brock also notes that Aboriginal campsites are known in Dungog: at the corner of the showground and in the location of the rifle range. He also mentions that the Aborigines "held corroborees at Taylors and McLennons Flats".7

R.E. Anderson, writing of his reminiscences of the Martins Creek area, mentions that in 1851, when the first European family settled at Martins Creek, Aborigines were their only neighbours and that they exchanged honey for bread, clothing and flour.8

In his reminiscences of life in the Paterson River valley, J. Tucker recalled several aspects of Aboriginal life also:

Even in my day (referring to the 1840's and 50's) the blackfellows were numerous. Many camps existed around the town (i.e. Paterson). They lived by hunting and fishing - fish, wildfowl and animals being abundant. They were expert at spearing fish and they made nets to catch wild duck... Their canoes were made of a sheet of bark from a big tree... Another interesting site was to see them climbing trees, going up to any height, cutting slight steps in the bark of the tree... And I have seen a blackfellow climb a tree in this way and cut out a stinging bees nest nearly 150 feet from the ground... Before white men came they used stone axes for this
He also mentioned that in the early 1840's, when his parents first came to Dungog, that he saw approximately 200 Aborigines set out to fight the Aborigines from Port Stephens.

W.J. Enright recalled that:
My old friend the late John Hopson stated that he had been informed by the late J.W. Boydell that in the summer time the Paterson River blacks ascended the Barrington Tops area via the Allyn River Valley and on a visit in Dec. 1915, we found a stone axe on the tableland.10

The above information about the Aborigines who had lived in the area now covered by Dungog Shire is thus very scant. European diseases, punitive action11 and the effects of dispossession led to the rapid breakdown of their society and hence the opportunity to record their culture in detail was lost.

However the evidence does show that Aboriginal people had lived along the Williams and Paterson Rivers in relatively large numbers - that is large numbers in the sense that the highest population figures for the Port Stephens area, a very 'rich' environment on the coast, was "nearly 200", though it would appear that the area involved was much smaller.

The aboriginal sites which have been recorded in Dungog Shire are also relatively few in number, but are widely distributed and occur in a variety of landsystems and topographic areas. They also include a relatively wide range of site types, including open artefact scatters (Vacy, Mt. Rivers, Lagoon Pinch); scarred trees (Martins Creek); carved trees (Allynbrook); grinding grooves (Paterson); burials (Dungog); and stone arrangement (Red Hill). The future location, investigation and proper management of sites such as these will greatly enhance an understanding of the area's aboriginal people and their way of life.
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NOTES.


2. A. Howitt, The Native Tribes of South-East Australia, 1904, p.85.


4. Threkeld cited in Brayshaw, 4.8, 4.11.


7. Ibid, pp. 6,8,15.


