

Daisy Bates Papers

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

V, 7. 8p. Manuscript letter, transcribed J. Walkley

Dear little Friends I should like you to know something about the little black children who lived on the banks of this Murray River long long ago and who have now passed away from it for ever. They must have been strong little children. They had the beautiful waters of this great river to drink. They had the Murray Cod and its little fish cousins, the yabbies and crayfish and mussels and frogs and the many waterbirds that came and went with flood and drought and they had the land creatures too, to feed on, kangaroo, emu, mallee hen's eggs, every little living creature, bird, animal, reptile, was their food in its season. In the cold and wet season their mothers built bark shelters shaped like a beehive cut in half and a fire was always in front of the shelter. When the wind changed the mothers would turn the bark around so that their little huts were always warm and dry. There was plenty vegetable food for them too, edible roots, berries or fruit of some kind and tiny edible seeds of a species of rye grass which the mothers gathered when ripe and ground and made a kind of cake, mixing the seeds with water and cooking them in the hot ashes. Their only vessels were little shallow wooden boles cut from the trees and hollowed out. And there were many kinds of grubs in the mallee and other trees which the children loved. These grubs feed on the soft sap in the roots and trunks of mallee and other trees and there were big brown beetles which they ate body and bones because they were so good to eat.

I do not think the little Murray River children were ever hungry. There is always plenty of food in the river areas of Australia and all river natives were strong and warlike and very tenacious of their river. The little children from babyhood were taken over and around every portion of the riverbank and country which their fathers had lived on for thousands of years and all little girl children went out with their mothers to gather the native roots and vegetable foods and to learn all the tracks of reptiles, opossums and so on so that when they grew up they would know how and when to look for these and fill their little bags with them for the men and boys. The boys learned how to spear from their fathers and made small spears of rushes and played at battle with each other and the fathers would watch their boys and see that they held their spears in the right way.

Though the little Murray natives had no schools such as we white people have, yet the little girl children learned daily how to find and kill and catch and dig out iguanas and other meat food as they saw their mothers do and the boys learned from seeing their fathers hurl spear or club at kangaroo or emu or fish. Each little girl and boy learned something every day – the river and the land which their fathers and grandfathers had lived on for thousands of years – was their river and land and so they must know where to find their daily food. They had no pantry or cupboard or storage place of any kind and so the foods of the day's hunting were eaten in the evening, all the meat food being divided among them according to the native food laws. No one punished the children, no mother could correct her little boy if he did wrong but the little boys and girls learned all the things necessary for them to know – learned the tracks of every living creature and played in the camp at making the best tracks of possum or reptile. The boys saw their fathers kill and cut up kangaroo or even giving the proper portion to everyone and when they were grown up and killed a kangaroo they would divide the meat in just the same way as they saw their fathers divide it. The only knives they had were pieces of flint which they chipped to make a sharp cutting edge and I have found so few flints in this Murray area and these are so small and so poorly made that I think the Murray natives had to barter for these flints with some other groups mostly N.E. or Nor West of them. I cannot find a trace of their campsites in this place where I have pitched my tent. The whole district is now a farming and orchard area – acreages are fenced in and I walk along an old cart-track to come to the public road. The district has all been transformed from wild scrub and waste land into a

most fertile wheat and orchard area and is a source of living to all its white inhabitants; but I can understand why its natives have vanished without leaving a trace today.

In their old wild life, food – from river and bush - was plentiful – always at hand. When the men elected to stay in camp they sent their women to forage and loafed and sang and corroborated as long as they desired. They were masters of their world – lords of creation and women and children waited upon them always. The women were the workers and were absolutely subservient to every man and boy in camp. A man could beat, maim and ill-treat his woman as his nature prompted and she had no redress. She was as much his property as his tamed dingo.

I would like you, my dear children, to remember that the poor native woman was the most slavish poor creature in the world. If food became scarce in drought times, she had to bring all her catch to her man, and after his dog, she might be thrown a bone or some other miserable portion. She had to serve him at all times, put up his bark or bush shelter, bring wood and water and never eat any food she had gathered until her man had fed on it and left her the dregs.

When the white people came to Australia, every native woman was living in this degraded state and when she became too old and feeble to hunt for grubs and lizards, when she could not rise from her sandy bed and follow the other women in their daily hunt for food for their men, she was left in the spot where she had fallen down and the others went on without her.

The white people came and took up their acres and cleared and fenced and worked, women and men together, to get the land ready and make a new home for themselves and their little children. The natives watched them; the white people saw no houses or huts that men or women would live in, the little beehive shelters had no meaning for them. The land was empty and they had bought it. The native women and children were sent by their men to find out and report on these strange humans and the white women and children treated them kindly from their first contact. Some young white women were timid at first but their great passion was soon roused and they gave food and tried to teach the native women to share in the work of home making, and the white men endeavoured to get the native men to help in the hard work of fence and paddock.

The native men watched the white man and his manner of life – his kindly treatment of wife and children, his way of living, and above and beyond all, his manner of storing his provisions, the flour, tea, sugar and bacca. When the native man tasted of these things, and saw the – to them – everlasting abundance of these foods – the trouble began. He wanted the foods but being master of all his own women kind and lord over them, he could not adopt the white man's routine of daily work for daily food and so he stole and killed or wandered here and there, stopped by fence and house and yard, his native roots ploughed up and thrown aside for the white man's potatoes which had to be planted and tended and brought to fruition by daily and manual labour, and daily manual labour was work for women only, and so he wandered with his women and children, but with no rest.

His area was now covered with great and fine foods and fruits but they had to be worked and watered and ploughed and through the centuries of his peoples, the bush, the river and the sea had to yield without labour. He wandered aimlessly from place to place. He would not learn to labour - he had no desire to expend his energy. He was fed and clothed by the white people who took up his ground but he could not be made to see the value of work or the greatness of turning a wild area into a fruitful one. The white man's food was too soft, too easily digested. His strong digestive organs required the hard coarse foods they had few of and he became flabby and weak.

The hard working white man despised the lazy native; the native despised the white man for his love and respect towards his wife and children. All the white man's ways were new and strange and he

saw no place for himself to lounge in and do as he pleased. When he and his family crossed the boundary of their own ground, they became intruders. Every group had its defined area and when they stepped over that boundary without invitation, they broke the native group law, and fighting and wounding, sometimes killing - followed and then the white man's law came in.

Here in this Murray River area, they saw such hard, constant, day by day work, women and children all intent on the day's duties, rising early and working late, that they fled from the vicinity and as all these native groups were at odds or at enmity with each other and one group whose home ground was ploughed over, could not look for hospitality from its neighbouring group and so the families sought the shelter of townships. Giving or causing trouble in these young towns, they became derelicts, wandering hither and thither among the white people till the government gave them a big or little reserve where they would receive rations, or work with white men for their living. Each step they made, after they had left their own boundaries, took them into strange places full of strange and evil magic to them and the fear in their hearts overrode their 'will to live' and they passed on. It is a terrible sight to see a man turn over on his side and die from no disease but a lack of the will to absorb new ways and a new outlook.

The everyday energy of the white man sapped their vitality and overwhelmed them. They had no more place in the scheme of things than we should have, were we suddenly overrun by such a race of primitives as they were and found ourselves in their Stone Age environment as they found in our civilization.

My dear little Friends – I may not speak to you again but I want you to remember this that I will say to you with all truth and sincerity. Do not think in the years to come – when you will be men and women some of you in positions of power and responsibility – do not think that our natives died out because of our cruelty to them, or because we neglected them or hunted them away or were unkind to them. I have spent thirty and more years in proving that these statements are not true. They are passing from us surely and truly because we are Twentieth century people, every century having advanced us a little more and a little more and they are primitive mankind unable to jump the centuries between. The old primitive vessels could not be filled with the new wine of our civilization. Addendum: letter to DMB from JHS Boyce, Mail Order Division of John Martin & Co. Limited and advertisement for a £5 manchester parcel (2 p.)