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L.M.S. REPORT [December 1825]

London Missionary Society
Aboriginal Mission, New South Wales,
December, 1852.¹⁵
Newcastle,

In a Mission scarcely entered upon, little can be expected for communication; but the state of the objects commiserated should be made known, in order that the hand of Omnipotence may be acknowledged when the effectual operation of the Eternal Spirit shall deliver them from their present state of darkness, error, superstition, and misery.

It would be indelicate to describe minutely the abject state of the Aborigines under our cognizance, suffice to say, that the **females** wander about, though towns, or among the more scattered residences of the Settlers, completely naked, often intoxicated, and even when furnished with articles of clothing, indifferent as to using them for the purposes of decency. The **men**, naked, fierce, cruel to their wives, frequently involved in quarrels ending in blood, in the open streets vehemently pursuing any object that will procure them spirits, and when under its influence uttering forth oaths the most horrid, and obscene expressions the most disgusting. The very **children** partake of these deplorable evils, and boys not seven years old have been seen staggering under the effects of liquor! Often are the Aborigines most shamefully ill-used by those who pride themselves on the difference of complexion; and there are stubborn facts in existence, when the poor Aborigines have been forced to give up their hard obtained provisions to their more powerful white neighbours, or personal maltreatment would be the consequence of denial. Their **girls** and **women** have been taken from their camps at night, shrieking, and muskets have been presented to intimidate, and

their heads have born the marks of the butt-end in preventing the interference of the males. It is not a matter of surprise that a few **Europeans** are yearly speared by the Aborigines, but it is wonderful that more of the English are not destroyed, considering the numerous aggravations given, and the many opportunities the Aborigines have of secretly taking vengeance on them.

The portion of **land** granted by Government for the use of the Aborigines, being a little distance from the Settlements, and affording by its local situation sustenance, so far as respects fish and wild animals, will be a means of withdrawing them from the evil influence of those who act with inconsideration; and the residence of one among them, willing to seek their good, may raise in their minds the impression [189] of that place becoming to them a kind of home. Although the soil is, most unfortunately, very inferior, contrary to the general opinion previously formed, yet the scite [sic] chosen will, it is presumed, afford sufficient scope to begin to turn their attention to the means of providing more permanently for their wants in the pursuits of Agriculture. Unforeseen circumstances have prevented hitherto the possibility of residing on the spot, but a few months more will, it is hoped, bring us to the future scene of exertion. The six months which have already elapsed, since the commencement of the Mission, have not been lost, but progress has been made in the acquirement of the **Aboriginal Tongue**, sufficient to excite a more ardent desire to proceed, and to convince that the difficulties formerly imagined are not so really great when determinately combated. One great advantage has been obtained in an **Aborigine**, who attached himself to us from the first, and whose knowledge of the English language is sufficient to render him highly valuable, and the pains he takes that my pronunciation may be correct, affords a convincing proof that they have an equal share of intellectual power with others of the human race.

The following circumstances having arisen during our residence here, and being illustrative of the manners of the Aborigines, will prove, no

doubt, highly gratifying to our friends, in England especially, and to all who feel an interest in behalf of the Aborigines of New South Wales.

June 3. - A terrible howl among the natives announced the death of some one, and on enquiry, found that it was the prelude of a **funeral**; they asked if I would accompany them; went and found in the bush about thirty male and female Aborigines sitting in groups. The dead body was lying on the ground, wrapped up from head to foot in the bark of a tree. The mother was sitting with the other women around the corpse, and she presented a most horrid frightful appearance. She, as well as the other females, was completely **naked**. Her face, back, and breast was one mass of pipe-day, her eyes glared through black holes, that part being left unsmear'd, forming the similitude of the ancient black rimmed spectacles. Flowing from a deep wound, inflicted by herself with an axe, in her head, streams of blood coagulated in their progress on the mass of pipe-clay, and rendered the whole appearance appalling. Four women were employed with sticks digging a grave, and throwing up the sand with their hands. The men sat with apparent indifference to the scene, save one, the girl's brother; he sat down with his arms on his knees, holding his head on them crying. He said he was very sorry for her. The crying was performed in unison, at intervals. When the grave was excavated, four other women came with boughs, and strewed them on the bottom of the pit. An old man descended into it, the four women took up the dead body and gave it into his arms, who gently deposited it at his feet, and then helped the women to fill up the grave. They appeared to be very particular in filling in between the arms and feet, and all around, pressing the sand with their hands. A child crying, attracted my attention; it was an infant at its mother's breast screaming for a pipe to smoke; it obtained the object of its desire, but could not guide it to its own mouth, it was so young; being applied by the mother it actually took a whiff, the smoke coming out of its mouth, and then sucked the mother's breast.

The interment being over, a female came to me, and in broken English begged I would not tell any person where the body was laid.

Enquiring the reasons of this injunction, they replied they were fearful that white fellow come and take away her **head**. The public exposure of New Zealanders' heads for sale is, no doubt, one of the causes of their fear.

This brings to my recollection a circumstance mentioned to me by my highly respected brother Missionary, J. Williams, during our co-exertions at Raiatea. On his return from this Colony he touched at New Zealand; a medical person was applying to a Chief for a human head, — one was produced — it did not please — the tatooning was insufficient. The Chief had not another, but turning round he put his hand on the head of one of his slaves standing behind him, turned the man's face from side to side, intimating that it should be forthcoming if that would suit. The gentleman declined the bargain.

On one occasion, I went out with a party who were going to hunt the **bandicoot**; eight or ten surrounded a grassy plot of ground, sending in their dogs amongst the high stuff; on the appearance of any game, the men transfixed it with their spears, or ran after it with their cudgels and destroyed it. Some of the Aborigines climbed the trees, others stood like statues on the stumps with spears poised ready for the discharge. They seldom miss their aim.

Their mode of **fishing** is curious, sometimes angling with hook and line thrown by the hand as they are seated in the bark canoe, sometimes diving for shell fish, sometimes standing in their frail bark darting their spears into the fish as they pass, or at other times using hand nets forming a circle in shallow waters and enclosing the fish; but the most curious method is that of planting sprigs of bushes in a zig-zag form across the streams, leaving an interval at the point of every angle where the men stand with their nets to catch what others frighten towards them by splashing in the water.

Their **canoes** are simply a piece of bark 14 or more feet long and from 3 to 4 feet wide. They are procured by climbing a large tree, not in the usual way of notching the bark with a hatchet, and placing the toes in those steps, but by raising a scaffold against the tree, and chopping round the top at the height they want. Others cut the bottom, and it is then stripped off, tied up at **[190]** each end to a point; a piece of stick is put

at one-third from each end, and a string secures the sides to the sticks so as it shall not separate; a quantity of clay is placed in the centre as a hearth, on which they roast the fish as they catch them.

It is miserable to see the **women naked** and shivering in the cold wind in the chilly season of winter toiling, and often without success. But hunger must be satisfied, and the wild fern root roasted forms a substitute for mere [sic] nutritious food.

When the frail bark needs repair, it is effected by the application of a bolster of soft bark on each side, and sown or rather laced across and across; the bark of the cabbage-tree forms the thread, the end of which is applied continually to the fire to harden it, the bone of a kangaroo pierces the bark instead of an awl.

A number of the Aborigines from Port Stevens came to **dance** with those who reside in this place. By what I can learn, it appears, that some one died some time since, and afterwards appeared to a person in the woods, and taught him the song and movement, directing that it should be made known to the tribes in their various districts. Nine of them formed a semicircle round a fire which threw sufficient light, just to observe their movements. A stick was held in each hand, which they swang backwards and forwards, striking them as they swang from them in time with one who stood beating two sticks to regulate their movements.

They held their heads downwards in a melancholy posture, and the curling long black locks hanging over their faces and shoulders, smeared with red ochre, and striped with pipe-clay, gave a romantic appearance to the scene. Those who sat round the fire kept time with their hands about thrice in a second, the women who had cloth, used that in their hands, and two were placed stooping at the last man of the semicircle and striking the hollow of the knee in the same time with the others. The words were monotonous, and they ended by turning sharply round on the heel, throwing up the arms and striking with a shout.

The next movement was different, green boughs of trees were woven and held by each one, as a garland at arms length; one stood before them chaunting a solemn strain. Their

motion was raising the garland very slowly, up level to their heads, and down as low as they could stoop to the ground, bowing their bodies at the time, and all joining in the song. This concluded with a shout, throwing up at the same time all the boughs, as they turned round on the heel. The women employed themselves in supplying the fire with sticks to keep up the blaze. They appeared highly delighted with the exhibition.

Messengers were despatched to the various tribes to assemble here at the **punishment** of a man, who killed another some time since; the precise time of meeting cannot be ascertained, but it is to be soon, as the Aborigines from the Hawkesbury have been and delivered up the man for punishment to the party here, and have learned themselves a new **chaunt**.

I was requested to accompany them on a **hunting** expedition to see them procure a small species of kangaroo. We mustered about thirty persons armed, with spears made of a stout kind of bulrush, pointed with hard wood, and barked with pieces of kangaroo bone. The **spears** are short pieces joined together with gum, and are about from fourteen to eighteen feet long; they are not thrown simply from the hand, but by means of a stick three feet long held in the ha[n]d hooked to the end of the spear.

After travelling a few miles, we arrived on the top of a high hill, the party separated, some going to the bottom, while we continued on the top. A deep valley was before us. The men arranged themselves in different parts, on rocks or stumps, or any little eminence waiting the appearance of game, which the party below, women chiefly, alarmed by their shouts. Seven or eight animals were obtained in less than two hours. One was killed with a young one in its abdominal **pouch**, which, when taken out, ran about seeking shelter, and when placed near its slaughtered dam, it speedily took refuge in the bag.

We then descended and proceeded to ascend another mountain; we halted, and in about a minute half-a-dozen fires were blazing around, and the party warming themselves, sides, backs, and fronts alternately; a few minutes elapsed, when the chase commenced again. One of the party carried a stick of fire; it is an universal

practice. Cold does not render subjects less susceptible of its effects, although continually exposed to its influence. The thermometer was about 62, and no wind.

On the *16th September*, the Aborigines met to decide, by **mortal combat**, some disagreement, and unfortunately they chose the scene of action close to our house, just at a period when quietness was most needed, in consequence of family circumstances. Many were assembled, and some intoxicated; their shouts, noise, clattering of spears and shields, with the loud whiz of a weapon they throw in the air, were exceedingly annoying; but, although highly enraged, yet at my request they departed, and shortly after dispersed: three were wounded.

On *Oct. 31st*, the Aborigines from the Main River, Sugar-loaf Mountain, Port Stevens, and other parts, assembled to **punish** a man; the occasion was, the supposition that he had killed a man by his conjuring skill as doctor. The persons who were to throw the spears were naked, painted red, their hair decorated with the down of the black swan; they advance, pretend to throw a spear, then a crooked piece of wood, then brandish their bludgeons, holding a shield in their left hand, and using every art to rouse the opposed party who attend to see fair play.

If my information is correct, this mode of punishment is a kind of retribution, similar to our ancient tournaments, which were witnessed by the fair sex [191] with so much interest; the black ladies also take a lively interest in these scenes, occasionally becoming a party concerned.

A few spears were thrown at the man, and it afforded me much pleasure to observe them dispersing with no other injury, save the broken head of one female, upon whom her forsaken paramour now had an opportunity of expressing forcibly his displeasure.

The Aborigines informed me of the meeting, but I told them I would not attend, as I would not countenance their fight; it was wrong, and I urged not to engage. Whether it had any effect in preventing a general fight, is difficult to ascertain.

A terrible scream among the Aborigines alarmed us this evening, *November 5th*; ran out to see what was the cause; saw a man beating his own mother most dreadfully with the cudgel; two or three women were endeavouring to divert his blows; I halloed to him, but he was white with rage, foamed at the mouth, and was much intoxicated; he began again, struck a blow on the woman's skull that laid it open, and her on the ground; I ordered him to desist; he began again, I expostulated with him, threatened to tum him out of our fence; again he attempted to renew his unmerciful attack, the cudgel was lifted up ready for the blow; I told him to cease; he paused, that moment; I seized the weapon from his hand; and ordered him to sit down, he listened, squatted down by the fire, placed his head on his arms, resting on his knees, and appeared perfectly spent with rage. The poor woman lay stretched on the ground before the fire, not quite dead, but stunned; many men sat around, but not one interfered; had they, punishment would be inflicted, it is said.

Enquiring the reason of into this paroxysm of fury, found that it arose from the death of the girl before alluded to, who was his sister, and of whom he was very fond; that she, his mother, not sending for him when she was at the point of death, enraged him, and this being the first time of seeing her since her decease, together with his being intoxicated, occasioned the affray.

On the following day, his brother asked Mrs. T. if I were not very angry with the man, and what was I going to do to him. Mrs. T. informed him I was grieved at his conduct, and would talk to him about it. The next day after this, the same brother came into the room bowing very low and saying, If you please, Sir, to make it up with that man this time, if you please, you know Sir, he is very sorry.

The offender was requested to appear himself; he advanced, looking very much cast-down; after endeavouring to make him understand my meaning, he promised to get his mother a kangaroo the next day, and giving each one a pipe of tobacco, they departed pleased.

On Monday night, *November 7th* — The natives came to me just as the sun had changed the shadows blue, to see a ceremony preparatory to the **knocking out of the tooth** of the

young men, who, by that operation, are rendered fit to enter the married state. They pointed out to me the doctor or priest, perhaps more properly the conjuror, as he completely deceives, pretending that he has long bones inside him which **Koen** gives him, and which bones are used as punches to punch out the teeth. **Koen** is the name of the being who made the first man, but what is their precise idea of this spirit, is not as yet ascertained. This mystical bone would have made its appearance out of the conjuror this evening, but the party from Port Stevens not having arrived, it condescended to remain where it was.

After the ceremony had been performed, an Aborigine informed me very gravely, that the **korarje** had many bones within him, that he came from the mountains, had been up with the fire in the sky (the comet), in fact, was a most wonderful man. It was asked, did you ever see the bone come out of him? No, was the reply, he goes into the bush, and **Koen** gives it him. No person is ever allowed to see the bone make its appearance.

The **ceremony** performed was this: — about twenty men stood at the extremity of a circle formed in the grass 38 feet diameter, every particle of vegetation was removed from within the ring, and in the centre a small hillock was raised, where the mystical bone is to be used.

The men stood at equal distances from each other in the circle, and wheeling round on their heel as a pivot to each other right and left with their elbows on their hips, but the right arm extended horizontally, their left legs swinging over the right foot every turn.

They then ran and shouted, meeting each other in the centre of the circle uttering a shrill scream. Their frequent running in this manner appeared to increase the hillock of sand in the centre by the shuffling of their feet.

They next ran upon all fours from the extremity of the ring, barking like dogs, until they met at the centre, where a genuine howl was set up, which would have been mistaken for real, if heard at a little distance.

The next movement was re-assuming the character of men. They walked from the extremity to the centre, pretending to eat, one

corn, another kangaroo, another fish, &c. &c. concluding with a shout.

Whether they thought this was not sufficiently characteristic of the human species, remains to be discovered, but they proceeded to give another unerring description of the beings whom they wished to represent. The whole party scouted off into the bush, where one gathered a long stalk of grass, another a twig, another a little bit of bark, &c. &c. They then took post at the extremity of the ring. The most menacing attitudes were displayed, the air rang with their shouts, the sham weapons were brandished, the blades of grass were poised, the twigs were ready to be thrown, and they advanced in double quick time to the centre, where meeting, they discharged their weapons in each other's face, shouting vehemently.

They then formed into a company four abreast, and ran and jumped, in exact time, shouting to every part of the circle, driving [192] away the enemy and exulting in victory. The whole afforded them much laughter and sport.

The first ray of the setting sun was now barely visible in the west, and the ceremony ended. The **korarje** standing by was pointed out to me, the bone was nearly out of him, they said, but would not come quite out that evening, as more ceremonies were to be performed ere that event took place. Expressing my doubts on the subject, the reply was, *massa, you know black fellow no tell lies!* Regret arose at my not yet being able in his own tongue to point out to his consideration, the Fountain of all Truth.

About 10 o'clock at night, **November 16th**. — Two of the Aborigines came requesting my attendance at a little distance in the bush, where the two **koradje** were waiting to exhibit the bones, as they would bring them forth that night; in vain was the unreasonableness of the hour urged, and the request made to defer until morning light.

No, you come massa and see it, not long, come now; it must be in the dark.

Most certainly, was my reply, lest it should be discovered in the light.

Well, massa! you no believe, you come, you see, you know all about it then.

They led the way, I followed. The moon shed its silvery light, darkened every now and then by

thick dense clouds. The wind whistled among the tops of the high trees and through the shrub. The distant roar of the ocean dashing on the sandy beach; the black naked figures stalking before me, streaked a little with pipe-clay, to make the blackness more visible, raised sensations pleasing, yet dull. A few minutes brought us to some fires briskly blazing, amidst the crackling thorns, surrounded by beings who were standing, squatting, or lying around, warming themselves at the cheerful blaze. The numerous half-starved wretched looking dogs set up a cry at our approach, and were with difficulty silenced. The men, women, children and dogs formed a company the picture of misery.

Preparations were now commenced for the ceremony, and their few vestiges of raiment, much tattered and torn, were deposited in the women's nets as cumbersome to both male and female.

They stood, the principal part completely **naked**, and though English friends may start at the idea of naked females parading, it is so common in this Colony, that it is scarcely noticed, although exhibited in the midst of towns and streets: it is an annoyance to be deeply deplored, but will not, I apprehend, be removed until a change of principle is effected in the Aborigines by instruction communicated in their own language.

The men proceeded to the ring, which has been already described, shouting and singing. An old man held up a shield beating time on it with a stick, — this is all the music they have, and chaunting a rather pleasing **chaunt**. The men capered about, chattered like monkees, ran about to every part within the circle. In the midst of a shout, in ran the two **korarjes**, one on all fours, the other with a stick supporting himself, and resting every minute with his chin upon the short stick, forming when he ran a figure on threes instead of fours.

A few manoeuvres passed in the ring, when one fell down flat on his back motionless, stretched out as dead; the other placed himself on threes resting at his head; the group stood over him looking attentively; the old man quickened his taps on the shield, the chaunt was in a lower tone, the whole paused.

Up starts the prostrate one; away followed after him the one on threes; the shouts and dancing proceeded; and all appeared life and joy. Again the man fell prostrate, again the same representation was exhibited, a groan burst from the prostrate one, he started up, and round he went his mystic maze.

The women gathered the sticks, the children lighted the fires, and the fathers were busily employed in watching for the bone.

A third time torpor seized the man, and a louder groan burst forth. The gentle tapping on the shield appeared to rouse him, and again the dance went off with the greatest vehemence.

During the greatest exertion the two **koratjes** leaped out of the ring, ran off into the bush, and the group seated themselves inside the extremity of the circle. The grass and bushes collected round the outside of the ring was now put in a blaze; the whole were in expectation; the bone was coming out, but where! in the bush, and no one must go near!

After a few minutes had elapsed a loud blow on the ground announced, in the bush, that they were coming. The group shouted and struck the ground in answer, another blow was heard, and answered again by the party in the ring. Every eye was directed to find out which way they would come. Here, no! there, no! another thump pointed out the line of approach, — the women rose, the children screamed, the dogs barked, and the two men were perceived at a little distance jumping like frogs. The noise was made by their feet occasioned by their leaping as far as they could in the frog position.

All pointed out to me the bone, which was held between the teeth, and used as a horn pushing from side to side as they approached the blaze. I saw that one was about three feet long, the other about half that length; in appearance like a hazle rod pulled and marked with black marks as though done by fire.

They jumped in the frog style after the men, women, and children, the former enjoying the sport, the latter screaming and alarmed. This continued some minutes, and made the matter appear more a scene of hilarity than superstition.

Standing on one side for their approach to ascertain more closely the wonderful bones, my expectation was frustrated by their darting off suddenly into the bush with a loud shout!

The whole party now burst out into every demonstration of joy, they ran from side to side of the circle, driving away, apparently, something from them with loud acclamations:

This ended the ceremony. I requested a sight of the bones, but was informed no one could see them, as they were within the two **korarjes'** flesh until again required. Enquiring how they came first there? the reply was, *Devil, devil gave it to them*; but since have ascertained that **Koen** who made the first man, gave them the bones — *devil, devil*, being only an English phrase. [193]

The **Aborigine**, who assists me in obtaining their language, informs me, that there is a being, in the Sugar-loaf Mountains, resembling a man but taller in stature; with arms, legs, face, and hair, very long on the head, but the feet are placed contrarily to the face being behind; and the body hairy, like an animal. The flesh is so hard in all parts of the body that it is impenetrable, except just between the legs, where a spear may penetrate, but at no other part. He is fierce, devouring men, and often pursuing the Aborigines in the mountains. There are females, but not many of the species. Their cry is often heard uttering **Perrelori-o**, dwelling very long on the O, in the summer time. Enquiring whether any Europeans had ever seen this Achilles of the Aborigines, the reply was, a soldier of the 46th heard him one night when he was out hunting with the natives! Query. — Do not the Aborigines of New South Wales stand on an equality with the Grecians, as it respects intellect, and is there not as great a sign of innate deficiency of reasoning faculty in the Greeks, believing the story of Achilles, as in the Aborigines believing the story of **Yarho Pattegarng**, the name of their Achilles!

Tunubuarng is the name of another being infesting the woods: — he appeared a few

months back to a man on the road we had marked through the wilderness, but the Aborigine was so much alarmed when he saw him, that he ran away immediately. This being is a wild man possessing a wife, who travels with a sharp-pointed stick on her shoulder, and when she meets a child she impales it, and carries it so transfixed in triumph on her shoulder to her retreat, and there devours it! Under such impressions it ceases to be a matter of surprise, that the Aborigines are so exceedingly fearful to be out in the dark.

If the customs and traditions of these people are vain; if our forefathers were led by practices more cruel and equally vain; and if Christianity has dispelled those gloomy clouds of ignorance which once darkened the understandings of our progenitors, who need despair of the same cause producing the same effects in reclaiming these sable sons of Adam?

If we, boasting of our superior light and knowledge, use no means to instruct and raise these wretched Aborigines from their depths of misery, increased by our residence among them, where is our vaunted characteristic philanthropy?

If those, who are accumulating wealth in the possession of this people's land, do not devote a portion of those riches for so noble, so just a cause, will not the cry of a brother's blood, occasioned too often to be shed through the thirst for wealth, encroaching on their native rights, ascend into the ears of him who has said, "For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise."¹ "Vengeance is mine, I will repay?"² and will not the wealthy possessors of the land, by apathy to the Aborigines, subject themselves to that imprecation of the Angel in the day of Retribution. "Curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof, because they came not to the help."³ Are there those who are professed followers of Him who is Love, who can merely say, "Be warmed,

¹ For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the LORD; I will set *him* in safety from *him that* puffeth at him. [Psalms xii.5]

² Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, **Vengeance is mine; I will repay**, saith the Lord. [Rom. xii.19]

³ Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the LORD, **curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help** of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty. [Judg. v.23]

be filled;”⁴ and do nothing more! who profess to be governed by that substance of all just law, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,”⁵ and yet make no effort to manifest the reality of their love? To the glory of England, be it said, that she has her ten thousands there, who feel the sympathetic glow in their breasts, and whose hands also minister to the wants of a brother’s woe, without regard to clime or colour. May the echo soon reverberate from happy Britain’s shore, that Australia too is not last, nor least, in this respect among the Nations of the Earth. It would be unjust not to acknowledge one act of pecuniary kindness, in this Colony, to the Aboriginal Mission established by the London Missionary Society, from a Lady, whose valuable present demands the tribute of thanks, which are thus most respectfully and sincerely presented.

L. E. Threlkeld, Missionary

⁴ And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, **be ye warmed and filled**; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? [James ii.16]

⁵ And the second is like, namely this, **Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself**. There is none other commandment greater than these. [Mark xii.311]