

# Aboriginal cannibalism

30th November 1998

Dear Scott,

During the late 1970's to early 1980 I spent much of my time researching and exploring many of the old goldfields in the regions of the Daintree, Palmer River, Chillagoe and Charters Towers areas. During that time I spoke to many old timers and read many articles detailing the life and times of the men who rushed to the goldfields in search of their fortune. I was also fortunate to spend a couple of days on walk-about with an old aboriginal gentleman who showed me much of his tribal lands and told me many stories of aboriginal life, customs and history.

While camping beside a creek a few miles south of Bloomfield he told of a massacre of Chinese prospectors which had occurred at the spot by members of his tribe and casually remarked that they were cooked and eaten afterward. This comment is further backed up by references to cannibalism which occurred on the Palmer River goldfields in a book written by Hector Holthouse, *River of Gold- the story of the Palmer River Gold Rush*. First published in 1967 by Angus and Robertson. Many accounts of atrocities by both blacks and whites are given in this book, many are also recorded in old newspapers of the times and references to similar events can be read in encyclopedias on Australian history. If you have a weak stomach please do not read any further, the segments, of which I will quote, from the book. It vividly reconstructs what must have been a very unique and largely unknown period of our history.

The author acknowledges staff at the Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane and friends for material used in this book.

## Accounts pre-dating the arrival of Cook:-

" They needed all their resources on the Palmer; the Cape York Peninsula was inhospitable country, Centuries earlier Chinese, Malays, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch travelers had looked at it-- and wanted no part of it. Gold had been found there and, like Lasseter's reef, lost again before it could do anyone any good. The first white man to see its interior had been killed by a cannibal's spear....

A party of Portuguese beche-de mer fishermen, driven from Timor by the northwest monsoon, landed somewhere on the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria. For weeks they endured a miserable existence on the inhospitable coast before the wind changed and they were able to get back to Timor. They took with them several samples of gold bearing quartz. Backed by wealthy merchants they returned with a well-equipped expedition to prospect the locality. Blacks drove them off, capturing some of their number and eating them.....

## The Merkin Tribesmen:-

The blacks of that stretch of the Palmer were Merkin tribesmen. In common with other tribes inhabiting that part of the peninsula, they were a well built, virile, copper-coloured race, who were warriors for centuries. Contact with races to the north of Australia had sharpened their wits and polished their fighting techniques. In a country where an uncertain supply of wild game provided either a feast or a famine, they were all cannibals "of a particularly bad type", one writer later put it.

They killed and ate their own women and children and occasionally their men", he wrote. " The older women were often killed for eating purposes like livestock. When a gin was to be killed she was taken away to a secluded spot. One man seized and crossed her hands in front of her, while another hit her on the back of the head with a nulla-nulla or wooden sword. Then she was disemboweled and cut up for roasting. A woman who was unfaithful was killed and eaten. If a man fell from a tree, or was in any other way seriously injured, he was generally killed and eaten. Plenty of food to eat was the mainstay of the peninsula aboriginal's existence.

They never ate the head of a foe. The part of a man most appreciated as food was the thigh, and of a woman, the breast, but the part most sought after was a man's kidney fat, or the kidneys themselves, which were regarded as

the centre of life. They liked to carry a piece of a dead foe about with them as a trophy; it was generally rolled up in grass or leaves and carried in a basket work dilly-bag. It was supposed to bring them good hunting---of man or smaller game."

### **Attacks on prospectors:-**

" On 11th of October they landed again and were attacked again, this time by an army of more than two hundred. They escaped when the chief of the attackers, a man about six feet six inches tall and broad in proportion, was taken by a crocodile while swimming a creek in an attempt to take them from the rear. Nine days later a shore party was again attacked and had to shoot its way back to the boats.

" In every camp along the beach for two miles" wrote Dalrymple, " was unmistakable evidence of wholesale cannibalism; heaps of human bones and skulls were found in each camp, and in some, roasted and partly eaten bodies were found beside the fires at which they had been cooked. Lumps of half-eaten human flesh were found in the gins' dilly-bags....."

" As diggers on the field dwindled in numbers, fought amongst themselves, and lay dying with fever, [ dysentery and typhoid ] the cannibal Merkins moved in to take revenge for the fouling of their fishing holes and a dozen unprovoked shootings. For centuries they had been in the habit of tiding themselves over the bad season with human flesh. Here was a new source of supply. Here was talgoro --human meat--waiting to be taken. All over the field and along the track isolated men disappeared. Few were ever heard of again. But two of them were.

Months later a young black girl deserted one of the tribes and was bought into Palmerville. After she had picked up enough English to make herself understood, she was asked if she knew anything about the two men, who had disappeared in the area she came from. The girl giggled happily, but at first would say nothing. After a good deal of persuasion she at last told them what had happened. The men of her tribe had surrounded the two diggers and tied them up with vines. They were kept tied up until they had carried to the blacks' camp, and then, so they would not be able to run away, their shin and arm bones were broken by being pounded between stones. Next day one of the men was knocked on the head and was roasted and eaten while his mate looked on. The following day the other man was eaten. "

### **A description of an attack on a party of prospectors:-**

....." Met a larger party next day. Three times that day the blacks showed themselves in force, but were apparently afraid to attack the larger party.

Next day we came up with about thirty Chinamen, all well armed, but scared out of their wits. The blacks had attacked their camp that morning, killed five of them, and carried off their boss whom they killed and ate. We later found part of his remains, partly roasted."

And a further attack on a German miner named John Strau, his wife and daughter:-

Next word from the lagoon was when two diggers came galloping up to a bark shanty on the Normanby where another convoy of carriers was camped. On reaching the lagoons, they said , they saw a big mob of blacks gathered around something. Suspecting trouble, they fired one of their three revolver shots and spurred their horses into the middle of them. The blacks bolted.

When the diggers reached the spot where they had been gathered they found Strau's body under his dray, and , a little distance away, the body of his wife. A spear had been driven through her mouth and had pinned her to the ground. Her clothing had been torn off and she had been horribly outraged and mutilated before death. Both bodies were still warm. Three horses were lying dead of spear wounds. Of the little girl there was no trace.

An armed party from the Normanby reached the spot next morning the bodies were still undisturbed.....  
.....They found black's tracks everywhere, but not a glimpse of a blackfellow. Then they found the little girl. She was lying on her back, an ugly gash on her forehead, her stomach ripped up by a wooden knife, her eyes pecked out by the crows.

Sub-Inspector Douglas, with a detachment of native police, tracked the raiders back across the Normanby river, came up with a tribe, and slaughtered them almost to a man. Along the trail they had found parts of the woodwork of the dray, split, broken, and sometimes partly burnt to allow the removal of every bolt, nail and piece of ironwork.

A few of the blacks were captured. The native police had their own method of interrogating them. Two young girls aged about twelve or thirteen were chosen, and each was tied to a tree a hundred yards apart. They were kept tied there, questioned and tormented by black troopers, until both told the same story, which was then presumed to be true.

Through the troopers, Douglas learned that Strau's party was camped for the night when the blacks attacked them. Strau was speared while reading a book beneath the dray, and the woman was sewing, sitting behind the wheel of the dray. The two young lubras described in blood chilling detail all that had happened to her before she was killed. They said the blacks had intended to keep the little girl and bring her up as a member of the tribe, but two old gins had quarreled over possession of her, and it was decided to kill her to avoid dissension.

After the police had gone, those tribesmen who had escaped came back and dug up Strau's body and took it away. It was never found.

On both sides, after the Strau murder, the conflicts between the whites and the myalls became more savage. Even those diggers and others who had once tried to make friends with them now shot all blacks on sight like vermin."

#### **More incidents:-**

Two white diggers arriving at Cooktown from the Palmer reported having met on the Palmer side of Hell's Gate by five terrified Chinese running for their lives. As they were coming up through the defile, they said, two huge blackfellows had stepped from behind a rock, grabbed one of their party by the shoulders and feet, and run away with him. "When we reached the spot," said the diggers, "everything was quiet, though there were some bamboo poles and Chinamen's baskets lying about. No doubt the Chinamen made a good meal, though if he was anything like his companions he would have been in very poor condition."

A killing which the diggers took far less calmly, and which stirred the conflicts to new heights of savagery, was the ambushing, murder, and eating of the Macquarie brothers on the tableland just above Hell's Gate towards the end of the year. Hughey Macquarie and his younger brother Don had given up shearing in the hope of making enough by packing on the Palmer to buy themselves a farm in Tasmania, where they came from, but Don's health had not stood up to the life, and Hughey was taking him back to the coast. On the way they were pounced on from behind rocks and knocked senseless before they could put up a fight. When Hughey came around Don was dead and the blacks were getting the body ready for roasting. To make sure that Hughey gave them no trouble they hacked off his legs at the knees and left him lying in agony while they went on with the feast.

Hughey lived long enough to leave a record of what had happened. On his belt he carried a tin pannikin, and with the last of his strength, almost unconscious with agony, he found a sharp chip of rock and used it to scratch into the tin the few words that told the grim story. Then he took the pannikin off his belt and pushed it under a rock before he died. Days later a party of diggers found the signs of the cannibal feast and scratching around found the pannikin.

Douglas and his troopers scoured the plateau and shot every blackfellow they could find. But still the war of attrition went on.....

A shanty-keeper on the Normanby was speared and eaten. A party of diggers reported it."The tent was riddled with spears and entirely deserted; there were free drinks for all who chose to take them."

Almost daily horses and bullocks were being speared and carriers and diggers attacked. Several diggers were attacked by a large party of raiders within five miles of Cooktown.

#### **The Chinese arrival on the goldfields:**

The Chinese fared worst of all at the hands of the blacks, but raids on them received little publicity unless a white digger was in some way involved. It was said the blacks preferred Chinese for eating purposes because their rice-fed flesh tasted better than the salty flesh of the beef fed whites.

Few of the newly arrived Chinese were allowed to keep the gold they won. They had signed indentures, with their families in China as security, in return for their fares to Australia, and their earnings went to their Chinese sponsors in Canton, Hong Kong and Cooktown. Their affairs were managed by a number of Chinese tongs or secret societies, who had divided the goldfield into strictly recognised working areas. Each gang was presided over by a tong representative--a trained hatchet-man---who directed activities, arranged rations and supplies, issued a few trusted coolies with such weapons as were available , and immediately took charge of all gold that was won. A quick knife in the back was the best a coolie could expect if caught stealing gold for himself. Eventually, when his debt was paid, together with suitable interest, he was free to work on his own account. Until then he laboured long hours, nearly naked in the scorching sun, provided with only the bare minimum needed to keep him alive.

In Cooktown the Chinese merchants were quietly digging in. One of them bought the Captain Cook Hotel for eight hundred pounds cash. Several large Chinese merchants in Canton and Hong Kong sent representatives to Cooktown, and large and handsome stores began to go up all over town.

" Mongolians land in large numbers from every steamer from Hong Kong and Singapore and announce their intention of making Cooktown a second Canton." Wrote the Australasian Sketcher correspondent. " They are genuinely surprised that the locals are not delighted at the prospect. The Chinese buy up the eligible town lots of land at high rates and quickly run up stores and open businesses."

To the cannibal blacks, the new chum Chinese were manna from heaven. Hundreds of them were ambushed, captured, and eaten at leisure in gloomy canyons like Hell's Gate, at creek crossings, and in patches of scrub along the track. The first the Chinese would know of an attack would be when innocent looking boulders or gum trees suddenly erupted with black figures striped with white and yellow warpaint and screeching like demons from the deepest hell.

Mining warden Sellheim's report for that month listed further murders on the Hell's Gate road and ended: " The object was evidently the use of the bodies for food." Somewhere near the Gate was supposed to be a large mountain cave which was given the name of the Devil's Kitchen. Rumour was that captured Chinese were taken there by the dozen and hung on trees outside by their pigtailed until they were needed for killing and eating. In later years many miners looked for it, believing that some of the gold the captured Chinese would have been carrying would be found there. If the cave ever existed, it was never located.

Sickness also took a heavier toll among the Chinese than it had done among the white diggers. From heat, exhaustion, snakebite, and fever they had dropped along the track and were left there by their countrymen to die. On 15th September a Cooktown newspaper reported: " Numbers of Chinamen are dying on the road and their countrymen systematically avoid them, even while still alive. I have seen personally a poor wretch, even within the precincts of the town, lying perfectly helpless by himself with but a few barrels to shelter him. It is a portion of their custom in such cases and the unfortunate quite accedes to the arrangement."

Soon after this a case of leprosy was reported among the Chinese on the Palmer, and there was an outcry from the diggers about the Chinese introducing " loathsome Oriental diseases ." The newspaper reported : " Mr Selheim has taken prompt measures to prevent the spread of this disease and has ordered that such Chinamen as are not holders of business licenses be confined to a separate camp on the south side of the river, as they have lately been in the habit of bringing their sick countrymen into Edwardstown and leaving them there to their fate."

One of them who, unlike most of his countrymen, registered his gold, sent more than a ton of gold out through Cooktown from what came to be called Chinky Creek. There is no record of the gold won by the other other Chinese in the party, but they probably did just as well.

**Christie Palmerston:-**

Christie Palmerston was one of the most remarkable men the north ever new. To the diggers he became a friend in need, to the Chinese a death dealing terror, and to the cannibal blacks a legendary figure who moved amongst them unmolested. He had shot blacks down in defence of white diggers, but on the other hand he had doctored and saved the lives of many who had been wounded by the bullets of the diggers' Sniders, and once had stayed with a myall tribe for weeks to look after a sick child. He had an uncanny knack of handling the wild blacks. At a time when white and Chinese diggers alike were being killed and eaten by them, he was always able to make friends among any tribe he chose and recruit young bucks who would follow him anywhere. For years he roamed the unexplored ranges with a private army of myalls, picking up gold whenever it suited him. But for the Chinese he had a fanatical hatred. He raided them ruthlessly, robbed them of their gold and stores, killed them by the dozen, and it was alleged, bartered those he took prisoner with the cannibal blacks knowing they would be used as food.

In the rugged country between Cooktown and the goldfields, Palmerston seemed to know his way about as well as the blacks themselves, and with the help of his black bodyguard, he developed the uncanny knack of knowing everything that was going on in it. Several times myalls, massing along the track to ambush diggers, found themselves mown down by a fusillade from the Sniders of Palmerston's men. Even the police admitted that Palmerston was worth a whole regiment of troopers for the work he did in controlling the blacks.

But this only made his attacks on the Chinese the more embarrassing to them. Little though many of the police liked it, it was part of their duty to protect the Chinese. In the early days of the rush Palmerston had organised his myalls into gangs to carry rations up from the coast. When the coolies began to compete, he retaliated by raiding their pack trains with his blacks, stealing their stores to sell to the diggers himself, and, according to some of the Chinese storekeepers at any rate, paying his cannibal recruits by letting them have the Chinese prisoners as food. The blacks by then were doing so much raiding on their own account that no one could tell whether Palmerston had any part in it or not. Most of the white diggers could not have cared less anyway.

There were also stories of lost diggers, almost dead from starvation, being tracked down by Palmerston and brought back to camp. There were others he had found helpless from fever in their tents and nursed back to health. With stories like this going around, it was hardly likely that the diggers would help hunt him down for the robbery of a few Chinese.

There was nothing Palmerston seemed to enjoy better than finding a big gang of Chinese scouring the gravel in some isolated gully. With his myall mob at his heels, he would charge down on them, firing wildly, screeching the same hideous cockatoo battle-cry as the blacks themselves, and, as often as not, scarcely distinguishable from them. The Chinese would scatter in panic, and while his followers pursued them Palmerston would be methodically going through their chamois leather bags for gold.

### **The Police and their Native troopers:-**

After a series of attacks in the Hells Gate area, a white police sergeant and three native troopers were sent to "disperse" the attackers. Sneaking up on a camp were heaps of all kinds of material stolen from the diggers, carriers and Chinese, and a large collection of very heavy, strong spears, all with barbed points and poisoned.

Continuing the pursuit into rough hilly country, the sergeant and troopers had to leave their horses and continue on foot over steep ridges and ravines for about four miles, and then into heavy scrub. The blacks made a fighting retreat, frequently driving the pursuers to cover, but never showing themselves long enough to make a target. "Piccaninnies had been left behind by the dozen," the sergeant later reported. "Their mothers simply abandoned them to their fate."

A couple of miles into the scrub, in a position that would never have been found had not the owners been tracked to it, the main camp was located.....They also found the whole body of a dead blackfellow, freshly cooked, and ready for eating.

The myalls often left children behind when pursued, and some of the police and carriers often took advantage of it to provide themselves with native servants. One such was Sub-Inspector O' Connor, who had been sent with twenty-four native troopers to establish a post on the Laura for extra protection in the Hell's Gate area. His troopers were Fraser Island boys, themselves cannibals on their home ground and outstanding, even by native

police standards, for their ferocity.

On one such pursuit following the discovery of two murdered packers who were about to be "dispersed":-

Towards daylight they heard firing down-river and ran towards it. Suddenly a big blackfellow sprang up from the river . Sambo fired and the man fell into the long grass. When O'Conner, Corfield and Sambo came up with the troopers there was not one live myall in sight, though several bodies lay crumbled on the ground. They burnt the bodies, together with all the weapons they could find, and also several bags containing the dead bodies of piccaninnies which the blacks had been carrying around with them. Corfield went with one of the troopers to where the soil at the roots of a large gum tree had been hollowed out by the water so as to make a sort of cave.

" What are you firing at ?" demanded Corfield.

" Two feller sit down there," said the trooper, hauling out the dead bodies of two dead blackfellers.

O'Conner's troopers no doubt found that day's work good training for future exploits. In 1878 they were lent to the Victorian Government to help track down the Kelly gang, and they were present at Glenrowan when Ned was taken prisoner.

**And finally a very unfortunate public servant :-**

During the wet season the Government sent a man with a boat to the Laura River to ferry stranded travelers across. But not many were traveling and the boatman was alone a good deal. The blacks speared and ate him.

Have a good day  
Steve.

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