

The First People of Kgarri (Fraser Island)

There is little dispute that Fraser Island was Butchalla territory. Other names have been identified but it is most likely that the Ngulungbara and Dulingbaras were Butchulla clans. This FIDO Backgrounder attempts to summarize some of the early recordings of the people and their culture. Backgrounder 47 – October 2010

Physical Attributes: Fraser Island Aborigines were described in the journals of those Europeans who first came into contact with them as being generally well built with good muscle. Their hair was usually jet black and the men grew bushy curly whiskers and moustaches. They ranged in height from 5 feet (153 cms) to 6 feet (183 cms) but averaged 5ft. 6ins (168 cms). The women averaged 5 feet (153 cms). Both sexes were extremely agile and very strong.

Dr Norman Tindale noted: *"This island would have been one of the more densely occupied areas of Australia, exceeded only by the Kaiadilt of Bentinck Island. Such densities seem possible chiefly when fish and reef products are freely available."*

All went naked except for pubic aprons which were sometimes worn. For protection from the cold, rain or insects, fat from fish or animals, often mixed with ashes, was rubbed on the body. The main ornament was a piece of seashell of elliptical shape, hung around the neck.

Distribution: Tindale's map of traditional Aboriginal territories throughout Australia, suggests that three tribes dominated the Great Sandy Region. The Ngulungbara occupied all of the northern part of Fraser Island and had no mainland territory. They claim they were separate people but there are reports of inter-marriage with Butchallas. The southern part of Kgarri and virtually all of the Cooloola sandmass was occupied by the Dulingbaras (or as Bracefell reported them the Doombarras).

The central section of Kgarri (also reported as "Carree" and "Carina" in early records) was occupied by the Butchallas (or Batjala) whose mainland territory extended to Bauple Mountain. Woody Island, called "Dooliwa", was occupied by the Woomaburrahs. There is some uncertainty as to whether the Woomaburrahs were a family group of the Butchallas or a separate cultural group.

As a result of global warming about 10,000 years ago, the sea levels rose and about 7,000 years ago, Kgarri again became an island. The rising sea levels forced many coastal people back on to higher ground and submerged all of their occupational sites around the former coastline at the edge of the continental shelf. Butchalla territory hasn't changed much in 10,000 years except that part of it was submerged under Hervey Bay and Great Sandy Strait. Most of their territory which once would have straddled the Mary River now straddles a much larger waterway.

Reported cultural attributes: The natives lived by a harsh and complicated social system with numerous taboos and rituals of great importance to every member of the tribe. Polygamy was legal and widely practised. A man could not marry a woman of his own clan and children belonged to the clan of the mother. To express sorrow in time of mourning, both men and women would gash themselves with sharp stones and other implements. The natives of Fraser Island possessed the same type of weapons and implements as their mainland neighbours, except for the woomerah. Their canoes were made from the bark of trees. These were used for trips for fishing and hunting dugong and turtle. Their middens, gunyah trees and a few other marked trees that the astute observer may notice are now the only relics of the traditional lifestyles of the first people of Fraser Island.

The Butchalla were healthy vigorous people who appeared not to use spears as much as scoop nets which they used to catch fish. Their culture was essentially based on the sea and its harvest. Evidence of this is still to be found in the numerous middens of shells of oysters.

There has always been a concentration of Aboriginal populations where there was an abundance of food and the richest areas for food were most frequently along the coast. Dating of all known coastal middens show that none are older than 5000 years. A number of archaeological sites along the west coast of Fraser Island have also been recorded. Middens along the sheltered shores include mainly oyster shells (*Ostreidae sp.*) whelks (*Pyrazus ebeninus*) and a variety of crustacea. These remnants of great feasts would have been almost certainly only deposited after the present coastline was established.

Prior to the destruction of their tribal life, the natives were governed by a Council of Elders who determined punishments, conducted inquests, and taught and explained the laws, customs and beliefs of their tribe. They also organised revenge expeditions. The Kabi tribe of which the Butchallas were a sub-group was regarded as being fierce and hostile.

Edward Armitage, in describing the cultural richness noted, *"They have preserved in their campfire songs and corroborees very accurate memories of historic events one hundred and sixty years ago.... Composing songs the blacks have no idea of rhyme or metre; it is simply prose set to music, but their sense of tune and time is perfect ... They have a very correct ear for harmony..."*

The End of the Dreaming

The Butchallas' exclusive occupation of Kgarri came to a relatively abrupt end following the establishment of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement in 1824. Although the settlement was outside the territory of the Great Sandy Region people, eventually the establishment of that settlement led to the tragic demise of the Aboriginal people of the region. The first inroads were made when convicts escaped from the tyranny of the penal system to be befriended by the Aborigines. The Butchalla knew them as "bundas" (white blackfellows). Some lived with their adopted Aboriginal clans for many years. This was true of James Bracefell whose Butchalla name was "Wandi" (meaning great talker).

Bracefell described his 12 month sojourn on Fraser Island in about 1840 to Dr. Simpson who made these notes before Bracefell's untimely death in 1842: *"He now accompanied these Blacks to their Island (Dooliwa) in Wide Bay, lying between the main land and Fraser's Island, where he remained a month and then passed over in a Canoe to Fraser's Island, called Carina by the Blacks. The tribes here, who go by the general appellation of the (Baltelus), are very numerous, thousands he thinks, for he states at their great fights he has seen them covering the Beach for four miles in length.*

"The Island itself shuts in Wide Bay to the Eastward and may be from 50 - 60 miles long but formed principally of sand hills like Moreton Island but well watered. There is also abundance of fish, crabs, turtle, sea-hogs, kangaroo and opossum, also the Honeysuckle and a kind of nut growing on a shrub (macrozamia cycad), which is rendered eatable by being pounded and washed in a running Stream."

The two events which most contributed to the Aboriginal demise in the region were the strong antipathy which was developed as result of some of the more lurid stories told by Eliza Fraser of her "capture" and "mistreatment" by Aborigines on Fraser Island and Cooloola in 1836. Although her stories were contradicted by some of her fellow surviving ship-mates, her stories were widely circulated.

The other event was the opening up of the Mary River for European settlement soon after in 1842. The British wanted to colonize Queensland faster to prevent a French settlement. They closed the Moreton Bay penal settlement and threw the whole state open to squatters. Andrew Petrie led an expedition in a precariously small craft to locate and explore the Moonaboola River which he had heard of from Aborigines. He picked up Bracefell on the way and with Bracefell's aid obtained an Aboriginal guide at Ballargan to guide them up *Moonaboola* (Mary River) to assess its potential for timber and grazing.

Petrie ventured on to Fraser Island looking for the remains of Captain James Fraser who died there. He reported on Fraser Island's superb forests. Petrie's exploration rapidly led to squatters taking up selections along the Wide Bay (Mary) River and the establishment of a settlement at what is now Maryborough within a year and to the exploitation of Fraser Island's forest within two decades.

Maryborough was surveyed in 1846. At first called "Baddow", the town and the river were renamed following the death of Lady Mary Fitzroy, wife of colonial Governor Fitzroy who had been killed in a carriage accident. The settlement of Maryborough had tragic repercussions for the Aborigines.

After many lethal skirmishes and massacres of Aborigines in and around Maryborough, Commandant Walker and 24 Native Police, supported by a number of "special constables" who had volunteered, spent eight days on Fraser Island carrying out what was euphemistically described as an examination of Aborigines. Subsequent reports indicate that this was a pretence for a series of massacres which occurred between Christmas Eve and 3 January. It may have been seen as a little "silly season" or Christmas sport.

In an effort to purge the mainland of all Aborigines, in 1860 the whole of Fraser Island was gazetted as an Aboriginal Reserve. This was with the idea of establishing a "homeland" for Aborigines under a kind of "apartheid" regime. However within three years this would be rescinded to facilitate commercial timber-getting exploitation.

A wily Scot, William Pettigrew, had established a sawmill at Dundathu on the banks of the Mary River to exploit Fraser Island's kauri pine and other timber. It was no coincidence that Pettigrew named his mill *Dundathu* because it was the Butchalla name for Kauri pine, (*Agathis robusta*). Kauri and white beech (*Gmelina leichhardtii*) were the first targets for exploitation of the region.

Missions Fail to Save Aborigines

Christianity was determined to save the Aborigines of Fraser Island before it was too late. In October 1870, Rev. William Fuller established his mission at "Balarrgan". It was important to Aborigines because it was one of the most habitable sites along Great Sandy Strait. It is strategically placed opposite the mouth of the Mary (or Moonaboola) River.

It wasn't an easy task to "save" the Aborigines. Rev. Fuller reported how the residents of his Mission would swim out to pilot the ships through Great Sandy Strait in 1870 for biscuits and tobacco: *"If a schooner is passing ... about sunset the natives will sometimes throw sand into the air and blow with their mouths towards the sun in order to make ... (it) go down quickly and thus compel the schooner to come to anchor for the night ... to enable them to get on board and obtain tobacco, biscuits, etc. which the Captains generally supply them with."* Fuller never elaborated on what the "etc." was.

According to the official records there were 171 Aborigines living at, or near Fuller's settlement at Balarrgan. Fuller was only there for two years and left in 1872. However Fuller became the first white man married on Fraser Island. His

records note that Rev J Buckle accompanied a Miss Winstone to Fraser Island and Fuller reported, ... *"with a minimum of ceremony we changed her name to Fuller"*.

In effect Fuller was evicted by the Queensland Government which needed to use the site of the Mission as a Quarantine Station to handle thousands of diggers headed for the Gympie goldfield. After the eviction, Fuller later went on to describe the massacre of Aborigines at Murdering Creek near Lake Weyba and Missionary Bay (named after his failed mission there) on Hinchinbrook Island.

Once the road and rail was established between Gympie and Brisbane, the buildings at Balarrgan were redundant as a Quarantine Station. On 23rd February 1897, Archibald Meston, Protector of Aborigines, "mustered" 33 men and boys, and 18 women and girls, 51 in all, and moved them to the deserted buildings of the old Quarantine Station. Meston noted that 'Balarrgan', was *"a favourite camp for ages"*. By May, the number had grown to 73 but Meston's "musters" soon led to Balarrgan being established as a type of concentration camp under control of Meston's pugilistic son Harold. The Aborigines lived in appalling conditions. Meston's aim was to deport all Aborigines from mainland Southern Queensland to Fraser Island. Any stray blacks on the adjacent mainland who had been mustered were deported.

On Good Friday, 16th April, 1897, Aborigines fought off a party of Maryborough excursionists who had landed on the beach at 'Balarrgan'. This led to both a court case and a petition in Maryborough - the first of many collected in that city concerning Fraser Island. 703 petitioners protested against the establishment of another Aboriginal settlement at the White Cliffs which had been ... *"a favourite resort for pleasure parties for over 20 years"*.

On 13th May, 1897 a public meeting in Maryborough (the first on Fraser Island land use held in that city), was attended by 300 - 400 persons who claimed the White Cliffs as *"their watering place"* since *"Before Queensland got separation"*. They were indignant at having White Cliffs *"wrenched away from them"* believing that this was an *"encroachment upon white man's rights to privileges"*. The Public Meeting achieved the desired results. Only a week later on 20th May, the Queensland Government re-established and re-gazetted White Cliffs as a Quarantine Station reversing a forgotten order of 1894 which had made it a Recreation Reserve. In this very early encounter, the white men were able to show that their *"favourite resort for pleasure parties for over 20 years"* was the basis of a stronger claim to the land in white law than *"a favourite camp for ages"* for the Aborigines.

As a result of these community actions the mission was closed down and it was relocated to Bogimbah Creek. During the next seven years, Aborigines lived in conditions comparable with the Jewish concentration camps of World War II. Unknown dozens died of malnutrition, dysentery, syphilis, influenza and tuberculosis. The Anglican missionaries who took control from Meston's State control in February 1900 abandoned it in 1904. Rather than release survivors, 117 of the handful of remaining inmates were exiled to Yarrabah near Cairns 1000 miles away.

These were the remnants of the more than 2000 Fraser Island Aborigines fifty years earlier. The tragedy of this race prompted one Maryborough resident of the time to write an *"enraged memorial"* in the Maryborough Chronicle. *"Isn't this one of the blackest pages in the history of the British Empire?"*

Meston's report to Parliament in 1905 summarized the tragedy: *"Fifty years ago there were from 2,000 to 3,000 aborigines on Fraser Island, an exceptionally fine race of people. Today they are about 20 left on the Island! The food supply from the ocean and the Straits was unlimited. The big scrub provided most of the vegetable diet."*