

THE LAST OF THE NOMADS

The Last of the Nomads is the story of Warri and Yatungka, the last of the Mandildjara people to remain in their country — the Western Gibson Desert region of Western Australia.

After many years of drought — the worst this century — the Mandildjara held grave fears for the safety of Warri and Yatungka. Their chances of survival under such adverse conditions and without the support of younger tribesmen and women were extremely remote. So, at the request of the Aboriginal elders and with the guidance of Mudjon, an old friend of Warri's, Dr Peasley and his companions set out in search of the elderly couple.

Thus began an extraordinary journey, a journey into the past to locate a man and woman pursuing a nomadic existence, as their people had done since the dawn of human occupation of Australia. W J Peasley's account of the events of that journey, his description of the country and of the emotional meeting in the desert are fascinating, thoughtful and, at times, extremely moving.

The Last of the Nomads also provides an informative account of earlier Aboriginal habitation and the significance of the country to Aboriginal identity. A brief history of Wiluna, the famous Canning Stock Route and early European exploration, and an appreciation of Aboriginal-European relations help make this an important and absorbing book.

Introduction

This is the story of a journey into the heart of the Gibson Desert of Western Australia in search of an elderly Aboriginal couple, the last of their tribe remaining in their own 'country', the last of the Aboriginal people left in the Western Gibson Desert and possibly the last nomads on the Australian continent to follow the way of life of their ancestors.

For my companions and I, it was a journey into the past, to locate and observe a man and woman pursuing a nomadic existence, as their people had done since the dawn of human occupation of Australia.

In an age when man travels faster than the speed of sound, when he can both hear and see events happening on the other side of the world the moment they occur, where he has journeyed to the moon and returned, an aged Aboriginal man and his wife were still living amongst the sandhills of the Western Australian desert, completely oblivious to all these wondrous things and with little knowledge of the world beyond the horizon.

They were thought to be hunting and food gathering over the land as their fathers had done before them, unaware of, and uninterested in the happenings of the outside world. War, famine,

revolution, acts of terrorism, things of great moment for civilisation meant nothing to that man and woman. On the infrequent occasions when outsiders had made contact with them in recent years they had never expressed any interest in life outside their own land, their 'country'.

Why did this couple, the very last of their tribe, choose to live alone in the desert? To answer this question it is necessary to examine the history, the sad history, of the Aboriginal people of Australia since the beginning of European occupation of the land.

This story was written following many requests from people wishing to know more about a unique Aboriginal man and woman; their reasons for remaining alone in the desert, the lifestyle they followed and their reactions to the white man's world. It was also written in an attempt to answer some of the criticism levelled at us by people who, not having full knowledge of the facts, laboured under many misconceptions.

There were those who loudly denounced us for bringing the couple out of the desert. It was said they should have been left to pursue their way of life unpolluted by 'civilisation', that we had no right to intrude, that it was far better they be left to die in the desert in their own 'country', than to live the degrading existence of the fringe dwellers.

Those critics will, I trust, be answered satisfactorily in this book, where the full facts are recorded for the first time. Without knowledge of the events leading up to the meeting out in the Gibson Desert, of the appalling conditions in which the couple were forced to live in the worst drought of the century it was, I suppose, understandable that some criticism should have been directed at us. Of our critics however I would ask two questions. What manner of man or woman would refuse to undertake a search when requested by Aboriginal elders, desperately anxious about the safety of two of their kinsfolk?

Who, after undertaking a long search and finding them alive but emaciated and ill, without adequate food and water, would be prepared to leave them in the desert to die alone? For death was not far away at Ngarinarri.

Chapter One

The occupation of the Australian mainland began more than forty thousand years ago but, contrary to popular belief, there has never been a complete land bridge between the southern continent and Asia. To reach Australian shores would have entailed a hazardous journey across open sea. Even during the Ice Ages, when the sea fell to its lowest levels, the distance that had to be traversed was more than eighty kilometres. It would have required great courage to embark on such a perilous venture across unknown waters with the nearest land mass to the south hidden from view below the horizon.

The oceans of the world were at their lowest levels (up to one hundred and forty metres below present-day levels) some ninety thousand, seventy thousand, fifty-five thousand, thirty-five thousand and eighteen thousand years ago, and these would have been the most suitable times for any crossing from the island chain in the north to the Australian mainland. There is evidence to indicate that man was already well established on the continent before the low sea levels of thirty-five thousand years ago. Had he arrived during the previous Ice Age some twenty thousand years earlier?



A long-disused Aboriginal ceremonial ground on the southern fringe of the Gibson Desert, the significance of which is uncertain.

The oldest human occupation sites that have been discovered in Australia are located in the southern half of the mainland. Does this indicate that the original inhabitants landed on the southern shore? This would appear to be highly improbable. I would suggest that there are far more ancient sites to be found in northern Australia, particularly the closest point to the northern island chain. However it must be borne in mind that the archaeological evidence which could possibly shed much light on the question of the location of the first landings, lies today far below the surface of the Arafura Sea.

If the first human visitors did, in fact, come ashore in the Kimberley region they would have found a relatively fertile land with a high rainfall. Food and water would have been readily available and for a very long period of time there would not have been any population pressures to necessitate a movement across

the less fertile country to the south. Yet there were Aboriginal people living in the southern part of the continent forty thousand years ago. It has been suggested that within the space of some two thousand years, the descendants of the original immigrants had occupied the whole of the Australian mainland. This is difficult to believe for, as stated previously, there would not have been any pressures on the people to bring about such a rapid infiltration to every corner of the land.

I believe that a much greater period of time elapsed before the Aboriginal people penetrated to every corner of Australia. With the discovery of occupation sites in the south dating back forty thousand years and, presuming that a time period of ten to twenty thousand years was required for the inhabitants to reach those sites, one can postulate that the first landing occurred between fifty and fifty-five thousand years ago. This was the time of the previous Ice Age, when the ocean level was at its lowest point, a time when a sea crossing was most likely to occur.

There is evidence to show that there have been several waves of immigrants and they probably took place at the time of the Ice Ages of the thirty-five thousand and eight thousand years ago. The Aboriginal people do not speak a common language as one would expect if their ancestors had a common origin. There are, or were, between three hundred and five hundred different languages and dialects, and in some areas, such as the Kimberley, the language spoken by adjacent tribal groups is so different that it appears obvious the ancestors of the people came from different places and possibly arrived at different times.

The theory of several waves of immigrants is further supported by the fact that the dingo, the native dog, did not appear on the continent until somewhere between seven thousand and ten thousand years ago and, as there was no land bridge over which this animal could migrate to Australia, it could only have been transported across the sea by humans. That there were no dingoes

on the continent prior to that time is indicated by the absence of remains older than about five thousand years and the fact that they did not exist in Tasmania. The rising sea levels after the last Ice Age separated the island from the mainland between ten thousand and twelve thousand years ago, before the dingo had penetrated to the southernmost parts of the land.

Where did the Aboriginal people of Australia come from? There has been a great deal of conjecture as to their origin. Some evidence points to the possibility of a migration of people from central and southern India down the island chain that extended to the south from Asia. The physical features of the Dravidians of India in many ways bear a striking resemblance to those of many Australian Aborigines, while the use of the throwing weapon, the boomerang, by both peoples and the similarity of the language structure in some cases suggests that at least some of the Aboriginal people may have had Dravidian ancestors. Small pockets of people possessing some of the characteristics of both Dravidians and Aborigines are to be found along the island chain, perhaps the remnant of a southerly migration of long ago.

The main objection to the Dravidian–Australian Aborigine theory is the fact that the blood groupings of the people of Southern India are dissimilar to those of present-day Aborigines, although an attempt has been made to explain this as being the result of the great demographic changes that have taken place in India during the last fifty thousand years.

Whatever their origin, the first human arrivals in Australia, after establishing themselves in their new land, began to gradually spread over the vast continent until by the year 1788, when the first European settlement was established, there were an estimated three hundred thousand Aboriginal people scattered across the country. They were divided into about five hundred different tribal groups.

At this point, it is important to remember that Aborigines had,

at that time, occupied the whole of the Australian mainland and the island of Tasmania. Every square yard of Australian soil was owned by, and was of very great significance to, one tribal group or another. Each group lived within their own tribal boundaries believing that their tract of land, their 'country' had been delineated in the far distant past, in the Dreamtime.

There was considerable movement across these boundaries for reasons of social intercourse, trade and ceremonial activities, but little evidence is available to indicate that tribal borders were crossed by people bent on acquiring new territory by conquest. Aboriginal people believed that their particular area of land was theirs and theirs alone. It could not be taken from them and they in turn, could not annex country that belonged to others. They were responsible for the protection and maintenance of the sacred sites within their territory, but could only visit the sacred sites of their neighbours by invitation.

The land was the very essence of their being. It had been entrusted to them by the creators at the Dreamtime. They were born of the spirits that inhabited the land and they knew that on their death they would return to the soil to await rebirth. They could not leave and take up residence anywhere else, for to live away from their country was to live without substance. The world was meaningless without the spiritual bond of their own land.

Because Aboriginal people were so deeply bonded to their country they could not retreat before the advancing settlements of the Europeans. They lacked the numbers and the organisation to resist the invaders and within a few short years the tribes that occupied the coastal regions largely disappeared. Their sacred sites were despoiled by the colonists, their land was taken from them, they were prevented from hunting over territory that had been theirs since the Dreamtime, and they were punished for infringements of the white man's laws, laws that they could not comprehend.



A grinding stone on a dry claypan.

Not only did they lose possession of their land, their way of life was also ridiculed and their social structure was undermined. They contracted the diseases introduced by the white man, against which they had no immunity. They wandered about aimlessly or huddled on the fringes of the settlements, and they lost the will to live, for without their land, their heritage from the Dreamtime, there was no meaning to life.

However, some Aboriginal people were fortunate. The white men were only interested in occupying the land that could be cultivated or would support their livestock. Their advance over the country was halted by the great deserts of inland Australia, which were to become the last stronghold of traditional Aboriginal life. In those areas, the people were free to live as they had done since the Dreamtime, with little interference from the outside world.

The Gibson Desert of Western Australia was one such place. A vast, ill-defined stretch of country, the Gibson extends from the Rawlinson Ranges in the east to Lake Disappointment, hundreds

of kilometres away to the west. In the north it merges with the Great Sandy Desert and, in the south, with the Great Victoria Desert. It is a great expanse of sandhills running parallel to the horizon, of huge open spinifex plains and belts of mulga trees and low scrub. There are few geographical features to relieve the monotony of the landscape. No mountains of any significance rise out of the plains, no rivers flow through the land. As one moves across the desert, occasional low hills and breakaways appear on the horizon, the eroded remains of mountain ranges of long ago. In places, the surface is covered with fine gravel, 'the great undulating desert of gravel', described by the Honourable David Carnegie during his epic crossing of the Gibson in 1896.

The desert was named by Ernest Giles, the courageous explorer, after his companion Alfred Gibson who, in 1874, lost his life whilst attempting to cross the arid country from South Australia to the west coast. In his journal, Giles wrote:

I called this terrible region that lies between the Rawlinson Ranges and the next permanent water that may eventually be found to the west, Gibson desert, after the first white victim to its horrors.

But this arid 'terrible region' which, to the white man is inhospitable, a place to be feared, was once the home of many Aboriginal tribes: the Budidjara, the Gadudjara, the Mandildjara, the Ngadadjara, the Wanman and others. They were not afraid of the desert, it was their country, a land like no other. They were as one with the rocks, the dry creeks, the rock holes that were created long ago by Wati Kudjara, the two mythical men whose work could be seen at every turn. By their very isolation these tribes were able to maintain their traditional way of life while their people in the more fertile areas, who bore the brunt of the white man's invasion, were powerless to prevent the destruction of their society.

The people of the Gibson spoke a common tongue, the language of the Western Desert, and they had little contact with the outside world prior to the early 1900s. Their country had been crossed by the exploration parties of Warburton (1873), Forrest (1874), Giles (1876), Wells (1896) and Carnegie (1896). An occasional prospecting expedition penetrated their land but found little of geological interest. Then, in the early years of the twentieth century a series of permanent wells were established across the desert from Wiluna to Halls Creek, a distance of one thousand six hundred kilometres. It was now possible for cattle to travel from the Kimberley to the railhead at Wiluna across formerly waterless country, and this was to have a significant effect on the desert people. They now had a sure water supply from the white man's wells and they made contact with the parties of drovers who pushed their herds of cattle south across the desolate land. Their isolation was beginning to break down. A movement out of the desert began and this rapidly gained momentum, and once having left their tribal land, few of the Aboriginal people returned to their homeland.

In the 1950s and 1960s small groups of the remnants of several tribes were still wandering over their lands. The policy of the Government at that time was to encourage those that remained in the desert to settle in the mission stations and reserves on the fringes of the settlements. Many were transported by land and by air to be 'civilised'. Many, too, came out of the desert without any encouragement, drifting into the settled areas, following a pattern that had been going on in other places for more than one hundred and fifty years.

For those who chose to remain in their own land, life became increasingly difficult. They were the older generation who did not display the same curiosity in the white man's ways as the younger members of the tribes. A great burden was placed on those who were left, for there were not sufficient numbers of young men and women to support the old.

As a result of their depleted numbers it became impossible for the Aborigines to sustain their social structure, to perform the rites of passage and to engage in the increase ceremonies that were required to ensure that animals and birds multiplied and the rains fell.

If a man wished to obtain a wife it was necessary for him to travel out of the desert to the settled areas where large numbers of his kinsfolk had chosen to live. Tribal law dictated that a man might not marry before he had passed through his initiation and this process was a long one. It was necessary for him to remain away from his country for a long period and many did not return home again after they had assumed the status of a man.

By the mid 1970s the drift that had begun only a few short years previously was almost complete. The country of the Budidjara, the Gadudjara, the Ngadadjara and the Wanman was empty, devoid of any human inhabitants. For the first time in possibly twenty thousand years, there were no Aboriginal people ranging across these tribal lands.

But the land of the Mandildjara had not been completely deserted by its people. Two people remained to hunt and gather food across their country, as their ancestors had done before them. They were the very last of their people, the last of the nomads.