STURT'S ENCOUNTER AT WYJUDGA SANDHILL

By Paul Hilbig

This incident deserves to be better known. It took place on Sturt's Central Australian Expedition of 1844-46. Having found and named Cooper Creek and its safe waterholes, Sturt followed the creek upstream into what today we call the Channel Country. This is a broad flat floodplain, fed by monsoonal floodwaters and punctuated by a prominent sand hill the Aborigines call Wyjudga. Sturt describes his meeting with so many aborigines in his book 'Expedition into Central Australia', and I quote from volume 2:

'We rode towards a sand hill about half a mile in front, and had scarcely gone from the huts when [the natives who had joined us] set off at a trot and getting ahead of us disappeared over the sand hill. I was too well aware of the customs of these people, not to anticipate that there was something behind the scene, and I told Mr. [John MacDouall] Stuart that I felt we had not yet seen the whole of the population of this creek……..We reached the sand hill soon after the natives had gone over it, and on gaining the summit were hailed by a deafening shout by 3 or 400 natives, who were assembled in the flat below. I do not know, that my desire to see the savage in his wild state, was ever more gratified than on this occasion, for I had never before come so suddenly upon so large a party. The scene was one of the most animated description, and was rendered still more striking from the circumstances of the native huts, at which there were a number of women and children, occupying the whole crest of a long piece of rising ground at the opposite side of the flat.'

'I checked my horse for a short time on the top of the sand hill, and gazed on the assemblage of agitated figures below me, and then quietly rode down into the flat, followed by Mr. Stuart and my men……I dismounted, and then walked to the natives, by whom Mr. Stuart and I were immediately surrounded. Had these people been of an unfriendly temper, we could not by any possibility have escaped them, for our horses could not have broken into a canter to save our lives or their own. We were wholly in their power, although happily for us perhaps, they were not aware of it; but, so far from exhibiting any unkind feeling, they treated us with genuine hospitality, and we might certainly have commanded whatever they had. Several of them brought us large troughs of water, and when we had taken a little, held them up for our horses to drink; an instance of nerve that is very remarkable, for I am quite sure that no white man, (having never seen or heard of a horse before, and with the natural apprehension the first sight of such an animal would create), would deliberately have walked up to what must have appeared to them most formidable brutes, and placing the troughs they carried against their breast, have allowed the horses to drink, with their noses almost touching them. They likewise offered us some roasted duck, and some cake. When we walked over to their camp, they pointed to a large new hut, and told us we could sleep there, but I had noticed a little hillock on which there were four box trees, about fifty yards from the native encampment, on which, forseeing that we could go no further, I had already determined to remain, and on intimating this to the natives they appeared highly delighted; we accordingly went to the trees, and unsaddling the animals turned them out to feed. When the natives saw us quietly seated they came over, and brought a quantity of sticks for us to make a fire, wood being *extremely scarce.'*

'The smallness of the waterhole on which these people depended, was quite a matter of surprise to me, and I hardly liked to let the horses drink at it, in consequence. At sunset the natives left us (as is their wont at that hour), and went to their own encampment; nor did one approach us afterwards, but they sat up to a late hour at their own camp, the women employed in beating the seed for cakes, between two stones, and the noise they made was exactly like the working of a loom factory.' At 11 all was still, and you would not have known that you were in close proximity to so large an assembly of people.'

'When I laid down, I resolved in my own mind what course I should pursue in the morning……..My horses, indeed, were now reduced to such a state, that I foresaw that my labours were drawing to a close. Mack [one of Sturt's men], was so ill, that he could hardly sit his animal, [and] I felt myself getting daily weaker and weaker. Accordingly in the morning, we saddled and loaded our horses, [and] I turned westward [towards home].

To understand this incident, one first needs to explain how Sturt obtained his reputation as one of the most considerate of Australia's explorers, in his dealings with the Aborigines. This begins on Sturt's first expedition, which was to explore the Macquarie River, beyond the barrier of the Macquarie Marshes. He was given as second in command Hamilton Hume. This was a wise choice.

Hume was one of the first native-born white Australians. His childhood play-mates included many aboriginal children and his playground was the Sydney bush. In his teenage years he explored widely through the Blue Mountains with his aboriginal friends. In 1824-5 he formed a partnership with captain William Hovell, and they became the first white people to travel over-land between Sydney and Port Phillip Bay (Melbourne). Hovell provided the navigational skills and Hume contributed his profound understanding of the Australian bush and its Aboriginal people.

Sturt learned a lot from Hume. It is interesting to note the way knowledge gets passed on from one explorer to the next. Hume learns from the Aborigines, Sturt learns from Hume, and Stuart learns from Sturt.

We can see this in the way Sturt shows no fear and walks peacefully among the natives. He accepts small gifts of water and firewood, but does not take up the offer of a large new hut, preferring to camp separately, but nearby, to which the natives '*appeared highly delighted*'. Sturt also makes sure that his horses do not drink too much of the already scarce water. Once his party has set up camp they sit down quietly and wait for the natives to came over, which is the custom. This is when Sturt hands out gifts, usually useful tools such as knives and axes. Both parties exhibit genuine hospitality.

But what else is happening here? Why are so many people congregating in this inhospitable part of Australia? From Sturt's account, it is clear that while the Aborigines may not have planted the grasses, they certainly understood when the time was right, to bring the harvest in. When Sturt topped that sandhill, the grass seeds had already been collected. Is it too much to call what the Aborigines had done thus far as farming?

That night Sturt became very aware of the next process, and he describes the natives working late into the night, *'beating the seed for cakes, between two stones'*. This reminds him of the 'dark satanic mills' of the industrial Midlands of England, because '*the noise they made was exactly like the working of a loom factory*.' What is described may be very primitive and labour intensive, but turning grain into flour, is surely the industrial process called milling?

The mention of *'cakes'* needs explaining. What Sturt is referring to is pancakes, but as the Aborigines had no metal pans, the dough mix went into the coals of the campfire – what today we would call damper. Like bread, this is best consumed fresh, but even stale damper, taken with you as food for a long journey, can taste good if eaten with honey, fresh from the hive. We know from evidence that the flour thus produced, was safely stored in animal skin bags, and was often traded.

What Sturt was not aware of, was that the grinding stones came from a native sandstone quarry, close to the Mulligan River, about 300 kilometres north-west of Wyjudga sandhill. Despite their weight, these stones were highly prized for their smoothness and were widely traded. After use, these stones were buried at the site, ready for use next year.

Perhaps the item most traded amongst Aborigines, was ochre used for ceremonial decoration. One important source is found near Lyndhurst in South Australia, at the foot of the Strzelecki Track. That Track follows an old Aboriginal trading route alongside an outflow of Cooper Creek, enabling ochre to be traded, through the desert, far into central Queensland.

Also growing along the banks of the Mulligan River was the Pituri bush. This is a native plant (Duboisia hopwoodii), closely related to tobacco, and whose active constituent is nornicotine – a drug four times more toxic than nicotine. The Aborigines were aware of the dangerous nature of Pituri and had developed a complex manufacturing process to reduce its toxicity. This involves the careful drying of the leaf, mixing it with the ash from a particular acacia tree and then distributing the product in distinctively coloured D-shaped woven bags. Is this manufacturing, marketing, or both?

Pituri was chewed and as a narcotic; its use was to numb the senses, enabling the Aborigines to travel long distances without thinking about food, water or pain. Pituri was highly valued and widely traded. Joseph Banks, travelling up the east coast of Australia on Captain Cook's 'Endeavour', records in his diary that '*we observed that some [of the natives] held constantly in their mouths the leaves of an herb which they chewed as a European does tobacco, or an East Indian, Beetle.'* We are talking about a distance of 1,450 kilometres by road from the coast at Brisbane, to the source of Pituri on the Mulligan River, or over 18 hours of non-stop driving.

I mention Pituri because it is such a well-documented example, but the grinding stones, flour and ochre previously mentioned, were also widely traded across Australia. It has been said that every major Australian highway follows an old aboriginal trading route. These Australian trading routes, are of similar scale and complexity, to the great trading routes of the ancient world – the Silk Road and the Inca Trail.

The main reason there were so many people congregating at Wyjudga sandhill, must surely lie in a ritual found in all agricultural societies – the Harvest Festival. When all the hard work has been done and the fruit of the land has been gathered in, the community naturally comes together and celebrates.

There are two famous Australian examples of Aboriginal people gathering together - the harvest of Bogong Moths on the High Plains of the Australian Alps, and the harvest of nuts from the Bunya Pine forests of Queensland's Great Dividing Range. I am suggesting that what Sturt came across at Wyjudga sandhill, was a gathering place very similar to the above examples.

It is not just food, that draws these people together. There is a religious component. Innately we realise the need to give thanks for the bounty that the season gives us, and the need to carry out ceremonies to ensure that next year's harvest will be beneficial. Gatherings like these are also political. They are used to consolidate friendly relations between adjacent tribes and to sort out a disputes before they can lead to violence.

Not all, of course, were interested in religion or politics. Most were interested in trade, (I prefer to think of it as shopping). It is interesting to note that while the aborigines had no coinage, they did use a form of currency. Both the flour ground on site, the Pituri produced in the region, and the ceremonial ochre that comes from afar, come in powder form, which can be easily divided into different sized piles to represent value.

These weren't the only things traded. The men were interested in hunting and fighting tools, such as spears, shields and boomerangs. The women were interested in domestic items, such as baskets, bowls, cloaks and nets. All would be engaged in the songs, music, and instruments, that went with ceremony.

European colonisers came to Australia with their 'scientific' understanding of native peoples, believing them to live in primitive hunter-gatherer societies. Like Sturt, they recorded what they saw in a rational scientific way, but because of their preconceptions, they did not investigate further to find out just how sophisticated Aboriginal culture could be. The evidence is there, to be found in the journals, letters and records of the early explorers and settlers. It is up to today's historians to collect this evidence, re-evaluate it and in that process re-educate us, as to just how complex Aboriginal culture could be.

This article must come with a caveat. This is my white fella interpretation of what Sturt (another white fella) experienced 180 years ago at Wyjudga sandhill. It inevitably comes with some preconceptions and bias. I am making judgements without having the Aboriginal side of the story. I am currently trying to establish who the local cultural knowledge holders are, so that I can understand their perspective on this historic meeting. This is a work in progress.