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AN ACCOUNT OF

ABORIGINAL USE OF THE YAM-DAISY

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Beth Gott has recently summarised information on the use of roots by Aboriginal people of Victoria, considering plant ecology and the interplay between plants and harvesting technology (Gott 1982). She suggests that fires, thinning out of stands, and turning over the soil would all have enhanced the growth and productivity of plants with edible roots (1982: 65).

The purpose of this note is to make available one additional account of Aboriginal practice which lends support to the third of her suggestions, and which provides further details on the use of the Yam-daisy ('murrnong', Microseris scapigera) in the Sunbury district. Isaac Batey wrote out his reminiscences in 1909-1910 (Batey n.d.) [1]. Much of his valuable section on Aboriginal people refers to the mid-nineteenth century and is therefore based on memories of his youth. Some sections report first-hand observations, others are hearsay, and a few are a combination of the two. The last is the case with the following extract:

> These relics [oven mounds and stone tools] of a people rapidly approaching extinction have to be searched for, not so with myrnong hillocks, because such are seen on land held by the Sunbury Lunatic Asylum. Should the ground remain unbroken these relics will endure for the next 100 years even longer than that. There is a sloping ridge at the lower end of what was originally known as Sideline Gully. The soil on the spot referred to is a rich basaltic clay evidently well fitted for the production of myrnongs. On the spot adverted to are numerous mounds with short

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[1] Isabel McBryde first drew my attention to this manuscript which is held by the Royal Historical Society of Victoria: I hope to present a complete version of it in the future.

spaces between each, and as all these are at right angles to the ridge's slope it is conclusive evidence that they were the work of human hands extending over a long series of years. This uprooting of the soil to apply the best term was accidental gardening, still it is reasonable to assume that the aboriginals were quite aware of the fact that turning the earth over in search of yams instead of diminishing that form of food supply would have had a tendency to increase it. On arriving in 1846 and thereafter myrnong digging was unknown to us, for the all-sufficient reason that livestock seemingly had eaten out that form of vegetation. We lads were in the habit of lifting myrnongs which appeared to be last years propagated from a bulb, but no doubt the plants sprung from seeds as well. This plant is a dandelion (Taraxacum) bore a large yellow blossom on a single stem. The roots were stoutish, in form partake of the oblong and some might be the length of the little finger. At Sunbury they were small, but on Glen Junction far larger. Young as I was on that station I have a vivid recollection of seeing lubras with bunches of myrnongs that had been washed, and as that operation removes the thin outer skin the things were beautifully white. They have an agreeable taste, are crisp, but are watery. Where once abundant they have become quite extinct for the district where the writer was raised in this 1909 might be searched without discovering a solitary example of the indigenous Taraxacum. Elsewhere it was intimated that our domestic animals had eaten them out, yet there was another factor of destruction in the soil becoming hardened with the continuous trampling of sheep cattle or horses. In proof of that Mr Edward Page said 'When we first came here I started a vegetable garden, the soil dug like ashes'. It has to be added it was a spot free of timber or scrub of any description, the soil a reddish loam and of great depth. Nowadays with winter rains beyond the average this same plot to turn it over would require a digging fork, a common spade would be useless.

The Sunbury Training Centre now occupies land adjacent to the reserve originally set aside for it, which is now part of a farm administered by the Department of Community Welfare Services, Victoria. I have been unable to trace 'Sideline Gully' although one of several ravines running into Jacksons Creek in the designated area is named 'Tramway Gully' in the original parish plans of 1854 (Plan H-98).

Neither an examination of standard high-level air-photos nor a survey of the area on foot revealed any features which might be identified as the 'myrnong hillocks' described by Batey. There are several likely 'sloping ridges' but the land (although not intensively worked) has been cleared, and enough agricultural activity has taken place over the last century to obliterate such small insubstantial mounds. It is not possible, therefore, to find physical confirmation of Batey's mound sites, or to develop ways of testing his hearsay account of the manner of their use or the process of their development.

Nevertheless these comments on 'accidental gardening' and awareness by Aboriginal people of the effects of their actions fit in well with current concepts and developing views both within Victorian prehistory and more generally.

They, together with Beth Gott's propositions, and accumulating evidence for the complex interaction with, and management of, resources elsewhere in the State, contribute toward the growing dissatisfaction (Bailey 1981) with the traditional dichotomy between 'hunter-gatherer' and 'farmer'. From sources such as these we may more clearly appreciate the complexity and variation possible in people's interaction with plant communities.

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