

# The Aboriginal people in Sydney as seen by Captain Abel du Petit-Thouars, 24 November to 9 December 1838<sup>1</sup>

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Abel du Petit-Thouars was 45 years of age when he arrived in Sydney in November 1838. He had joined the French Navy at the age of 11, and served in the Mediterranean during the Napoleonic wars. He later spent four years at the French Naval Station in the Pacific, looking after the interests of French commerce along the war-torn Pacific coast of South America. He was thus a well-experienced seaman when he was appointed to lead an expedition around the world to support French trade generally and, more specifically, to assist the ailing French whaling industry in the Pacific. With a view to impress the people he would meet, he was given a large three-masted vessel, the frigate *La Vénus*, and a complement of no less than 468 officers and men. His instructions were to travel around the world in a westerly direction.

On 29 December 1836 he left Brest in the north-west of France and arrived in Rio de Janeiro on 4 February 1837. He and his men then rounded Cape Horn, battling the raging seas and floating ice, and arrived in Valparaiso on 26 April. They stayed here until 13 May (carefully avoiding becoming involved in Chile's war with Peru) and then sailed on to Callao (the port of Lima) before crossing to the Hawaiian Islands where they arrived on 8 July. They stayed here until the 24 April, before leaving the warmth of Honolulu to sail north to the freezing climate of Petropavlovsk in the Russian territory of Kamchatka.

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1 This translation may be compared with my previous article in *Aboriginal History*: Dyer 2013.

After two weeks here, their itinerary became circumambulatory. On September 16 they set out for California, then to Easter Island, and then back to Valparaiso where they had stayed a year earlier. After six weeks here, they went north again back to Callao, then out across the Pacific again but this time to Tahiti where they arrived on 28 August 1838.

On 17 September Du Petit-Thouars left Tahiti and 'island-hopped' his way (Rarotonga, the Cook Islands and the Bay of Islands in New Zealand) to Sydney where he arrived on 24 November to a very cool reception. The English were suspicious and anxious about his activities in Tahiti (they feared he had annexed it for France) but he firmly declined to discuss this subject and refused to accept that he was in any way accountable to the English. During his 16-day stay, however, relations between him and his hosts gradually became less strained, and he was later quite happy to accept an invitation to visit Governor Gipps at his Parramatta estate.

On leaving Sydney (on 9 December 1838), he travelled south and then veered west into the powerful winds of the 'Roaring Forties'. The ship plunged through the waves and, by the end of January, was talking in water at the rate of two feet a day! He headed north-west and, after passing Cape Leeuwin, the weather improved rapidly as he sped towards l'Ile Bourbon (today's La Réunion) where he arrived on 5 March. After taking on ample supplies of food and water in preparation for the long and hazardous voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, *La Vénus* set out once again and finally, on 8 May, arrived at the island of Saint Helena, where Napoleon lay buried since 1821.<sup>2</sup> From here the journey was uneventful, and du Petit-Thouars finally arrived back at Brest on 24 June 1839. He and his companions had been away for two and a half years.

In 1841 Du Petit-Thouars was made a Rear-Admiral, and returned to the Pacific as Director of the Naval Station. It was he who, in 1843, claimed French sovereignty over Tahiti. He returned to France in 1844, and was promoted to Vice-Admiral two years later. He died in Paris in March 1864.

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<sup>2</sup> The year after Du Petit-Thouars' visit Napoleon's remains were taken to Les Invalides in Paris, where they are to this day.

## Translation of Du Petit-Thouars's text, vol. 3, pp. 275–83<sup>3</sup>

'The indigenous people [*indigènes*]<sup>4</sup> of New Holland offer remarkable particularities which make them usually looked upon as a race apart, very distinct from those who live in Polynesia, to whom the name *Papuans* [*Papous*] or *oriental Negroes* [*nègres orientaux*] is almost universally given.

Wherever you go in New Holland, these indigenous people have thick protruding lips, prominent cheek-bones, small deep-sunken eyes, rough long black hair, and a high narrow forehead. Their head is elongated and depressed on the top, and they have a large nose although not flat like that of the Africans. They also have black skin, which is much darker than that of the New-Zealanders but less so than that of the negroes [*nègres*]. It is said, however, that there are also in New Holland tribes of a whiter colour and like that of the Malays. Their legs are spindly and their tummy is protuberant. Such are the general characteristics of the natives [*naturels*].

Those we saw in Sydney conformed to this description. They were of average height. The women were less tall than the men, and they had small feet and hands, and harmonious voices. We have no information whatsoever on the number of indigenous people who exist in New Holland, but it seems that this island [*sic*] contains very few inhabitants.

They feed on roots and on the product of their fishing and hunting. In the country of Cumberland no-one has ever found a single house built by them. They take shelter either in the hollow of a rock, or quite simply under a piece of bark leant against a tree.

Towards the north-west and south-west of the island, huts made of tree-bark, roughly made and with no decoration (and even with no household utensils) have been found. In different places, tree-trunks hollowed out by fire, and pieces of bark bound at their two ends and caulked with clay (which they doubtless used for crossing rivers), have also been found.

Of all these objects which they have created the fishing nets made with stringy plants are the ones we noticed as being the most curious. Their only sharp instruments are made of hard stone or jasper, and attached with hardened gum onto a split stick. Their weapons are the spear, the *womera* (used to throw the spear) and the *boomerang*. There are also several kinds of clubs, named *nullah-nullah* and *waddie*. They have never been seen with bows or arrows.

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3 This text has not been edited.

4 Du Petit-Thouars uses this term (which here in French is a noun) throughout his text.

The spears in use among the indigenous people of New Holland are a little more than three metres long, and are as thick as a finger. They have a point hardened by fire, and are sometimes barbed. The natives [naturels] are very skilful in using them, and send them with great force and precision over a distance of 18 to 20 metres. The force of the projectile is greatly increased by the *womera*, or throwing-stick. The *womera* is a piece of wood about a metre long and eight to nine centimetres wide at one end, and decreasing in width up to the other end where it comes to a point. At this point there is a hook, which is placed into a notch,<sup>5</sup> purposefully made at the end of the spear. When throwing the spear, the *womera* is held by the wider end, and acts in a way like a bow in relation to an arrow. A strong man can reach 30 metres with a spear when thrown in this manner.

The boomerang is a weapon with a very peculiar and curious shape. It is a piece of very hard wood, curved and about a metre long. It is from six to eight centimetres at its widest, and becomes narrower on each side up to the point. The concave part is from four to eight millimetres thick, and the convex part is entirely sharp. An indigenous person can throw this instrument 40 or 50 metres, parallel to the horizon and skimming the ground without touching it at about one metre or one metre 30 centimetres elevation. Then, at this distance, the boomerang suddenly rises in the air up to 50 to 60 metres and, describing a great curve, it comes back to fall at the feet of the individual who threw it. It thus comes back around on itself, rather like a billiard ball hit below its centre of gravity, goes away at first and then returns to its point of departure. The boomerang turns on itself with great rapidity during its flight, like a piece of wood on a pivot, and produces a whistling sound in the air.

In the hands of a European, the boomerang is just a simple inoffensive stick, but this becomes dangerous for the person who wishes to use it without knowing how to do so. As a consequence, Europeans have wounded themselves when they have tried to throw it like the natives, because sometimes the boomerang comes back and hits the person who threw it. In the hands of the indigenous people, however, the boomerang becomes a terrible weapon with which they inflict mortal wounds.

The *waddie* and the *nullah-nullah* are clubs of different shapes and sizes. The *tomahawk* is a piece of sharpened stone (usually quartz), fixed into a split handle with hardened glue. The natives [naturels] use this to make notches in those trees which are too wide to be embraced. By this means they climb to the top of the highest trees, although these trees often have no branches and are 15 to 20 metres above the ground.<sup>6</sup>

5 In the French text (p. 277) 'engougure', a word not known to the present translator.

6 Du Petit-Thouars 1840–43: 275–78.

The indigenous tribes are not very numerous, and the social unit seems to be the family. They live separate from one another, and each one contains thirty to forty members at the most, women and children included, and they occupy a certain stretch of land. It is very probable (as among other aboriginal [sic] peoples) that these territorial limits are the most frequent cause of the continual wars which reign here.

Polygamy is in use among these tribes, in which moreover the feminine sex is treated in the most cruel manner. It is said that, to procure a companion, a man goes to the neighbouring tribe during the night where he hits a girl on the head until she loses consciousness, and then drags or carries her away to make her his wife.

These tribes are not held together by any political bond, or at least none has been recognised as existing. A fact regarded as accepted truth by the English, is that these indigenous people are cannibals and that, not content with eating their enemies killed or taken prisoner in combat, they never let an occasion go by to satisfy this cruel passion at the expense of any European who falls into their hands.<sup>7</sup> The colonists claim that they had multiple proofs of this fact, and that it frequently happens that they kill and eat their own children. The colonists also assert that other indigenous people bleed themselves in order to cook their blood and eat it when they wish to appease a devouring hunger. These ferocious customs are the result of a long-standing way of eating, and this is the only excuse one can find for these acts of such a great barbarity.

No objects relating to a cult have ever been seen among these natives, and nowhere have idols or anything resembling them been found. They are not, however, without several superstitions. For example, when a person of their tribe dies, they believe they must immediately kill an indigenous person of another tribe. Why? They don't say, perhaps for an excellent reason: they themselves don't know and have nothing to propose to justify this practice, if only that it is the custom.

The indigenous people of New-Holland bury their dead in large cemeteries. Their tombs, like those of many aboriginal peoples, are indicated by a small elevation, a kind of *tumulus* which is either oval-shaped or sometimes conical.

It has been noticed in New Holland (as can be seen everywhere that Europeans have established themselves) that the indigenous population has decreased rapidly since the beginning of the colony. Here, however, this destruction (which is caused in part by war, famine and sickness) has been even more rapid.

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<sup>7</sup> Delessert will declare in 1845 that he remembered 'an elderly native' whom he had 'once questioned on this subject' who told him that 'he had eaten human flesh when a child' (Dyer 2013: 95), but there are no actual eyewitness accounts by French explorers of cannibalism (see Dyer 2005: 71).

The natives who live in the towns or other establishments of the colony do it only by begging. They have a great aversion for work. Some of these indigenous people who have been employed in agricultural work, have been unable to resist the tiredness this brings on, and have run away. Sometimes, however, they have been employed with success by the police as *assistant-constables* to act as trackers and to find deserting convicts in the woods. They are gifted with an extraordinary sense of smell, and can recognise all kinds of tracks left in a wood or on untouched land. These qualities enable them to render excellent services – when, however, they can be persuaded to do so.

A story is told in Sydney as a very surprising example of this kind of aptitude.

An inhabitant whose farm was situated on the great western road having disappeared, the convict overseer led people to believe that he had left secretly for England and had put him in charge of the property. This report seemed very suspicious, because this inhabitant had very good conduct, and had no problems and no debts.

This affair was already almost forgotten when, one Saturday during the night, another inhabitant coming back from market with his horse and cart, and arriving at the part of the road bordered by the fence of his absent neighbour's property, thought he saw him sitting on the gate. Whipping up his horse, he approached him and called out but, upon receiving no reply, he got down from his cart and walked towards him. It was then that his neighbour got off the gate and went off across a field, making his way towards a pond in the direction of the house he was supposed to have abandoned. The farmer found this behaviour very strange, but got back on his cart and continued on his way.

However, the next morning he went to his neighbour's farm where he thought he would meet him, but found only the overseer who laughed at his adventure and told him that his master was at that moment probably very close to the coasts of England. However, this explanation seemed so improbable to the farmer that he went to the nearest Justice of the Peace and told him what had happened, adding that he thought some bad deed was afoot. A black indigenous man attached to the constable's station was sent with a detachment of police on horseback to the spot where the farmer thought he had seen his absent neighbour.

This spot was indicated to the black man, without telling him in which direction the man sitting on the gate had gone. He looked around very carefully, and thought he picked up a track. He then walked off in a straight line towards the pond where, having noticed some kind of grease on the water's surface, he picked some of it out with a leaf and tasted it. He thereupon declared that it contained *grease from a white man*. He then walked around the pond and saw a few bits of broken leaves and grasses. Following these along, he discovered a spot where the earth seemed to have been recently disturbed. He then asked his colleagues to dig here, and this is where they discovered the body of the unfortunate proprietor. His head was smashed in, and seemed to have stayed for

some while in water. The overseer who, by this murder, had come into the dead man's possessions, was brought before the criminal court. The circumstances we have reported were regarded as sufficient proof, and the overseer, declared guilty by the jury, was condemned to death and led to the scaffold, where he still protested his innocence. But, at the last moment, his firmness abandoned him, and he confessed his crime. He was walking, he said, behind his master when he went through the gate where the farmer claimed to have seen him, and killed him by striking him on the head. He then dragged the man's body to the pond and threw him in, only to draw him out a few days later to bury him.

The black man's shrewdness was much admired and this wonderful tale, told down the ages, will still serve for a long time to lull little children to sleep. The aboriginal [sic] races, already very reduced in numbers and pushed back into the interior where they no longer find the means of existence they had near the sea, are destroying themselves in a frightful proportion. This can leave no doubt that before long they will have completely disappeared. Today the people of Sydney who seem to be the best informed do not believe this population is above five thousand souls in total'.<sup>8</sup>

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It is here that Du Petit-Thouars leaves the subject of the 'indigenous people'.<sup>9</sup> Other French explorers visiting Sydney, however, had also discussed the possible future of these people.

In Sydney in 1819 Louis de Freycinet had declared that 'some educated English people here ... deliver themselves of the opinion that ... perhaps it would be better if they died out completely'. In this same year, his companion Jacques Arago also wondered if the English wished, 'in their culpable lack of concern, to let this race annihilate itself?'

In 1825 Hyacinthe de Bougainville had believed that 'the Australians [meaning the Aboriginal people] ... will probably never yield to the forms of civilisations which ... will end up, according to all appearances, by annihilating their race'. In Tasmania in 1827 Dumont d'Urville thought that 'as a consequence of on-going aggression between these people and the settlers, the number of natives has rapidly decreased and ... it is probable that, within forty or fifty years, this whole race will have completely disappeared'.<sup>10</sup>

8 Du Petit-Thouars, pp. 279–83.

9 Du Petit-Thouars goes on to say that he had attended a 'banquet at the Australian Club', and then 'accompanied the Governor [Sir George Gipps] to Parramatta'.

10 Sources here are Freycinet 2001: 309; Arago 1839: 88; Bougainville 1839, I: 457; and Dumont d'Urville 1987, I: 189.

Perhaps the worst indictment of the English colonisation, however, was that of Nicolas Baudin as early as December 1802 when he had predicted in a letter to Governor King that 'the small number of those [Aboriginal Australians] surrounding you will not long exist', and that the English would then 'remain the peaceful possessors of their heritage'.<sup>11</sup>

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11 The full text of this letter may be found in Peron 1971: 42–43.

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