The Documentary Evidence

Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of ethnographic information available from the study area with the aim of assisting archaeological interpretation. Chapter 2 established that the Jirrbal people from the Cedar Creek, upper Tully River area, were amongst the last rainforest groups on the Tablelands to come into permanent contact with Europeans. The documentary evidence from the Tablelands is presented first, followed by analyses of two documentary sources that are directly linked to the study area: the early observations by Michael O’Leary on the upper Tully River; and Eric Mjöberg’s documents, including his 1913 diary notes from the Cedar Creek campsite.

Ethnohistorical information

The earliest European accounts from the rainforest region are mostly fleeting descriptions of European encounters with Aboriginal people, written by government-employed explorers and prospectors. They provide descriptions of characteristic material culture items observed in Aboriginal campsites, as well as the detection of substantial tracks and large clearings in the rainforest. The dates, nature of observations and the locations of the primary explorers and commentators in the northeastern Queensland rainforest region are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Tablelands rainforest explorers, dates and locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explorer</th>
<th>Date of exploration</th>
<th>Nature of observation</th>
<th>Area of observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edmund Kennedy</td>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Transitory. First inland European expedition to Cape York</td>
<td>Traversed the Cardwell Range probably crossing the upper Tully River at Urumbal Pocket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Mulligan</td>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Transitory/gold prospecting</td>
<td>Atherton Tableland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael O’Leary</td>
<td>1880s</td>
<td>Transitory/gold prospecting</td>
<td>Culpa goldfield on the upper Tully River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christie Palmerston</td>
<td>1882 (2 April – 2 Aug)</td>
<td>Transitory/in government employ seeking railway route</td>
<td>From a location on the coast across to the Atherton Tableland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1882 (31 Oct – 12 Nov, 21 Dec – 30 Dec)</td>
<td>Transitory/in government employ seeking railway route</td>
<td>Return trip from Geraldton (Innisfail) to Herberton, following the North Johnstone River and Beatrice River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1884-1885 (21 Dec – 27 Jan)</td>
<td>Transitory/gold prospecting</td>
<td>From Herberton to the Barron Falls, covering areas around the Atherton Tablelands, Beatrice River and the North Johnstone River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1886 (12 July – 9 Nov)</td>
<td>Transitory/gold prospecting</td>
<td>Three journeys along the Russell River and its tributaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Lumholtz</td>
<td>1882-1883</td>
<td>Established scientific exploration of rainforest flora, fauna and traditional Aboriginal society</td>
<td>Started at lower Herbert River on the coast, moving north and northwest following the Herbert River</td>
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</table>
Material culture collections

Material culture collections from the rainforest region consist mainly of characteristic traditional organic items that have been documented in the ethnographic rainforest literature, and will not be repeated in any great detail here (however, see for example Bottoms 1999; Brayshaw 1990; Colliver and Woolston 1980; Ferrier 1999, 2002, 2006; Pedley 1992; Roth 1898, 1901–10). Material culture items in rainforest collections generally include a variety of artefacts such as wooden shields, spears, spear-throwers, throwing clubs and boomerangs, and a variety of baskets, bark blankets and other items. Historical documents demonstrate that Aboriginal rainforest people used the lawyer cane (Calamus spp.) in the manufacture of many traditional organic artefacts related to subsistence strategies including baskets for sieving toxic nuts and climbing ropes used to collect food from treetops. Fish, eel, and wallaby nets were also made from lawyer cane fibres. In addition, substantial weather proof huts were built from the cane’s vines and leaves, enabling Tableland rainforest groups to live a more sedentary life during the wet season (Duke and Collins 1994; Mjöberg 1918:365–366; Roth 1901–10).

1849: The Kennedy expedition

The first inland European expedition to Cape York was led by Edmund Kennedy. Edgar Beale’s biography on Kennedy, titled Kennedy of Cape York (1977), provides information based on Kennedy’s 1849 diary entries, which, amongst other things, provide some insight into the pre-European rainforest environment. Kennedy described large areas of thick and impenetrable lawyer cane, which had to be hacked through, on a steep range separating the coastal lowlands from the drier and open woodlands west of the rainforest region. He wrote that the landscape was a patchwork made up of open forest pockets and dense rainforest. At times, Kennedy’s party followed Aboriginal tracks that criss-crossed through the rainforest, however, they were mostly avoided. This is because he considered that attacks by the ‘natives’ were more likely to occur out in the open (Beale 1977:176). The fate of the expedition was well publicised (The Moreton Bay Courier 1849:4). Ten party members died, including Kennedy, who was speared and killed. It has been suggested that the ill-fated expedition may have restricted European settlement of the far north for many years (Ritchie 1989:61).

1870s–80s: Gold prospecting and scientific explorations

The first European township in the region, Cardwell (Fig. 2.1), was established in 1864 on the coastal lowlands. European settlement across the rainforest region occurred in the decades following the arrival of Waybala (Jirrbal word for European people and settlement) on the coast, and gradually expanded to include rainforests and sclerophyll forest areas located at the western edge of the rainforest region. Some of the earliest written accounts from the Atherton Tableland are from...
prospectors who travelled to the area in search of various metals and minerals. The discovery of gold on the Palmer River to the north in 1873, and in the early 1880s on the Russell River to the east, brought thousands of prospectors to the Atherton Tableland.

In 1876, gold prospector James Mulligan described, for the first time, large clusters of huts located in open eucalypt pockets on the northwestern fringe of the rainforest on the Atherton Tableland, which he referred to as ‘townships’. At each campsite many wide and open tracks met, some of which his party followed for many kilometres, skirting around the edge of the rainforest:

There are roads off the main track to each of their townships, which consist of well-thatched gunyahs [huts], big enough to hold five or six people. We counted eleven townships since we came to the edge of the scrub (Mulligan 1877:401).

Mulligan conducted several prospecting expeditions together with fellow prospector-explorer Christie Palmerston who, in 1882, was commissioned by the Queensland government to search for a railway route, connecting the coast with Herberton (Fig. 2.1) located on the Wild River (Savage 1989:17). During his subsequent gold prospecting explorations along the Russell River and on the South and North Johnstone Rivers (Fig. 2.1), Palmerston (1883, 1885–87, 1888) records some details of Aboriginal use of the rainforest in his diaries. Although transitory in nature, dates, landmarks, distances, and detailed observations characterise these diaries. For example, they depict the nature of the vegetation and Aboriginal paths connecting cleared campsites within dense rainforest (Savage 1989). In spite of Palmerston’s unsympathetic behaviour towards the Aboriginal people he met in his sojourns, his observations are important in attempts to piece together a picture of pre-European Aboriginal rainforest culture and settlement. On the North Johnstone River, Palmerston described what he referred to as a pocket:

A pocket – that is a piece of open country about a quarter of an acre in size, circular shaped, used by the aborigines [sic] for war dances and fighting. They take particular care to keep the place free from jungle, which would creep over in a few seasons if allowed. There were several gunyahs [huts] around its margins (Palmerston 1885–86:232).

Palmerston continued by describing cleared paths linking these pockets throughout the rainforest:

There were many large paths leading from the pockets in many directions. A fair sized aborigines’ [sic] pathway crosses the mountain and we followed it along the summit, when it led us straight into an aborigines’ camp … we emerged upon another scrupulously cleaned pocket, equal in size to the one left this morning, only its covering paths are much larger. It has a floor like appearance. We steeply ascended a table-land’s [sic] summit, where we picked up a lot of fresh nigger [sic] tracks, which led us into another large open encampment by sunset (Palmerston 1885–86:232–233).

Government geologist Robert Logan Jack, whilst documenting the geology of the Russell River in 1888, recorded clearings in the rainforest in the upper Russell River area:

A few cleared spots in the jungle that were used for corroboree of the tribe and for meetings of neighbouring tribes. These bora-grounds are probably of great antiquity as no tradition of their origin can be gathered from the natives. The clearing of an acre of jungle with stone implements (aided perhaps by fire in the very rare dry seasons) must have been the work of a very long time (Jack 1888:3).

These early historical accounts from the Tablelands clearly demonstrate that at the time of European arrival in the rainforest, this landscape was managed by Aboriginal people. It appears that the large open pathways, open eucalypt and grassy pockets, as well as smaller rainforest clearings described by Mulligan, Palmerston and others, were integral to Aboriginal ways of life and tenure in the rainforest.
In 1889, journalist and explorer Archibald Meston undertook and led the first botanical and zoological collecting expedition to the Atherton Tableland. During the expedition, Meston made special efforts to find out Aboriginal names for natural features of the landscape (Ritchie 1989:51). Meston’s 1889 report provides some detail on Aboriginal subsistence practices and the location of Aboriginal campsites he encountered in the rainforest (Fig. 3.1). His first-hand observations of material culture items relating to toxic food processing were the first descriptions in writing. Furthermore, Meston’s observations demonstrate that the rainforest region provided a resource base that allowed Aboriginal people on the Atherton Tableland to establish seasonal camps which he referred to as ‘wet weather camps’ (Meston 1889:8):

Their [rainforest Aborigines] food is chiefly vegetarian, varied occasionally by the flesh of the wallaby, the tree-climbing kangaroo, fish, birds, eggs and three or four varieties of opossums. The koa nut, and other large nuts not yet botanically named, are the chief articles of diet. Some of the nuts and roots they eat are poisonous in their raw state, and these are pounded up and placed in dilly bags in running water for a couple of days to have the poisonous principle washed out. Of edible nuts of various kinds they have an unlimited supply. In pursuit of tree climbing animals, they take a vine and run up the tallest trees. Their main camps are always built on some healthy dry situation, beside or very near a running stream. These main ‘wet weather camps’ is where they remain during the wet season, and store large supplies of nuts. We saw no camps higher than 2000 feet and very rarely any above 1000 feet. The nuts they chiefly live on are only found on the flats and in the valleys (Meston 1889:8).

During this period of early rainforest explorations, Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism characterised culture research. His theory positioned white people as a superior race, a theory which sparked and legitimised the expansion of colonies and establishment of mission stations, including Australia. Therefore, the early scientifically produced evidence from the rainforest region was aimed at capturing pre-European Aboriginal rainforest culture and society before its imminent disappearance (Lumpholtz 1889; Mjöberg 1913, 1918; Roth 1898, 1900–10).

Carl Lumholtz

The earliest scientific study of this kind is Lumholtz’s early 1880s account of his time on the Herbert River, located in the southern extremity of the rainforest region (Fig. 2.1). He and others worked in a period when ideas of biological and cultural development dominated:
I am interested in gaining knowledge about the Australian Aborigines, since they are considered to be the lowest race on earth. I believe the Aborigines are a doomed people … the most degraded and hopeless of all savage races (Lumholtz 1889:375).

In *Amongst Cannibals* (1889), Lumholtz depicts himself as the white explorer who achieves the trust of the local Aboriginal people with the power of a gun, tobacco, and friendliness (Lumholtz 1889:117). Lumholtz’s accounts on the lifestyles of the Aboriginal rainforest people he met suggests that many pre-European aspects of Aboriginal rainforest culture had survived European settlement in the Herbert River area. The local Aboriginal people were still carrying out traditional hunting and gathering practices such as burning large grassy pockets to flush out kangaroos, producing and using many traditional organic rainforest implements, and participating in ceremonial activities. He also documented the use of woollen government blankets amongst the Aboriginal people he met on the Herbert River (Lumholtz 1889:287). He was informed by Europeans that the local Aboriginal people had recently been allowed to come to Herbert Vale Station and that they were becoming fond of wearing the garments and ornaments of white people and of smoking tobacco (Lumholtz 1889:82). Lumholtz wrote about some of the cruelties towards Aboriginal people in the area, referring to stories told to him by settlers and squatters who were shooting ‘cattle killers’ living on their runs. He also recognised the damage that was being done by the Native Police force:

That inhuman institution has also been an important factor in the destruction of the natives. They have not only slain a large number, but also contributed largely to their demoralisation (Lumholtz 1889:374).

Whilst acknowledging the devastating effects European settlement was having on the Aboriginal population, Lumholtz firmly believed that Aboriginal people were inevitably destined for extinction. This theory legitimised events that took place in north Queensland, and elsewhere in Australia, and also helped shape government policy.

**1890s: Photographers in the rainforest**

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, studio photographers from Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane were active in the rainforest region. They travelled to the Atherton Tableland via a new train line connecting Cairns with Atherton, to photograph ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people and artefacts, European logging activities and the rainforest environment. Some of the photographs were made into postcards (G. Genex, pers. comm., 2006). A visual history of Aboriginal rainforest culture is offered in the photographs from this period (see Figs. 3.2–3.4).

![Figure 3.2 Construction of a hut in a cleared area at the edge of the rainforest on the Atherton Tableland.](image)

Source: Courtesy John Oxley Library: Atkinson collection. Photograph also appears in Mjöberg’s 1918 travel account, 1918:182.
Figure 3.3 Aboriginal walking track through rainforest.
Source: Courtesy John Oxley Library, Brisbane.
Figure 3.4 Aboriginal men in traditional ceremonial costume with their shields, swords, and spears.
The photograph appears in Mjöberg’s travel account *Amongst Stone Age People in the Queensland Wilderness* (1918), entitled ‘A secret meeting in a remote rainforest location, a so called “yabba-yabba”. Here decisions are made by the chief, along with his closest associates, the old and wise within the tribe, on the most important questions.’
Source: Mjöberg 1918:388.
Despite the staging of people and artefacts in many of the photographs, they illustrate the traditional painted wooden shields cut out of buttress roots from fig trees that were used together with long one-handed hardwood swords and spears during the corroborees (Figs. 3.4–3.5). These material culture items are unique to the rainforest region, as well as the use of cockatoo feathers in body decoration seen in Figure 3.4 (Coyyan 1918, part V); M. Barlow, pers. comm., 2004).

In addition to the characteristic organic rainforest weapons, two domestic items also distinguish rainforest groups from other Aboriginal groups (Fig. 3.5). These are a bark basket used to carry water and other liquids, and lawyer cane baskets, used to carry fruits, nuts and other portable items (including babies) (Mjöberg 1918:240), they are also used in the processing of toxic nuts.

Figure 3.5 Aboriginal family group on the Atherton Tableland with painted shields, spears and a hardwood sword, as well as two characteristic domestic rainforest items, a water-carrying bark basket (left) and a bicornual lawyer cane basket (right), 1890s.

Source: Atkinson collection, courtesy Cairns Historical Society, Cairns.
Transformations on the Tablelands

Aboriginal resistance from the rainforest

The history of Aboriginal resistance to European settlement on the Tablelands was investigated by Loos (1982). He found that from the early 1880s, as Europeans began to arrive and settle in the Tablelands area, Aboriginal rainforest people were driven away from their traditional hunting and gathering grounds by the Native Mounted Police force. However, the use of the Native Mounted Police force on the Tablelands was more or less abandoned a few years later, partly because Native Troopers and a Sub-Inspector Nichols had killed at least four Aboriginal people at Irvinebank in 1884. Nichols was discharged but the incident appeared in the *Herberton Advertiser* and the word ‘massacre’ was used for the first time in the Queensland Parliament (Genever 2006:6). However, the main reason for the abandonment of the Native Police force was the rainforest environment, where horses could not be used and the advantage of rifles over spears was limited. The effectiveness of the Native Police force, and the devastating results that had been seen in other parts of southern and central Queensland was greatly diminished and the force was abandoned by the Queensland Government as a result (Loos 1982:103).

Loos’ research into newspaper articles and police reports from the 1880s show that during the early resistance period relatively secure refugia were to be found for Aboriginal people in traditional rainforest campsites. However, because of their confinement to rainforest campsites and the loss of access to traditional hunting and gathering grounds, people were starving. As a means of securing food, raids were conducted on European houses, cattle were speared, and food, crops, and other items were stolen from European camps and settlements (Loos 1982:110). In a report from Atherton Police Station, dated 25 November 1888, Constable Hansen described a 19-day search for Aboriginal camps through rainforest near the township of Atherton (Loos 1982:109). He found rainforest camps containing bushels of corn plus a variety of European items, including steel axes and tomahawks. Before the end of December, Hansen had brought several Aboriginal people to Atherton from such rainforest camps, who informed him of their hunger. In response, many of the European settlers requested that the Queensland Government provide Aboriginal rainforest people with food rations as a measure to stop Aboriginal resistance and attacks on European homes and stock (*Herberton Advertiser* 1888, 1889; Loos 1982:109). Aboriginal resistance from the rainforest was more or less extinguished by the implementation of a new government policy in 1889 that recognised food shortage as the main reason behind Aboriginal attacks on Europeans (Loos 1982). By the turn of the twentieth century, Aboriginal rainforest people were living in fringe camps near European towns. They were supplied with food rations and in some areas, to some extent, allowed to supplement their European food rations with traditional foods (M. Barlow, pers. comm., 2004; L. Wood, pers. comm., 2004).

The 1897 Protection Act

Walter E. Roth was the first Protector appointed in north Queensland. The appointment of Protectors of Aborigines in Queensland was part of a government initiative to keep the peace between European settlers and Aboriginal people. Presented at the time as a charitable and humane measure, the 1897 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* controlled the fate of Aboriginal people across Queensland. Its practical outcome was oppressive, further restricting the freedom of Aboriginal people. As the new policy paved the way for the establishment of Aboriginal reserves and missions, Aboriginal people were relocated by the newly designated ‘Protectors’ (Evans et al. 1988).

As previously discussed, the Native Police force had been the main government instrument for the administration of Aboriginal people. With the implementation of the Protection Act of 1897, this policy was abandoned and the troopers were dispersed. Bushman Michael O’Leary reflected on the serious consequences this had for the Aboriginal people living in remote rainforest locations:
At that time most of the troopers were disbanded and allowed to roam at large. They visited the outside parts and induced the young females to accompany them to where they could trade in spirits, or charcoal opium. This sudden disbanding of the troopers had the effect of wiping out a lot of those scrub blacks in a very short space of time. Once those cast-off troopers were allowed a free leg they rose to the occasion and the consequence was that the different tribes vanished with astonishing rapidity (Coyyan 1918, part VIII:2).

Soon after the implementation of the 1897 Protection Act, official police records reported trouble on the Atherton Tablelands by Aboriginal people moving up from the coastal lowland areas. Their reports were most likely referring to dispersed Aboriginal troopers on the coast coming up to the Tablelands:

7.7.1898. Higgins [Const. 596] to Sub-Inspector of Police Cairns. The blacks come from the coast up the Murray and Tully Rivers on to the Tableland and is very troublesome (Police Department, 1898: A/38047).

It appears that the Protection Act did little to protect traditional rainforest people still living on the Tablelands. In 1910, Tom Mitchell was appointed as the first official Protector of Aborigines in Ravenshoe, an office usually held by the local police officer, missionaries, or civil servants. A mission station was never established at Ravenshoe and, since the nearest police station at the time was in Herberton, the postmaster of Ravenshoe was appointed to take on this position (Toohey 2001:65). Also officially appointed was the ‘King’ of the Jirrbal people, who was required to travel to Herberton once a year to receive an annual gift from the authorities to distribute to his people. This included blankets, tomahawks, plugs of tobacco and pipes. On these occasions, he was expected to wear his breastplate of office. ‘King’ or ‘brass plates’ were presented to perceived chiefs or leaders of a tribe, or to faithful servants who helped in some way to ease the white peoples’ progress in Australia (Troy 1993). The plates were presented to Aboriginal people from the earliest time of European settlement through to the first decades of the twentieth century (Troy 1993). The first such appointee in Ravenshoe was given the name King George after King George V in England who acceded to the throne in 1910 (Toohey 2001:66) (Fig. 3.6).

Figure 3.6 King George of Ravenshoe receiving the annual handout of blankets from the Protector of Aborigines, circa 1910.
Source: The photograph is displayed in the Ravenshoe cultural centre (also see Reynolds 1972, front cover).
In 1913, Eric Mjöberg had an encounter with King George of Ravenshoe, who accompanied him into the rainforest to collect insects. Mjöberg commented that: ‘The king speaks relatively good English and are [sic] assisting the Europeans in various ways’ (Mjöberg 1913a). The European appointment of Aboriginal Kings was also commented on by O’Leary:

Well, it may appear all right, but it is a bit of blissful ignorance, that is, as far as those scrub blacks are, or were, concerned. They had no king or even chief man. Old age played an important part among them: even both sexes were respected when hoary frost made its appearance. Still, it was only respect for old age for no one among those blacks was elevated to a pedestal (Coyyan 1918, part V:2).

Thus, the Queensland Government was partly usurping traditional Aboriginal power structures to maintain control and regulation by elevating certain older Aboriginal people to the status of king or chief of a tribe. The distribution of European gifts such as blankets and tomahawks was most likely an attempt to keep peace with Aboriginal people and avoid further raids on European farms and settlements. The overall outcome of the Protection Act for the Aboriginal rainforest people on the Tablelands was that Aboriginal culture and society underwent further transformations to accommodate new government policy.

Ethnohistorical evidence from the Evelyn Tableland

The remainder of this chapter presents analyses of two ethnohistorical sources that can be directly linked to the Evelyn Tableland: the early writings of Michael O’Leary and Eric Mjöberg’s documents from 1913.

Michael O’Leary

Prospector Michael O’Leary was one of the first Europeans to arrive in the upper Tully River area in the early 1880s. He employed local Aboriginal men and boys in his pursuit of an alluvial gold resource (Toohey 2001:68–69). The mining did not produce a large amount of gold and by 1905, the small-scale gold rush was over. During his years prospecting in the rainforests of the Evelyn Tableland, O’Leary wrote a bush diary which he later published as extracts in local newspapers, under the name Coyyan, the local Aboriginal word for white quartz (D. Donoghue, pers. comm., 2008). O’Leary never explained why he wrote under the name Coyyan. Perhaps Aboriginal men gave him the name because he was a white man, or perhaps he got the name as a result of prospecting for gold and asking about where to find white quartz sources. O’Leary communicated with the local Aboriginal people in their language:

For the person who wants to learn their language thoroughly, the young boys are the best to learn from, as they are generally slow of speech, and sound the accents clearly (Coyyan 1915:1).

His main work, 10 newspaper columns titled ‘The Aboriginals’ (Coyyan 1918, parts I–X), discuss many aspects of Aboriginal rainforest culture, much of it based on first-hand observations of the lifestyles of the upper Tully River Aboriginal people in the late 1800s. He concluded with the statement:

I make no apology for this crude attempt to give the reader some knowledge of those people who once were, but are no more, that is, as far as their ancient habits and customs are concerned. What I have penned about them is not from hearsay, it is from actual experience while living among those people. The wages system and the regulated hours of labor [sic] held no charms for me, so therefore I chose the rough but independent and free life of the metal hunter. Naturally, this mode of life threw us in daily contact with those people [Aboriginal people]. Again, I do not wish to impress the reader that I am a real live authority on the subject, for most bushmen can relate some curious traits that they have witnessed at different times. I have omitted many instances that might have amused the reader, but for the present this humble effort will be sufficient. COYYAN (Finis.) (Coyyan 1918, part X:2).
O’Leary’s writings show bitterness towards government officials and their attitudes towards Aboriginal people. He was clearly upset about the Protection Act and the work of the missionaries, perhaps reasons behind his decision to publish his diary. In one instance, he is openly critical of the Queensland Government and Roth’s work as Protector of the Aborigines. Angry about the effects Europeans and government policies were having on the Aboriginal rainforest people he wrote:

They [Aboriginal people] began to see things in a different light. They gradually began to learn the white man’s ways. The old men of the tribe lost their control of the younger male members. The excitement of discovery led many of them further a field [sic]. Fear, of course, now keeps the slaves in their place (Coyyan 1918, part V:3).

From his writings, it appears that O’Leary wanted to inform the newspaper readers about traditional Aboriginal rainforest culture and society and historical background. Perhaps it was an attempt to make the readers aware of some of the reasons why things had changed in traditional Aboriginal society since European arrival. Whatever his motives, the columns hold new and significant information on pre-European Aboriginal rainforest culture and society in the study area.

**Eric Mjöberg**

Around three decades after O’Leary’s gold prospecting days on the upper Tully River, Swedish scientist Eric Mjöberg undertook an expedition to the rainforest region and other places in Queensland (Ferrier 2006). A short background to Eric Mjöberg is presented below, which includes a consideration of his motives for carrying out ethnographic research and his academic and professional achievements.

Eric Mjöberg was born in 1882 in Sweden. He was employed by the Swedish Museum of Natural History between 1903 and 1912 whilst undertaking his university studies. He received his PhD in entomology in 1910. Mjöberg’s life ambition was to explore and conduct scientific research in the tropics. Between 1903 and 1910, the Stockholm Natural History Museum’s professor, entomologist and explorer Yngve Sjöstedt, introduced Mjöberg to the scientific world of exploring. The European tradition of foreign expeditions and explorations that began in the eighteenth century still flourished at the turn of the twentieth century and Mjöberg was attracted to the idea of exploring exotic tropical places (Ferrier 2006). Financed by scholarships, Mjöberg organised and lead an expedition to the Kimberley region of Western Australia in 1910 with a group of other scientists, including ethnographer Yngve Laurell (Kronestedt 1989:60). Laurell’s collection of ethnographic items and recording of Aboriginal society and culture appears to have influenced Mjöberg, because his subsequent expeditions to the tropics involved ethnographic as well as scientific research agendas. Results from the Kimberley trip were published in various journals and in a popular travel account titled *Amongst Wild Animals and People in Australia* (1915, 2012). On Mjöberg’s return from Australia in early 1912, Sjöstedt, an influential member of the Traveller’s Club in Stockholm, introduced Mjöberg to its members and, as a result, he became a member of the club (Fig. 3.7).
The purpose of this exclusive club was to ‘stimulate friendships between men who have travelled and explored at least two continents outside of Europe’ (Traveller’s Club 1912: iii). Mjöberg’s membership resulted in him receiving a grant from the club. Later that year he set out on a second expedition to Australia, this time to Queensland. The location was inspired by a brief visit to Queensland’s southern rainforests in 1911, during his first Australia expedition (Mjöberg 1918). This time he travelled alone with scientific biological research agendas and ethnographic research agendas. This included collecting mammal, insect and botanical specimens on behalf of the Swedish Museum of Natural History (Ferrier 2006). The aim of the expedition was to collect specimens from the southern and northern parts of Queensland and to compare and contrast the two ecological zones (Mjöberg 1918:52). The scientific results from the two expeditions to Australia (1910–11 and 1912–13) were published over a number of years in a compilation titled Results of Dr E Mjöberg’s Swedish Scientific Expeditions to Australia 1910–1913. The ethnographic results were published in scientific journals (e.g. Mjöberg 1925) and in a travel account titled Amongst Stone Age People in Queensland’s Wilderness (1918).

Mjöberg spent 1917 and 1918 in the USA on a lecture tour presenting his results at various institutions. Feeling restricted and unsatisfied with his life in Sweden after returning from the USA, he decided to take up a position as director of a zoological research station in Deli, on Sumatra. Later, Mjöberg accepted a position as director at the Sarawak museum in Borneo and undertook a year-long expedition to Mount Tibang followed by a return journey to Sweden in 1926. Between 1927 and 1929 he undertook three journeys to India, mainly collecting ethnographic items that he sold to museums and at auctions. By 1931, he was seriously ill and confined to a life in bed. He died in Stockholm in 1938 at the age of 56 (Ferrier 2006; Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon 1984:538–541).
Analysis of Eric Mjöberg’s diaries

Mjöberg’s original diaries, photographs and other written material from the two Australia expeditions were located in the archives of the California Academy of Sciences (CAS) in San Francisco in 2001 (C. Hallgren, pers. comm., 2005). For unknown reasons, the collection was confiscated by American customs as Mjöberg was about to leave the USA, presumably at the end of his lecture tour in 1918. It was subsequently sold at auction and donated in 1932 to CAS. Research on the collection by the author has shown that Mjöberg wrote at least three diaries during his north Queensland expedition (1913a). Diary 1 documents his arrival in Cairns in early January 1913, the organisation of his fieldwork on the Tablelands and the first two months of collecting faunal specimens and insects in the rainforest. Diary 2 (dated 24/3/1913–4/9/1913) documents his time on the Evelyn Tableland, time spent at Yarrabah mission, and a trip to Chillagoe located in the dry area west of the rainforest region. Diary 3 documents an expedition to Laura and the Coleman River on Cape York, which ended his north Queensland expedition. Aspirations for a second expedition to Cape York and Mornington Island never eventuated.

Previous research (Ferrier 1999, 2002, 2006) on Mjöberg’s rainforest expedition focused on reconstructing his travels in the rainforest region and the ethnographic rainforest material he took back to Sweden. His diaries had not been located at the time of the original research (1999), and as a result, it was mostly based on Mjöberg’s published works (1918, 1925). In addition, a small number of letters and journal articles were found in Swedish archives, which were analysed and used to piece together his rainforest expedition. The research established two general collecting areas in the rainforest region: the Tablelands and the coastal lowlands around Cairns (Ferrier 1999, 2006). The investigations within each area focused on trying to find out where he travelled and the types of Aboriginal material culture he collected at each location. Items of material culture were relatively clearly provenanced, and the research showed that a relatively high proportion were collected at a location referred to as Cedar Creek (Ferrier 1999, 2002, 2006).

Analyses of Mjöberg’s diaries support previous research results (Ferrier 1999, 2002, 2006). Diary entries show that he arrived in Cairns on 3 January 1913, and embarked on what was to become the main component of his expedition, the exploration of the rainforests. Mjöberg’s first diary entry from far north Queensland describes the rainforest scenery as he travelled from Cairns to Atherton by train:

3/1 Friday We arrived in Cairns, which is nothing more than a small village, at 5 am. I took the 7 am train up to Atherton. The scenery on the way up is stunning, steep hills are covered with dense dark scrub, palms and vines and steep ravines, small mountain creeks play and jump down its steep bases. Clearings are now and again visible. Also visible on occasion inside the dark scrub are green crowns of eucalypt trees, visible high above the dominant scrub vegetation. I arrived at 2.30 pm in Atherton and checked in at the Barron Valley Hotel with great trepidation (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

Staying at the Barron Valley Hotel brought him unexpected good fortune:

This turned out to be lucky because here I met with Mr Arena, a prospector, who promised to take me on a trip to unknown scrub areas for a week. In addition, Mr Drew, a surveyor and Mr Maguise, who promised to lodge me for a week or so, giving me an opportunity to collect Dendrolagus [the tree kangaroo] which according to my sources are relatively common in the area. Drew’s address is Malanda. This is a fantastic opportunity to photograph and collect specimens. I will have my own camp and tent and black fellows. Good, good, thus I will be amongst Dendrolagus and possums in tropical scrub, it will be excellent (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

The diary shows that surveyors and prospectors helped Mjöberg plan and execute his many rainforest expeditions. For example, they assisted him in finding Aboriginal guides and took him to areas of undisturbed rainforest where he collected animals and insects. Excited about how his first day on the Atherton Tableland had turned out, he started to organise his expedition:
5/1 Next week I will be going out into the scrub and follow the track of the timber cutters and camp with them. According to information I have received, there are areas of newly felled scrub also at Drew’s place. The location, where I will go to with Arena, is on the Great Dividing Range from where you get a beautiful view over the lowlands in the west towards the sea of Carpentaria. This area of scrub has so far not been surveyed and the country is classified as ‘new country’ (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

He soon realised the difficulties of working in rainforest:

Sunday 12/1 1913 The leeches are terribly mean. They attack without any consideration and suck one’s blood with a never-ending appetite. Working in the scrub [rainforest] is almost like visiting hell: ticks and leeches, sharp and thorny vines as well as stinging bushes make life very difficult. The rain has not stopped for days, making life in the scrub miserable to say the least, and my scrub itch is getting worse (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

The rainforest region was also struck by a tropical cyclone in the early phase of his expedition and Mjöberg became confined to a small hotel in Herberton for several days, cut off from the outside world. It became clear to him that conditions in the rainforest during the wet season were going to seriously affect his progress. In addition to the difficult terrain and weather, at times his health deteriorated with fevers and tropical ulcers, which slowed his work down (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

Despite the generous help he received from local settlers and prospectors, Mjöberg was generally very critical of the Europeans he encountered in the rainforest region and of Australian society in general. He commented on the general lack of good character and bad behaviour of Australians:

The country is exaggerated with its democracy, here you see the priest riding a bike, going to the pub getting drunk together with hooligans and playing tennis etc. The doctor in the village is an ordinary little man who visits the bars and who is an equal to everybody else (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

The diaries provide insight into Mjöberg’s thoughts on how civilised (i.e. white) people should behave according to class and occupation. He, like many others at the time, believed that the extinction of Aboriginal people was inevitable with the arrival of European civilisation (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1). As a result, he wrote sympathetic accounts about Aboriginal rainforest people in his travel account. His preconceived ideas about ‘Stone Age people’ and ‘natives’ living in exotic locations such as the rainforest region, strongly influenced his ethnographic work. While it is beyond the scope of this research to present any detail on the differences between Mjöberg’s diaries and his published travel account (1918, 2015), when the two sources are compared there are some clear differences. One is his lack of recognition of the assistance given to him. In the travel account he sometimes mentions ‘a white gentleman’ accompanying him but fails to acknowledge the extent to which Europeans and Aboriginal people guided him to places in the rainforest where he was able to collect and document flora and fauna and Aboriginal material culture items. Another difference lies in the way he describes European settlement on the Tablelands. For example, in the chapter on Cedar Creek in his travel account, it is suggested that very little European settlement had taken place. In fact, a pub already existed, which he occasionally visited, two stores were in operation, and there were more than 300 selectors in the area (North Cedar Creek Settlers Group 1908; Ravenshoe Writers’ Group 1999). Selections of land had been available since 1907 and European family homes had been built on the banks of Cedar Creek (Smith 2001; E. Dingwall, pers. comm., 2005).

**Encounters with Aboriginal people**

Mjöberg spent the first weeks of January in rainforests outside of the town Atherton, where he stayed with his newly acquainted prospecting friend Arena at his place ‘somewhere in the scrub’ (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1). Moving away from the settled areas around Atherton, Mjöberg set out to find rainforests untouched by the timber cutters. He regularly accompanied surveyors in his rainforest sojourns and for the rest of the time, he hired Aboriginal guides:
Friday 17/1 Set out once again to the rainforests together with the surveyor. However, heavy rain stopped our journey and we returned by 2 o’clock. On Monday I will start a journey to Mt Lavery [sic] with two pack horses and a few black fellows. Cedar Creek is rumoured to be very good. (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

Diary entries show that within weeks of arrival he had heard about Cedar Creek, where according to his European sources, Aboriginal people were living in traditional campsites at the edge of undisturbed rainforests. He later noted in this diary:

In Cedar Creek I encountered a traditional wet-season native rainforest village used by a large group of native people that inhabit rainforests around Cedar Creek and Tully River (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

Some of Mjöberg’s Aboriginal guides appear to have spoken relatively good English and his failure to question them about Aboriginal rainforest culture and society past and present probably reflects his lack of training in ethnographic and anthropological research. He spent most of his time with young Aboriginal boys and men, who would have had more limited cultural knowledge compared to the more senior Aboriginal men and women. It is also quite possible that the older people avoided him. Similar to his predecessor Meston, Mjöberg sometimes noted the Aboriginal name for an object or animal. A list of Aboriginal words and their meanings is provided in the third diary but it is generally unclear who provided information on the Aboriginal names for various things. The type of limited information he documented is demonstrated in the following diary extract:

9/1 I will tomorrow hire some Negroes and start collecting. – mabi = Dendrolagus sp. (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

For the most part, no information on the names of Aboriginal groups he encountered or observed in the rainforest can be found in the diaries. This means that the only way of interpreting whose traditional land he was travelling in is by finding out the names of the locations he visited.

Change and continuity in cultural trajectories

Historical information shows that, by the time of Mjöberg’s visit in 1913, traditional Aboriginal society had already changed a great deal because of European settlement in the region. Mjöberg’s previously unanalysed diaries, therefore, have the potential to contribute information on change and continuity in traditional Aboriginal rainforest culture and society during the transitional contact period. As a result, the following analysis reflects on change and continuity in the trajectories identified in Chapter 1: material culture and technology, subsistence strategies and rainforest settlement patterns, between circa 1880–1913.

Material culture and technology

When Michael O’Leary arrived in the upper Tully River area in the early 1880s, he observed many of the typical organic material culture rainforest items described in the ethnographic literature in use:

Before the white man’s time those people had no utensils for boiling water. They had a bag made from the nupa bark that they used for carrying honey, etc. It was sometimes used for water purposes. The native bee supplied them with honey and also wax, so that the fastenings where string was used could be made more secure. This vessel was called the nupa, and the honey and wax was known as myee. Water would be mixed with the honey and then it would be lapped up with the aid of pieces of vine that they had purposely chewed into shreds. This nupa tree came in for a good many purposes. The shoots or saplings supplied them with very strong rope. From the bark they made their blankets. The tree when dead decomposed very quickly and it was a favourite timber for the beetles to deposit their larvae in. When hatched they formed into grubs, and, of course, provided those people with food. This grub is known to them as the chambonne. Before using, the bark is carefully smoked. Those trees [nupa] are often ringbarked so as to cause their decay. The young vine tree [Calamus spp.] is somewhat similar to the nupa. From it they get material for ropes, blankets, vessels, and the tree is often stripped for making humpies (Coyyan 1918, part X:2).
He observed that men manufactured most of the equipment used to hunt and fish as well as more domestic items mostly used by the women:

The weapons that those scrub blacks have in use are a fair load to carry, the shield and sword being rather cumbersome. The task of making fishing nets, turkey nets, dilly bags, vessels for holding water, and the catching of large game, such as the possum [sic], tree climbing kangaroo and cassowary, is monopolised by the males. All their weapons, swords and spears of all descriptions, woomeras, waddies and boomerangs, are made from varieties of hard timber that is also very durable. The shield is made from a very light and soft timber. It has also to be tough enough to turn or stop a flying spear. During the heavy wet months of the year the wood supply entailed a fair amount of labor [sic], as their stone axes were a very primitive implement (Coyyan 1918, part X:2).

References to stone implements in the ethnographic literature are rare and the naming and use of some stone implements on the upper Tully River suggests little contact with Europeans:

The stone axe is called Moan, but the name mostly used is Puddy. All quartz is called Coyyan, but each kind has its own name. Stones are called Tebun, but here too they apply the word to stones in general; having different words to designate different material, as basalt, granite etc. Flewen means the sapphire or any transparent stone. Before glass and metal was available to those abos. [sic] a sharp piece of quartz was used in slicing and cutting, much like a knife (Coyyan 1918, part VI:2 & part VIII:3).

This extract shows that artefacts made from quartz were used at the time of European arrival. Later on, glass and metal replaced quartz as the raw material used in the activities described above.

Mjöberg collected a small number of Aboriginal stone implements (Ferrier 2002). His diary shows that Europeans presented him with most of these and informed him that they were no longer in use by the Aboriginal people at Cedar Creek or elsewhere in the rainforest. Based on his own observations, Mjöberg wrote that European axes were common amongst the Aboriginal men, as many of them worked for European timber cutters and surveyors as trackers and tree climbers. The diary demonstrates that on many occasions, information on Aboriginal rainforest culture was based on hearsay and not on first-hand observation. In addition, the diary shows that during Mjöberg's visit to Yarrabah mission he came across previously published works about the rainforest Aborigines:

Have with great interest read Matthews work, as well as Spencer and Gillen, Roth and others. They are available here at the station in addition to Lumholtz. –For comparative purposes, I can borrow a lot of information provided by Mathews and Spencers. According to sources, the children were carried in a piece of bark and a lawyer cane vine around the forehead (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

Thus, it appears that Mjöberg used a variety of sources to try to piece together a picture of ‘traditional’ Aboriginal rainforest culture for his travel account.

**Acquisition of material culture items**

A sword and two spears labelled ‘Atherton’ in the Swedish Museum of Ethnography collection were paid for by Mjöberg with money. There is no mention of who they were purchased from when he wrote ‘1/1 Bought a beautiful sword and two spears’ (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

One possibility is that the items purchased in Atherton were made by Aboriginal people who were selling them as a source of income. It is equally possible that he purchased them from European collectors. A number of the material culture items from Cedar Creek were bought directly from Aboriginal people:

25/3 Tuesday A day extremely rich in results. My workers arrived and work is in full swing. –My steps went towards the black fellows’ camp, where I quickly acquired a few items. In every camp I observed a primitive grinding stone implement, a simple flat piece of rock and a cobble stone. I bought three samples of these, as well as headache stones. In the camps at Cedar Creek I saw a large number of shields, swords and some spears as well as a beautiful club, a few grinding stones and some music sticks as well as several dilly bags, some beautifully painted with red ochre. I hope to acquire a bark blanket,
these were made and used in the old days but some people still know the method of how to make them. Similarly, I will acquire an eel net, a turkey net, an eel spear and eel trap made of lawyer cane (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 1).

Mjöberg's reference to bark blankets and stone axes made and used in the ‘old days’ are the only two examples in the diaries where he mentions a change in Aboriginal material culture resulting from European arrival.

Some material culture items were 'collected', i.e. stolen, from campsites and on the rare occasion, he traded, or promised to supply, European goods in return for Aboriginal artefacts:

27/3 In the afternoon, I continued on to the Negroes camp where I previously found and collected a large nice dilly bag and seven nulla nullas. The Negroes were all at the camp, they had hidden the eel spear and sword, but after a lot of negotiation I managed to exchange the large shield with the promise of a few pipes in return. It is a ceremonial fighting shield and has spear marks from the corroboree. They were very hesitant to separate themselves with it because it requires a lot of work to make a new one. It has been cut out by using a stone axe and is very old, and is the pride and joy of its owners. I also discovered oval stones, somewhat bigger than a hens’ egg, hidden along the walls in the huts and carried around by the women in their lawyer cane baskets. They are painted with a layer of wax or resin of some sort. They are apparently used to cure headaches with. The women are quite unwilling to separate themselves from the stones which are believed to have magical powers. I managed to acquire a sample of them from their baskets when they were out collecting food (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

One contact item in the Mjöberg collection is a fishhook made of iron, which was collected at Cedar Creek. Its presence demonstrates the inclusion of European items into the traditional material culture of the Aboriginal people living at Cedar Creek. Some of the material culture items were commissioned by Mjöberg. Mjöberg received (from an unknown source) a gigantic slate axe head which was later fitted with a new flimsy lawyer cane handle by Tommy, one of the Aboriginal boys working with him during his stay at Cedar Creek (Fig. 3.8).

![Figure 3.8 Large slate axe with a new lawyer cane handle, Cedar Creek.](Source: Courtesy Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm.)

Mjöberg did not document what this type of axe would have been used for in the past, possibly because his source was not able to inform him on the uses of pre-European Aboriginal artefacts. The surface is covered with ochre, which suggests that one of its uses was to process ochre, or
perhaps it was once painted with ochre for some unknown reason. Diary entries indicate that stone artefacts were generally no longer in use at Cedar Creek with the exception of flat basalt rocks used as grinding stones accompanied by a small cobbble. Combined, they served as an important tool in the preparation of nuts, fruits, and roots, as well as for grinding ochre. Mjöberg also acquired two previously undocumented types of baskets. One was made from eucalypt bark and another from grass, which indicate the inclusion of raw materials from an open forest environment. With the location of Cedar Creek at the western margin of the rainforest region, Mjöberg suggested that the Aboriginal people in this area utilised raw materials from two different environments (i.e. semi-dry open woodlands and rainforests) in manufacturing of their material culture (Mjöberg 1918:447).

Subsistence strategies

The historically documented use of toxic walnuts and other rainforest food plants are discussed in more detail in the context of the Urumbal Pocket archaeological plant assemblage (Chapter 6). The following extracts from Coyyan's column (1918) titled ‘Their Food’ provides information on additional food sources and subsistence strategies in use in the upper Tully River area in the early contact period:

When the abos. [sic] are preparing for a journey they always prepare a bountiful supply of food. Yams, ground nuts, the succulent part of the lawyer vine, the grass tree and every other sort of vegetable food that these people use have to go under some preparations before they can be used. The yams have a fair amount of energy expended on them. The toe-kerroo is a plum tree. The fruit is a large white nut, forms on the trunk of the tree, and when ripe, can be eaten without preparing. The Davidsonian plum grows on a small bush, and is strictly confined to our high land scrubs. On account of its bitter, acid taste it is not eagerly sought for (Coyyan 1918, part IX:1).

The use of the grass tree again demonstrates that food plants outside the rainforest were used. O’Leary’s descriptions on the types of animals hunted provide additional insights into rainforest subsistence:

When the turkey season is on it becomes a busy time for the abos. [sic]. Nets have to be made for trapping the birds, they lay their eggs at the same time. Those nets are made from the fibre of a small sapling, carefully scraped with some sharp stone. When finished the net is taken to the desired spot and set. Some koah nuts are then broken and distributed both inside and outside the net. The turkey and scrub hen provide the most food. The cassowary is often caught when young and it will get that tame that it will follow the tribe into different camps. When a large bird has been killed it gives the tribe a good feast. The tree-climbing kangaroo (mapper) is about the best flesh that those people get. They require dogs to hunt these animals. In those scrubs there is a species of black and brown dingo. It is a puzzle how they came into those scrubs. The abos. [sic] claim to have tamed and used them for hunting before they secured dogs from the white man. When they have an abundance of this food they will erect a stage about three or four feet high and on it they will spit the mapper. Next on the flesh list is the wallaby. There are two or three species of scrub wallaby and the abos. [sic] generally trap them by making pits on their regular pads. Then comes the bandicoot, but it is not a favorable [sic] dish of the abos. [sic]. Next on the list are the rodents. The two large species are game for the males; they are the turkim and the yarrey; all the smaller species (the muckah and mookin) are left to the females. There are two or three sorts of possums and the scrub one is a very large species; its color [sic] is black. They all provide food for the abo [sic] but at times it requires a considerable amount of climbing before they secure their prize. Both the carpet snake and a large black snake are eaten by those people. There are also several large lizards and iguanas in those scrubs that supply food for the abo. [sic]. They made cooking a profession, disembowelling all game before committing it to the fire. The scrub black will carefully dress his food and cook it properly, providing they are in a camp and have the time at their disposal (Coyyan 1918, parts IX:2–X:1).

Thus the traditional diet of the Jirrbal Aboriginal people was varied and, as with their material culture, incorporated plants and animals from two different environments: the rainforest and nearby open sclerophyll forest. Fish also played a significant role in the Aboriginal rainforest diet and O’Leary described different methods of catching fish:
Fish plays an important part with those people. From the rivers great quantities are caught. Their method
is to form small eddies with stones on the river rapids. His device for throwing them out of the water is
made from the lawyer vine, and is in appearance like two big fans joined together. Members at the camp
will have fires prepared. The fish are placed in leaves and then baked in the hot ashes. When cooked
the whole fish remains intact. Those people can turn their food out of the ashes entirely free from dirt.
Another plant of the abo. [sic] is to form a wall of stones across rapids. At prepared openings they will
place dilly-bags for the fish to enter. Then there is their pastime of fishing with hook and line. The line
is made from the Boombal and is fairly strong, and hooks are made from a very hard timber that has
been seasoned in the fire. Fish bones are also converted into hooks and another variety is obtained from
a certain kind of shell. Nature supplies hooks in abundance from a species of lawyer vine. This species is
known as the jaggan. Then comes that method which is the king of sport, spearing with a fish spear and
woomera. In the shallow creeks is the home of the eels, and the abo [sic] has a tube made from lawyer
vines for catching them. One end is closed the other is bell-shaped. In the night they will traverse
those watercourses by the aid of torches known as the chillo, the tree is known as the bin-dan-new.
The eels are apparently attracted by the flare of the torches, and are easily decoyed into the lawyer tube
(wongar). In those waters are also the tortoise and the crayfish or lobster. In those scrubs there is a very
large frog that is known as the tang-go. They are cooked on the fire (Coyyan 1918, parts IX:2–X:1).

Mjöberg’s diary entries show that some toxic rainforest foods were still being processed and consumed
at Cedar Creek in 1913. He, like O’Leary, specifically documented the importance of *Calamus* (the lawyer vine) as a raw material in the manufacture of many material culture items but also for other purposes:

Thursday 25/3 Took photographs of their mimi. Each family usually have their own hut (during the
wet season) during the dry season they protect themselves with branches and leaves. At times, families
join together and build a family mimi (majmaj) which has two openings. – The smoke escapes through
an opening in the ceiling (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

Saturday 28/6 Another new use of the lawyer cane may be added to all the previous ones, they eat many
of the new shoots. Thus, also a source of food! (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

Mjöberg concluded that the lawyer vine must have played an important role in Aboriginal rainforest
adaptation, and continued to play an important role in Aboriginal rainforest occupation in 1913. Both O’Leary and Mjöberg observed that many animals and plants had to be collected from the
treetops, which was achieved with a climbing rope:

Those blacks would climb the tallest tree with ease. They used a pliable lawyer vine for climbing and it
was known to them as the ‘Cambey’. Where the scrub was very dense, and the limbs overlapped each
other, those blacks would take advantage and climb from tree to tree (Coyyan 1918, part II:3).

One annual rainforest activity during the drier months was to hunt large grubs, which involved
burning dead and decaying tree logs on the rainforest floor:

There was one yearly custom that they would indulge in. During the cold months, when the
chambonne (tree grubs) were plentiful and fit for eating, a number of the tribe would gather and go on
a chambonne hunt. When they came to the desired spot, fires would be set going and the fallen trees
or decayed timber would be burst into fragments. Some would be cooking the grubs, and at a signal all
hand would partake of the food in a hurried manner, and then amid much laughter they would rush
through the scrub, until another patch of decayed timber was found. This would happen during the
dry and cold months (Coyyan 1918, part VIII:2).

This suggests that fire was an important tool in traditional rainforest subsistence strategies. Mjöberg’s
diary shows that in addition to the Aboriginal camps at Cedar Creek, he also visited camps on
European Tableland properties, where Aboriginal people worked for the landowners:

5/4 I walked over to the Negros [sic] camp where Tommy lives [on private land near Malanda] and
talked to him. On the fire was a complete roasted Dendrolagus [tree kangaroo] with the skin left on.
The intestines had been removed. I received a water bag and bark of the stinging tree which they use
to sieve honey. They spread out one piece in the bottom of the container, place one in the middle and
finally two pieces that act like mesh on the top (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).
He sometimes referred to the Aboriginal people living at Cedar Creek as the ‘Tully River mob’ and documented that the people occupying the wet season camp at Cedar Creek would at certain times of the year travel to the Tully River to catch eel, a seasonally important food source.

The diary documents some of the food consumed by the rainforest people he met:

Thursday 24/4 Jack has also showed me food, yam, a type of plant with wide leaves. The tube stock is very long and tastes like sweet potato according to Jack. They call it chokoll. They dig them out of the ground at a depth of 2 feet. Received five nuts from a type of tree which they eat and that they call Agkon, these they grind like walnuts and prepare a type of porridge (similar to dough). They cook a type of cake from the walnut porridge (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

This brief account on rainforest food sources lends support to the suggestion that Mjöberg fleshed out his published travel account with other historical sources, in which Aboriginal food sources and subsistence strategies were discussed in more detail. It is also possible that the lack of references to traditional food sources in Mjöberg’s diary reflects the use of European food items at the Cedar Creek camp in 1913.

Rainforest settlement patterns

As the prospectors headed for the upper Tully River area and the Culpa goldfield in the early 1880s, they tried to follow Aboriginal tracks. Prospecting in dense rainforest without any local knowledge proved difficult:

You would often strike one of their pads running in the direction you wanted to go. You would naturally follow it but you would not go for long before you would come to a standstill. Your beautiful track had run you into the tangled-up mass of a windfall or a dense cluster of vines. After the abos. [sic] joined us and we began to understand them we soon learnt where to find the proper track. You would notice where a young tree had been cut down at some time and a bunch of green shoots had grown. Just brush yourself through them and you would find yourself once more on the clear pad. It was a clever device, and I suppose often assisted them to escape from an enemy (Coyyan 1918, part VII:2).

In time, the prospectors learnt many of the skills of the rainforest Aboriginal people. They also instigated contact with the Europeans sometime after their arrival in the area, perhaps as a result of events taking place on the coast. O’Leary’s descriptions of Aboriginal rainforest settlement and use include the construction of camps and tracks:

It was only during heavy spells of wet weather that they made a decent camp and even then it would require some everyday improvement to keep it rain proof. The males seldom assist in camp-making; this work belongs solely to the females. This allows the males to be able to hunt for game. In the early days, while the Abos. [sic] were in their wild state, I have come across camps, or huts of theirs that would easily hold 40 or 50 persons. These camps were built in semi-circle fashion, and were held or strengthened by what we would term props. Those camps were well built, and would stand the roughest of weather. In those dense scrubs their pad will always be on the leading spurs. There are two reasons for them adopting this method. First, the scrub is not so dense on high lands, and second, because it avoids the broken country, and is therefore easier for travelling. The scrub tracks must naturally be crooked, as it never was the abos. [sic] game to hew down trees to gain a straight track: their plan was to go round them (Coyyan 1918, part II:2).

In March 1913, Eric Mjöberg witnessed and described Aboriginal people building wet-season huts in a large clearing at Evelyn, north of Ravenshose:

They have the best huts on the continent regarding quality as well as form. Considerable time and effort is involved until the hut becomes pleasant to use as a dwelling. The location of a camp is always near a small creek, often at the edge of the rainforest to avoid the constant dripping from trees and dead branches falling down. Some camps used during their travels are found inside the rainforest and here they clear a large semi-circular area. The first step in making a hut is to build an oval or circular dome-shaped frame out of tough rainforest vines. The frame is held together with split lawyer cane vines and gets covered in layer after layer of large palm leaves, tied down with more split lawyer cane
vines. Stones are placed here and there on the ground to fill any gaps. Sometimes several of them are connected together and you can walk from one to the next through a covered path. The openings are always oriented facing the calm side and away from wind and rain and are kept closed during cold nights with a large piece of bark. They are completely waterproof, even against the heaviest rainstorms imaginable. A large family hut houses around 30 people. Their mostly used kitchen tools are on the ground, the others are attached to the wall and a fire is constantly burning in the middle of the hut. A ditch is dug around it to steer water away during heavy rain. How long these huts are occupied for is unknown but I assume that they are used at least for a few years since there is considerable time and effort involved to build them (Mjöberg 1918:429–432).

Weatherproof huts built out of rainforest plants thus remained in use for some time into the post-contact period. Most likely they were preferred because of their superior quality compared to huts made from European materials. Construction of weatherproof huts appears to have been a significant component in pre-European Aboriginal rainforest occupation, allowing local Aboriginal people to remain on the Tablelands throughout the wet season. This in turn would have allowed access to an abundance of important rainforest plant foods available at this time of year.

Ceremonial gatherings

The words ‘corroboree’ and ‘bora ground’ are commonly used in the ethnohistorical literature in reference to large ceremonial gatherings that were observed at contact. Some details of the significance of these ceremonial gatherings were described by O’Leary:

The corroboree is called Bullbah. In speaking of their meeting places or Bora grounds, they say Bullbah. The word booyah-booyah means a fight and, of course, tribal differences are settled at these places. Those old time bullbhas meant a lot to those blacks. It was there that marriages would be arranged, and things in general would be fixed up to the satisfaction of all parties interested. Want of food would generally be the means of breaking up those meetings, and often the visitors would be last to leave the bullbah ground. The blacks who acted as messengers would carry a passport to ensure their safety. After the messages were delivered, business would become very brisk with the owners of the bullbah ground. Camps would be erected at one end of the ground in the adjacent scrub, so as to be clear of the numerous missiles that would be hurled during the fray. The cleaning of their bora grounds was generally the work of old males and females. The site chosen would be on the cap of a ridge or fairly level ground, and it was there that the rival parties would meet and adjust their differences. Mummies, spare weapons, and hiding places for edible nuts would be stored at the bullbah grounds. The ground is properly cleaned and prepared for action. Then there was the preparing of food, a task that would keep all the female members pretty busy. Huge piles of the various eatable nuts would be ground and made into food. Tree-climbing kangaroos would be caught and preserved either by half-roasting or perhaps they would be lucky enough to keep it alive until the eventful day. Sometimes when food would be very plentiful, they would congregate in large number. The visiting tribe would always travel by the main tracks that led through this dense jungle, and would arrive at the opposite side to where the camps were erected (Coyyan 1915:1).

In addition, some of the weapons used during a ceremony were described and named:

Their war implements consisted of a heavy wooden sword (bacckur), shield (pekin) and spears (tuli). Boomerangs were not much in use among those scrub blacks, as their weapon was almost useless in the dense jungle, and I think that it must have come into use among those blacks in recent years, as none of the scrub blacks were adepts either in the making or using of this weapon. As the sword and shield were very heavy and cumbersome, it was no light task for those people when they were called on to carry them about (Coyyan 1915:35).

Thus, the aim of the bullbah was, amongst other things, to settle disputes between participating tribes through ceremonial dance, and to trade goods and arrange marriages.

Having heard rumours of ceremonies recently taking place at Cedar Creek in the summer of 1913, Mjöberg travelled to the area to seek out the local Aboriginal population and to witness a ceremony first-hand:
Monday 24/3 1913 To Tumoulin and from there to Cedar Creek, the location for the last remnants of natives in the area. Here they fight bloody battles during corroborees, a couple of months ago the heads on two boys were speared with the result that their brains seeped out. Saw a few water carrying devices made of bark and shield and spears (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

As it turned out, Mjöberg never observed a ceremony first-hand and comments in his published travel account of the activities are based entirely on hearsay:

Thursday 24/4 He brought with him a native, Jack, with an unusual capacity to talk and understand conversation. He told me the circumstances around the corroboree. The killer will at the following corroboree be challenged to a fight. The defender of the dead person takes his leg bone, and attaches the sharp end of the bone to the tip of a spear. He thereby spears the offender who receives the spear with his shield, which the bone penetrates. The spirit of the dead is transmitted to the speared person who has a fit and runs around like crazy rolling his eyes in a wide circle only to return and fall into a type of coma. Everybody comes running over to him and throws cold water in his face in order for him to come back to sanity. At the next corroboree event they spear him with a normal spear and that settles the dispute (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

This information suggests that ceremonies were still being held at Cedar Creek during the wet season, a suggestion that is supported by Jirrbal oral traditions and historical documents (Police Department, 1914: A/38015; M. Barlow, pers. comm., 2004; L. Wood, pers. comm., 2004).

Mjöberg returned to Cedar Creek in early August after a journey to Chillagoe, west of the rainforest region (Fig. 2.1). He noted in his diary that the ‘black fellows’ he had camped next to at Cedar Creek in March and April had left:

Thursday 7/8 1913 I went over to visit the [sic] camp but no sign of its inhabitants.
Saturday 9/8 still no sign of the black fellows (Mjöberg 1913a, Diary 2).

It appears that Mjöberg made no attempt to find out why they had left or where they had gone. However, oral traditions show that during the winter months, Jirrbal people visited neighbouring groups to trade and participate in ceremonies (M. Barlow, pers. comm., 2004). Thus, in 1913, it appears that the Jirrbal people from Cedar Creek were allowed some degree of mobility. A newspaper article (cited in Berry 1999), two years after Mjöberg’s visit, demonstrates how Aboriginal people ‘gathered from all parts’ at Cedar Creek:

January 23 1915 ’Northern Herald’
Numerous blacks gathered from all parts, danced, gesticulated, threatened, threw a few spears and boomerangs on Sunday and afforded an interesting and expectant afternoon to the white onlookers, but nothing striking happened (cited in Berry 1999:27).

This shows that the Jirrbal people of Cedar Creek, and their neighbours, adapted their lifestyle and traditions according to changes brought about by European settlement, and continued to transform their culture and society into the post-contact period. By the early 1920s, the Jirrbal people of Cedar Creek were living in ‘town camps’ on farm properties around Ravenshoe, their ceremonial ground becoming part of a golf course that was constructed around this time.

Mjöberg left the rainforest region on 12 August when he travelled to Cairns and prepared for an expedition to Laura and the Coleman River on Cape York. In a statement sent to Sweden and published in the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography journal Ymer (1913b), Mjöberg outlined some of the results of his rainforest expedition:

I have studied the native people of the country with an open eye. The Tribes I have encountered in the rainforest have as a rule been in contact with white civilisation but have with a high degree of toughness remained unchanged in all of the essential aspects of their traditional society. I will bring home a select collection of their weapons and tools, which in regards to manufacture and practicality are advantageously different from tribes in Central and Western Australia (Mjöberg 1913b:336).
The analysis of Mjöberg’s diaries shows that his statement ‘unchanged in all of the essential aspects of their traditional society’ mostly refers to Aboriginal people and rainforest occupation he observed at Cedar Creek. Here many of the characteristic organic rainforest items were still in use, and people were still occupying their traditional campsites. Documenting the rapid changes taking place in Aboriginal rainforest culture and society at the time of his visit was of little interest to Mjöberg.

**Summary**

From the available ethnohistorical evidence, it appears that, at the time of European arrival to the rainforests of far north Queensland, Aboriginal people had developed a culture and way of life well adapted to the rainforest environment. O’Leary’s first-hand observations of Aboriginal subsistence strategies demonstrate that many types of rainforest plants were gathered and consumed but that other food sources such as fish, eel, mammals, birds and reptiles significantly contributed to the diet, including food items collected outside of the rainforest. The analysis has shown that during the wet summer months, Aboriginal people in the study area became more sedentary and hosted large ceremonies when large quantities of rainforest nuts were collected and consumed. Aboriginal campsites and rainforest tracks were kept clear of vegetation and the maintenance of large open pockets, connected by an elaborate network of tracks through the rainforest, allowed for large ceremonial gatherings to take place. Open forest pockets also allowed some larger mammal species to live in the rainforest region.

The analysis of Eric Mjöberg’s diary from 1913 has shown that he received information from Europeans on aspects of Aboriginal culture that he could not have observed himself. Evidence also suggests that when he wrote his published travel account (1918, 2015), he had to use ethnohistorical information recorded earlier in the contact period, because of the many changes that had taken place since first contact. His diary demonstrates that he focused on collecting traditional Aboriginal rainforest material culture, some items given to him by European settlers, and others commissioned or acquired through trade with Aboriginal people. The Cedar Creek diary, however, supports previous research in that Aboriginal people at Cedar Creek were still occupying their traditional campsites, collecting rainforest plants, processing toxic rainforest tree nuts, and using their pre-European ceremonial ground in a large open pocket at Cedar Creek to host ceremonies during the wet season. From the historical evidence, it appears that the existence of open forest pockets in the rainforest were an important aspect of Aboriginal rainforest settlement at the time of European arrival. One hypothesis that presents itself from the analysis is that significant archaeological evidence may be present in open forest pockets within rainforest, allowing for investigation into long-term Aboriginal rainforest occupation.