

*Amongst Stone Age People in
the Queensland Wilderness*
(Bland Stenåldersmänniskor i Queenslands
Wildmarker [sic Vildmarker])

By Eric Mjöberg

Translated by S. M. Fryer, edited by Åsa Ferrier and Rod Ritchie, 421 pp., Hesperian Press,
Carlisle, WA, 2015, [First published in 1918 by Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm],
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Amongst Stone Age People in the Queensland Wilderness is the second of Eric Mjöberg's popular accounts of his scientific work in Australia, which were first published in 1915 and 1918 respectively in the Swedish language. The recent issue in English translation of this book and the first book (*Among Wild Animals and People in Australia* by Margareta Luotsinen and Kim Akerman) are valuable and welcome additions to the corpus of books about early Australia.

The author, Eric Mjöberg, was born in Sweden in 1882, completed his doctoral studies in entomology in 1910, and became a renowned Swedish zoologist (entomologist), collector, ethnographer and explorer. While working for the Swedish Museum of Natural History, he led two Swedish Scientific Expeditions to Australia. The first expedition was undertaken with three other scientists in 1910–1911 and focused on the Kimberley region of Western Australia. At the conclusion of this expedition, Mjöberg and his colleagues made a brief visit to the Blackall Range area of south-east Queensland. The second expedition, of which Mjöberg was the sole member, took place during 1912–1913 and investigated regions of Queensland's coastal subtropical and tropical rainforest and central Cape York.

Amongst Stone Age People in the Queensland Wilderness is more than a mere travelogue of the second expedition and includes discussion of issues that have continuing topicality, such as the situation of Australia's Aboriginal people, the conservation of its forests, protection of its fauna and flora, and husbanding of its natural resources. The book has three main sections: an editors' introduction, the translated text of the original book and an end section that contains some endnotes, references and four indexes (the main index and indexes of Aboriginal words, plant names and animal names).

The editors' introduction gives some background information about Eric Mjöberg and events associated with publication of the translation of this book (see 'Translator's notes' and the 'Translation editors' notes'). The translator, Sivi Fryer, and two translation editors – Åsa Ferrier (an archaeologist and cultural historian) and Rod Ritchie (who perhaps could be described as an environmental historian) – have their own separate histories of connection to this book. Rod Ritchie, with the assistance of two Swedish speakers, translated some portions of this book including some of its picture captions for his own book, *Seeing the Rainforests in 19th-century Australia* (1989), before he discovered in the early 1990s a computer printout of a complete translation of the book in the John Oxley Library, Brisbane, and subsequently, the translator, Sivi Fryer. There is, however, disappointingly little information about Sivi Fryer and the circumstances that led to her translation of this book and its subsequent much later publication. Åsa Ferrier has a long-standing interest in Mjöberg's research and is currently translating his Queensland field diaries into English as part of the preparation for 'a manuscript that brings forward new evidence on the Queensland expedition' (p. xi).

The translated text commences with Mjöberg's own introduction (pp. xiii–xv), in which he mentions how the brief excursion to the Blackall Range area in Queensland in 1911 at the end of the First Swedish Scientific Expedition led him to decide to undertake the Second Swedish Scientific Expedition to Australia, which 'from a biological point of view was intended to carefully and systematically explore the so-called rainforests or jungles, which thrive on the east coast of the ancient Australian continent' (p. 21). Mjöberg then introduces his readers to the continent of Australia (Chapters 1 to 3) and sets out in Chapters 4 to 20 an account of his journey of scientific investigation of Queensland's unique rainforest and savannah forest flora and fauna and its Aboriginal inhabitants. His evocatively written account provides details of his research methods and difficulties, field sites, the townships he visited, the countryside travelled through, his camp life, the bushmen and Aboriginal people who assisted with procuring specimens for the huge collections that were transported to Sweden, and descriptions of Aboriginal society and culture.

The text is well illustrated with captioned photographs of spectacular scenery, Aboriginal people, native flora and fauna, and two maps. According to the translation editors, Mjöberg took some photographs himself, and obtained others (in particular those of Aboriginal people in ceremonial dress) from photography studios and postcards because his photographic equipment was inadequate for the humid conditions he encountered (p. v). Two of the illustrations – Figure 176 ('A cannibal from the Gulf of Carpentaria') and Figure 203 ('a beautifully painted giant shield from Harvey's Creek, Q.') – are reproduced on the book's dust jacket. Figure 176 and Figure 244 ('Three little Queensland virgins') are reproductions of paintings made in 1909 by Oscar Friström. Their inclusion in this book would have had particular interest for the book's original Swedish audience, for Oscar Friström originated from Sweden and settled in Brisbane in about 1884, where he worked as a photographer and painter. Mjöberg may perhaps have obtained these paintings or photographs of them in 1911, when he visited Friström's Brisbane studio.¹

I was frustrated in my reading of this book by the lack of a detailed chronology of Mjöberg's travels and a second edition of this book would benefit from an editorial synopsis of his itinerary. To orientate myself in the historical landscapes and environments described so evocatively in the text, I supplemented the occasional mentions of dates and places in the text with information taken from Ferrier (2006) and items in old newspapers to reconstruct his itinerary. Based on this reconstruction, *Amongst Stone Age People in the Queensland Wilderness* comprises distinct sections. First is an introductory section that gives an overview of Australia's geological and biological history, and includes mention of its megafauna (Chapters 1, 2 and 3) and an account of Mjöberg's own journey from Sweden to this continent only five months after his return from the expedition to the Kimberley region. On reaching Rottnest Island, he went through quarantine, and being found to be free of smallpox, landed at Fremantle in late August 1912² (Chapter 4). After visiting Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, he arrived in Brisbane to commence his first stint of fieldwork during October–December 1912 in the Mt Tambourine, Lamington Plateau and Mt Colosseum regions of southern Queensland. The mention of Mt Colosseum, where Mjöberg went to hunt for the tree-climbing kangaroo, as 'one day's journey north of Brisbane' (p. 32) may be a translation error, for Mt Colosseum, which is south of Miriamvale, would in 1912 have been several days' journey north of Brisbane. While in this region, Mjöberg noted the environmental devastation caused by extensive ringbarking and found a local farmer who was willing to assist him. Together they collected an astounding '2,300 animals and amongst them were several new and interesting species' (p. 36). On his return to Brisbane,

1 'Bon Ami', 'The studio', *The Brisbane Courier*, 28 October 1911: 13.

2 'A Swedish Scientist Dr Mjöberg at Fremantle', *The West Australian*, 24 August 1912: 11.

Mjöberg tells that he 'sent off the first 10,000 animals to Sweden. After giving a lecture on my first expedition to the Kimberley to the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland, I was ready to move my activities northward' (p. 36).³ By this time, it was late in December 1912.

His northern rainforest fieldwork was undertaken during January–August 1913 at several sites in the Cairns region, including places in the Yarrabah, Cedar Creek, Tully River, Johnstone River and Malanda vicinities (Chapters 7 to 16). Chapter 15 is devoted to an account of Yarrabah mission, where he says he went 'to familiarise myself with the local fauna and also to study the conditions that prevailed in this little community of whites and blacks' (p. 161). This visit seems to have begun at the end of May 1913, and to have been of several days' duration. While there, he visited the mission head station and outstations. I read this chapter with particular interest, having first visited Yarrabah in 1970, and since 1998 undertaken research relating to its former and current residents, including some descended from Aboriginal persons mentioned in Mjöberg's account. Mjöberg noted the mission's poverty and that Yarrabah's Aboriginal residents 'originate from quite diverse parts of northern Queensland [and] are all put together, accommodated in a Christian framework' (p. 168). While there, he persuaded some residents to perform traditional dances, which he filmed.

The conclusion of his rainforest field research was followed by a brief excursion in August 1913 to investigate the Chillagoe Limestone Caves, where he found only one cave insect (Chapter 17). The last stint of his fieldwork occurred during August–September 1913 and took Mjöberg via Cooktown and Laura to the Coleman River region of central Cape York (Chapters 18 to 20). At Cooktown, he was delighted to discover that the mayor, Mr Seagren (Sjögren), was from Stockholm, and received from him a sliver of the original 'Cook-tree, i.e. the tree to which Captain Cook is supposed to have moored his ship *Endeavour*, in 1770' (p. 194). From Cooktown, Mjöberg travelled by rail to Laura 'the last outpost of civilisation' (p. 195). From there, assisted by two 'bushmen' and one 'black', he set off with a packhorse caravan of 24 saddle-horses to explore central Cape York. At Laura, he stated 'being a zoologist and naturalist, I found nothing of interest in the terrain, other than the numerous termite mounds' (p. 196). Mjöberg was clearly not told that near Laura is one of the largest repositories of rock art in the world, first documented by Percy Trezise in the 1960s, for later in his book he states that: 'As far as I have found there are no cave paintings in Queensland; nor is there any known practice of painting on bark or carving figures in it or making drawings in the sand' (p. 340). I found Mjöberg's account of the magnetic termite mounds very interesting, having seen hundreds of these

3 The *Brisbane Courier*, 9 December 1912: 2, item 'Meetings'.

during my fieldwork in Cape York, but, until I read this book, knew nothing about their residents and architecture. Mjöberg took several of these mounds to Sweden, including one that weighted 400 kilograms.

Mjöberg left Queensland for Melbourne in late September 1913⁴ and the final portion of his book gives an account of his post-fieldwork activities and also has several chapters devoted to aspects of the culture and society of Queensland's Aboriginal people (Chapters 21 to 27). Chapter 21 is devoted to a discussion of current and future planning for Aboriginal people, and a plea for the preservation of their languages and the lifestyles of groups inhabiting areas of Queensland not yet colonised. In particular, he singled out Mornington Island, the largest and most northern of the 22 islands that form the Wellesley Islands group that he had hoped to visit during the second expedition (p. 245). Then follows an account of Aboriginal people's various ways of living and procuring food, their ontological and cosmological beliefs, life cycle, mortuary practices, art and music (Chapters 22 to 27), garnered not only from his own field observations, but also from the research of other observers, such as the Rev. John Mathew and the former Chief Protector of Aboriginals for Queensland, Dr Walter E. Roth. Mjöberg mentions that he 'visited several areas where Roth had stayed, and I was able to confirm his statements. I found, in most cases, them quite correct and in agreement with my own notes just taken down for my own interest' (p. 255).

His comparison in Chapter 24 of plains-living and rainforest-living people is particularly interesting, as it provides a biologist's perspective about environmental effects on Aboriginal material culture and local organisation. Mjöberg found that the rainforest people 'can only move about with difficulty and on certain known tracks in the dense and cumbersome terrain, which has made them more permanent settlers' (p. 285) and that they have unique artefacts such as cane baskets, waterbags, large battle swords and colourful and bright giant, wooden shields. He noted that the Coleman River region people had 'long fantastic fire igniters, which are amongst the most beautiful ethnographic artefacts found on the whole continent' (p. 222).

The book concludes with some results of his research (Chapter 28) and his departure from Australia in December 1913,⁵ his survival of a hurricane while at sea and arrival in Sweden in January 1914 (Chapter 29). One result of the Second Swedish Expedition was 'a rich and valuable collection of about 40,000 animals and a selective ethnographic collection' (p. 187), much of which was stored in Sweden's National Museum. The 40,000 'terrestrial animals' (mentioned again at p. 364) would have included snakes, worms, grubs, centipedes,

4 Shipping. Departures, *Cairns Post*, 29 September 1913: 2.

5 Mentioned as a passenger leaving Port Adelaide on board the Swedish steamer 'Australia' for Sweden in the *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 8 December 1913: 4.

earwigs and ticks, as well as larger mammals and marsupials. This number may perhaps be an underestimate, for it may not include items collected during the Cape York portion of the expedition. Among the large collection of Aboriginal artefacts was 'a 16 ft long genuine canoe still in use around Cairns' (p. 195). Mjöberg also brought to Sweden the cinematographic films he made during the expedition (1,000 yards according to one report),⁶ some of which focused on Aboriginal people performing traditional dances, hunting and fishing, and going about their daily lives.

I found this beautifully written and interesting book tells us much about its author, as well as the people, places, flora and fauna he encountered, his collecting methods, and the difficulties of his fieldwork. It is a thought-provoking book for it presents an educated outsider's view of the state of the continent, in particular Queensland, just over a century ago. Mjöberg could perhaps be considered a pioneer in environmental science, and Australia gave him research situations where he could investigate not only the effect of different environments on flora and fauna, but also on its Aboriginal inhabitants. He undertook this research aware there was a limited window of opportunity to do so, given the colonisation of Australia by the 'pernicious white' (p. 269) along with introduced species and the prevailing government policies towards Aboriginal people.

Amongst Stone Age People in the Queensland Wilderness gives us today a picture of early Queensland, when large tracts of its rainforests were still standing and inhabited by Aboriginal people. Until I read this book, I did not know that in addition to his south-east and north Queensland rainforest research, Mjöberg spent three weeks in the Upper Alice and Coleman River region, and that he recorded ethnographic information about Aboriginal people not only in the rainforest areas but also in parts of Cape York. It is clear that his experiences during his second expedition led him to become an advocate for Australia's Aboriginal people, in particular those residing in Queensland, with respect to the recognition, protection and conservation of their societies and cultures, and the development of policies that would provide them with a dignified location in the continent's new economic and socio-political order.

As a social anthropologist, I found that although the book has some information about the Aboriginal people Mjöberg encountered, it lacks details of particular interest, such as Aboriginal names of the local groups and languages of the Aboriginal people he met and who assisted with his work, the extent of their territories, their social organisation, contact histories and so on. However, the absence of such information may be related to the fact that this book is a popular

⁶ 'Trees and natives; a plea for their preservation. Hints for Australia. Interview with a scientist', *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 3 December 1913: 14.

travel book and not an academic account. Perhaps such information may be recorded in Mjöberg's field journals, the translation of which into English may one day be available.

Mjöberg's comments on how Queensland was being developed for agricultural purposes and its treatment of its Aboriginal people are valuable contributions to Australia's ecological and social history and also, as noted by the editors (p. vi), to research now being undertaken for Native Title claims. His statements that: 'in Queensland, groups of blacks were herded like cattle down to the waterholes and mass-murdered. Their blood became mixed with the clay water and turned into red lakes. Horrific but true. Even today, there is a stench of black human blood in the southern parts of Queensland' (p. 239) brought his Swedish readers' attention to an aspect of Queensland's history that has only recently entered the public domain in Australia through the work of historians such as Gordon Reid, Judith Wright, Henry Reynolds and Jonathan Richards: the massacres of groups of its Aboriginal inhabitants.

His brief visit to Yarrabah mission may have had a profound effect on him and perhaps may have led to his later public campaign against the establishment of a Presbyterian mission on Mornington Island. Although he writes positively about the missionaries at Yarrabah (p. 162), who he described as 'very pleasant and good-hearted people, striving to do their best ... enlightened by a fervent desire to achieve the best possible result from this rather impossible material. In this, they were very different from what I had seen in other parts of Australia' (p. 162), he was not impressed by the compulsory inculcation of religion that he witnessed ('Three times a day, they had to be on their knees, automatically reciting prayers to a higher being, who had no existence in their primitive beliefs. The Stone Age man had been robbed of his own religion and had another thrust upon him ... The Christian religion and their own are totally incompatible and cannot substitute each other or be assimilated' (p. 164)). Neither was he impressed by the neglect at Yarrabah of what he termed 'the practical side of life' (p. 166), i.e. what is required for a healthy life in the present; and by the missionaries' procurement of a 'little income for the mission' (p. 169) through the selling of weapons and utensils mass-produced by the Aboriginal residents for which they received a receipt that could be used to buy basic supplies from the mission store.

Mjöberg has been severely criticised for his illegal removal of Aboriginal remains from north-west Australia during the First Swedish Scientific Expedition (Hallgren 2010). However, this should be balanced by an appreciation of his bold advocacy against Queensland's treatment of its Aboriginal people, which displays his appreciation of their cultures and societies, his compassion for their situation and his determination to do something to rectify it.

Perhaps, during his Second Expedition, through close living with Aboriginal people, he developed an appreciation in their religious beliefs, social and territorial organisation, and a deeply felt and genuine concern for their plight and future prospects. As a scientist, he was keenly interested to record Aboriginal culture and society before it disappeared or was irrevocably transformed. He was pessimistic about the future prospects of Australia's Aboriginal people, stating: 'Due to the lack of wisdom from the Australian government, it will probably not take more than at the most one hundred years until this people in its entirety are eliminated from the earth. This is in accordance with the common wishes' (p. 268). This book shows that he attempted to raise the Australian public's awareness of the essential worthiness of Australia's Aboriginal people's rich cultures and unique and highly complex societies. Mjöberg fully intended to return to Queensland for a third expedition,⁷ but this did not happen. Perhaps his outspoken criticism of the then current church-dominated policies and practices towards Queensland's Aboriginal people may have adversely impacted on these plans.

The publication of this translation into English of his *Amongst Stone Age People in the Queensland Wilderness* allows those who followed in his footsteps to appreciate his research and the courage of his advocacy on behalf of Queensland's Aboriginal people. I recommend this book as a valuable addition to Australian history, and in particular to its Aboriginal history and suggest that its next edition include a detailed chronology of the expedition's itinerary, and that the text is enriched through footnotes that refer to relevant extracts of his field journals.

Other references mentioned in the text

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7 'Fine Type of Blacks', *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*, 17 November 1913: 3.

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