Aboriginal Routes and Guides of the Victorian High Country

Peter Gardner

(Excerpt from a unpublished paper for the Historical Section of the Department of Conservation and Environment 1989)

From Part 1

Corryong historian John Murphy noted that "many of the local roads and tracks follow the same paths that had been used by Aborigines for thousands of years and it is surprising how often you find discarded stone axes and other implements along these routes." (1) It seems more than a coincidence that the major tracks to be used both into and out of the Omeo district were tracks used by, or most certainly known of, the Jaitmathang. These tracks include Omeo – Monaro and the Omeo – Gippsland tracks as well as the tracks to the Bright and Tawanga districts by way of Mt. Hotham and Bogong High Plains and Mt. Fainter. These tracks seldom climbed to the mountain tops but made efficient use of valleys, long spurs, ridges and low passes. Aboriginal historian Phillip Pepper noted C.J. Tyers description of a mountain route from Gippsland to Melbourne. Pepper stated:

> "As the occupation of Gippsland continued, the white people made use of the Aborigines knowledge of the country. Tyers suggested that someone should explore a route to Melbourne which was 'infinitely superior to the one now in use.' He said that the Kurnai had told him two years earlier that this was their route to Melbourne and some of the Wurundjeri came to the lakes along the same track. Leaving Sale by way of Glenmaggie the Aborigines 'ascend the Dividing Range, where it is gradual, cross the large plains, with running streams on either side, and reach Ryries station on the Yarra Yarra in four days. The route is well grassed all the way without any scrub and is a good way for drays."(2)

As the routes between districts were well defined so too were the tracks from the low to the high country. Alfred Howitt when ascending Kosciusko in 1866 from the Upper Murray followed an Aboriginal track for part of the way. (3) Likewise more than twenty years earlier in the first European ascent of the highest mountain on the continent also used similar tracks. H.M.E. Heney's *In a Dark Glass* uses James MacArthur's diary to describe the ascent. Before midday they had stopped above the tree line "in the place where every year the local natives gathered to eat the bogong moth grubs which collected there, and around the party were abundant signs of Aboriginal encampments." (4) Almost certainly another example of European use of Aboriginal tracks includes that by Cobungra stockmen Jim Brown and Jack Wells in their route from the Bundara River to the Bogong High Plains. As a final example the Rev. W.B. Clarke left an account of a party of aboriginals who had been caught in a snowstorm whilst crossing the Alps from the Upper Murray to the Maneroo with the result that two of them were smothered in a snow drift and one was severely frost bitten. (5)

As with the use of Aboriginal tracks so too the encroaching Europeans used Aboriginal guides and trackers to their advantage. There are few examples of frontier squatters that did not have Aboriginal guides to assist them through the country. One noted example was the attempt by Angus McMillan to cross through the rugged hill country between Ensay to the Bruthen district in late 1839 which was a singular failure. With the addition of two Jaitmathang guides [to his party] the next effort to get to the clearer country around Bruthen was successful. As well as using the guides Cobbone Johnny and Friday to obvious advantage, this journey also travelled, at least partly, on Aboriginal paths. Whilst many of the Aboriginals employed were local, either from the Ngarigo or the Jaitmathang, many squatters brought Aboriginals from outside the district. Strzelecki and MacArthur in their journey through the south-east used Charlie Tarra, [an] Aboriginal from the Sydney (6) district. On their ascent of Kosciusko they employed an extra local guide named Jackie, most probably of the Djilimitang tribe. It seems likely that Jackie then directed Charlie Tarra and Strzelecki on the best route over the Gibbo Range to Omeo. Other squatters to employ Aboriginals from outside the mountain district included P.C. Buckley's George Gilbert from the Liverpool tribe and the tracker for the Hunter brothers called Pigeon.

Jemmy Gibber from the Ngarigo has achieved notoriety through McMillan's account of his supposed attempted murder of him. Prior to McMillan, Jemmy Gibber acted as a guide for E.W. Bayliss. Whilst some accounts mention lone efforts to find new squatting country it must be remembered that these accounts are referring to Europeans only and take no account of Aboriginal guides. Also a number of accounts mention that Aboriginal guides were used but make no attempt at identifying them. Of the local guides it is surmised that Matooka guided Walter Mitchell to Bruthen and showed him the pass in the dividing range known as the gap. It is also quite possible that Matooka took Edmund Buckley down to Tongio on the Tambo River. Since Walter Mitchell used guides it is fairly certain that his uncle, the secretive James MacFarlane, also used them. Also since the use of Aboriginals as guides and trackers was an essential ingredient in the success of a squatting venture it can be inferred that those successful ones used them wherever and whenever they were required and that in the absence of information to the contrary it should be assumed that many squatting parties used Aboriginal co-operation to achieve their goals...

Besides the obvious [earlier] contact and conflict...the tribes often were in contact with Europeans through the [eighteen] fifties and later. They worked as stockmen and guides and there are at least two instances of Aboriginals being used as blacktrackers. The first was in the apprehension of the murderers of Constable Greene of the Omeo Gold Escort, Armstrong and Chamberlaine. They were tracked through the Gibbo country by a Jaitmathang named Tommy and later located, with his assistance, hiding in the branches of a tree. The other instance was the use of Krauatungalung Charlie Hammond to find a small girl lost in the bush near Omeo. (7)

From Part 2

As noted (above)...the tracks used by Aboriginals tended to follow the 'easiest routes'... Key points in these tracks were the Gaps and passes in the mountains. Such passes known to be regularly used by Aboriginals include that commonly known as 'the Gap' on the Omeo Highway where it crosses the Dividing Range and Bingomunjie Gap which Gray, Wells and Brown utilised on the advice of the Jaitmathang Larnie. It is also most likely that within tribal areas definite tracks were established, whilst between tribal groups, especially those hostile to each other, only occasionally used routes were utilised. One such route was the Tambo Valley utilised by the Brabiralung and Jaitmathang when engaged in inter-tribal conflict...Forgotten or unrecorded routes and tracks could possibly be rediscovered by a combination of technology available today and would include literature searches, local and folk history research [and] close examination of topographical maps in combination with Archaeological maps with campsite and other [implement] locations (8). An archaeological examination of a known Aboriginal track in an area not commonly used or disturbed by Europeans (such as the one to [the] High Plains used by Brown and Wells from Cobungra) could establish a frequency of discarded [implements] which in turn could be used as a guide to locating other tracks that cannot be identified by other means.

End Notes

1. J. Murphy personal communication

2. Pepper, P. *The Kurnai of Gippsland*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1985 p.106

3. Mitchell, E. *Discoverers of the Snowy Mountains*, McMillan, Melbourne, 1985 p.72

4. Heney, H. *In a Dark Glass*, Angus & Robertson, Melbourne 1961 p.82

5. Mitchell, E. Op.cit. p.2

6. Charley Tarra was possibly from the Goulburn tribe.

7. Stirling, A. *Memoirs of an Australian Childhood*, Schwartz, Melbourne, 1980 p.25

8. I have replaced the loose term "artefacts" with the more specific "implements".