

Murdering Point and Indigenous Cannibalism

"The accusation of cannibalism is essentially a term of abuse. Such accusations are levelled at enemies, neighbours or 'inferiors', to show how 'primitive' or subhuman they are."¹

Dr. Timothy Bottoms

Three months after Cairns was established (October 1876), the *Queenslander* in 1877 published an article by Old Chum about the Native Police and their 'dispersing' of Indigenous people. Quite readily this reporter relates how the Native Police answered the question:

Do we shoot them? Of course we do. The popular idea is to disperse them by firing over their heads. Bah! only people who know nothing about wild myalls would imagine that they would be afraid of that sort of thing. One thing is certain. If you point a gun at a nigger (sic) to frighten him you had better let him have it straight, or you are very likely to find a spear sticking in your back as soon as soon as you turn away. *Queenslander* (27 January 1877)

This practice was observed, not, as 'Old Chum' states before 1877, but as long as the Queensland Native Police existed (1859-c.1910). That is why the Danish editor, Carl Feilberg² after editing the *Cooktown Courier* went on to edit the *Queenslander* and in 1880 produced *The Way We Civilise* which unfortunately confirms what 'Old Chum' declared openly. Yet the Native Police had been operating for 17 years (1842-59) as a part of the NSW government, before the establishment of the colony of Queensland in 1859, and it continued under the Queensland government until approximately c.1910. Henry Reynolds observed:

Harsh racist views were obviously convenient to a community engaged in dispossessing a native people and perhaps some such doctrine was psychologically necessary to the pioneer or to those aware of conditions on the frontier of settlement.³

No matter how you look at it, to the Indigenous people of Australia the arrival of Europeans was an invasion of their traditional lands. James Cook claimed the eastern side

¹ Paul Bahn, "Is cannibalism too much to swallow?" *New Scientist*, 27 April 1991, pp.30-32, Vol.130, no.1766.

² C. Feilberg, *The Way We Civilise; Black and White; The Native Police: A Series of Articles and letters Reprinted from the "Queenslander"*, G and J Black, 1880. See also R Ørsted-Jensen, *Frontier History Revisited*, Lux Mundi Publishing, 2011.

³ H. Reynolds, "Racial Thought in Early Colonial Australia", *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* (1974), p.52.

of the New Holland at Possession Island in the Torres Strait in 1770, but nobody informed Aboriginal Australia! Eighteen years later the actual act of possessing the land started after Governor Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet arrived in Botany Bay, on 18 January 1788. The diversity of languages spoken by Indigenous tribal groups meant that most Europeans had only a rudimentary (if that) knowledge of the nature of people whose lands they were invading. So, their interpretation of Indigenous people was purely on supposition, based on what Europeans thought they were thinking. Similarly, the gorier aspects of the Bama's (rainforest Aboriginal peoples) mortuary practices were amplified and utilized to denigrate them. This was particularly noticeable with regard to cannibalism.⁴

William Kracke, who arrived on the Palmer Goldfields in 1882 as a would-be miner, and lived in the area for the next 22 years, stated that:

The North Queensland blacks, or better called Myalls, are acknowledged to be the lowest class of human beings under the sun, nothing can be lower than they are - in fact, lower than most animals. They are cannibals of the worst type.⁵

This derogatory view of far northern rainforest Aborigines was certainly prevalent among miners and the general European community. It bespeaks the fear with which the invaders held indigenous people. The historian, Geoffrey Bolton, felt that there:

[was] some indication that cannibalism was rare before the coming of the white man, who, however, was ready to credit the Aborigines with man-eating and soon found proofs which appeared to carry conviction.⁶

In the light of Rainforest Aborigines mortuary practices, Bolton's interpretation seems quite apt. Nevertheless, there appears to have been a form of non-gustatorial cannibalism, which when it did occur, involved the eating of a tiny portion of the thigh and kidneys. Typically, the portion was very small and enabled the deceased to share a part of his spirit and knowledge (as a medicine-man or well-known warrior).⁷ The evidence is too contradictory to be very precise. Generally, it would appear that misunderstandings of Bama mortuary practices gave Europeans the impression that cannibalism was rife, when

⁴ T. Bottoms, "Djarrugan, the Last of the Nesting", MA(Qual) JCU, 1990, p.82, pp.84-86.

⁵ W. Kracke, "22 Years in North Queensland, How and Why I Went There", originally delivered as a speech in Omeo, Victoria, c.5 October, 1909. Cairns Historical Society, Doc 1027, p.8.

⁶ G.C. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away*, Canberra, 1972, p.7.

⁷ C. Lumholtz, *Among Cannibals*, 1889, Canberra reprint 1980, pp.294-95; R.A. Johnstone, *Spinifex & Wattle: Reminiscences of Pioneering in North Queensland*, republished articles from *The Queenslander*, 1903-05, Cairns, rpt 1984, p.59. See W.E. Roth, "North Queensland Ethnography", Bulletin 9, Vol.III, Hesperian Press, Victoria Park, 1984.

it was likely that was not. To what degree Europeans were capable of distinguishing between supposed human remains, preserved mummies or parts thereof, and local animals, such as the cassowary, merely adds to the uncertainty of the debate. In this regard Europeans had trouble in distinguishing between a Cassowary thigh bone and a human femur.



An Emu femur chisel (almost identical to a Cassowary femur) as wood-working gouge.
V. Sinnamon, Kowanyama Archives Collection.

The Governor, in his reply to the Secretary of State for Colonies in August 1875, described the Aborigines of the North as 'numerous, savage, treacherous, and very commonly cannibals' - a conclusion that was readily supported by the violent culture contact apparent by that time on the Palmer mining frontier.⁸ However, there is no evidence for being 'very commonly cannibals' - although we know that food resources were scarce on the Palmer as Mulligan noted that 'fish will not bite at all this moon, and the birds are scarce and hard to kill...'⁹ and that this might have ostensibly led to cannibalism. But again, there is no proof that this was the case, and nobody is taking into account Aboriginal culture and religious beliefs which would be aghast at eating people. But we don't know whether with scarce resources on the Palmer, that there might have been some Indigenous people who

⁸ H. Reynolds (ed), N.S. Kirkman, "From Minority to Majority: An Account of the Chinese Influx to the Palmer River Goldfields, 1873-1876", *Race Relations in North Queensland*, JCU History Dept., 1978, p.124.

⁹ N.S. Kirkman, "The Palmer Gold Field 1873 -1883", Hons., History Dept. JCU, 1984, p.260.

could have resorted to eating people. However, primary sources have not come to light that reflects this.

Archaeologists' interpretations of how long Aboriginal people have occupied the Australian continent varies between 65,000 and maybe as long as 120,000 BP.¹⁰ Settlers in the 19th century considered that Aboriginal people had been here for a couple of hundred years when in fact they are the oldest living culture in the world.

In 2017, *The National Geographic Magazine*, wrote:

when Columbus came back [to America], the indigenous people who had previously been classified as friendly were suddenly described as cannibals, so you could do anything to them. You could enslave them, take their land, murder them, and treat them like pestilence. And that's exactly what happened, ... The idea of cannibalism as a taboo was used to de-humanize the people encountered on these conquests.¹¹

In a similar vein the after-effects of and continuing detrimental diseases of cannibalism led to degenerative brain disorders, such as kuru and mad cow disease, which were nearly always fatal. If this had been practised over 65,000 years, there would have been clues to it in their DNA and would work against their longevity.

During my historical research and writing over the last 30 years I could not find any primary source documents that actually witnessed cannibalism. What I did find was that the Rainforest Bama practised ritualistic, but not gustatory cannibalism. The white intruders needed to have an excuse for their own barbaric behaviour to lay at the Indigenous people's door - the trouble is that we do not have any primary source documents that support this historical impression of outright cannibalism. You will notice in the primary sources, where claims of 'cannibalism' are made, it is nearly always third hand; no one actually witnesses the act of a cannibalistic feast. If you wanted to take the land, the Indigenous people had to be portrayed as less than human. All this was to prejudice settlers against the traditional owners, by the promulgation of 'cannibalism' by Europeans, which helped to justify the great land theft.

¹⁰ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/evidence-of-first-peoples> ; <http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2011/09/23/3323640.htm> ; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2016-06-07/dna-confirms-aboriginal-people-as-the-first-australians/7481360> (accessed 1.6.2021)

¹¹ *The National Geographic Magazine*, February 19, 2017.

Even today in the third decade of the 21st Century there are still heritage signs and some books that try to convey that the local Aboriginal people were cannibals, when it is blatantly obvious through their belief in *Djudjaba*¹² or *Bulurru*,¹³ or *Ngajakurr*,¹⁴ that eating a human being was an anathema to their spirituality and way of life.

South of Innisfail, at the entrance to Murdering Point Winery there is a questionable history of why it is called 'Murdering Point'. The retired teacher who wrote it states that 'some Aboriginal tribes were cannibals' and also that they 'were consistent aggressive towards any intruders'. When one examines the primary source documents, such as W T Forster, *The Wreck of the Maria* (1872),¹⁵ one can see that this interpretation is questionable. The author appears to have used as his guide, Dorothy Jones *Hurricane Lamps and Blue Umbrellas* (a secondary source), and *Spinifex and Wattle* (a primary source with an agenda) by Robert Arthur Johnstone.¹⁶ Both these sources are flawed as they portrayed Aboriginals as 'cannibals' when there are no credible witnesses to the events described as such. The psychological background to this attitude appears to have been laid with the conclusions of the Report of the Select Committee on the Native Police in 1861. Despite substantial evidence to the contrary, the Chairman, R.R. MacKenzie, brought down what amounted to a verdict. He concluded that the

evidence taken by ...[the]...committee shews [sic] beyond doubt that all attempts to Christianity or educate the Aborigines of Australia have hitherto proved abortive ...invariably they return to their savage habits. Credible witnesses shew [sic] that they are addicted to cannibalism; that they have no idea of a future state; and are sunk in the lowest depths of barbarism.¹⁷

So, one can see that the Queensland colonial government imbued with this spirit undoubtedly influenced the settler population. The unfortunate thing was as the frontier expanded, no other proposal was even considered; they just continued for over 60 years, the financing of the Native Mounted Police, and lied about the subsequent cruelty and massacres.

¹² Dyrbal-speakers.

¹³ Djabugay, Buluwai, Yirgay & Yidiny / Gungay speakers.

¹⁴ Kuku Yalanji.

¹⁵ W.T. Forster, *The Wreck of the Maria*, Sydney, J. Reading & Co.,1872.

¹⁶ T. Bottoms, *Conspiracy of Silence, Queensland's frontier killing times*, Allen & Unwin, 2013, gives clear indication that RA Johnstone was a killer and a rapist. pp.114-5, 135, 138, 143-6, 195-6. See Also Jonathan Richards, *The Secret War*, UQP, 2008, p.241.

¹⁷ "Report of the Select Committee on the Native Police", *Qld Votes and Proceedings*, 1861.

The wreck of the 'Maria'¹⁸ in 1872 on Bramble Reef, and the subsequent story of the survivors became part of white folklore. Even to the extent that the Cutten brothers when establishing themselves near Kurrimine Beach, ten years later were frequently warned 'that the blackfellows would kill and eat them, as they had done the crew of the brig *Maria*.'¹⁹ The Murdering Point Winery scribe re-iterates this version even though the evidence does not substantiate this interpretation of cannibalism. There were 75 men on board the brig,²⁰ of which thirteen were on the large raft, twelve on the small raft and an unknown number on two of the of the ship's boats,²¹ one of which carried the captain. Noel Loos lists fourteen of the survivors as having been killed by the Bama.²² The first news of the disaster appeared ten days after the *Maria* went down.²³ The rapidity with which the news travelled south to Brisbane and Sydney was due to the telegraph being extended from Junction Creek to Cardwell in 1870.²⁴ Two survivors from the ship's boats made their way to Cardwell and raised the alarm.²⁵ They had been attacked near Tam O'Shanter Point and had seen the Captain and one other killed. The Bama involved were probably the Dyirbal-speaking Djiru.²⁶ To the north, the larger raft grounded between the Johnstone River and Point Cooper. There were thirteen on board, but five drowned and the remaining eight were aided by presumably members of the Wanjuru. The second, smaller raft, with twelve originally on board, came ashore to the south of the Johnstone River, in Dyirbal-speaking, Mamu territory. It is not known how many drowned, but six bodies were found, and yet the newspapers still managed to state that 'all but one have been most barbarously murdered by the blacks.'²⁷ It should seem odd that each group

¹⁸ This 156 tons wooden ship built in 1848, left Sydney on the 25th January (1872) and was "very poorly equipped and only four of the crew [were] experienced." J. Loney, *Wrecks on the Queensland Coast*, Vol.I, Geelong, 1982, p.43.

¹⁹ I.M.E.Wigg, *Memoirs of the Cutten Family*, JCU, 1951, p.17.

²⁰ A. Laurie, "The Black War in Queensland", *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Vol. VI, No.1, September, 1959.

²¹ W.T. Forster, *The Wreck of the Maria*, Sydney, 1872, pp.13-14, Forster was on the large raft.

²² N. Loos, "Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland, 1861-1897," PhD, JCU, Townsville, pp.808-9.

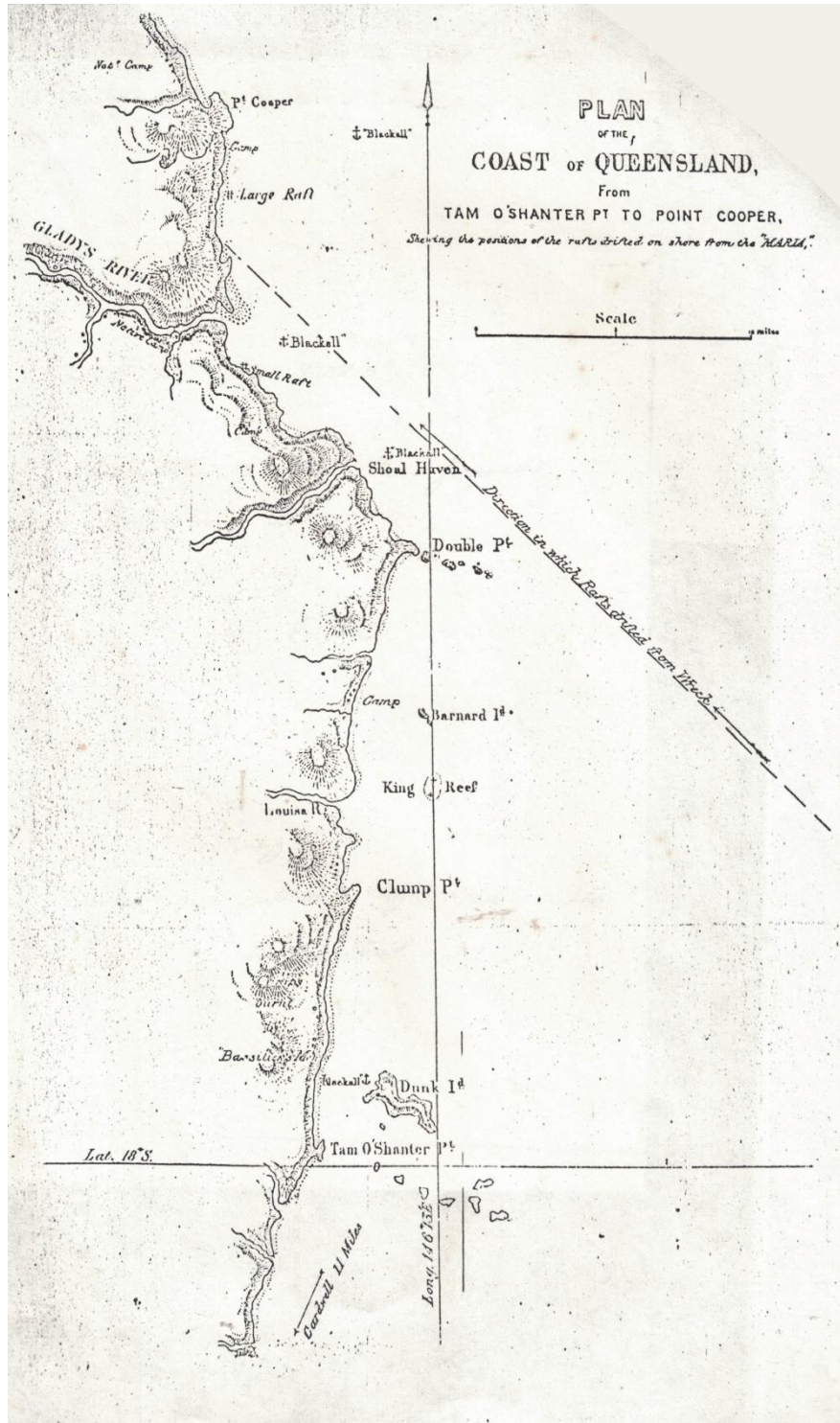
²³ Forster states the brig was abandoned on 26 February and the Sydney Morning Herald published its first report on 7 March, 1872. See Forester, *Wreck of Maria*, pp.11 and 15.

²⁴ C.H. Fuelling, "Early History of the Post Office in Cairns and Inland Districts," *The Post Office Historical Society of Queensland*, 10 May, 1958, p.2.

²⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, (SMH) 7 March, 1872.

²⁶ See N. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, Canberra, 1974, p. 87; R.M.W Dixon, *The Dyirbal Language of North Queensland*, London, 1972, p.25.

²⁷ SMH, 7 March, 1872.



From W.T. Forster, *The Wreck of the Maria*, Sydney, J. Reading & Co., 1872

should be treated so differently. One of the large raft survivors, W.T. Forster wrote an account of his experiences and it is significant how he interpreted their treatment by the Bama. He recalled that

Our four companions whom we had left south of Point Cooper, had arrived shortly before we did, and stated that Smith and Ingham had been maltreated

by the blacks. We were rather puzzled to account for this, as we have received nothing but kindness at their hands: the only solution I could arrive at, was that they had failed to understand their signs, and consequently had done something to displease them.²⁸

Forster's party also appeared to appreciate the difficulty they posed in expecting the small Wanjuru group to feed them all, and so they distributed themselves among them. The essential aspect of this party's interaction with the Bama was their intentional or unintentional following of etiquette. Professor Stanner has stressed the need for introductions and purpose of visit to be conveyed to Bama whose territory was being visited by Europeans.²⁹ It would seem that Forster must have introduced himself as he states 'Our new friends names were Newyunggor and Weimah, we tried to get them to repeat ours, but they made a very poor attempt of it.'³⁰ Presumably the Bama were aware of the raft and along with the fatigue and hungry look of the Europeans deduced the reason for their presence. It is also noteworthy that the Wanjuru 'made us a fire at a little distance from their own' which suggests that this might have been a part of the ceremonial presentation of fire to visitors, given before admission to the camp.³¹ At the departure of the Europeans in the *Basilisk*, found by Moresby, 'the natives embraced the castaways, weeping bitterly, and stood grouped on the beach gazing long after our receding boat.'³² So much for Chairman MacKenzie 1861 verdict!

Forster expressed surprise at the 'massacre' of the captain of the 'Maria' and his crew by the Djiru at Tam O'Shanter Point, some 60 kilometres to the south. This man, who had been succoured by the Bama seemed determined to find reasons other than 'savage barbarians', when he wrote

²⁸ Forster, *Wreck of Maria*, p.29.

²⁹ W.E.H. Stanner, "The History of Indifference Thus Begins", *Aboriginal History*, 1, Part 1, 1977.

³⁰ Forster, *Wreck of Maria*, p.22.

³¹ D.F. Thomson, "Ceremonial Presentation of Fire in North Queensland," *MAN*, 31, July. 1932, pp.163-64. Thomson observed that "the custom with most of the Australian natives for newcomers whether they be the most intimate relations or strangers, to approach a camp with decorum. I have seen a young man returning with a host of good things and presents after an absence of two years from his people, approach his parents' camp as quietly and as inconspicuously as possible. At a point twenty yards from the camp he sat down and waited silently. His mother doubtless saw him and longed in her heart to embrace him, but she, to all outward appearance, ignored him. After a wait of about ten minutes the young man moved a little closer and sat down again, and later at an opportune moment and when other people were busy, he walked calmly up to his mother and embraced her; there was no exuberance of feeling, no fuss or show, but one could sense that intense delight of the people, and no cultured Englishman could have been less demonstrative than that primitive aborigine." See also G.H. Wilkins, *Undiscovered Australia*, London, 1928, p.50; & A.W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p.668.

³² J. Moresby, *Two Admirals*, London, 1913, p.224,

We at first conjectured that this was because the natives with whom we had been living, had had no intercourse whatever with whites; but that this was not the only reason, was proved by the subsequent discovery of the murder of seven of the poor fellows who had started on the other raft, on the southern side of the mouth of Gladys [Johnstone] River. We had been on the northern shore of this river on the third day after landing, but were unable to cross; we had however, met blacks there, who treated us in the kindest possible manner; and these men were evidently in the habit of crossing, as they had both rafts and canoes. The only solution, therefore, that I can arrive at, is that the occupants of the other raft, had made no attempt to conciliate them, but had endeavoured to live on their own resources: the blacks, being naturally shy, would then never make any advances, but would look upon any strangers as intruders, and consequently, as enemies.³³

Unfortunately, this clear insight into Bama etiquette, evaded the conquerors' version of events. So how could Forster's eye-witness account be ignored for the denigrating portrayal of Bama being subhuman/cannibals. This distortion of the real facts some 149 years after the events, leads one to wonder how much of this distortion has been written and then becomes the 'history' in white-man's Australia.

Captain Moresby found his involvement in this affair particularly distasteful, even though he was the carrier for the mercenaries. He observed that

several unfortunate blacks were shot down by the native troopers, who showed an unrestrained ferocity that disgusted our [Royal Naval] officers; and the camp in which some clothing and effects of the four murdered men were found, was destroyed.³⁴

For all practical purposes this was the end of the matter. However, a minor furore erupted a little over two years later which culminated in an enquiry which was tabled in the Queensland Parliament in 1875.³⁵ Two letters to the *Sydney Morning Herald* described outrages committed against the Bama in the incident referred to and the Bowen district. Both criticized the actions of the Native Mounted Police. Charles Heydon who was on the *Governor Blackhall* sent from Sydney for the *Maria* search:

³³ Forster, *Wreck of Maria*, p.32.

³⁴ J. Moresby, *New Guinea and Polynesia Discoveries and Surveys in New Guinea and D'Entrecasleaux Islands*, London, 1876, p.41.

³⁵ See "Alleged Outrages Committed on the Aborigines in Queensland by the Native Mounted Police," *Queensland Votes & Proceedings*, 1875 (7th, S.2, Vol.1), pp.621-628.

had opportunities of becoming acquainted with the state of public opinion in North Queensland with regard to the blacks. I heard white men talk openly of the share they had taken in slaughtering whole camps, not only of men, but of women and children.³⁶

His observation of the euphemistic language utilised on the frontier demonstrates the psychological framework being constructed by Europeans. He states

private persons go out to kill blacks, and call it 'snipe-shooting'. Awkward words are always avoided, you will notice 'Shooting a snipe' sounds better than 'murdering a man'. But the blacks are never called men and women and children; 'myalls', and 'niggers', and 'gins', and 'picaninnies' seem further removed from humanity.³⁷

Here again one can see that there were Europeans with insight and humanity towards Aboriginal people, but the Colonial Queensland government ignored this for over fifty years. The Commissioner of Police for Queensland, D.T. Seymour in his response to these accusations manages, although not satisfactorily, to deflect them, by focusing on the specifics of triviality rather than an investigation into the thoughts behind the behaviour of his subalterns. One is forced by the evidence, to acknowledge that what:

the Aboriginals thought, felt and did was filtered through European prejudices to become 'history'. The errors made in recording this history were ones of inference, not observation - and it needed only a trickle of evidence to become a torrent of interpretation. A number of historians later unhesitatingly accepted the accounts of the whites and ignored a possible Aboriginal perspective. In doing so, they reduced history to a series of events rather than an investigation of the thoughts behind those events. Eliminating the Aboriginal perspective no doubt helped to rationalize what would be otherwise too painful to remember. It was just one of the many "mechanism of forgetfulness."³⁸

But at the same time, wrapped up the European ideas on cannibalism by traducing a mourning ritual for the dead into something more bestial. Nearly thirty years ago Paul Bahn in the *New Scientist* wondered, 'Is cannibalism too much to swallow?'³⁹ - well, certainly in relation to Australia's history.

³⁶ *Ibid*, QV&P, 1875, p.622.

³⁷ *Ibid*, QV&P, 1875, p.623.

³⁸ B. Breslin, *Exterminate With Pride, Aboriginal-European Relations in the Townsville-Bowen Region to 1869*, p.51.

³⁹ Paul Bahn, "Is cannibalism too much to swallow?", *New Scientist*, 27 April 1991, pp.30-32, Vol.130, no.1766.