Sir George Hubert Wilkins, M.C.
Original of portrait taken by Miss L. Maitland, September 12, 1928

UNDISCOVERED AUSTRALIA

Being an account of an expedition to tropical Australia to collect specimens of the rarer native fauna for the British Museum, 1923-1925

By
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With 47 illustrations and a map

NEW YORK · G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS · LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1929

dren were afraid. "Where do you sleep?" asked the tame dog. "I sleep in a hollow log," answered the wild dog. "I sleep in a house with my master," boasted the tame dog. The wild dog said, "Oh! And do you use your master's fire?" "Well, no," replied the tame dog. "I don't exactly use the fire." The wild dog then asked, "Do you speak the same language as your master, or how do you communicate with him?" The tame dog said, "I can't speak to my master in his tongue, but I can communicate with my nose and my tail." "Well, I can use my nose and my tail and my teeth also, if need be," said the wild dog, "so we will both use the path."

Why the Dog likes to Live with the Blackfellow

One day a spirit man was walking through the bush and he met a dog. The man had many good things, and he said to the dog, "Would you like some clothes? I could give you some good clothes." "I don't want any clothes," said the dog. "What about fire?" asked the man. "I could let you have a fire-stick." "I don't want any fire," said the dog. So the man went on his way. A blackfellow had seen the man and the dog together, so he ran up and asked the dog what the man had said. The dog told him. "Well," the blackfellow said, "I should like some clothes and a fire," and he ran after the man. The man gave the blackfellow some clothes and a fire-stick, and the dog was then sorry that he had not accepted the man's offer, and he begged the blackfellow to allow him to remain in his camp.

CHAPTER XXII

Industries, Duels, Amusements, and Customs in Arnhem Land

It was not yet convenient for the "James McBride" to go to Groote Eylandt, and in the meantime there was always something of interest to see or some work to do. The plague of mosquitoes made life almost unbearable out of doors and walking over the rain-sodden ground was most unpleasant. Storms and high winds at frequent intervals were the order of the day. The violent winds lasted for ten or twenty minutes, and then a downpour of rain would follow. Then there would be a clear spell and steamy heat, and then another storm.

The natives came and went, their numbers fluctuating between two and four hundred. Some of them had been engaged in cutting canoes from the milkwood and ti trees that grow beside the billabongs, and during the wet season the canoes were easily transported to the sea. In years gone by, before the Macassar fishermen came and traded tomahawks and iron implements, the Australian natives used to make their frail vessels of the bark from the stringy-bark tree, but when iron instruments were introduced they were able to cut strong and solid canoes from the trunks of the large, soft-

wooded trees. These may be anything up to four feet in diameter, and with a straight, limbless trunk to a length of twenty feet. After being felled, the body of the log is removed by chopping, and then the ends and sides are shaped to the internal dimensions. During the wet season they are floated across the swamps and billabongs to the rivers to fiords where the final balancing and trimming are done. With the aid of an axe or a tomahawk it may take a native from two to three months to cut one canoe from a tree, and he is usually assisted by several of his tribe, who share the craft when it is finished or share in the proceeds of its sale to the white man. A skilled white axeman may cut a canoe from a tree in three or four days.

One day during the wet season a messenger arrived from a camp where a canoe was being cut for the Mission Station. He brought a message and delivered a letter-stick shaped like a cricket bat and marked with various carvings. The carvings were not by any means an attempt at calligraphy, but the stick was carried as a token of good faith, as messengers in other countries carry signet rings and other tokens. It was also an aid to a system of mnemonics practised by the tribe to which the man belonged. This messenger held the stick in his hand while he delivered the message, but he did not indicate the meaning of the signs until he was asked to do so. There were ten cuts to represent tobacco, and he could not very well ask for more and pocket the difference, as he might have done without the stick.

Each letter-stick is usually signed, for every native can make a mark by which the tribe may recognize him. The black boys whom I had with me left on several

occasions some tobacco at a temporarily deserted native camp, and in each instance they left some mark on the sand or carving on a stick, and on being asked what it meant, they would say, "That one name belonga ma." Micky, a native, arrived at the station with a new canoe a few days before Christmas, and at our first meeting he proudly introduced himself and volunteered information that left no doubt as to his identity. "Me Micky," he said. "Me bin longa gaol five years. Me savvee everything now, whisky, missionary, white missus ben see-em that pfeller picture. All about savvee everything." Micky was the sender of the letter-stick referred to, and was one of the men who had served a term of five years' imprisonment in the Darwin gaol for being suspected of the murder of some foreign fishermen at one of the Crocodile Islands. He consistently pleaded not guilty, and later the real murderer confessed his crime, but the confession did not reach the ears of the officials at Port Darwin. Micky and his companions had served the full length of sentence and gloried in the fact. They were innocent, and they had suffered for the guilty, but they did not mind and were proud of the knowledge thus gained.

It is exceedingly difficult to get accurate information through an intrepreter from a native under cross-examination, and for this reason the law has often to be satisfied with the punishment of one or more of the tribe concerned in the wrongdoing. To the natives, whose tribal laws include the system of family, totemic, and tribal vendettas, this is not surprising, and they never complain of the treatment received. For many

years, they told me, a death for a death was the only way in which to satisfy the parties concerned in a blood feud, but of late they had introduced another method that they now recognize as satisfying honour. If a certain man of a family or tribe had been the victim of three or four unsuccessful attempts upon his life and he by his own skill had escaped, then he could, by voluntarily offering to undergo a certain punishment, atone for the death of the previous victim and conclude the matter to the satisfaction of everybody. The degree of punishment was that the man should deliver himself to his enemies and stand in front of them while one of the family concerned would slowly shove a broad cutting spear right through the muscles of his thigh and withdraw the spear-shaft through the wound. Two men who were often at my camp had undergone this ordeal, and they would proudly show the scars left by the wounds thus made.

The natives of the area of the Mission Station are just now beginning to understand something of the white man's ways, and within their own tribes they are tempering their justice with mercy. They are also applying these methods in their relations with the white man. One old man told me that he recently had trouble with a white man who was always interfering with the women. "Me no-more bin finish 'em altogether (kill) that one," he said. "Suppose me bin finish 'em altogether, me stop longa Fanny Bay (Darwin Gaol) long time. Me bin cut 'em up all ober long tomahawk." He had hacked and slashed the man in the fleshy parts with a tomahawk, but had refrained from doing him any permanent injury. Needless to say,

that white man did not again interfere with the natives' domestic affairs.

Among these natives polygamy is practised extensively, and wives are acquired as gifts from friends and in compliance with a complicated totemic system. It is generally arranged that young girls are given to old men, and young men get wives beyond the child-bearing age. This is not invariably so, of course, but it appears that the natives, in spite of their general belief about spirit children, have yet realized that in the struggle for existence it is advisable to keep down the population, and they have regulated their customs so as to minimize their numbers. The belief about spirit children is thought by some scientists to be held by many of the aboriginal tribes. Several of the Arnhem Land natives told it to me as being true. They said that all children are first of all controlled by spirits which roam the bush, and that they are under the guidance of various controls, such as emu, crows, pandanus, turtle, etc. Women are not able to see these spirit children, but men can see them, and when a married man sees the spirit of a child under control of a suitable totemic guide, be it bird, tree, or fish, he will send his wife to the place where the spirit child was seen and the child will enter the woman, to be born in due time. Because the father was the first to see the child, he is in a position to know its totem, and he alone has the right to name the child after it is born.

If it should happen that a woman given in marriage to one man should have a great regard for another and the affection is returned, then the lover will make overtures to the lawful husband, and the hus-

band will, if he is not particularly anxious to keep the woman, agree to fight a duel, and if the lover proves the better man the girl is his. One of the men at my camp was playing the part of the lover during my residence with these natives. An old man, camping near by, had three wives, one of whom was a most prepossessing lady and the cause of a lot of trouble. The old man was not anxious to lose the woman, but agreed to fight a duel. The lover collected some of his friends, and at an appointed time the duellists faced each other at a distance of about fifty yards. They were each armed with a wommerah and a handful of spears. The old man opened the duel, and they threw spears, throw for throw, and after each throw they each advanced a pace. They skilfully dodged or parried the spears, and when all of them were thrown without either being hit (although two of the interested spectators had been wounded), the younger man rushed at his opponent with his wommerah uplifted. The old man parried the blows for a while, and after a short, sharp bout he turned and ran, dodging between his friends or behind any convenient tree. With the vanquished on the run the victor did not seem to want to inflict any serious harm, but tapped him smartly with the wommerah whenever he got a chance. The chase was not long continued, and after several sharp taps he gave up the pursuit and marched back to his friends, who were gathered round the accidentally wounded.

The women meanwhile had bolted for the main camp and there awaited the result. What their actual feelings were I can only imagine, but the victor returned and claimed his bride, and everyone seemed

satisfied; even the casualties with serious wounds, one in the foot and one in the arm, bore no grudge and submitted to the painful operation of dressing the wounds with stoical indifference. One would judge from the behaviour of the wounded men when in pain that the native races are without the finer feelings and sensitiveness displayed by the white man, but, whatever may be the case with regard to physical feelings, in sentiment they differ very little from the more cultured races. I have often watched the children playing on the beach, and it has happened that one or other of the little ones will get bowled over and slightly hurt. Its playmates will stop their play, pick up the little one, brush the sand from its knees and comfort it. Very often a young man will hasten to relieve his wife of a cumbersome burden when difficulties are met with on the trail, or he will take and pacify, or carry, the baby on occasion. A man will often do a double share of work rather than waken his sleeping comrade. I have seen love-sick black swains and coy young lubras sit for hours beneath a tree, holding hands and glancing at each other, and accepted suitors proudly stepping out beside their newly-acquired brides, with a bold defiance and haughty mien, in just the same manner as do white people who are newly wedded. The dusky maidens and grass widows, and others of the native women, are not without their wiles and graces, and after a few weeks' association with these aborigines, making one's presence as unobtrusive as possible, one comes to the conclusion that after all they differ very little from other humans in fundamental principles.

Christmas came, but it was not going to be a festive

one for us. Mr. Watson, on the "James McBride," had sailed for Port Darwin, but the ship from the south would not arrive in time for him to collect the Christmas mail and parcels and return to Milingimbi before Christmas Day. The natives were disappointed, for they had been looking forward to the Christmas presents and festivities, of which they had heard so much. I had dismissed the possibility of festivities and was prepared to postpone all such things until the "James McBride" arrived, but the natives, with surprising forethought, were not going to forget the eventful day. I was sitting in my tent revising notes and turning over specimens when, looking up, I saw a group of natives in their war paint parading up and down the beach. I was busy, and took little notice of them until a deputation of four men came to my tent. They stood uneasily before me, and I could see that they were concerned about something.

"You bin see 'em allabout boy him bin paintem?"

"Yes," I said.

"Bin makem one big pfeller corroboree," I was told.

"All right; go ahead," I replied.

They hesitated and looked at each other, and then one of them said softly, "We bin make this big one corroboree all for you. You no come look?"

Of course I would go and look. I felt quite ashamed of myself. Without the Christmas parcels and mail I had been willing to let all the arrangements slide, but these natives, thinking that I would be disappointed at not being able to arrange a display for them, had spent considerable time and trouble in arranging a display for

Two Boys "Dressed" for a Corroboree

The designs are marked with coloured clay and the decorating occupied a whole day

A Wild Woman from the Bush and Her Baby

She borrowed a towel in which she dressed before having her photograph taken

me. I had not asked them to do any such thing, and, like the average white man, I did not credit the natives with so much understanding. They were disappointed at my lack of interest, but now that I was coming to join them there were no more sad looks. The members of the deputation ran before me capering and leaping about and shouting wildly. The others answered with enthusiasm, and soon the whole scene was staged and ready to begin.

Two groups had painted themselves in different styles, and they were to stage a sham fight. The audience ranged itself along the edge of the beach and the fighting groups took up a position opposite each other on the sand. They stood about two hundred yards apart. First, eight selected men from each side, each carrying spears and wommeralis, advanced upon each other in single file, and after passing, wheeled quickly and marched back again in a stately manner. As they again approached within twenty yards of each other, four and four abreast, they stopped and side-stepped, first to one side and then to the other, and uttered terrible shouts of defiance. They then turned on their heels and scampered back to their respective groups as fast as they could run. Then one man from each side broke from the groups and pranced about, running a zigzag course until he was about fifty yards from his supporters; when he stopped there was about a hundred yards between the two men. Each man carried four spears and the throwing-stick. One of them struck a defiant attitude and stood motionless. The other selected a spear and, with careful aim, threw it over the head of the other man, who stood like a statue until

the spear struck the ground; then he tramped back and forth a few times like a tiger in a cage. He took up his position again, and his opponent selected another spear. This was thrown so that it stuck in the ground a few yards in front of the man opposite. That man did not stir a muscle until the spear struck, then he rampaged up and down and for a second time took his stand.

The feeling was now intense; the whole crowd was on the alert. The man who had thrown the spears capered and danced about, and then he suddenly snapped the head from a spear and flung it from him. He then fitted the shaft to his throwing-stick and hurled it straight at his opponent. It had hardly left the throwing-stick before another, the last—a spear with a cruel barbed head—was fitted and thrown with lightning-like speed, so that the two spears were in the air at once. They were travelling straight for the motionless man, so that he either had to dodge or ward off first one and then the other. With a flick of his wrist but without moving his body he caught the blunt-headed spear on his throwing-stick and guided it just past and within three inches of his shoulder. If he had not touched it, it would have struck him over the heart. Almost instantly he had to turn his attention to the second spear, which was travelling straight towards him. With an upward strike he sent the spear ricochetting far above his head. The audience roared its approval, but the performers ran quietly back to their respective groups and, with conspicuous bashfulness and modesty, hid themselves among them. It was a skilful exhibition, and I was told that it was in this chivalrous manner that important tribal fights were carried on. When one

man failed to ward off a spear and was either killed or wounded, the decision was given against his tribe.

Several other men showed their prowess that day, throwing first from one side and then from the other, and the audience became so worked up that one youthful spectator, in his excitement, felt that he must throw his spear, and he let fly right amongst the spectators. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, although two people had narrow escapes. This incident broke up the party, and the people gathered round in groups to discuss the day's performance. In the evening they had another wild corroboree.

There had been comparatively little to collect in the way of natural history specimens on Milingimbi or the neighbouring islands. Some eighteen varieties of edible fruits had been preserved and photographed. These fruits, though fairly plentiful for a short season, do not form part of the natives' regular diet, with the exception of the barrawon, a species of Zamia palm, the round nuts of which are about an inch in diameter and usually grow in pairs. The natives collect these nuts, and after the kernels are extracted they are soaked in water for about three days. They are then beaten to a pulp, which is washed and dried over a fire until it reaches the consistency of dough, when it is wrapped in sausage-shaped rolls in the bark of the ti tree (paperbark) and baked in the ashes. The result is both palatable and nourishing. The volatile acids contained in the nut prevent it from being used as raw food, but it is harmless if either soaked in water or boiled in a change of water, and it makes a form of concentrated food that the natives can carry with them. Another

food condensed by the aborigines is the product of a fruit-bearing tree. It has the appearance of a very small and stringy mango. The skin is easily removed, and the flesh between the fibres has a pleasant flavour, but is somewhat astringent. The natives eat the fruit as it falls from the tree, but if more than enough for immediate need is gathered the women remove the skin and pound the black seed together with the fibrous flesh until it is a stringy mass. This is then rolled in paper-bark or broad leaves and is carried by the women from camp to camp. After being kept for a few days it begins to ferment, and is, in fact, preferred that way, but there is seldom enough gathered to last more than a day or so, as the aboriginal is not provident.

Fronting the fringe of mangroves on the coast was a strip of slimy ooze from which protruded here and there a rough and rocky surface. Among these scattered rocks and beneath the tangled roots of mangroves the ooze seethed with life. Exposed at low tide, the slime shone and shivered with the activity of its inhabitants, and silent watchfulness enabled one to see myriads of obscure, small animals whose existence would not be suspected unless one had a knowledge of these things. From a background of grey-green ooze would emerge from unseen apertures a wonderful assortment of animated life-stilted crustacea with long, slim legs, and fat-bodied slugs that twist both ends and wriggle to a softer spot to mingle again with the ooze. A feathery-legged and bearded crab would raise itself from the surface where it had been completely camouflaged and move to an even more secluded spot, or a

brilliantly-coloured land-crab would appear from its slimy bed, clean as from a band-box, and raise its stilted eyes to survey the unusual intruder. The movements of these hinged and periscopic-eyed creatures were very droll, especially if you were waiting with apparatus with which to catch them. I worked with a stout tin fastened on to the end of a stick, and when a particularly interesting specimen presented itself, I shoved the tin down, engulfing the area into which the specimen had disappeared. Then with a twist I would bring up the tin full of mud, in which the animal was almost sure to be embedded. It was sometimes possible to extract the creature directly from the mud, but usually I had carefully to wash the mud with sea-water to dislodge the specimen. I sometimes used to lie and watch, admiring and marvelling at this wonderful life on the beach, but as my job was to secure the specimens for preservation I could not linger long in observation; it was necessary to spend most of my time actively collecting. A quantity of this biological life from the littoral was added to our collection. It included several varieties of crustacea with various markings. Some were brown and black; others were red with a Greek cross marked plainly on their backs, and there were other species in which every individual seemed to have one very large and one small claw. As we crossed between the islands in the lugger we noticed many of these crabs migrating in a north-westerly direction, all of them with their big claw foremost. Other navigators have told me that they have seen a similar sight when passing between Thursday Island and New Guinea.

New Year came, and with it the "James McBride,"

bringing the Christmas mail and parcels. We had a wonderful display of fireworks and a tournament of "white man's" games, such as cricket, football, and running. Many of the blacks are fleet-footed; their speed for two hundred yards, according to the official timing, was almost equal to the record. They liked cricket and played it well, especially Yorum and the other Badu Island boys. They found it difficult to keep to the rules of football, and liked to kick the ball all over the place and keep it from one another, and they took no notice of "off-sides" or goal-posts. In the evening Mr. Watson showed a series of lantern slides, much to the astonishment of the Milingimbi natives, who had never seen anything of the kind before, although they had heard of the "pictures" at Darwin. I sat in the background observing the behaviour of the natives. They showed considerable interest in the pictures, which were mostly of local scenery and native life in other parts of Australia, but their interest did not prevent some of them from showing how similar they are in some things to the more civilized "picture-theatre" habitués. In the faint light many lovers could be seen holding hands, and couples leaning with their arms about each other; others were whispering with faces unnecessarily close.

The display of genuine affection by these people is remarkable, and differs very little in form of expression from that seen among Europeans. They have no form of handshake, but they like to demonstrate or sense friendliness and love by touch. Of course individuals among these natives differ as they do in other

civilizations, but all are quick to perceive expressions of sympathy.

With their limited knowledge of the English language it was difficult for them to express themselves to us, but their pidgin English was generally sufficient to enable us to understand their meaning. They told me that they distinguished between missionaries and white men. Missionaries are a class apart; while white men include policemen, traders, surveyors, and stockmen—the only classes of whites they had seen. White men, I was told, "humbug (fool about and tell lies) and make trouble with women 'longa camp. They give 'em plenty food, tobacco, but allabout him bin talk, 'Here you, Johnny, run do this. Hi! Johnny, you run do that.' That kine talk no good. Black man no like that pfeller much." They had rather a difficulty in placing me at first. I did not "humbug 'longa camp." I did not give them orders, or, for that matter, much food or tobacco. They knew I was not a missionary, although I often attended the meetings and sometimes played the organ at the Sunday services. One day they added a new word to their vocabulary.

"You proper-white man," they said. "You come sit down 'longa camp; no humbug 'longa women. You eat tucker (food) allasame black people. You no more make 'em allabout work 'for give 'em tucker, no more make 'em allabout listen when you talk; you sit down quiet and listen allatime and eyes belong you look-about, see everything. Allabout (everybody) feel quiet inside when with you and allabout want to touch you."

It often happened that the black people about my

camp would come and sit beside me and put their arms through mine, and sometimes when I was sitting at work two arms would steal about my neck and a dusky face would be held close to mine. Very often when I visited a new camp where the people had heard of me but had not seen me the men would gather round and hold my arms or legs, or any part that they could get hold of. I wondered at first if they might be sampling me to see if I was fat enough to eat, but soon I discovered that it was just because they wanted to express their friendly feelings.

By hunting with the men I was able to get their confidence, and by refusing the hospitable offer of their wives and the advances of the women, I was soon looked upon by the latter as not being a real man, but just one to whom they could give their confidence, and they had many secrets of their own that they could not tell a "real" man; some of these they told to me.

I said good-bye to the natives and mission workers at Milingimbi with considerable feelings of regret, and boarded the "James McBride," which sailed for Groote Eylandt.

PART III

1925