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Walter Edmund Roth

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Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines

Walter E. Roth's 1897 study of the Aborigines of North-West-Central Queensland was among the first of its kind in Australia, and established his international reputation as a leading anthropologist and ethnologist. Roth, a physician who was later appointed 'protector of Aborigines' by the government, gained the confidence and trust of the Aboriginal people among whom he lived, and tried to stop the exploitation and injustice they suffered, in the face of fierce political opposition. His book provides a fascinating and closely observed account of the Aborigines' traditional way of life, including their language, kinship and customs. It describes social organisation, food, tools and weapons, personal decoration, travel and trade, birth and death, and even cannibalism. Containing over 430 illustrations and a glossary summarising key vocabulary, this thoroughly-researched book is widely recognised as a valuable and enduring anthropological record.

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ETHNOLOGICAL STUDIES

AMONG THE

NORTH-WEST-CENTRAL

QUEENSLAND ABORIGINES.

BY

WALTER E. ROTH,

B.A. OXON., M.R.C.S. ENG., L.R.C.P. LOND., J.P. QU.; LATE NAT. SCIENCE DEMY OF MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD.

WITH 438 ILLUSTRATIONS.

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TO THE HONOURABLE

SIR HORACE TOZER, K.C.M.G.,

HOME SECRETARY AND ACTING PREMIER OF
QUEENSLAND,

AS A SLIGHT TRIBUTE

IN APPRECIATION OF HIS DETERMINED EFFORTS

TO AMELIORATE THE CONDITION

OF THE

QUEENSLAND ABORIGINAL,

THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE, WITH PERMISSION,

Dedicated

BY

THE AUTHOR.

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Walter Edmund Roth

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P R E F A C E.

SINCE 1894 my tenure of office as Surgeon to the Boulia, Cloncurry, and Normanton Hospitals, respectively, has afforded unrivalled opportunities for making inquiry into the language, customs, and habits of the North-West-Central Queensland aborigines. The following pages embody the notes collected during that period.

At Boulia, where strictly professional work was conspicuous by its absence, almost my whole time was devoted to a careful study of the local (Pitta-Pitta) language: only when this was sufficiently mastered did I find it possible to understand the complex system of social and individual nomenclature in vogue, and ultimately to gain such amount of confidence and trust among the natives as enabled me to obtain information concerning various superstitions, beliefs, and ceremonial rites which otherwise would in all probability have been withheld. To any future observers of, and writers on, the Queensland aboriginal, I would most strongly recommend this method of making themselves familiar with the particular language of the district before proceeding to make any further inquiries.

I would also draw the attention of the reader to the chapter on the Sign Language, which I first accidentally hit upon at Roxburgh Downs, on the Upper Georgina. I was out on horseback one day with some blacks when one of the "boys" riding by my side suddenly asked me to halt, as a mate of his in front was after some emus, consisting of a hen-bird and her young progeny. As there had been, apparently to me, no communication whatsoever between the boy in front and the one close to me, separated as they were by a distance of quite 150 yards, I naturally concluded that my informant was uttering a falsehood, and told him so in pretty plain terms, with the result that, after certain mutual recriminations, he explained on his hands how he had received the information, the statement to be shortly afterwards confirmed by the arrival of the lad himself with the dead bird and some of her young in question. The reported use of "masonic" signs attributed to the blacks by Captain Sturt, who had been in close proximity to these districts some half a century ago, immediately flashed across my mind, and the possibility of such signs being ideagrams, the actual expressions of ideas, led me on step by step to making a study of what I subsequently discovered to be an actual well-defined sign-language, extending throughout the entire North-West-Central districts of Queensland. It may be interesting to note that I have during the past few months discovered traces of a gesture-language, with some of the ideagrams expressed by identical signs, in the coastal district around Rockhampton.

The pronunciation of all aboriginal words from Chapter IV. onwards will be found in the Index and Glossary.

With regard to the chapter on Ethno-pornography, I am well aware that it is far from suitable for the general lay reader; the subject matter, however, being essential to a scientific account of these aborigines, I have decided upon

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PREFACE.

its publication, at the same time placing it at the very last, in the hope that those who do not wish to peruse its pages need not unwittingly find themselves doing so.

I take this opportunity of thanking my old friend and teacher, Mr. F. M. Bailey, Queensland Government Botanist, for his kindness in determining the various plants, grasses, &c., submitted to him for examination. Mr. C. de Vis, Curator of the Brisbane Museum, did me a similar service with regard to the fauna. I also wish to express my obligations to the many station-managers—notably, Mr. Sam. Reid, of Clonagh; Mr. J. Craigie, late of Roxburgh Downs (now of Stockport); Mr. J. Coghlan, late of Glenormiston; Mr. Reardon, of Carlo; Mr. A. Cameron, of Marion Downs; and Mr. Dan. Wienholt, of Warena—for all their trouble and help in furthering my investigations. Messrs. R. Etheridge, junr., and Chas. Hedley, of the Australian Museum, Sydney, have also given me continuous advice and encouragement in carrying out these Ethnological studies: the former gentleman has laid me under a deep debt of gratitude in drawing up the Bibliography. My greatest thanks of all, however, are due to Mr. Parry-Okeden, Commissioner of Police, Brisbane, who has given me every facility and assistance in preparing the work for publication. I look forward to the day when Mr. Parry-Okeden will have the satisfaction of seeing his words verified, that “Queensland will be proud of her aborigines”—a consummation in which he has made up his mind to take an active part.

In the arrangement of the tabular matter, and in the setting of the different types necessary for the elucidation of the text, the reader cannot fail to appreciate the many difficulties that have been so successfully overcome by the various officials at the Government Printing Office—Mr. E. Gregory, Mr. G. A. Vaughan, and the staff generally.

W. E. R.

Brisbane, Queensland, Sept., 1897.

ERRATA.



Sect. 62, subsection *f*.—*Omit* “an absence which was also met with around Rockhampton and Gladstone (sect. 70*d*).”

Sect. 70, subsection (*d*).—*Omit* “the gamo-matronyms being alone deficient.”

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A LIST OF THE MORE IMPORTANT PUBLICATIONS BEARING ON THE DISTRICT AND TRIBES
DESCRIBED IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, OR THAT SHOULD BE REFERRED TO
IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE MATTER THEREIN CONTAINED.

BY

R. ETHERIDGE, JUNR.,

Curator of the Australian Museum, Sydney, N.S.W.

N.B.—While away in the North working at his MSS., Dr. Roth was unaware of the existence of the following literature, and hence has described certain tribes under names spelt differently from those given in Mr. Etheridge's List. To prevent ambiguity the accompanying table is appended:—

<i>Names in Mr. Etheridge's List.</i>	=	<i>Names in Dr. Roth's Work.</i>
Karrandee	=	Karunti
Kulkadoon	=	Kalkadoon
Miappe	=	Miubbi
Moorloobulloo	=	Mooraboola
Mykoolon	=	Mikoolun
Oonoomurra	=	Woonamurra
Ringa-Ringaroo	=	Ringo Ringo
Runga-Rungawah	=	Rungo Rungo
Wollongurma	=	Wollangama
Yanda	=	Yunda
Yelina	=	Yellunga

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