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James Dawson

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Australian Aborigines

James Dawson first published *Australian Aborigines* in 1881, after deciding that his careful description of the tribes, languages, customs, and characteristics of the indigenous peoples of the western district of Victoria was too bulky for its originally intended publication in a newspaper. Essentially a field-inspired anthropological account of the dwindling Aboriginal population, written before the emergence of anthropology as a formal discipline, Dawson's book draws on his daughter's ability to speak the local languages and attempts a balanced description of a culture he considered ill-used and under-appreciated by white settlers. Minute details about clothing, tools, settlement and beliefs combine to depict a complex society that possessed highly ritualised customs deserving of respect. Dawson also included an extensive vocabulary of words in three indigenous languages that he hoped would facilitate further cross-cultural understanding. His work provides valuable source material for modern researchers in anthropology and linguistics.

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)



KAAWIRN KUUNAWARN

(HISSING SWAN),

Chief of the Kirra Waurong,

(BLOOD TIP TRIBE).

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James Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

THE LANGUAGES AND CUSTOMS OF SEVERAL TRIBES OF ABORIGINES
IN THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

BY

JAMES DAWSON

GEORGE ROBERTSON
MELBOURNE, SYDNEY, AND ADELAIDE

MDCCCLXXXI

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James Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

P R E F A C E .

A NUMBER of years ago there appeared in the columns of the *Australasian* newspaper a short account of the language of one of the native tribes of the Western District of Victoria, written by my daughter, whose long residence in the Port Fairy district, and intimate acquaintance from infancy with the aboriginal inhabitants of that part of the colony, and with their dialects, induced her to publish that sketch. Some time afterwards our attention was directed to the formation of a vocabulary of dialects spoken by aboriginal natives of Australia, and a request was made that she 'would assist in collecting and illustrating all connected with their history, habits, customs, and languages.' In undertaking so interesting a work, our intention was to publish the additional information in the columns of the *Australasian*; but, finding it to be too voluminous for that journal, it was resolved to present it to the public in its present shape.

Great care has been taken in this work not to state anything on the word of a white person; and, in obtaining information from the aborigines, suggestive or leading questions have been avoided as much as possible. The natives, in their anxiety to please, are apt to coincide with the questioner, and thus assist him in arriving at wrong conclusions; hence it is of the utmost importance to be able to converse freely with them in their own language. This inspires them with confidence, and prompts them to state facts, and to discard ideas and beliefs obtained from the white people, which in many instances have led to misrepresentations. All the information contained in this book has been obtained from the united testimony of several very intelligent aborigines, and every word was approved of by them before being written down. While co-operating in this arduous task, which they thoroughly comprehended, our sable friends showed the utmost anxiety to impart information, and the most scrupulous honesty in conveying a correct version of their own language, as well

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James Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

as of the languages of the neighbouring tribes; and so proud and jealous were they of the honour, that, by agreement among themselves, each was allotted a fair proportion of questions to answer and of words to translate; and if levity was shown by any individual present who could not always resist a pun on the word in question, the sedate old chief, Kaawirn Kuunawarn, at once reproved the wag, and restored order and attention to the business on hand.

During this tedious process, occupying several years in its accomplishment, I found my previous good opinion of the natives fell far short of their merits. Their general information and knowledge of several distinct dialects—in some instances four, besides fair English—gratified as well as surprised me, and naturally suggested a comparison between them and the lower classes of white men. Indeed, it is very questionable if even those who belong to what is called the middle class, notwithstanding their advantages of education, know as much of their own laws, of natural history, and of the nomenclature of the heavenly bodies, as the aborigines do of their laws and of natural objects.

In recording my admiration of the general character of the aborigines, no attempt is made to palliate what may appear to us to be objectionable customs common to savages in nearly every part of the globe; but it may be truly said of them, that, with the exception of the low estimate they naturally place on life, their moral character and modesty—all things considered—compare favourably with those of the most highly cultivated communities of Europe. People seeing only the miserable remnants to be met with about the white man's grog-shop may be inclined to doubt this; but if these doubters were to be brought into close communication with the aborigines away from the means of intoxication, and were to listen to their guileless conversation, their humour and wit, and their expressions of honour and affection for one another, those who are disposed to look upon them as scarcely human would be compelled to admit that in general intelligence, common sense, integrity, and the absence of anything repulsive in their conduct, they are at least equal, if not superior, to the general run of white men. It must be borne in mind, also, that many of their present vices were introduced by the white man, whose contact with them has increased their degradation, and will no doubt ultimately lead to their extinction.

And even, in censuring customs and practices which we may regard as repugnant to our notions and usages, we should bear in mind that these may appear right and virtuous from the stand-point of the aborigines, and that they have received the sanction of use and wont for many ages. If our habits,

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978-1-108-00655-2 - Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia

James Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*PREFACE.*

v

manners, and morals were investigated and commented upon by an intelligent black, what would be his verdict on them? What would he think of the 'sin of great cities,' of baby-farming, of our gambling hells, of our 'marriage market,' of the universal practice of adulteration, of the frightful revelations made by Mr. Plimsoll's committee with respect to rotten ships freighted and insured on purpose to founder, of the white slavery in all great cities, and of the thousand and one evils incidental to our highly artificial civilization? Living, as we do, in a conservatory constructed of such remarkably fragile materials, we should hesitate before picking up the smallest pebble wherewith to lapidate the despised blackfellow.

To several friends who have assisted me in various ways in the publication of this book my thanks are due: to Professor Strong, of the Melbourne University; to James Smith, Esq., Melbourne; to Mr. Goodall, Superintendent of the Aboriginal Station, Framlingham; and especially to the Rev. F. R. M. Wilson, formerly of Camperdown, now of Kew.

To my sable friends who have kindly given us their aid I express my gratitude for their patience and their anxiety to communicate information; especially to the very intelligent chiefess Yaruun Parpur Tarneen, whose knowledge greatly exceeded expectation; as also to Wombeet Tuulawarn, her husband, who assisted her. In return for their friendship and confidence, I trust that this little contribution to the history of an ill-used and interesting people, fast passing away, may lead to a better estimate of their character, and to a more kindly treatment at the hands of their 'Christian brethren' than the aborigines have hitherto received. If so, this volume will attain its chief object, and will confer intense gratification on their sincere friend,

JAMES DAWSON.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

As it has been found almost impossible to represent the correct sounds of the Australasian languages by adhering to the rules of English orthography, these rules have been necessarily laid aside, together with the signs of accentuation. Double consonants are used to express emphasis, and double vowels to express prolongation of the sound. People who are unacquainted with the difficulty of communicating in writing the pronunciation and sound of foreign words may cavil at the employment of so many double letters, but this mode has been adopted, after very careful consideration, as the most suitable for the purpose.

The following examples will fully illustrate what is meant. The English word 'car' would be 'kaar,' 'can' would be 'kann,' 'rain' would be 'rææn,' 'rainy' would be 'ræænæ,' 'meat' would be 'meet,' 'met' would be 'mett,' 'life' would be 'liif,' 'live' would be 'livv,' 'tome' would be 'toom,' 'tom' would be 'tomm,' 'boot' would be 'buut,' 'cut' would be 'kutt,' 'one' would be 'wunn,' 'magpie' would be 'magpii,' 'pussy cat' would be 'puusæ katt.' The k and g which appear before consonants in the syllables of many aboriginal words represent sounds barely perceptible, yet indispensable to right pronunciation. The nasal sound of 'gn' or 'ng' often occurs at the beginning of syllables in the aboriginal languages. As it is found at the beginning of, and only occurs in words like poignant and poignard, derived from a foreign source, it is somewhat difficult for English people to pronounce it. Some sounds which lie beyond the scope of the English alphabet are represented by the letters which come nearest to them, so as to give an approximately correct idea of what is intended to be conveyed.

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James Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.—TRIBES : their names, boundaries, languages, and dialects ...	1
CHAPTER II.—POPULATION.	3
CHAPTER III.—CHIEFS : their power, dignity, and succession	5
CHAPTER IV.—PROPERTY : of the family, laws of, inheritance	7
CHAPTER V.—CLOTHING : men's, women's, at night, adoption of European clothing, rugs—how made	8
CHAPTER VI.—HABITATIONS : permanent, temporary	10
CHAPTER VII.—CLEANLINESS : superstition relative to, the muurong pole, parasites	12
CHAPTER VIII.—DOMESTIC FURNITURE : baskets for carrying and for cooking, wooden bowl, bark bucket, water bags, water troughs, mortars, means of producing fire	14
CHAPTER IX.—COOKING AND FOOD : ovens, roasting, animals eaten, shell-fish, roots and vegetables, grubs, gum, manna, drinking water, fruits, division of the spoils of hunting, story of the Selfish Fellow	17
CHAPTER X.—TOOLS : stone axe, stone chisel, scrapers, rasp, mortar and pestle, bone chisel and bodkin, knives	24
CHAPTER XI.—LAWS OF MARRIAGE : tribal, class, origin of classes, other relations, polygamy, rank, re-marriage of widows, consent of chiefs, strictness of laws, betrothal, mothers-in-law, "turn-tongue," initiation into manhood, marriage-dress and ceremonies, first two months, divorce, selection of wives, gifts of wives, dissolution of marriage, spells, treatment of wives	26
CHAPTER XII.—CHILDREN : birth, nursing, clothing, killing the weak, language, strange law relative to language	38
CHAPTER XIII.—NAMES OF PERSONS : naming of children, changing names, the effect of death on names, lists of names	41
CHAPTER XIV.—SUPERSTITIONS AND DISEASES : supernatural beings, celestial, infernal and terrestrial, ghosts, wraiths, shades, haunted cave, witches, dreams, superstitions relative to animals, etc. ; fires, spells, sorcerers, "White Lady," doctors, common remedies, supernatural remedies, and artifices, sorcery stones, sunstroke, moonstroke, pulmonary complaints, epidemics, other diseases	49

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00655-2 - Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia

James Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER XV.—DEATH AND BURIAL: putting old people to death, suicide, burial, cremation, wakes, death and funeral of a chief, relics, spirits appearing, mourning, eating of human flesh	62
CHAPTER XVI.—AVENGING OF DEATH: finding out the spell-thrower, modes of destroying him, pæet pæets, executioner's club, revenge a sacred duty	68
CHAPTER XVII.—GREAT MEETINGS: summons, preliminaries, message-stick, test-message, messengers, how distinguished, Weeratt Kuuyuut hears of Buckley, public executioner, Pundeet Puulatong, accusations, satisfaction for private wrongs, public wrongs, wild blacks, quarrels between tribes, tournament, trading, necessity to attend meetings, drives of game	72
CHAPTER XVIII.—AMUSEMENTS: music, songs, korroboræ, gala dress, ornamental cicatrices, nose ornaments, dancing, clowns, stalking the emu, wrestling, football, spear-throwing, toy-boomerang, wuæ whuitch	80
CHAPTER XIX.—WEAPONS: spear, spear-thrower, light shield, liangle and heavy shield, clubs and boomerangs	87
CHAPTER XX.—ANIMALS: dingo, kangaroo, opossum, wombat, native bear, emu, extinct large bird, turkey bustard, gigantic crane, water fowl, eagles, fish, eel-fishing, crayfish, etc.; snakes, stories of boas	89
CHAPTER XXI.—METEOROLOGY, ASTRONOMY, ETC.: signs of weather, rain-making, astronomical knowledge, list of heavenly bodies, earthquakes, volcanoes	98
CHAPTER XXII.—NATIVE MOUNDS: their origin, sometimes used for burial	103
CHAPTER XXIII.—ANECDOTES: the first white man, the first ship, the first bullock, the first formation of water-holes, the tortoise and the snake, the blue heron, the native companion and the emu, the bunyip, the ghost, the meteor, Buckley's widow	105
CONVEYANCE, BY PRINCIPAL CHIEFS TO JOHN BATMAN, OF 100,000 ACRES OF LAND, BETWEEN GEELONG AND QUEENSLIFF	112
VOCABULARIES.—WORDS; ANIMALS; RELATIONSHIPS; NAMES OF PLACES; GRAMMAR AND SENTENCES; NUMERALS, cardinal and ordinal	i
NOTES TO CHAPTERS XI., XII., XIII., AND XIV., by J. D.	ci
NOTE.—REPORTS OF GOVERNMENT INSPECTORS OF ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS	ciii

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00655-2 - Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia

James Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



YARRUUN PARPUR TARNEEN

(VICTORIOUS),

Chiefess of the Morpurr Tribe.