WELL BEATEN PATHS
STUDIES IN NORTH QUEENSLAND HISTORY


WELL BEATEN PATHS
Aborigines of the Herbert Burdekin district, north Queensland
An Ethnographic and Archaeological Study

Helen Brayshaw

Foreword by Isabel McBryde

Swarms of ducks covered the margin of the lake; pelicans, beyond the reach of shot, floated on its bosom; land turtles plunged into its waters; and shags started from dead trees lying half immersed, as we trod the well-beaten path of the natives along its banks.

(Leichhardt 1847:185)

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Well beaten paths.

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The commitment of Brian Dalton to this project from its very conception to final completion so many years later, and the generous allocation by him of the resources of the History Department at James Cook University, have been profoundly important and deeply appreciated. The departmental secretarial staff have been a crucial component of this support. The contribution of Barbara Van Houts, who has coped with several word processing programmes (not all compatible), complex tables and appendices, and having the author in another state, cannot be overstated.
It was a great pleasure to be invited to present the Foreword to Dr. Brayshaw's book published by the History department of James Cook University of North Queensland. This book is an important one; it also has special significance for me as an archaeologist concerned with Aboriginal prehistory. First because it presents a regional survey. I have always been convinced of the fundamental value of regional archaeological studies, so a volume such as this one I see as contributing another basic 'building block' to the structure of Australia's prehistory. For me personally the Departmental context of the research and my links with its author as supervisor of the project gave added pleasure at the invitation.

This monograph presents the results of a detailed regional study of Aboriginal culture and prehistory in the Herbert/Burdekin area of North Queensland. It looks to archaeology, history, ethnography, geography, oral traditions and museum studies for its evidence and melds all these diverse sources of vital information into a unified account of Aboriginal life in the region. Such regionally focussed comprehensive studies are fundamental. Their importance can never be minimised, and never diminishes.

Professor Dalton is to be congratulated on a vision which included archaeology, ethnohistory and Aboriginal history in his plan for regional studies to be fostered in his new Department at James Cook. His encouragement was basic to Dr. Brayshaw's project, not least for providing a context in which it was viewed as integral to understanding North Queensland's past. In 1970 I visited the Department, at a time when it was discussing future directions. The willingness of those historians to welcome unusual directions, and new but allied disciplines, impressed me. It led to fruitful interaction, and to the Department's major contributions to Aboriginal history, local history, prehistoric and historical archaeology as well as what many might consider more 'mainstream' themes in historical studies. The publication series to which this volume belongs is a tribute to this stimulating interaction.

Dr. Brayshaw commenced research for the volume while on the teaching staff of Professor Dalton's Department. Her training in both history and archaeology fitted well the demands of regional research requiring the use of diverse sources. Her field abilities and dynamic energy were also vital to success in field work in North Queensland, especially as the pioneer of such enterprises. Dr. Brayshaw came to Townsville after studying at New England, and teaching at Newcastle University. Her historical ethnography of the Hunter Valley Aborigines was excellent preparation for work on a wider scale in North Queensland. Since completing this study Dr Brayshaw has followed a successful career as an independent archaeological consultant. Much of her work as consultant is based in the Hunter Valley, and in North Queensland, as her special knowledge of these regions is highly valued.

North Queensland is often considered territory for pioneers, expanding pastoral and mining frontiers. Dr Brayshaw's research is also pioneering, expanding the frontiers of knowledge and exploring new approaches to the past. The past studied, and presented in this volume, is that of the Aboriginal societies who were dispossessed in the expansion of earlier frontiers in nineteenth century Queensland. Her volume stands as the first statement of the great potential of the region for archaeological and ethno-historical research. It also stands as the pioneering field study, in archaeological field survey and the excavation of stratified deposits.

Dr. Brayshaw may be seen as following in the footsteps of that earlier pioneer field worker of the mid-nineteenth century, Amalie Dietrich. Amalie Dietrich was a field collector of an important private museum in Germany. She spent a number of years in remote parts of Queensland collecting and recording natural history specimens and Aboriginal culture - isolated both geographically and by being a woman researching in a professional field then little understood. Amalie Dietrich's collections documented Aboriginal culture for a learned world that knew little of it. Similarly, Dr Brayshaw's book is an important addition to our knowledge of Aboriginal culture in North
Queensland. Its breadth is impressive, including as it does field and excavation archaeology, analysis of ethno-historical sources and of museum and private collections of material culture. Recording these took Dr. Brayshaw across Europe and the North American continent as well as to remote station properties in North Queensland. In the chapters of this book and its detailed Appendixes we have a significant resource for future research.

To Dr. Brayshaw, the Department of History at James Cook and to Professor Dalton my warmest congratulations on presenting us with this pioneer study of North Queensland Aboriginal culture.

Isabel McBryde
Australian National University
INTRODUCTION

This study was initially undertaken in the History Department at James Cook University of North Queensland as research for a doctorate commenced in 1973 and finally submitted in 1977. After that my own path led me away from the area, although the links have remained strong, and for a number of years now I have worked to produce the results of my research in a more accessible form. I have always felt that to do this was a responsibility I could not ignore - a responsibility resulting from the support I had in terms of public money, a responsibility to the many local people who were so helpful, and not least a responsibility to the Aborigines of the Herbert/Burdekin of whom I wrote and to those who follow.

This study of the Aborigines and their material culture is based on ethnohistorical literature, ethnographic collections and archaeological evidence. Material culture, here interpreted in its broadest sense, refers to most physical manifestations of Aboriginal life: material creations such as dwellings, weapons, and equipment; diet; patterns of settlement and social, cultural and economic interaction; ceremony and ritual; and the creativity expressed in the decoration of artefacts, personal adornment, and its most enduring embodiment, rock art.

The historical component of the three classes of cultural evidence examined includes sources such as explorers' journals, early settler's diaries and reminiscences, and official reports, with occasional oral supplementation. Also researched were collections of a wide range of artefacts, such as shields, dilly bags, knives, necklaces, fish poisons and canoes, housed in Australian and overseas museums. Both forms of evidence relate to the period of cultural contact which in this area of north Queensland extended throughout most of the 19th century. By contrast archaeology has access not only to the immediate past but is capable of extending the dimensions of past occupation in an unforeseeable way. The archaeology of the Herbert/Burdekin, hitherto practically unknown, has since my field research was completed, been considerably extended by others, and this discussion has been amplified by reference to their work.

My principal aim in engaging in the research was to develop a picture of a people, their environment and their material culture, reconstructed as accurately and as fully as the available range of evidence would allow. In doing this an attempt was made to distinguish between culturally inspired variations and those reflecting responses to environmental factors. The opportunity also arose to assess the different sources of evidence and to develop an understanding of their relative strengths and weaknesses applicable to other areas of investigation. Methodological insights are the spin-offs for academics. The real achievement here will have been to produce this work in an emulsion with lasting qualities, so that the picture of a people and their life does not fade but endures for future enrichment.
HELEN BRAYSHAW grew up on a rural property near Gundy in the upper Hunter Valley. She attended secondary school in Armidale and graduated in history from the University of New England, where she was introduced to archaeology and Australian prehistory by Isabel McBryde. After tutoring in European history there and at the University of Newcastle, and a year of high school teaching, she travelled extensively overseas. Upon her return she came to Townsville to take up a tutorship in Australian History at James Cook University. At the time very little was known of the Aboriginal prehistory of north Queensland, and this inspired her to commence a regional archaeological and ethnographic study. This formed the substance of her doctoral research and is the basis of this book. While conducting this research she carried out the first archaeological consultancies in Queensland. Since that time she has worked as a consultant archaeologist, for several years serving as president of the Australian Association of Consulting Archaeologists. She lives in Sydney.