

## Aborigines in the Hills District

### **The Cumberland Plain**

Aboriginal people have been living in the Sydney region for at least 40,000 years.<sup>1</sup> The people living in The Hills belonged to the Darug tribe of which there were a number of family groups or clans that were nomadic within a specific area. For example, the Burramattagal clan (burra - eels and fish, matta – place of fresh running water) occupied the Parramatta/North Rocks area of Hunts and Darling Mills Creeks; the Toongagal or Tuga clan (place of thick woods) lived in the Toongabbie Creek/Hawkesbury River catchment. These clans spoke the inland dialect of the Darug language.<sup>2</sup> The Darug people were not confined only to The Hills area and spread out all over the Cumberland Plain. This area stretches from Windsor in the north to Picton in the south and into the inner west of Sydney. Most of Western Sydney was home to the Darug people and as such their traditions, culture and lifestyle is not unique to The Hills but represents Aborigines from a number of other local government areas as well.

The Darug people of the Cumberland Plain usually camped within 100m of permanent water sources as a home base. There is evidence of camps further away than that however very few have been recorded as being further than 500m from water.<sup>3</sup> Remains of both open camps and cave dwellings have been discovered in the Hills Shire, with charcoal drawings, shellfish middens, animal bones and stone flakes being discovered in caves. The rock dwellings found in the Darling Mills Creek area of West Pennant Hills date back almost 12,000 years.<sup>4</sup>

### **Culture and Diet**

Darug people travelled along the ridgelines (often the routes of present day roads) and followed creeks to sacred sites in the Hills District and elsewhere in Western Sydney for special ceremonies and gatherings. What an area could not provide for them, such as silcrete and quartz for blades and axes could be acquired by trading with people from adjoining clans such as the Boorooberongal clan from the Hawkesbury/Blue Mountains area where such materials occurred naturally.<sup>5</sup>

Most men had one of their upper front teeth missing, removed in the initiation ceremony held when boys reached their early teenage years.<sup>6</sup> People often had the septum of their nose pieced with either a bone or other ornament.<sup>7</sup> Both men and women used white clay to make designs on their faces and bodies for important gatherings.

The Darug people had carefully considered laws and customs preventing over-gathering or hunting of particular plants and animals and to ensure the elderly members of the clan were fed.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> James Kohen, *The Darug and their neighbours: The traditional Aboriginal owners of the Sydney region* (Sydney, Darug Link in association with Blacktown and District Historical Society, 1993) 3

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>3</sup> Val Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past: Investigation the archaeological and historical records* (Sydney, University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2010) 50

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>6</sup> Kohen, *The Darug and their neighbours* 39

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

women provided the bulk of the food<sup>9</sup> in the form of fish and yabbies speared or snared from the creeks and fruit such as lilli-pillies, figs and native grapes. They also dug up roots and tubers which were only partially eaten and then reburied. Men occupied their time hunting and trapping animals and birds such as possums, goannas, wallabies and ducks and also gathered honey.<sup>10</sup>

The Aboriginal people living on the Cumberland Plain relied heavily on underground vegetables like tubers and roots of orchids, lilies, yams and native carrots. It is believed that the Darug derived their name from these tubers as Darug means yam in some dialects.<sup>11</sup> Strappy leaved plants and grasses like Lomadra were used to weave baskets.<sup>12</sup> The creeks provided fish, eels, mussels, crayfish and ducks<sup>13</sup> to eat as well as fresh water for preparing food, washing and playing. Creeks were also used as a source of rocks used in grinding seed and ochre and for sharpening axes. The tall forests of the ridge tops provided native cherries, lily and orchid tubers as well as possums.<sup>14</sup> The Darug were also able to use them for timber for water and storage containers, spears, boomerangs, clubs, digging sticks as well as bark for canoes and shelters.<sup>15</sup>

### European Settlement

In the years 1789-1790 a smallpox epidemic swept through the Sydney Aboriginal population killing many of the people living in the region. Most of the clans around Port Jackson were almost completely wiped out and the disease killed off many inland Darug people as well. The surviving members of the clans had to join together to survive. It is estimated that been fifty and ninety percent of the Aborigines in the vicinity of Sydney died within the first three years of European settlement.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, riverbanks and creeks were settled by colonists and the surrounding forests were cleared for farmland in an effort to support the growing size of the colony.<sup>17</sup> The change from bush to farmland meant that game animals were driven away and the Darug people found themselves increasingly displaced in their own country.

For a number of years some clans fought against the Europeans with Pemulwuy leading the resistance until he was shot and killed by Henry Hacking in 1802.<sup>18</sup> Once the rebellions were put down by British soldiers, the Darug learned to live within European society or on the fringes around it. By 1820 the Cumberland plain had been heavily occupied by over 24,000 colonists and the pattern of life that the Darug had developed over thousands of years had almost completely vanished in the area.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the words used by the Darug people have found their way into the Australian language including dingo, koala, wallaby, wombat, boomerang and billabong. In addition some places in

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<sup>9</sup> James Kohen, *Aborigines in the West: Prehistory to Present* (Sydney, The Western Sydney Project, 1985) 9-10

<sup>10</sup> Peter Turbin, *The Aborigines of the Sydney District before 1788* (Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1989) 61-65

<sup>11</sup> Kohen, *The Darug and their neighbours*, 14

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>13</sup> Kohen, *Aborigines in the West* 89 pp9-10

<sup>14</sup> Turbin, *The Aborigines of the Sydney District* 61

<sup>15</sup> Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past* 105

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Perkins and Marcia Langton, *First Australians* (Melbourne, The Miegunyah Press, 2010) 21

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-26

<sup>19</sup> Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past* 15

Western Sydney still carry remnants or derivatives of their traditional Aboriginal name like Parramatta, Toongabbie, Mulgoa, Maroota, Cattai, Cobbitty, Colo and Yarramundi.

Further Reading

Attenbrow, Val. *Sydney's Aboriginal Past: Investigating the archaeological and historical records*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2010  
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