

A NOTE ON THE BURIAL CUSTOMS OF THE
TASMANIAN ABORIGINES.

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The methods of burial as practised by primitive races are of distinct interest in assisting to trace their evolutionary history. Owing to the lack of authentic information in detail of the customs of the Tasmanian aborigines, our knowledge is, in many matters, vague and uncertain. Often the observations relating to the aborigines were made years after their contact with the white race, and naturally their customs had been affected.

Further, the more one studies the early records and observations made by early colonists, the more one realises their contradictory nature. The available evidence which could be gathered from early records has been admirably summarised by Ling Roth (1899, pp. 116-122). A later paper by Noetling (1908, p. 36) dealt with the supposed native burial ground near Ross, but, personally, I am unable to agree with all the conclusions arrived at by Dr. Noetling. In a later paper Noetling (1910, p. 271) again referred to the matter, but his deductions are at variance with the observations of the French naturalist Péron, who distinctly states that the tombs found by the French on Maria Island in 1802 were placed near the camping ground.*

There is sufficient evidence to show that the natives usually burnt their dead, and often, after cremating the body, the residue would be buried or certain portions carried as a charm. In some cases the body would not be burnt, but would be placed in a hollow tree or a shallow grave.

I am not aware of any authentic records as to the position of the buried body, and hope that the following observation, made in exhuming aboriginal remains, may be of interest, as information on the point helps to illustrate the evolutionary status of the race.

*It must be remembered of course that in regard to the tombs referred to by Peron the bodies had first of all been cremated and the remains gathered and placed in the ground, over which a frail superstructure of grass and bark had been raised.

In January, 1919, a number of Tasmanian aboriginal remains were found at Eaglehawk Neck, as already recorded in the Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania (1918, pp. 118-119; 1920, pp. 140-152). In exhuming these remains I particularly noticed that the bodies were doubled up in most cases, the skull being closely wedged between the femurs. Owing to doubts as to how the skeletons came to be there and also owing to the fact that the sand dune in which the excavations were made showed signs of movement, it was not thought fit to make any comment at that time. Recently, however, a further discovery was made in the sand dunes at the south end of Ralph's Bay, where Mr. E. A. Calvert found portion of an aboriginal skeleton. This he kindly presented to the Tasmanian Museum. I subsequently visited the site of the discovery in company with Mr. Calvert, and, in questioning him as to the exact position of the bones, I found that, according to his description, they were placed in practically the same position as the ones which had been found at Eaglehawk Neck.

Judging from observations made in the above mentioned cases there is some evidence to show that such bodies as were buried were placed in the three bent sitting position. Further evidence is needed, however, before it is safe to assume that the above position is typical, and the present note is written merely in the hope that it may be of assistance in the event of further discoveries being made.

LITERATURE REFERRED TO.

- 1899 Roth, H. Ling, *Aborigines of Tasmania*.
1908 Noetling, *Papers and Proceedings Royal Society of Tasmania*, 1908.
1910 Noetling, *Papers and Proceedings Royal Society of Tasmania*, 1910.