



## A Reflection on Aboriginal Tracking

Gary Presland<sup>1</sup>

How is it that Aboriginal people are able to follow tracks with such seeming ease? This is a question I have been pondering for a number of years as I have been researching the employment of Aboriginal men as police trackers, particularly a group of about ninety men from Queensland who worked with police in Victoria between 1880 and 1968.<sup>2</sup> The police work for which these Murris were employed included following the trail of people to and from scenes of crimes, finding lost children and wandering lunatics, and tracing stolen property, particularly cattle and sheep. In all such cases the Murris displayed, often in spectacular fashion, an amazing ability to reconstruct a sequence of events, purely on the basis of their reading of signs invisible to their employers.<sup>3</sup>

The ability so successfully utilised by the Murris in Victoria, and demonstrated by indigenous people repeatedly all over Australia, is arguably the developed outcome of a combination of factors. Both males and females begin as children to learn how to track the widest range of animals for the purpose of procuring food and raw materials. It can be argued, however, that the body of information that is acquired through many years of practical tuition in tracking consists of more than the ability to recognise the tell-tale marks of animals. Tracking is but one component of the knowledge system of Aboriginal people, and, like other elements in that system, it is a means to understanding the world and mediating an individual's course through it. In the case of Aboriginal people, that knowledge system is also linked inextricably to the nexus between people and land.

For a period of almost 90 years Aboriginal men from Queensland were taken to Victoria to work with the police. That men from a completely different environment could transfer their tracking abilities from one place to another and successfully operate as trackers, as these Murris did time and time again, suggests that their skills in understanding the landscape were not fixed to the one locality, but were part of an entire 'worldview'.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Presland is a historian and archeologist who has written extensively on pre-European Koorie culture in the Melbourne area, the cultural landscapes of which hold a special significance for him. He retired as Head Curator of Museum Victoria in 2000, but returned there in 2001 as the Thomas Ramsay Fellow

<sup>2</sup> The term now commonly used to distinguish the indigenous people of most parts of Queensland from their counterparts of other regions of this continent is 'Murri', which will be used here henceforth.

<sup>3</sup> G. Presland (1998) *For God's Sake Send the Trackers*, Victoria Press, Melbourne.

Aborigines regard land as a religious phenomenon. The earth owes its topography to the acts of the world-creative powers. As most of these powers are prototypes of natural species, relations to land are bound up with relations to other forms of life. The latter class of relations is conventionally put under the heading of 'totemism'. Thus the way in which indigenous people constantly affirm their place in the world explicates a worldview that is couched in terms of the connections and relationships that exist between themselves and all other living beings within that world.

That the body of lore through which Aboriginal people transmit their understanding of those connections and relationships is referred to - in the present participle - as 'The Dreaming' ought to tell us that it is not a static thing or a past event but rather an on-going process. It should come as no surprise then that the relatedness that indigenous people feel with every part of their world would invest many ordinary features of day-to-day life with an added dimension. Changes in the landscape, such as the traces, however slight, of the movement of people and other life forms across the surface, do not go unnoticed.

Tracks are indeed of particular importance to Aboriginal people, especially those left by humans. The tracks of an animal may indicate the presence of food but the tracks of a fellow human provide the key to the actual identity of an individual. To the trained and practised eye, an individual's footprints are unique and act as a sure indicator of that person's identity. In an Aboriginal camp, great interest is expressed in a child's first steps, partly for the natural human pride in seeing a child learning to walk but partly also because the resulting footprints provide a means of recognising that child, wherever it may walk in the future. The peculiarities of a footprint are registered in people's memories and serve when seen in future to evoke a mental image of that person. In some Aboriginal language groups footprints are treated grammatically as representations of the person. They also fulfil a role in Aboriginal culture like that of photographs in other cultures, as a means of identification, and a memory aid to the appearance of an individual.<sup>4</sup> Such is the power of these images as a means of recognition for those to whom they are familiar that identification of individuals, absent for as much as thirty years, has been known to take place from a single print.

In keeping with their worldview, individuals are thus recognised by means of their impact on the physical environment, rather than as abstracted or external entities. They are literally 'read off' the land. It is this perspective, that connects humans to land in an holistic worldview, that allowed Aboriginal people to excel at tracking in all parts of Australia.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Bohemia & W. McGregor (1995) *Nyibayarri Kimberley Tracker*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.