

PLANT FOODS OF THE TASMANIAN ABORIGINES

by

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There are very few sources of information about the plant foods of the Tasmanian Aborigines which record either statements made by the Aborigines to Europeans, or observations by the latter on foods eaten. These sources are -

- (a) A very few records by the marine explorers who made contact with the Aborigines. These are nearly confined to some observations made by members of the D'Entrecasteaux expedition in 1793. These explorers also recorded observations on animal foods, based largely upon food debris at campsites, together with some records of plant materials used by the Aborigines in their manufactures.
- (b) George Augustus Robinson (GAR) names a number of plants providing food for the Aborigines, which they had gathered during the time he spent with them on Bruny Island, and also during his excursions through the bush between 1829 and 1834. These are almost the only records of the plant foods of the Tasmanian Aborigines which refer to field observations on the living people, nearly all others containing some element of doubt (Plomley, 1966).
- (c) James Backhouse and Ronald Campbell Gunn were two botanists who wrote about edible Tasmanian plants.

Backhouse visited the Colony from England (with G.W. Walker) in 1832 and again in 1833/34. It is likely that he had few contacts with the Aborigines, and all these with the captives he met at the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement when he was there in October 1832, December 1833 and January 1834. The account Backhouse wrote of those visits (1843) refers only to three plants which provided food for the Aborigines, the tree-fern, bracken fern and the grass-tree (*Xanthorrhoea*), with the pigface mentioned only as a purgative. In an article on the 'indigenous esculents' of Tasmania (1834), Backhouse listed all the plants known to him of which the whole or part are edible. His article deals with many more species than those about which he had been told by the captive Aborigines on Flinders Island. All the others he mentions must therefore have been species which he knew to be edible from his own experience, or had been told were edible by settlers he met during his tours of Tasmania. For the Tasmanian Aborigines a plant was edible if it could be eaten raw, or cooked by roasting on hot coals and perhaps heated stones. If a plant food needed boiling, or cooking in an oven, to prepare it for eating, it could not be used by the Tasmanians, who had neither containers for heating fluids nor built ovens, so that they could not prepare hot beverages or boil vegetables or make stews.

R.C. Gunn came to live in Tasmania in February 1830. He was a keen botanist and was in contact with Backhouse during his visits. Gunn's contacts with the Aborigines would have been very few, little more than his meeting with the captives at Flinders Island during the two days he spent there

late in January 1838 as one of those accompanying Sir John Franklin on his official visit. Otherwise, Gunn would have had to rely on his own experience and on information received from the settlers (1841).

- (d) Ernest Westlake, who visited Tasmania from England in 1908/10 (Plomley, 1991), recorded the names of a number of plants providing food. Some of these plants can be identified fairly certainly. Those used by the Cape Barren Island people, mixed-bloods whose use of plant materials would have been based on associations with Aboriginal women from Victoria as well as from Tasmania, refer to Furneaux Islands species. His other records may be inexact because the informants had had experience of both Tasmanian and Australian Aborigines, or had reported at second hand, or had memories which were uncertain and confused.

In addition to these few primary statements there have been many secondary statements. These have taken two forms -

1. Because a plant was used for food by the Australian Aborigines it was therefore so used by the Tasmanian Aborigines, and particularly where related plant species occurred both in south-eastern Australia and Tasmania.
2. Because a Tasmanian plant provided an edible part (berry, fruit tuber, etc.) it therefore provided food for the Tasmanian Aborigines (as Brough Smyth, 1878).

G.A. Robinson's records of plants providing food for the Tasmanian Aborigines, although they are almost the only records which relate to Tasmanian plants, are subject to two main defects when a list of actual food plants is being compiled. One of these is that Robinson's plants are not often identifiable with certainty. The other is that Robinson's experience in regard to foodstuffs was far from comprehensive, because there were few occasions upon which he saw the Aborigines carrying on their normal day-to-day activities at their campsites.

The situation, then, presents a dilemma: how to deal in a meaningful way with a very meagre record of plants providing food for the Aborigines. The course adopted for this review will therefore be to consider classes of foodstuffs on a basis of definite records of usage. This means that tubers, fruits, seeds and so on will be dealt with as classes of foodstuffs, listing the records in each class. These records will afterwards be supplemented by suggestions as to what other species in each class might have been used.

TYPES OF FOOD PLANTS

FERNS

'Tree fern'

The soft top of the trunk, where new leaves are being formed, was removed by cutting open the stem to expose its upper soft core, some 12-18 inches (30-45 cm) long. This soft core was roasted before being eaten (Backhouse, 1834).

GAR jnl 6/12/30, upper Boobyalla River: 'the natives seemed filled with joy when they met

with a description of fern tree called by the Brune natives RULLY, which is pleasant eating; this is far superior to the other called LAR which is known by the smoothness of the stalk of the leaves, the RULLY by the roughness of the stalk, which is prickly like pine'.

GAR jnl 14/7/31, headwaters Brid River: the natives can subsist in green forest on fern tree, wombat, porcupine, etc.

GAR jnl 15/7/31, headwaters Little Forester River: fern trees torn in quest of food... had been done some years before by the blacks who once inhabited these lonesome forests and whose chief subsistence was on roots, animals, etc.

GAR jnl 15/7/32, region of Marrawah: a basket filled with pieces of the fern tree, called by those natives LAR.NER, abbreviated LAR.

'Species with a prickly stalk' - ref. GAR jnl 6/12/30, 15/7/32. These records apply to both species of *Cyathea*.

Cyathea cunninghamii:

Now rare.

Cyathea australis (*Alsophila australis*):

This species occurs in northern Tasmania and although uncommon, is known from many places in the north-east.

Backhouse (1834) records *Alsophila australis* as a foodstuff; 'found at Macquarie Harbour, and in other places on the western side of Van Dieman's Land'; Aborigines said to prefer this species.

'Species with a smooth stalk' - ref. GAR jnl 6/12/30.

Dicksonia antarctica (*Cibotium billardieri*):

Common in Tasmania generally.

Backhouse (1834) records this species as a foodstuff, and that the Aborigines roasted it and ate it as bread, 'but it is too bitter and astringent to suit an English palate'.

FRUITS

Acacia verniciflua 'Native Willow'

GAR jnl 8/2/30, Louisa Bay: the large pods of the Native willow eaten.

Note: Rodway (1903) says name 'native willow' is also sometimes applied to *Bedfordia salicina* and *Pomaderris apetala*. Neither of these species has an edible pod.

Carpobrotus rossii (*C. aequilaterus*, *Mesembryanthemum aequilaterale*) 'Pigface'

GAR jnl 8/2/30, Louisa Bay: pigface eaten.

GAR jnl 30/1/34, Table Cape: the natives got what is called by the whites pigface.

GAR jnl 30/2/34, Studland Bay: the natives gathered KUN.YONE or pigface; these they suck the inside; were highly pleased with getting KONE.YUN or pigface on their journey.

Note: The ripe fruit is succulent. The last record certainly, and the others probably, cannot refer to *Disphyma australe* ('Round-leaved Pigface'), which has a dry fruit. The leaves may have been chewed (Westlake Papers: Benlow).

Cenarrhenes nitida 'Native Plum'

GAR jnl 8/2/30, Louisa River: the native plum LAY.LUE.BER.RY eaten by the natives.

Coprosma quadrifida (*C. billardieri*, *C. microphylla*) 'Native Currant' (red fruit)

GAR jnl 8/2/30, Louisa River: a small red berry, BORE.RAR, eaten.

GAR jnl 9/11/31, Four Mile Marsh (NE from Bradys Lake - 740 m): berries on plant growing in marsh; not known to natives of south; red; taste like stale apple.

Note: While the Louisa River record probably refers to *Coprosoma quadrifida*, the Four Mile Marsh species may have been the similar alpine form *C. nitida*, or perhaps *Astelia alpina* ('Pineapple Grass'). In both cases there is possibly confusion with *Cyathodes* sp. Field studies are needed for clarification of these matters.

Cyathodes sp. (red berries)

GAR jnl 29/5/34 - 2/8/34, ML A7031, part 7, page 11; R/A 196 - not dated but c.9/6/34, Surrey Hills: 'the red berry that grows on the heath about the Surrey Hills particularly on the high country at Netherby and near Mt. Pearce where it is abundant about the size of a large pea or currant has a large core; TOR.RUL.TER.RARE, Probelatter.' - with a sketch.

Note: The description and sketch indicate *Cyathodes* sp., the sketch suggesting *C. juniperina* or *C. parvifolia*. This should be checked by field studies.

Leucopogon parviflorus (*L. richiei*) 'Native Currant' (white fruit). Distribution: sandy coasts.

GAR jnl 8/2/30, Louisa River: berry eaten by natives; white colour; pleasant flavour; PUR.RAR (Brune).

GAR jnl 13/2/30, Hannant Inlet (Port Davey): PUR.RAR berries; pleasant.

Solanum laciniatum (*Solanum aviculare*) 'Kangaroo Apple'

GAR jnl 10/2/30, Cox Bight: 'My aboriginal guide gave me a wild fruit resembling a greengage, which the southern natives call NUM.HER'.

Note: To describe the fruit of the Kangaroo Apple, which has many seeds, as a 'greengage', a plum with a single stone, is likely to be an error of writing. In his original journal GAR spells it 'green guage'.

GAR jnl 25/3/30, Giblin River: 'At this place the natives were enabled to obtain an abundant supply of the kangaroo-fig'.

GAR jnl 26/3/30, Nomeme Creek, Nye Bay: at these villages 'are in general to be found the native fig'.

GAR jnl 6/4/30, Elliot Bay: 'an old man... about seventy years of age... enquired how he lived seeing he had no wife to get him fish and was told that he lived on NUM.MER (kangaroo-apple)'.

Jorgenson states that the Aborigines were 'particularly fond of what is named the kangaroo apple and after pulling them, they placed them in sand banks to get ripe' (Plomley, 1991A).

Note: Field studies might clarify this identification, because other possible species are *Cenarrhenes nitida*, the 'Native Plum', and perhaps even *Carpobrotus rossii*, the 'Pigface'. However, it should be noted that both *C. nitida* and *C. rossii* have their own distinct native names.

FUNGI

'Various are the fungus which the natives eat, and are all known to them by the different qualities which they possess, and are all known by different names'. (GAR jnl 2/7/31, Winnaleah region.)

Psalliota campestris 'Common Mushroom'

Backhouse (1834) and Gunn (1841) list the common mushroom, but do not make any clear statement that it was eaten by the natives.

'Bracket Fungus'

1. GAR jnl 30/5/29, Bruny Island: 'I observed them knock off the fungus from the gum tree, which they eat. It has the appearance of wood and has a sweet flavour not unlike mushroom. The Natives call it NINGHI'.
2. GAR jnl 30/5/29, Bruny Island: 'There is another sort of fungus belonging to the same tree but which they do not eat, called TUVARA'.
3. GAR jnl 30/5/29, Bruny Island: 'There is also another sort of fungus which belongs to the she-oak (= *Casuarina stricta*), resembling sponge, of which they also eat'.
4. GAR jnl 26/7/30, Table Cape: Fungus on gum tree which natives eat; RING.HE (= NING.HE?).
5. GAR jnl 2/7/31, Winnaleah region: Fungus from peppermint tree (= *Eucalyptus amygdalina*) eaten; called TRAR.RAR (Brune).
6. GAR jnl 24/7/31, upper Boobyalla River: 'saw my native companions eating the different fungus which they occasionally met with on the different trees'.

7. GAR jnl 28/4/32, between Mount Housetop and the Hampshire Hills: 'the natives ate heartily of the fungus which they procured from the trees'.

- Notes:
1. Probably a species of *Fomes* or *Trametes* with a woody pileus.
 2. One of the 'bracket fungi' with a fleshy pileus, e.g. *Hydnum*, *Polyporus*.
 3. Perhaps a species of *Hexagona*.
 4. As well as *Polyporus*, there are a number of fungi which grow on dead wood, such as the Polypores and Thelephores.
 5. *Polyporus* sp.?
 6. See Note (4).
 7. The description is vague and may refer either to *Polyporus* sp. or to *Cyttaria gunnii*.

Cyttaria gunnii

Parasite of the branches of *Nothofagus cunninghamii* ('Myrtle').

GAR made a drawing of this fungus on the end pages of his journal for the period 7/12/33 to 15/1/34 (ML. A7031, vol. 10, part 4; see also R/A 184): 'this fruit is hollow and contains in its vessel nearly half of a liquid of pleasant taste the fruit is palatable; MAR.DEVE.VER.HE.PYTE.YER (OYB), NARM.MEN.ER (N. coast), WUR.DEVE.VER.HE. (Brune)'.

Note: There is a drawing of a similar, probably identical, fungus growing on *Atherosperma moschatum* ('Sassafras') on the same page as above, with the following caption: 'an excellent vegetable; the natives are very fond of it; the natives of the south don't eat it; they roast it in the fire but will eat it without roasting; it resembles a honey comb and is of a yellow colour and soft and juicy'.

It is of some interest that present ideas restrict this fungus to *Nothofagus cunninghamii*.

'Jelly fungus'

GAR jnl 2/7/31, Winnaleah region: 'a white fungus, quite transparent and resembling jelly'.

Note: The 'jelly fungi' include the *Caloceras* and *Tremellas*.

Polyporus mylittae (*Mylittae australis*) 'Native Bread'

GAR jnl 2/7/31, Winnaleah region: 'The natives brought me a large excrescence or fungus known by the white people as native bread, but by the natives of Brune as (1) PYNE.NER (2) WE.ME.LEEBE, by the Oyster Bay DREEN.YE and by the Cape Portland TOO.RER. The natives procure this fungus from under dead or fallen timber, to which it adheres, and growing on the ground. In size it is about as large as a big turnip, and in taste it resembles boiled rice'.

GAR jnl 23/10/31, Eastern Marshes: 'one of the native women, Sall, found a bulbous plant called by the white people 'native bread', which they gave me as a present'.

Note: Although the text reads bulbous plant, the qualifying statement that it was called 'nature bread' identifies the fungus with some certainty.

GAR jnl 25/10/31, headwaters Prosser River: 'in our way the natives showed me a dead tree where there was native bread growing: I saw no signs myself; they smelt the wood and said the plant was a long way in the ground'.

GAR jnl 26/10/31, headwaters Prosser River: 'came to a dead tree and the native women went to look for bread fruit: if they pass where this plant is they find it out by smelling it'.

Note: *Polyporus mylittae* produces an underground sclerotium which may weigh five or more kilograms. This comprises a mass of densely packed *mycelium*, of which the outer layers form a skin. The fruiting toadstool is rarely seen.

'Toadstools'

GAR jnl 26/3/30, Giblin River: 'saw the natives eat toadstools'.

Note: Another name for the mushrooms or Agarics, and is applied especially to capped fungi.

GUMS

Acacia sp.

GAR jnl 16/12/31, Lagoon of Islands: 'the natives collected gum from a tree in appearance like the prickly mimosa, having a yellow flower and pods like a chestnut; this gum they eat'.

Note: The 'pods like a chestnut' were perhaps galls.

LEAF BASES

See also: tree ferns (meristems)

Xanthorrhoea australis (*Xanthorrhoea arborea*) 'Grass-tree'

GAR jnl 25/7/30, Sisters Creek: 'Observed the natives to eat the grass-trees: they took a stone and beat down the young grass-tree and stripped off the outer leaves. I ate some and found it very nutritious, in taste like a roasted chestnut. It is called MAR by the Brune natives, YEM.MER.NER by the R.I. [Robbins Island] natives, and KAR.LETH.ER.KER by the Oyster Bay. The Brune natives told me they eat the pad when young'.

Xanthorrhoea humilis 'Dwarf Grass-tree'

Backhouse (1834), Gunn (1841) and Davies (1846) add this species to the above.

Note: The 'Dwarf Grass Tree' of Tasmania has been named *X. minor* until recently, but this name is now used exclusively for an Australian species. In Tasmania there are at least two species of 'Dwarf Grass Tree', *X. arenaria* and *X. bracteata*. The 'Dwarf Grass Trees' do not have an upright trunk.

SEEDS

Acacia melanoxylon 'Blackwood'

GAR jnl 30/1/34, Table Cape: 'in the course of the day the natives got... the seed of the lightwood like the French bean; these they roast'.

Note: Lightwood' is considered to be a form of 'blackwood'.

Acacia sophorae 'Boobyalla', 'Coast Wattle'

Gunn (1841) states that the Aborigines were in the habit of collecting the pods of this shrub when the seeds were ripening and, after roasting them in the ashes, they picked out the seeds and ate them.

STEM BASES

Three groups of plants include species whose swollen stem bases are succulent. They belong to the families -

- (a) The Liliaceae, Iridaceae and Amaryllidaceae - including members of the genera *Bulbine*, *Dianella*, *Haemodorum*, *Hewardia* and *Wurmbea*.
- (b) The Juncaceae ('rushes'), Juncaginaceae, Potamogetonaceae and Typhaceae - including members of the genera *Juncus*, *Typha* and *Triglochin*.
- (c) The Cyperaceae and Restionaceae - including members of the genera *Carex*, *Cyperus*, *Eleocharis*, *Scirpus* and *Xerotes* (= *Lomandra*), plants which are commonly known as 'sedges'.

In the rushes the culms are pithy and soft, and in the larger ones there are no apparent leaves but only flower stems; while in the sedges the green leaves and brown flower stems are more firm and often harsh.

Bulbine sp. (a lily)

GAR jnl 11/7/29, Bruny Island: the women 'collected together a marine plant termed POORNER, resembling a young shallot, of which they appeared to be very fond. It is placed on the hot coals (their only mode of cooking) and thus eaten. It has a very insipid taste but is juicy and nutritious'.

Note 1: The description 'marine plant' is given elsewhere as 'plant of the seacoast.'

Note 2: This description of the plant lacks any distinguishing features, so that its identification as *Bulbine* sp. is tentative. The plant could well have been a species of orchid.

'Rushes' / 'Sedges'

Gar jnl 31/1/30, Huon River: 'the Brune natives had a basket of roots when they came on board the boat, which formed a part of their food. They get them at lagoons. The Port Dalrymple natives recognised them and called them LOM.ER.LAL.ER; the Brune natives LOI.TY.'

GAR jnl 17/7/30, Bathurst Channel: 'the natives gathered some roots which they roasted and ate'.

GAR jnl 6/6/30, Sandy Cape: 'the natives had visited the lagoons.. and had pulled a quantity of WORE.DOR (called LAIDY by the Brune natives)'.

GAR jnl 8/6/30, Thornton River: 'the natives... gathered WARD.ER, a species of bark that grows in the lagoon'.

Note: Although it is not stated here, or in the record of two days earlier, that WARD.ER (WORE.DOR) was being gathered to eat - bark was used by the natives to make string - this is the implication. Its use as food is one which receives support from the Brune word for it being LAIDY (LOI.TY). It seems, therefore, that the use of the word 'bark' here points either to a different use of the word at that period or to an error of transcription, the only text known for this part of the journal being a contemporary copy.

GAR jnl 17/10/30, Ringarooma River: 'in the lagoons or marshes the natives gathered among the rushes a root which they eat; I ate some of it and found it pleasant'.

Jorgenson states that the Aborigines 'used to dig out of the lagoons WATTALAPRE or POMALLE, here called the native potato, but it bears no resemblance to the English root' (Plomley, 1991A). However, the plant commonly known as the Native Potato is the orchid *Gastrodia sesamoides*, which does not grow in lagoons. It is more likely that Jorgenson was referring to a sedge or a water plant having a swollen stem base or storage root.

STORAGE ROOTS

Two different series of plants are included here -

- (a) *Daucus* sp., *Geranium* sp. and similar forms.
- (b) The *Orchidaceae*.

Daucus glochidiatus 'Native Carrot'

Francois Péron, when he visited Maria Island in 1802, collected there 'a small species of daucus with a flavour like that of our common carrot' (Plomley, 1983).

Note: Brown and Bayly-Stark (1979) list *Daucus glochidiatus* in their *Vegetation of Maria Island*.

Geranium parviflorum (*Geranium potentilloides*, = *G. dissectum* ('Cut-leaved Cranesbill'))

Gunn (1841) states that he had been told that the Aborigines were in the habit of digging up the roots of this plant, which are large and fleshy, and roasting them for food; and that the species was widely distributed being called about Launceston the 'native carrot'.

Curtis (1975) finds that this group of geraniums with swollen roots comprises three species, *Geranium potentilloides*, *G. sessiliflorum* and *G. solanderi*.

Dipodium punctatum (an orchid)

GAR jnl 4/3/30, Melaeuca Inlet: 'the natives brought me a bulbous root which they eat, called TAR.TER by the natives of the south'.

GAR jnl 8/6/30, Thornton River: the natives gathered 'a root called BARTER (spelling may be TARTER) that grows on burnt heathy ground'.

Gastrodia sesamoides 'Native Potato', 'Potato Orchid'

GAR jnl 2/11/31, Andover/Little Swanport River: 'observed the natives to procure a small plant near the root of a peppermint tree or by old wood. It resembled in appearance asparagus and is called by the natives of the east LARN.NE. - BUN.ER, by those of the north-east (MANNALARGENNA) LARN.BUN. - NEM.EN.ER, by those of the north LARN. BUN.NER and by those of the south (1) WORE.NER (2) LUN.NER.'

Note: Although WORE.NER and WARD.ER (see above) are similar words, they appear to have been associated with different plants.

Backhouse (1834) records that the bulb-tubers of *Gastrodia sesamoides*, which grow out of one another, are of the size and nearly the form, of kidney potatoes. 'These roots roasted and eaten by the natives; in taste they resemble beet-root; and are sometimes called in the colony "native potatoes". See also Gunn (1841).

UNDERGROUND SHOOTS

Pteridium esculentum (*Pteris esculentum*) 'Bracken Fern'

GAR jnl 24/6/31, Ringarooma River: 'the natives eat the fern root baked in the ashes, and in preparing it they cut it into short pieces, and eat it with the roasted kangaroo skin'.

Backhouse (1834) states that 'it is known among the aborigines by the name of TARA'. He goes on - 'the aborigines roast this root in the ashes, peel off its black skin with their teeth, and eat it to their toasted kangaroo, etc., in the manner that Europeans eat bread'.

Gunn (1841) repeated the statement made by Backhouse.

Phragmites australis 'Reed'

In his account of the natural history of Maria Island, written following his visit there in February 1802, Francois Péron (Plomley, Cornell and Banks, 1990) relates how he found that this plant was cropped selectively by the natives. The description which follows is confused and may refer to two different plants. Local field studies are therefore needed for identification. While we have called the plant *Phragmites australis*, it may be *Eleocharis sphacelata*.

Upon crossing one of the marshes (along the northern shore of Oyster Bay), I was surprised by the large number of holes that I noticed in the ground there.

While trying to guess their possible cause I spotted several large clumps of a plant which also appeared to me to belong, of necessity, to the *graminaceous* family. I say 'appeared' because I was unable to find a single specimen of it either in flower or in fruit, to guide my efforts to determine precisely the family to which this plant must actually belong. Be that as it may, I realised easily that the wish to obtain its root was alone responsible for the natives digging this great number of holes. Guided by this conjecture, I tried to pull up some of these roots myself. I managed to do so with difficulty, for without growing deeply, they were creeping and had numerous shoots which were intertwined, thus making it hard to extract them. The stem is jointed like that of the sugar cane, and from each joint there grow one or more stalks which, at first sight, rather resemble large rushes, from which, however, they are soon easily distinguished by the following characteristics. Instead of being full of matter, like rushes, they are all completely hollow, though at intervals one can plainly see the signs of a small, circular partition - very thin, resistant, hard and brittle - which is firmly set into the inside of the wall of the stalk itself. Between each of these solid, woody partitions, there are many other weak, membranous partitions of great thinness. Their number varies in each stalk, according to its particular length, and this length itself varies from four to five and six feet.

The order to which I suspected this plant must belong made me hope that it might contain some useful substance. I was not mistaken. Upon chewing some of the young shoots growing out of the joint of the root, I discovered them to have the flavour of a raw chestnut. The newest and freshest parts of the root seemed to me to be equally good to eat, but then wanting to taste the oldest roots, I found them almost unbearably bitter. They were not only bitter, but astringent as well, like acorns.

MISCELLANEOUS

'Cider'

(Sweet sap exuded in summer from the bark of *Eucalyptus gunnii* ('Cider Gum').)

GAR jnl 16/12/31, Lagoon of Islands: 'the melliferous cider tree was growing most luxuriantly, some of them twelve feet in circumference, and the liquid was oozing out in tolerable quantities. Holes at the bottom of those trees had been made to receive the juice and which answered the purpose of a tank. Some of the liquor had dried and was white and resembled in appearance and taste a bruised apple; some was brown. It was amusing to see the natives run from tree to tree to suck this juice, of which they are very fond'.

'Kelp'

GAR jnl 27/3/30, Nye Bay: 'the Port Davey natives eat kelp, and the same I found was the case with the Brune natives'.

GAR jnl 17/6/33, Elliott Bay: 'found a lame woman in a small hut be herself without fire; she was subsisting on kelp and herbs'.

GAR jnl 29/6/33, Giblin River: the old woman (entry 17/6/33) was so lame she could only

crawl and that 'she was living on kelp and roots'.

D'Entrecasteaux expedition: there are references in the records of this expedition to natives seen in February 1793 who were eating kelp gathered near Recherche Bay, after they had roasted it.

'Manna'

(Flakes formed from the sweet sap exuded in summer through the bark of *Eucalyptus viminalis* ('White Gum', 'Manna Gum').

GAR jnl 24/11/31, Kenmare Rivulet: 'the trees of the forest at this season had scattered their manna on the ground and the natives collected and ate of it'.

REVIEW

Incomplete as they must be, the above records do give some idea of the types of plant material which the Aborigines used for food in Tasmania. Other plants occur in the territory which could have provided food, and probably did so, but we have no record of their having been used. This is not surprising in view of the few records of the use of plant products for subsistence.

It is likely that plants were also used medicinally, though there are no clear records of this. Flowers at least were gathered for their scent or for adornment.

Two of those who have dealt with edible Tasmanian plants were writing at a time when the natural Aborigines were still alive, James Backhouse (1834) and Ronald Campbell Gunn (1841) and their remarks will be incorporated in the following review of the types of plant foods which were used by the Aborigines. Brough Smyth (1878) quotes a list of 'plants that could have been used for food by the original Tasmanian natives' which had been prepared for him by Ferdinand von Mueller, Government Botanist of Victoria.

FERNS

The only records of ferns as food for the Aborigines concern the soft upper core of the stem near the growing point in the tree-ferns, and the tender tips of the roots of the bracken. It seems unlikely that other ferns were sources of food, although it is just possible the young leaves of some species may have been chewed, if they were not unpleasantly astringent.

FLOWERS

Although flowers are not mentioned by GAR as having been sucked by the natives for their nectar, it is not unlikely that they were. Brough Smyth suggests those of species of *Xerotes* and *Banksia*, but others are likely, such as those of some *Epacridaceae*, *Myrtaceae* and *Proteaceae*, e.g. *Telopea* sp.

Although not directly relevant to the study of plant foods, the following record is of some interest -

GAR jnl 2/7/31, region of Mount Cameron East: WOORRADY convalescent. Since his recovery he had made use of a shrub by tying it round his head, neck, face, and such parts as were affected, and his recovery he attributed to the medicinal qualities of this plant (currajong). He would have a bunch of the leaves bound round his face, smelling it. I had formerly imagined that it was only used as a bandage, but now I learnt it was to act as a charm or from the medicinal qualities being inhaled up the nostrils.

FRUIT

Many more fruits are likely to have been eaten than the few recorded above. The Aborigines would have eaten anything they could find which was edible, and the following plants probably would have been sought for their fruits in season -

Astelia alpina 'Pineapple Grass'

The red berries are edible (Gunn, 1841).

Astroloma humifusum 'Native Cranberry'

Edible fleshy fruit; abundant in dry heaths (Backhouse, 1834), Gunn (1841). *Astroloma pinifolium* also has an edible fruit.

Billardiera longiflora 'Climbing Blueberry'

Blue, red or white berry, 6-8 mm long. Widespread and abundant.

Coprosoma nitida 'Mountain Currant Bush'

Fleshy fruit, edible; red to amber colour (Gunn, 1841).

Coprosoma pumila (*C. repens*) and *Coprosoma moorei*

Montane species having orange to red (*C. pumila*) and blue (*C. moorei*) berries.

Exocarpos cupressiformis 'Native Cherry'

Black seeds borne on a thickened succulent white or red pedicel; common in eucalypt forest (Gunn, 1841). There are four other Tasmanian species, in various habitats, with similar fruits, *E. strictus*, *E. syrticola*, *E. humifusus*, and *E. nanus*

Gaultheria hispida 'Snow Berry'

Succulent white fruit; shrub 1-2 m; in rainforest and wet eucalypt forest from sea level to montane (Backhouse, 1834; Gunn, 1841). Another species, *G. depressa* (= *G. antipoda*) is found occasionally; it is a sub-alpine.

Leptomeria drupacea

White fleshy fruit, c.6 mm long (Gunn, 1841). Another species, *L. glomerata* (= *L. billardieri*) has a red fruit and is a rare montane form.

Leucopogon spp.

Backhouse (1834) includes among the edible plants of Tasmania *Leucopogon lanceolatus*, a large bush growing along the sea shore, with some smaller inland shrubs of the same genus,

e.g. *L. ericoides*, produces very small white berries of a sweetish and rather herby flavour; all are 'called white or native currants in the colony'. Gunn (1841) repeats much of this description, but correctly calls the species *L. richiei*. This coastal species with white fruit is now known as *L. parviflorus*. *L. lanceolatus* usually has red berries, and was formerly common on the far north-west and west coasts but is now confined to a few small areas in the region and to Three Hummock Island.

Other species of *Leucopogon* are known from Tasmania, but in some of them the fruits are dry and inedible.

Muehlenbeckia adpressa

Vine with succulent fruits; widespread on sandy shores, except West Coast (Backhouse, 1834; Gunn, 1841).

Muehlenbeckia gunni 'Macquarie Vine'

Fruit similar to that of *M. adpressa*; occurs on West Coast (Backhouse, 1841; Gunn, 1841).

Muehlenbeckia axillaris

Occurs locally in Central Plateau and northern Tasmania. It is a small shrub, and the fruit can be either succulent or dry.

Note: Backhouse (1834) calls the 'Macquarie Harbour Vine' *Polygonum adpressum*.

Pernettya spp.

Brough Smyth (1878) suggests that the fruits of *Pernettya*, of which there are two Tasmanian species, were perhaps eaten.

Rubus gunnianus

Spreading dwarf plant; fruit a cluster of small red fleshy fruits; montane (Gunn, 1841).

Rubus parviflorus 'Native Raspberry'

Slender prickly shrub; fruit a head of red or orange fleshy berries like a coarse raspberry; lowland form (Gunn, 1841).

Sambucus gaudichaudiana 'Native Elder'

Undershrub; fruit yellowish-white, fleshy, c.3 mm long, containing 3-4 stones; local in gullies and alluvial flats in northern Tasmania (Gunn, 1841).

Styphelia adscendens

Small fleshy fruit; occurs on dry heaths (Gunn, 1841).

Brough Smyth lists the following - *S. lanceolata* (= *Leucopogon lanceolatus*), *S. humifusa* (= *Astroloma humifusum*), *S. oxycedrus* (= *Cyathodes juniperina*), *S. richiei* (= *Leucopogon parviflorus*) and *S. sapida* (= *Lissanthe* sp.)

FUNGI

Little is known about which Tasmanian species of Fungi are edible and which are poisonous. As a group they are regarded as poisonous except for the few that have been tested. Our doubts about edibility are to be contrasted with the definite knowledge of the Aborigines, who had eaten Tasmanian fungi for thousands of years. Most of the fungi described by GAR as having been eaten by the natives are probably determinable from field studies. Fungi have little food value, and perhaps were eaten by the Aborigines as a savoury rather than as foodstuff.

Brough Smyth (1878) suggests that the Aborigines may have eaten *Agaricus* spp., *Clavaria botrytis* and *Hydnum* spp., and probably many other mushrooms occurring in Tasmania. *C. botrytis* (= *Ramaria* sp.) may be identifiable.

GUMS

Gunn (1841) suggested that the gum of the 'Black Wattle' (*Acacia mearnsii*) and 'Silver Wattle' (*Acacia dealbata*) might have been chewed by the Aborigines as a mild sweet. Compare with GAR's record concerning the gum of the 'Prickly Mimosa', and with Gunn's comment that the seeds might have been eaten.

HERBS

In any discussion of the use of herbs by the Aborigines, it must be remembered that the word 'herb' may have had a different connotation when Backhouse and Gunn were writing, being used by them in the sense of 'pot herbs'.

Gunn (1841) has listed several herbs among the native plants available as food for man, while Backhouse (1834) refers to species producing arrowroot-like materials when leached with water, examples being the roots of the bracken when reduced to a pulp and mixed with cold water; and the roots of the swamp plant *Typha*. However, the Tasmanian Aborigines did not have any type of container, except a *Haliotis* shell, in which fluid could be heated. This would have restricted the use of herbs to those which could have been chewed as a savoury, or cooked with roasting animal tissue, or eaten raw or after roasting (for a short time) in the ashes or on hot stones.

In keeping with restricted use, few references are to be found in GAR to herbs, and those said to have been eaten by the Aborigines are not determinable. The only references are -

1. GAR jnl 6/6/31, (Cape Barren Island): John Smith told GAR that on Cape Barren there were roots and herbs of various kinds to which the natives are remarkably fond.
2. GAR jnl 18/6/32, West Point: Jack (TUN.NER.MIN.NER.WAIT) showed GAR a herb like groundsel which the sealers eat with mutton birds.

Note: By the 1830s the European groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) could have become well established on the Furneaux Islands, as well as in Tasmania. For the natural

Aborigines, however, there were several Tasmanian species in this genus which are perennial herbs, such as *Senecio lautus* and *S. capillifolius*, which are widespread on sea coasts. There are also such Cruciferous plants as the cresses which are native to Tasmania, and now several introduced forms as well.

3. GAR jnl 17/6/33, Elliott Bay: the old woman LY.WELOPE had been subsisting on kelp and herbs. Other references record her diet as being 'kelp and roots' (29/6/33) and 'kelp and green herbs' (FM, p.813, note 103).

Note: The term 'green herbs' was used in Robinson's day for certain Chenopodiaceae such as the oraches and samphire.

Backhouse (1834) refers to *Oxalis microphylla* (= *O. corniculata*) 'Yellow Flowered Sorrel', and Gunn (1841) also to *Oxalis lactea* (= *O. magellanica*), which has white flowers. Their leaves can be eaten.

Gunn (1841) includes cress among his vegetable foods, and lists three species, *Cardamine heterophylla*, *C. nivea* (= *C. hirsuta*) and *C. tenuifolia*.

Brough Smyth (1878) adds *Nasturtium terrestre* (= *Rorippa islandica*), *Barbarea vulgaris* (= *B. australis*) and *Lepidium spp.* (cress); and the herbs *Apium prostratum* ('Sea Parsley'), *Eryngium vesiculosum*, *Sonchus oleraceus* (the 'Sow Thistle' of Europe), an introduced species. The Tasmanian species is *Sonchus megalocarpus*.

Gunn (1841) also refers to plants of the family Chenopodiaceae and its genera *Atriplex*, *Chenopodium*, *Rhagodia*, *Salicornia* and *Threlkeldia*. In the genus *Atriplex* are the 'Saltbushes' *A. paludosa*, *A. cinerea* and *A. billardieri*, which are mainly coastal plants. These may have been chewed by the natives, but it seems less likely that they were used as flavourings when roasting meat. Salt may have been of importance to the inland tribes whose animal food was obtained by hunting, but the salt content of meat is likely to have been sufficient for a normal diet, especially because the usual method of roasting preserved the animal's juices. (There were also salt deposits in some localities, e.g. the Salt Pan Plains.)

There are two Tasmanian species of *Chenopodium*, the herbs *C. glaucum* and *C. pumilio*; two species of *Rhagodia*, *R. candolleana* ('Coastal Saltbush') and *R. nutans* ('Climbing Saltbush').

The two Tasmanian species of *Salicornia* (= *Sarcocornia*), *S. blackiana* and *S. quinqueflora* grow in salt marshes and resemble the European Samphire.

SEEDS

The two references from GAR to the use of seeds concerns two species of *Acacia*. However, the fact that the Aborigines made grinding stones in the form of pestle and mortar, shows clearly that they had use for this type of utensil. Many of them had a religious significance, being used in the preparation of red ochre, but that certainly did not apply to all of them.

A likely use of a pestle-and-mortar type utensil is for grinding seeds, and those of *Casuarina* spp., *Banksia* spp., *Spinifex* and grasses with large seeds could well have been used to prepare farinaceous pastes, which could be cooked on heated stones.

Brough Smyth (1878) suggests such use of the seeds of *Acacia* spp., *Polygonum* spp., *Rumex* spp., *Linum marginale* ('Wild Flax'), the sedges *Ehrhartia distichophylla* (= *Tetrarrhena distichophylla*) and *E. tenacissima* (= *T. juncea*), and the grass *Festuca fluitans* (= *Glyceria fluitans*).

STEM BASES

Brough Smyth (1878) lists the liliaceous plants *Arthropodium paniculatum* and *A. strictum*.

To be included among the marsh plants whose swollen stem bases are succulent, are some listed by Brough Smyth (1878), viz. *Rumex bidens* ('Mud Dock'), as well as species of *Anguillaria* (= *Wurmbea*), *Burchardia*, *Caesia*, *Heleocharis* (= *Eleocharis*) *sphacelata*, *Hypoxis*, *Scirpus maritimus*, *Triglochin procera*, *Typha brownii* (= *T. angustifolia*) and *Typha muelleri* (= *T. angustifolia*).

STORAGE ROOTS

Swollen, fleshy roots and tubers were undoubtedly a source of food for the Aborigines, and were either roasted or eaten raw.

Brough Smyth (1878) lists the following plants as having fleshy roots - *Geranium dissectum* (= *G. parviflorum*), and the composite *Microseris forsteri* (= *M. scapigera*), the 'Native Dandelion'.

The orchids were well known as having swollen tuberous roots which provided food for the Aborigines. Backhouse (1834) and Gunn (1841) refer to *Gastrodia sesamoides*, which produces bulb-tubers of the size, and nearly the form, of kidney potatoes. These were roasted, in taste resembling beet-root, and were sometimes known in the Colony as native potatoes.

Gunn (1841) adds the genera *Caladenia*, *Diuris*, *Microtis*, *Prasophyllum*, *Pterostylis* and *Thelymitra*.

Brough Smyth (1878) adds species of *Acianthus*, *Caleana*, *Calochilus*, *Chiloglottis*, *Corysanthes*, *Cryptostylis*, *Cyrtostylis*, *Eriochilus*, *Glossodia*, *Lyperanthus*, *Spiranthes*, that is, nearly all the genera of orchids which were known from Tasmania at that time.

UNDERGROUND SHOOTS

No other underground shoots are mentioned by Backhouse (1834), Gunn (1841) or Brough Smyth (1878) than the 'Bracken Fern' ('Brake'). None of the reeds are referred to.

THE WESTLAKE PAPERS

Ernest Westlake was in Tasmania from December 1908 until June 1910, and while there visited many parts of the northern, eastern and southern regions and made a trip to the Furneaux Islands. During these various excursions he interviewed several people of mixed blood, several old settlers who had known the Aborigines at Oyster Cove and a few whose parents and other relations had had contact with the original people in the 1830s and 1840s.

The records for the Cape Barren Islanders concern a mixed-blood people whose original male parents were Europeans or had lived in such a community, and whose original female parents were either Tasmanian or Australian Aborigines, the first associations involving Tasmanian Aboriginal women but by the mid-1830s Australian women had entered the community, bringing their particular knowledge of plant foodstuffs. This mixed-blood people, moreover, had a European way of living, which meant among other things very different possibilities for cooking than those of the natural Aborigines, in particular utensils in which fluids could be heated and ovens for baking. The range of plants available for food was therefore increased.

Westlake's enquiries from people in mainland Tasmania, on the other hand, about the plant foods of the Aborigines, largely concerned the fullbloods removed to the Aboriginal Settlement, originally located on Flinders Island but moved to Oyster Cove on D'Entrecasteaux Channel in November 1847. Among this group was the halfcaste Fanny Cochrane Smith who lived with these people until she married the European William Smith in October 1854. Although these fullbloods were some of the original Aboriginal people of Tasmania, the information about them which Westlake reported has the defect that it relates to a people long dead, whereas the halfcastes of the Furneaux Islands (and their European associates) were giving information at first hand.

Just as the original Furneaux Islanders were subjected to the influence of the arrival of Australian Aborigines among them, those who reported on the Tasmanian Aboriginal fullbloods were subjected to the influences of meetings in mainland Australia with Australian Aborigines. Many of Westlake's settler informants, and especially those living in the Channel area, confused what they thought was Tasmanian with recollections of the Australian Aborigines gained during visits to Victoria or while working there. This confusion of origin, coupled with forgetfulness and distortion in recollections at least forty years earlier - Trucanini died in 1876 and Westlake's interviews did not take place until 1909 - produced a wide variety in the supposed facts he was told.

In a number of instances, Aboriginal names are recorded for the various foodstuffs, and these can often be used to associate more definitely records relating to individual plants. However, this is not always so, because sometimes a name does not correspond with others for the same plant. In this matter, the names given by the mixed-bloods of Cape Barren Island agree better than those given by others, and it has been noticed that the confusion of naming relates especially to Westlake's informants from the Channel region.

Lastly, it must be remembered that the vegetation of Tasmania shows differences from place to place. While that of the Furneaux Islands is very much the same as that of north-eastern Tasmania, other regions, such as south-western Tasmania are markedly different. Such differences mean that

food plants found in one region may not be found in another.

Altogether, it must be said that while Westlake's records are generally similar to those of G.A. Robinson, James Backhouse and R.C. Gunn, confirm them as a whole and sometimes in particular, they cannot be regarded as proof that a particular foodstuff was used by the natural Aborigines.

RECORDS FROM THE FURNEAUX ISLANDS

FERNS

'Tree-fern'

Armstrong (Harry): LAKRY - man fern; pith edible; not so sweet as grass tree.

Collis (A.H.): LAKRY - pith of old man fern; young halfcastes would eat tree fern heart; cut down tree with axe and split; eat the inside; two species, one with rough bark, the other smooth, rough the sweeter.

Beeton (Henry): LACKRY - pith of fern tree; quite soft and young at top where leaves spring out; eat butt end.

Thomas (Philip): LACHRY - heart of tree fern; cut open stem, take out inside and roast it, burying it in the fire.

FRUITS

Carpobrotus rossii 'Pigface'

Armstrong (Harry): pigface - seeds very nice raw.

Blyth (Robert); CANNYGONG - fruit of the pigface; sweetish taste like slightly rotten apple.

Collis (A.H.): pigface - seed eaten when ripe.

Knight (G.W.); halfcastes eat pigface, the fruit by preference but also the leaves which they chew.

Smith (Mrs John): never knew natives eat leaves or pigface, because if you do your mouth gets parched as if you had been eating alum.

Beeton (Henry): KANICOM, KANICONG - pigface; eat seeds only.

Note 1: The seeds of the pigface are very small, so that it was the fruit which was eaten and with it the seeds.

Note 2: The following record perhaps refers to the pig-face - Mansell (Mrs Nancy): 'Potato vine' - 'seed vessels eaten when ripe'. However, both the potato and the 'Kangaroo Apple' are solanaceous plants, and although the latter is not a vine, its flowers are similar to those of the potato.

Exocarpos cupressiformis 'Native Cherry'

Armstrong (Harry): wild cherry eaten.

Leucopogon sp. 'Native Currant'

Armstrong (Harry): wild currant eaten.

Solanum laciniatum 'Kangaroo Apple'

Armstrong (Harry): Kangaroo apple - eaten raw; has skin like a banana, which cracks early in the morning; gather those; very nice raw, something like a banana.

Solanum vescum

Maynard (Miss): Kangaroo apple - green when ripe

FUNGI

Collis (A.H.): like yellow mushroom ('old granny'); cook and roast on the coals. Perhaps *Boletus* sp.

Polyporus mylittae 'Native Bread'

Beeton (Harry): TOURY, TOORY - native bread; roast on fire.

Mansell (Mrs Nancy): native bread - eaten when green and soft.

Note: The word 'green' may mean 'young' in this context.

LEAF BASES

Xanthorrhoea australis 'Grass Tree'

Armstrong (Harry): grass tree - at all seasons supplies an edible pith about a foot long (similarly the old man fern); can be eaten raw; slightly sweet. Young grass tree with all green leaves source of edible top; hit the stem half a dozen times with an axe and pith will come out, breaking off where soft.

Collis (A.H.): grass tree - cut off crest with axe; in the butts of the stalks a sort of pith, very sweet.

Beeton (Harry): grass tree - butt fine eating where leaves spring out.

STEM BASES

'Rushes' / 'Sedges'

Armstrong (Harry): PONGRALEPRA - grows in lagoon; rush-like leaf; root eaten.

Beeton (Harry): rush - broad leafed rush that grows in sandy ground in the edge of banks; very broad leaf; eat the long soft roots, as sweet as sugar ('sweet rush').

Collis (A.H.): PONGRALEPRA - reeds; halfcastes used to eat them, said very nice; grow in water like a waterlily. (Mrs Collis): bullrush; roots eaten.

Beeton (Harry): PLONDOLIVA, PONDALKEEPA - grows on soft bottoms of lagoons.

Mansell (Mrs Nancy): PONGROLEEPA - a thing in the water with a long root; roasted like a potato.

Thomas (Philip): PANAMLIE - like leek, in the lagoons, the leaf spreading out on the surface of the water as much as 5 ft like the leek or English rhubarb; the root down in the mud that is eaten.

Note: This plant is one of the *Cyperaceae* / *Juncaginaceae* / *Typhaceae* series, perhaps *Typha*, *Eleocharis* or *Triglochin*. PANAMLIE is doubtfully different from PONGROLEEPA.

STORAGE ROOTS

Thelymitra sp. 'Sun Orchid'

Beeton (Henry): WOOLLOOLY - two little taters like a yam at the end of the root; little blue flower and one broad leaf like a leek; larger taters in sandy soil than in hard ground; roasted in hot ashes.

Collis (A.H.): WOOLALIE - egg at bottom of little bulb.

Collis (Mrs): bulbous root of onion-like plant; blue flower.

Mansell (Mrs Nancy): WOOLLILY - a kind of yam eaten on Cape Barren.

UNDERGROUND SHOOTS

Pteridium esculentum 'Bracken Fern'

Armstrong (Harry): WOGLY - fern roots; halfcastes cook them under the ashes, but have not much taste.

Blyth (Robert): WOGLIE - young shoot (stem) of the fern just as it comes above ground.

Beeton (Harry): WOGLY, WOGLIE - soft edible end of common fern; cook the growing end which is quite soft.

Thomas (Philip): WETHERLOONA - underground roots of fern; wash clean and roast.

MISCELLANEOUS

Casuarina sp. 'She-oak'

Collis (A.H.): she-oak apple - roasted when green, soft, young; kernel eaten, sweetish sour and astringent.

Note: These were the young female cones.

'Kelp'

Beeton (Henry): natives used to eat bull kelp.

RECORDS FROM MAINLAND TASMANIA

FERNS

Gleichenia sp. 'Umbrella Fern'

Miller (Mrs John): umbrella fern - eat the roots; roast on fire; taste like asparagus.

'Tree-fern'

Blyth (William): LACHRA, LAKRAH - common bracken fern; used to roast and eat. (Error: identification.)

Hughes (Mrs Alfred): LAKRA, LAKRAH - yellow centre of tree fern, at top.

Imms (Mrs): LACHRA, LACRA - heart of tree fern; used to split, take it out, roast it and eat it.

Watson (Horace): LACARA, LAKARA - split fern with wedge; obtained the central pith and this thrown into the ashes and roasted.

Miller (Mrs John): LACRA - old man fern; get the heart out and roast it.

Smith (Tasman): LACKRA fern- the heart is as bitter as gall when raw, but when roasted is as floury as a potato and very palatable; takes a long time to roast.

FRUITS

Billardiera Longiflora 'Climbing Blueberry'

Blyth (William): MULLA, MULLAH - native fuchsia, dark blue berries; used to throw them on the coals, eat the berry.

Hughes (Mrs Alfred): MULLA - purple berry.

Imms (Mrs): MALA, MARLER - blue bulbs eaten (vine).

Miller (Mrs John): MULLA - large blue berry on a vine.

Miller (Mrs William): MULLA - blue berry on a vine.

Smith (Joseph): MULLA - blue fruit on a vine; roasted.

Smith (Tasman): COMILLA - berry which grows on a square blue-bell, hollow inside, with a seed like a turnip seed; when ripe seed will drop out; eaten raw; vine can be cooked.

Carpobrotus rossii 'Pigface'

Benbow (Mrs): pigface - used to eat the green leaves raw like a salad with mutton fish.

Blyth (William): CUNNYGONG - fruit of pigface; red-purple; sweetish taste like slightly rotten apple.

Davis (George): would eat the fruit of the pigface but not the leaves.

Hughes (Mrs Alfred): KAN.I.KOOM - the wild pigface; blacks would eat the fruit.

Exocarpos cupressiformis 'Native Cherry'

Thomas (Henry): wild cherries half an inch long and stone at end, growing on bush.

Dunbabin (Thomas): ate native cherry.

Rubus parviflorus 'Native Raspberry'

Dunbabin (Thomas): ate wild raspberry.

Solanum laciniatum 'Kangaroo Apple'

Thomas (Henry): kangaroo apple - very nice; when quite ripe crack open; just like floury potato when boiled.

FUNGI

Polyporus mylittae 'Native Bread'

Miller (Mrs William): TOOREELA - native Bread.

Miller (Mrs John): TOOREELA - native bread; believe eaten.

Smith (Joseph): native bread eaten.

Smith (Tasman): native bread - really eaten

'Punk'

Benbow (Mrs): punk - when blacks got punk young and green they would eat it raw.

Imms (Mrs): little brown punk off the logs eaten; has a sourish taste.

Note 1: The word 'punk' has two slightly different meanings, one for rotten wood or a fungus growing on wood, and the other for these when dry which were used as touchwood. In its botanical meaning, the original use of the word 'punk' meant the hyphal sheet inside the rotten tree, but later 'punk' was applied to the fruiting bracket.

Note 2: In her use of the word 'green', Mrs Benbow probably meant soft and young. There are few fungi which are green in colour.

GUMS

'Wattle gum'

McGuire (Mrs): wattle gum runs out after trees are barked, and they would go up and poke it off with a stick and eat it.

STORAGE ROOTS

Gastrodia sesamoides 'Potato Orchid'

Blyth (William): LANAPANA - native yam, very bitter; brown stem with bell flowers.

Hughes (Mrs Alfred): would dig up LONAPONA, a root like a sweet potato, with a stick and eat them as they dig them; and sometimes roast them.

Hughes (Mrs Alfred): LONA.PONA - 'black man's potato': bulbs at the root, white and water-looking inside; have a sweet taste.

Imms (Mrs): LANA.PANA - sweet potato.

Miller (Mrs John): LUNNABRINNA - like a tater; dig out of ground; like a kidney potato.

Smith (Joseph): LERNER.MERNER - as big as a kidney potato

Smith (Tasman): LUNNA.BUNNA - shape of a kidney potato, the thickness of one's thumb; blue flower; when roasted like a ball of flour. (Error identification: see below.)

Riley (Thomas): ate native taters, probably peeling off the skin after roasted.

Thelymitra sp. 'Sun Orchid'

Benbow (Mrs): black man's potato; a blue flower on a long inflorescence, growing like an ear of corn.

Hughes (Mrs Alfred): another (than LONAPONA) with a long leaf like a lily and pretty blue flower.

Imms (Mrs): COMICA - root the shape of an egg, with pretty blue flower and leaves like a lily.

Note: Apparently an error of naming.

Miller (Mrs John): WILLILLA - get before it flowers (pretty blue flower) and roast it.

Smith (Joseph): WILLILA - roasted.

Smith (Tasman): WILLILLA - grows about 18 in.; like a young oat with a thicker leaf, the large ones $\frac{3}{4}$ in. wide; a grass not a vegetable; has roots like a potato, 1 in. long and $\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick; four or five; a blue flower like a potato; roast it; green leaves good to eat.

Thomas (Henry): a grass 8 in. to 9 in. high and underneath a little bunch of root-like potatoes, 2¹/₂ in. long and as thick as a finger.

UNDERGROUND SHOOTS

Pteridium esculentum 'Bracken Fern'

Blyth (William): WOOLIE - young shoots of fern stem just as come above ground.

Davis (George): never heard of their eating the fern root, which is very bitter stuff.

Galagher (James): ate green fern, the root good.

Imms (Mrs): dig roots of common fern, roast them and eat.

Miller (Mrs John): fern - the common sort; ate the young root before it shoots up; roast them.

Smith (Tasman): fern root - eaten, brake fern; very nice washed.

Note: 'Brake' is another form of the word 'bracken'.

The lists for the Furneaux Islands and for mainland Tasmania are generally speaking, similar to that of the Tasmanian record.

Most of the names given to the plants by the Cape Barren Islanders and others are the same as or similar to the corresponding Aboriginal names (Plomley, 1976), but a few are not. Are the latter derivatives of Australian Aboriginal words, or are they no more than confusion and forgetfulness?

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the fact that there are few definite records relating to plants used for food by the Tasmanian Aborigines, and these few largely from a single source, the field journals of G.A. Robinson, they do point to the types of plant materials which were eaten by the Aborigines. These plant materials fall, generally speaking, into fruits, seeds and flowers, soft leaf bases and fleshy roots. As well, the fungi were an important source, and there was a miscellaneous lot which included seaweeds and certain saps and gums.

The most obvious feature of the part played by plant foods in the diet was that in Tasmania the sources of such food comprised both a limited range of materials and a low production in any area. On the other hand, there are few species of Tasmanian plants which produce a fruit larger than a berry of, say, 5 mm diameter; moreover, much of the fruit is often occupied by the seeds. On the other hand, the density of these food plants in any area is not usually heavy, so that the labour of collecting the fruits in any quantity would have been considerable.

The other important aspect of the use of plants for food is that many of them are seasonal, being available only for short periods of the year. This restriction applies principally to the fruits, but is also applicable where growth is periodic, as found on the one hand with those fungi forming an

above-ground spore-producing cap or vesicle, and on the other hand where the edible part is a region of active growth, as with the rhizomes of the bracken-fern and the developing seed heads of *Casuarina*.

This study has brought out two aspects of the use of plants for food by the Tasmanian Aborigines. One of these is that to consider classes of foodstuff rather than individual species utilised, demonstrates the uses to which the plant species of the Tasmanian environment provided a supply of food.

The other feature of these plant foods is that they comprise two general types of supply, one which was available only seasonally, such as the fruits, and the other which could be drawn on all year, such as the stem bases.

Finally, a comment on G.A. Robinson's records as a whole. The definite localities given in his journals may make it possible to identify with some certainty many of the plants he records as having been used for food by the Aborigines. What is now required is to make collections in the places named. However, it should not be expected that this will always point to single species, because it is likely, especially with the berries, that more than one species grows in the same habitat.



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