

As discussed before in reference to La Trobe's reports, cannibalism is one of the first accusations levelled at any group of Indigenous people inconveniently in possession of land desired by Europeans. Almost all reports are coloured by avarice and the repulsion felt by Europeans for such acts while ignoring the incidence of the same in their own societies.

Many colonial accounts mention that skin is removed from behind the knees and in front of the elbows and indicates a more ritualistic practice than hunger or blood lust would suggest. In one of the most complete reports, Charles Sievwright, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, refuses to leave a ceremony where Jarcoort people prepare the body of one of their daughters. The girl was killed during an argument brought about when two opposing clans are forced to take residence together on George Augustus Robinson's ill-informed insistence. Sievwright knew that both groups would be insulted to live in the same camp and wasn't surprised when violence occurred.¹

Siewwright got on well with the Jarcoort and understood them better than most but it didn't stop him from insisting on witnessing the mourning ceremony while lounging on a log from which vantage point he could watch in comfort.

The girl's body was opened at the chest and the initial incision was accompanied by prolonged singing and wailing. Methodically the organs, blood and serum were removed from the chest cavity, and portions of skin meticulously sliced away. Sievwright admitted the grief displayed was extraordinary but refused to go when requested and continued to watch as portions of the body were consumed. He interprets the enthusiasm for the consumption as avidity and ferocity but can't explain why this particular ceremony is conducted in this way while all other burials he has observed proceed normally. The girl's head is smoked for preservation and memorial and in all other ways the respect and grief attest to the people's love for the girl.

Siewwright is repulsed when offered part of the body but the people seem confused by the Assistant Protector's refusal to leave the scene. Perhaps they think he wishes to be included in the ritual, but whatever they think or Sievwright thinks it is compromised by cross-cultural misunderstanding. Sievwright had been told by the

people that they abhorred cannibalism but, naturally, he is shaken by the scene he witnessed and unable to see it in any light but savagery. He believes they have no 'religion'.²

Something else is going on in this ceremony and it might be repugnant to most other civilisations but to call it cannibalism in the absence of true understanding is extremely prejudicial and to report only that part of the ceremony obnoxious to Christians without explaining the attendant grief and ritual is mischievous.

Modern political figures might be excused by their historical ignorance for using such examples in a prejudicial way, but anyone with anthropological awareness must read that report and know that the ceremonial use of the body and the obvious grief mean the incident is not an example of cannibalism. What the ceremony means has been lost with the destruction of the Jarcoort elders who might have been able to explain the higher significance.

The squatter, CB Hall, was more alert to the subtle cultural messages than most. He reported to La Trobe: 'Their cannibalism and cutting out of warriors' kidney fat were only manifestations probably of *their* religion or superstition, as the rack and the faggot have been, and the prison is now, the means by which the dominant orthodoxy of the day is vindicated on the other side of the world'.³ This perceptive gentleman was never invited to comment again but his abhorrence of murder seems to evaporate as he is later accused of allowing his cook to shoot two Jacelet men.

Perhaps Sievwright gained a more profound insight into the ritual after the Muston's Creek massacre. A party of Kirrae, two men and their wives, two other women and two children, left the Mount Rouse Protectorate in 1842 on their way back to their own country but while camped at night a posse of at least eight white men, possibly with the involvement of the squatters Osbrey and Smith, stormed into the camp and five of the Kirrae were killed. On that excursion the squatters had some neighbours, some labourers, a visiting cousin, an accountant, a draper and the proprietor of the *Melbourne Daily News*.⁴ Quite a party. It seems everybody liked to get involved in a bit of rough justice.

In *Scars in the Landscape* Ian Clark brings together all the documentary evidence on numerous murderous clashes of the period, and reports one of the participants in this incident saying