'Belé: Sauvage de la Nouvelle-Hollande' (1845) from L. Verguet's *Histoire de la première mission catholique au vicariat de Mélanésie*. Paris, 1861:32.

LEOPOLD VERGUET AND THE ABORIGINES OF SYDNEY, 1845

Hugh Laracy

On 21 June 1845 a party of French Catholic missionaries, members of the Society of Mary (Marists) arrived at Sydney. They stayed there, living at Woolloomooloo, until November, arranging shipping to take them on to New Guinea and the Solomons.¹ One of the party was Leopold Verguet, who subsequently left the mission in Melanesia and passed through Sydney again, briefly, in April 1847, *en route* to France. He later became a canon of the cathedral of Carcassone. There he wrote an account of his missionary travels, in which he included extensive descriptions of the people in the various places he visited. A talented artist, he illustrated his text with his own drawings. The first edition of Verguet's *Histoire de la première mission catholique au vicariat de Mélanésie* was published at Carcassone in 1854.

The contacts with Aborigines described in the book occurred during his first visit to Sydney. The extract which follows is my selected translation of pages 38-48 of the second edition, published in Paris in 1861.

The value of Verguet's work stems in large part from the extreme paucity of firsthand accounts of Aborigines in the Sydney area in the 1840s. They had almost been wiped out there by that time, and any detail concerning them is to be welcomed. Even though the picture it presents is scarcely a beautiful one it is important in that it makes clear in particular and personal terms, and not in abstract and collective ones, the indignities inflicted on the Aborigines by European contact. Verguet's account is also of interest in that it reflects what were then currently accepted opinions. Although he was a humane and sympathetic observer of non-Europeans, he still shared the view that there was little good to be said of Aborigines.

Translation

The Manners of the Natives Around Sydney

... Not all the natives are in the interior; there are some who keep wandering around Sydney. During the night they shelter in a wood, lighting a fire and dosing down beside each other. As soon as the sun rises they take the road to town, to beg and to get drunk. In the early days of colonisation they came to town in their bush clothes, that is to say entirely naked. But they have since been persuaded to present themselves decently clad. The men now wear trousers and jackets; and the women, long aprons and white smocks. Among them scarves and hats are common to both sexes, men and women alike wear them.

They gather gum from trees and bring it to town, where it is normally sold by the women. The English buy it from them for twenty-five francs [i.e. about £4] a hundredweight. This fortune does not remain long in the hands of the natives; they buy brandy with it and drink without moderation, making themselves drunk as soon and as often as possible. Poor natives! From their contact with Europeans they learn only our vices.

1 For an account of this missionary effort see Laracy 1976 and 1970. For Marist beginnings in Sydney see Hosie 1968. Comments on Verguet (and also on Aboriginal missions) are contained in Wiltgen 1979.

In a letter of 15 August 1845, I wrote to M. Gary, my brother-in-law, 'it is not rare to see near the entrance to Port Jackson gatherings of natives. The rocks of the coast provide many caves there, where they can pass the night sheltered from bad weather. Furthermore these semi-naked people are not fastidious about their choice of a sleeping quarter. In good weather the first place they come to will do. I have often noticed two who come to pass the night in a forest beside our house, opposite our windows. They light a little fire and then lie down, smoking a pipe to put them to sleep; when the man has smoked enough, he passes the 'tongue-burner' to his wife. Soon they are asleep and the fire is out. Woken by the cold, they re-light their little fire, smoke another pipe, and go back to sleep. This sequence continues till morning. Then, they light their fire for the last time, warm their limbs, numb and covered with dew, eat and set out for Sydney. Their breakfast is scarcely tasty; you would need to be a savage to dare touch it. It consists of the remains of roast meat which they have begged the day before. They place the bones on a stone and remove the flesh from them with another stone, or they just gnaw them with their teeth. From their point of view they are happy and prefer their life to ours. The English have tried several times to make them abandon the unsettled life, but all such efforts have been useless. The savages have never been able to apply themselves to work. One governor built a house for them, which they could enjoy at their ease; they came to spend several days there but eventually became bored and returned to the bush.'²

Early Wars against the Natives

In the early days of the colony when the Europeans were few the savages took advantage of their superior numbers to steal sheep and destroy gardens. The settlers, annoyed by this brigandage, were forced to repel them with musket fire and to hunt them like wild beasts. It is thus that Van Diemen's island has been entirely cleared of natives. I have heard it said that around Sydney there have been frightful massacres and that at certain times the ground has been strewn with the corpses of blacks. Although regretting that the English were not able to civilize the savages by gentle methods, one is inclined to excuse the settlers for their severity. The settler is not unwilling to share his civilization with a native, but he must also be careful to ensure the success of his affairs, or he will ruin himself and his family.³ If, when he is applying himself diligently to his work, the native obstructs him, has he not the right to repel force with force? The settler is on his own ground, he has paid the native for the land which he occupies and which he cultivates;⁴ he possesses it by title of rightful owner, both as conqueror and as cultivator. Even so, it may be concluded that the settlers whose main concern is religion, rather than commerce, would be the only ones to work efficiently on civilizing the natives.

The Tribe of Tamara

Following the conflicts between the natives and the settlers, the natives were forced to yield the land and retreat far into the interior.

2 This is probably a garbled reference to the Native Institution, a school founded by Governor Macquarie at Parramatta in 1815. It could also refer to Macquarie's attempt to create a black peasantry when in 1815 he established sixteen Aboriginal men and their families on land at George's Head.

3 For a recent useful, though slight, survey of 'contact history' see Willey 1979; see also Ross 1976.

4 This statement would have been news to the Aborigines of the time, as it is to those who are currently battling for land rights, especially in Queensland.

Those of them who decided to remain among the Europeans have become quite inoffensive people, but retain the distinctive characteristic of Australian natives. They are easy to approach and I have been able to study them at my ease. I have even drawn several of them, whose portraits I have sent to Europe.

Belé, of the tribe of Tamara, is one of those I have drawn. I went to draw the natives in their camp under a rock at Double Bay, where I met them by chance. These natives spend the nights in woods on the edge of the town; they seek to shelter from the wind and camp sometimes in one place and sometimes in another. They shelter on the slope of a hill, under bushes or in holes in the rocks. I arrived at Double Bay about 8 a.m.; by the edge of the sea I met five natives eating. What a poor meal. But it was a pleasure to see them eat it. An iron cook-pot was in the midst of them. Into it they threw a handful of dried grasses which they drew out impregnated with a liquid; they then opened their mouths widely and put this disgusting grass in with two hands, and sucked it most enthusiastically. I asked them what was in the pot. They told me it was sugared water; there was also, very probably, a good quantity of brandy.⁵ Thus I explained to myself their delight with this favourite dish; and I understood that they did not swallow this dried grass but used it as a sponge. When the water was all gone they lit a pipe of tobacco which they then passed from one to another. All smoked it, even an old woman who was in the group. I asked them who was their chief. 'Tamara', they said. 'Is he with you?' I said. 'No,' they replied, 'he is up there under that rock'.

I climbed towards the rock indicated, and soon found myself in the midst of about twenty natives; the women, seeing me coming, wrapped themselves in their capes; they were apart from the men. 'Is Tamara here?' I asked them in English. The women answered in their own language and gestured towards the other end of the group. There I found Tamara and his wife peacefully smoking a pipe. I asked Tamara's permission to draw his portrait; he offered to come and pose at our house. But, remembering how much Belé, another native, had become bored the previous day sitting one hour in front of me on a chair, I preferred to run back to the house by myself and return to the rock with my paper and crayons. There under the rock I made portraits of Tamara, of a woman and of a child. The natives, at first timid kept their distance, then, little by little they gathered around to see my work, and as the picture advanced they burst out laughing in recognising their chief on my paper.

A Catechism Lesson

While I was drawing the portrait of a woman one of my confrères, Father Paget,⁶ who had joined me, questioned Tamara about his religious beliefs. The chief made himself understood in a kind of English jargon which the natives learn easily. He showed much good sense in his words; he was not embarrassed like the other natives his eye was lively and sharp; he was conscious of his superiority. We learned from him that the savages of these parts believed in a being who created the sea, fishes, trees, axes, fire, in fact, everything. 'Where will you go, Tamara, if you are good', my confrère asked him. 'I will go to Heaven', he replied. 'And if you were wicked where would you go? 'I would go into the fire', he said. I have not changed his answers in any way. We spent all the morning there talking to these people and teaching them the catechism. They did not seem to me to be as deprived of intelligence as I had expected from reading the accounts of certain travellers. Still, this conversation was too serious to please all our audience, and so they gradually drifted away from us and picked up their blankets and went back to sleep around the fire.

5 This concoction was known as *bull*. For descriptions of how *bull* was made see Gunson 1974:I, 71, note 62.

6 Paget was later killed in the Solomons. For an account of his life see Paget 1915.

A Native Camp

When they were not passing the time eating or smoking, their whole occupation was to keep alive the fire, around which they were crouched. Wrapped up in their blankets they look like bundles or sacks of old clothes thrown here and there without any order. They were so well enveloped that you could not even see their heads. From time to time one of these inert bundles would come to life and there would emerge from it a black head covered with long crinkly hair, beneath which I saw two small eyes, thick lips, and above all two swollen cheeks which served as a bellows. At other times, it was a black arm, long and skinny, which came out through a hole in the blanket to throw a little dry wood on the fire. As soon as the flame flared, the head and the arm, having nothing more to do, retreated into their sanctuary.

These people love dogs very much and have a great number of them, with whom they share their food and their shelter. Moreover, when the native sleeps the dogs lie around him, and even on him, both to give and to receive warmth. Besides that, there was no mattress, no sleeping mat, even for the chief, only mother earth, nothing more. I leave it to the reader to imagine their filth; it is this as much as misconduct which causes the ulcers that can be seen on the legs and necks of several of them.

As I was about to go back to Sydney a native arrived. He had in his hand several wooden spears, several metres long and with three points at one end. I looked at these spears with an air of surprise, which seemed to ask what they were for. Tamara hastened to tell me that they were to harpoon fish; and, in fact, another native soon appeared with a fish in his hand. Having finished my business with Tamara I gave him some bread, some cheese and a cotton cap to thank him for his co-operation. He appeared to me well-satisfied. He was much more grateful for this mark of my affection than for that with which I flattered him in the beginning in telling him that his likeness would cross the sea and that it would carry his fame as far as Europe...⁷

Catholic Missions Among the Natives

The English clergy, occupied with caring for the colonists, do not have enough priests to be able to afford to send any of them into the interior in pursuit of the natives. Some Italian priests of the Passionist order have undertaken this repulsive apostolate. They have to civilise and instruct the most wretched people on the earth. The native of New Holland is man fallen to the lowest level of degeneration.⁸ However, despite what certain travellers and theorists have said, he is still, despite his faults, infinitely superior to a brute. But what a distance from the savage with black skin, with frail limbs and a wild look, from a savage, in a word, hideous to behold, to a European civilised by Christianity! The natives cannot easily think of non-material things. For several years the Passionist missionaries have worked with them.⁹ They have had great difficulty learning the language; this language varies from place to place, each lot of people has its own dialect. The missionaries have not yet been able to baptise any of them. The task of these dedicated priests is very difficult; before turning them into Christians, they have to

7 Verguet here notes that in Sydney he also drew the portrait of the French consul, M. Faramond.

8 This is an idea which was once widely held, and still appears to survive in certain circles in Queensland. For an historical account of views about the place of Aborigines in the human group see Mulvaney 1964. On pages 50-52 of his book Verguet reiterates his belief in the basic humanity of the Aborigines in a subsection titled 'The common origin of all men'.

9 For accounts of this mission venture, which was undertaken from 1843 to 1847 on Stradbroke Island, near Brisbane, see Thorpe 1950, and Laracy and Laracy 1973.

civilise the people a little. Through dedication and patience the missionaries won the confidence of a tribe; they asked the natives to allow some of their children to be sent to the Catholic school in Sydney. The natives entrusted two children to them and these were sent to Bishop Polding. These children were doing rather well in their new life; but after some months, the parents, unable to endure the separation, asked insistently to have them back.¹⁰ They accused the missionaries of having killed the children and threatened them with death if they were not given back to them soon. This argument was unanswerable; it was necessary to yield to it and to renounce the fine hopes which had been held for the Christian education of the children

[Verguet concludes his comments on Aborigines by quoting a long description of them and of their way of life from a letter of one of the Passionists, Fr. Luigi Pescioroli, dated 29 January 1844].¹¹

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10 In fact three Aboriginal children, two boys and one girl, were taken back to Sydney by Polding after his visit to Stradbroke Island in May 1845. They stayed there for about five weeks. At the same time Polding also took back with him two half-caste boys, sons of an Irishman named Dick Smith, who were still with him in September 1845. See Thorpe 1950; also Forster 1979.

11 Verguet 1861:46-48. This letter, translated into English, is re-published in Thorpe 1950: 214-217.