HERE BE CANNIBALS

CANNIBALISM IN AUSTRALIA

There is no doubt that cannibalism existed among them until recent times, and possibly in such dangerous areas as Arnhem Land, in the far north of Northern Territory, may exist to this day. Motives for the eating of human flesh, as elsewhere, are varied, and often closely intertwined. The need for sacrifice; the demands of magic; the desire for revenge; all these are present, as elsewhere; but in the case of the Blackfellows they are perhaps less clearly evolved and crystallized.

Garry Hogg, *Cannibalism and Human Sacrifice*, p. 179

The eating of human flesh was not practised by the Australian native to the extent that it was by the South Sea Islander. The term 'cannibalism' is usually taken to mean gorging on human flesh, and with relish; and that seems a valid description of the cannibalism of the Melanesian *indigènes* of New Caledonia, who appear to have regarded man-meat much as we regard the Sunday-joint. Not all cannibalism is the same in purpose.

In hard summers, the new-born children were all eaten by the Kaura tribe in the neighbourhood of Adelaide, according to Dr McKinley. In 1933 I was able to talk to old men who had eaten human flesh. The chief of Yam Island described to me how he had eaten finely-chopped man-meat mixed with crocodile-meat, at his initiation. He added that it had made him sick. The purpose, as he put it, was 'to make heart come strong inside.'

In the Wotjobaluk tribe, a couple who already had a child might kill their new-born and feed its muscle-flesh to the other one to make it strong. The baby was killed ritually, by striking its head against the shoulder of its elder brother or sister.

Human flesh-eating among many tribes was a sign of respect for the dead. At a Dieri burial, relatives received, in strict order of precedence, small portions of the body-fat to eat. 'We eat him,' a tribesman said, 'because we knew him and were fond of him.' But revenge cannibalism is typified in the custom of the Ngarigo tribe, who ate the flesh of the hands and feet of slain enemies, and accompanied the eating with loud expressions of contempt for the people killed.

Colin Simpson, *Adam in Ochre*, Angus & Robertson, 1938

The body [during burial rites] was dried over a fire or in the sun, after the internal organs had been removed through an incision and it had been packed, bound up and, usually, painted. It was then made up into a bundle, and is carried around by the mourners until their grief had been assuaged. It is finally disposed of by internment, cremation, or by being put inside a hollow tree. In some districts, the preparation is complicated by cannibalism, so that the bundle consists only of the bones, or the bones and the dried skin.

Cannibalism forms a ceremony, not only in connexion with mummification in parts of Queensland, but also precedes the exposure of the body on the tree-stage among other tribes. Parts of the body have to be eaten by prescribed relations. Practised in Queensland, as part of burial, cannibalism was considered a most honourable rite, to be used only for persons of worth. It was, incidentally, a quick method of preparing the 'mummy,' the flesh being eaten instead of merely being dried in the sun or over a fire.

A. P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, *The Australian Aborigines*, Angus & Robertson, 1938

The first case was at Apawandinna, halfway from Cowarie. A very fat Blackfellow chased an emu and became overheated in the chase, and died. The other Blackfellows were very worried over the death. They examined the man, but could not find anything to show as a cause of his death. He was a good-natured man, very popular with the tribe, so that it was unlikely that he had been 'boned' – a form of magic widely practised among the Wonkonguru tribe.

Finally, the old men of the tribe decided to cook the body. They cut it up and distributed it right round the camps of the tribe, which at that time extended from Killalpaninna to Birdsville in Queensland. The idea of the old men was that if the dead man had been 'boned,' his flesh would poison the man who had 'boned' him, and anyone who was innocent would be protected from such a death by eating a piece of him. I talked it over with one old man who had

eaten it in order that the rest would not think him guilty of ‘boning’ the dead man. He put it to me this way: ‘'Spose 'em me no eat 'em. 'Nother fella say, Him kill 'em. Me eat 'em, then all right.’

Horne, G. and Aiston, G., members of the Australian Mounted Police, *Savage Life in Central Australia*, Macmillan, 1924

It appeared that a white man by himself on such a mission as mine might easily find himself wrapped in pandanum-leaves and roasting quietly on the ashes of an Arnhem-Land fire. ‘From well corroborated evidence, a form of cannibalism is still practised by three groups between the Blyth and Liverpool Rivers,’ Gordon Sweeney, a Patrol Officer in the Native Affairs Branch, one of my predecessors, wrote. ‘The bodies of all except the children, old people, and the diseased are cut up after death, the bones taken out and the flesh cooked and eaten. There appears to be no special ceremony at the time, or ceremonial significance attached to this practice, at least among two groups, the Manbuloi and the Gumauwurrk. A third group, the Rauwarang, do not allow the children to eat. The bones are shortly afterwards handed to the relative who is to carry them at the usual Buguburrt corroboree, which under this name is practised throughout the social area. The reason given for the cannibal practice in all three groups is that the people think that eating human flesh will make them clever at hunting, at spearing kangaroos, finding wild honey, getting yams, etc.’

I wondered about Sweeney's warnings of Cannibalism. I had known the Australian aborigine for too long to believe that he was a blood-thirsty, man-eating savage. Provoked, he *was* savage. But I did not mean to be provocative. As for man-eating, I discovered later that this was only partly true. The Liverpool River natives did not kill men for food. The ate human flesh largely from superstitious beliefs. If they killed a worthy man in battle, they ate his heart, believing that they would inherit his valour and power. They ate his brain because they knew it represented the seat of his knowledge. If they killed a fast runner, they ate part of his legs, hoping thereby to acquire his speed.

S. Kyle-Little, *Whispering Wind*, Hutchinson 1957

Among the native tribes of Australia, the bodies of those who fall in battle, honoured chiefs, and newborn infants, are frequently consumed to obtain their qualities, just as in the Torres Straits (which separate the northernmost territory of Australia from the southernmost part of New Guinea) the tongue and sweat of a slain enemy are imbibed to get his bravery.

E. O. James, *Origins of Sacrifice*, John Murray, 1933