

# The Making of a Bark Canoe

By FREDERICK D. MCCARTHY

THE aborigines of Australia are not noted for their skill in building canoes, and when Captain Cook in 1770 saw some examples of the bark type used by the natives of Botany Bay he remarked that "they are as mean as can be conceived", and "are, I think, the worst I ever saw". It must be remembered that he had just come from Polynesia where magnificent sea-going canoes were in use—the contrast between the craft of the islanders and those of the

mainland is very marked indeed. The bark canoe of south-east Australia, of which there are several varieties, is one of the most primitive vessels employed for navigation by man, and is only a step in advance of the log raft. Examples are on exhibition in the Australian Museum.

The illustrations of this article are from photographs taken some thirty years ago by the late T. Dick at Port Macquarie, and they constitute a unique series in which are shown the various stages in the building of a single-sheet bark canoe on the coast of New South Wales. A bark canoe is not difficult to make, but it took about ten days to complete, and had to be done in the spring when the condition of the sap made it possible to remove with comparative ease the sheets of bark up to fifteen or more feet long.

The swamp mahogany, red gum, river gum and stringy-bark trees provided the bark in suitable sheets of the large size required. One man climbed the tree to a height of eighteen or twenty feet, or to where it was considered the bark would lift, and with his axe cut a groove through the bark right round the trunk. In the meantime his companions cut a similar groove several feet above the ground, and he cut a vertical one, to link the two encircling grooves, as he descended the tree. In some localities the rough bark was chipped off with a sharpened stick, while the sheet was still on the tree, but in other places, as at Port Macquarie, it was removed subsequently. The flattened end of a pole was then inserted between the bark and the trunk, and by pressure upon this lever the cylindrical sheet of bark was loosened and eased off the tree. To make the bark pliable it was heated over a long open fire, or a bundle of sticks and leaves was lighted inside the cylinder, which was tied at each end and rolled about to



The aboriginal, standing on a sapling as a ladder, is levering the cylinder of bark from the tree trunk.

Photo.—Thos. Dick.

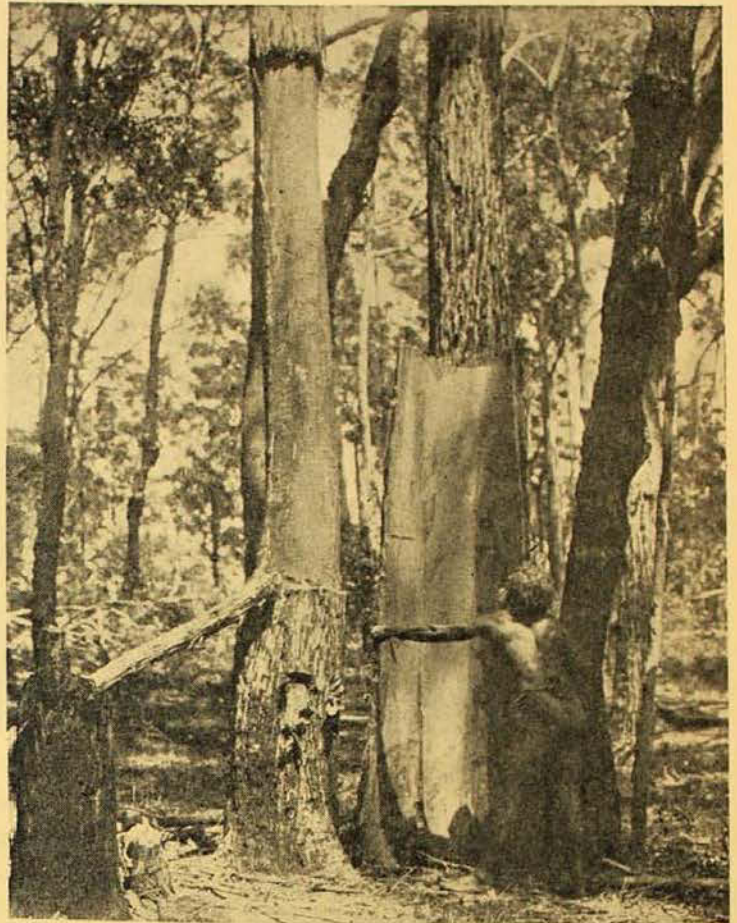


ensure that the full length was treated. It was then necessary to bend upwards and fold as tightly as possible several feet of bark at each end to form the frilled bow and stern; sometimes this was held together by a binding of rush-fibre cord or a strip of vine, but in some places a hardwood skewer was pushed through the folds of bark to hold them more securely.

The vessel had now taken shape, but had to be strengthened before it was ready for use. Its sides were not rigid, and to stiffen them a stem of an acacia or eucalyptus sapling was bound along the inside of the gunwale, the bark-fibre cord passing through holes punctured in the bark with a sharp-pointed stick. The sides, too, were apt to flatten out, as the large canoes were three feet wide, and an additional piece of sapling or vine was bound securely across from side to side near each end of the canoe. Struts or ribs were rarely used in south-east Australia. One or two short wooden pegs were set up on one end to hold the fishing-spears and paddles. A large slab or stone, or a thick mass of mud, was placed on the middle of the floor of the canoe to form a hearth on which a small fire was set. The bark became stiff and strong when it dried, and after about twelve months' service it became water-logged and the canoe had to be discarded. A piece of gum, mud or clay was usually carried to patch any leaks that developed. A shell, bark or gnarl container served as a bailer.

Each family had one or two canoes which were often left on the beach or river bank near the camp, but when strangers were about they were concealed in the bush. Thus when Bass and Flinders appeared at Twofold Bay in 1799, two natives paddled to the shore, swung their canoes on to their heads, and ran into the bushes fringing the beach.

The canoe, although made by the men, was used chiefly by the women along the coast for fishing with hook and line or for gathering oysters and cockles on mud flats and shoals. Often two men, the paddler in the stern and the hunter in the bow, floated slowly along a river or over a shallow bay, and obtained a good



The cylinder of bark is lifted from the tree to be carried to a convenient working place.

Photo.—Thos. Dick.

supply of fish with the aid of the wommera and pronged spear. One or two fish were cooked on the fire in the canoe and eaten to ease the pangs of hunger during the day's activities.

In some places the canoes were propelled by pressing a long pole or spear against the bottom of a shallow stream or shore, and with short, oval bark paddles in deep water. In other localities wooden paddles up to five feet long were employed, and the coastal men often adapted their broad-ended spear-throwers to the purpose.

The woman sat in the middle of the canoe, with her baby across her knees, and perhaps several other children in the frail craft. Sometimes she knelt on the bottom, with her knees pressed against the sides of the canoe to hold her body in position. In either case, she had to move very carefully to tend the fire or baby, or to change her position, to avoid upsetting





The "rough" of the bark is trimmed off with a stone axe.

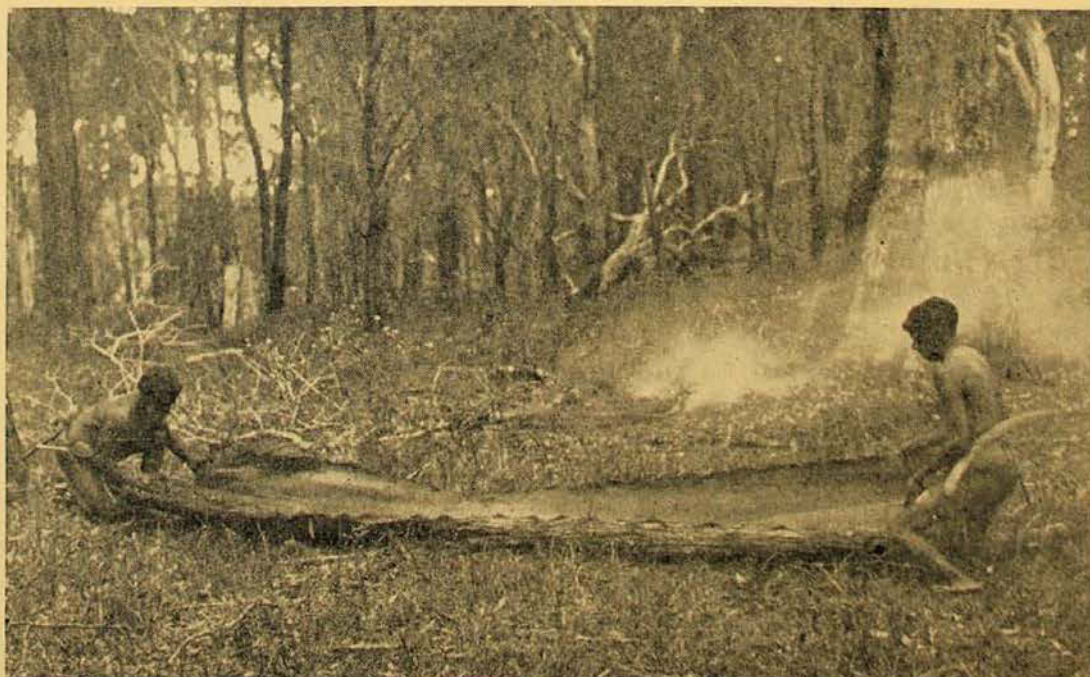
Photo.—Thos. Dick.

the canoe, the gunwale of which was only six inches above the water. Fish was a staple food of the coastal tribes, and stormy weather was no deterrent to the women-folk in their task of collecting it. However rough the weather might be, every effort was made to launch their canoes. If the canoe overturned, the fisher-woman put the baby on her shoulders, and the other children hung on

as best they could while she swam ashore; the children saved, she retrieved as much of the gear as possible. Captain Tench, of the First Fleet, was impressed by the dexterous manner in which the natives managed their canoes. They were often able to turn over an upset canoe, climb back into it, and bail out the water. The canoe was turned broadside-on when landing on a beach.

After heating the ends are folded and tied.

Photo.—Thos. Dick.





The canoe in use. The occupants are using multi-pronged fishing spears. Photo.—Thos. Dick.



Canoes of the type described were seen in large numbers by the early navigators. In 1770 Captain Cook saw groups of between six and twenty canoes, in each of which were one or two women fishing or gathering cockles on the mud flats, at Botany Bay. In May, 1788, Governor Phillip saw fifty canoes on a beach of this bay, and in 1789 his officers counted fifty-seven on Port Jackson during the spring when the men were making more in the woods.

Although these canoes were poorly made, they served the requirements of the natives, who made some remarkable trips

in them, their need being vital enough to override any fear or danger involved. Long journeys up rivers for trading and other purposes were made, but the most daring ventures were crossings of several miles of open sea from the coast of New South Wales and Victoria to islands such as Tollgate, French, Brush, Broughton, and Montague. The Five Islands' group was also visited by these primitive canoe-men, and Captain Tench reported having seen them several miles out to sea off Port Jackson. Many sable warriors no doubt provided tasty meals for sharks when their canoe upset on one of these hazardous voyages.

## LOBSTER OR CRAYFISH?

### A CORRECTION.

On page 169 of the last issue it was stated that "only occasionally is *Jasus lalandii* taken along the New South Wales or Victorian coastlines, for it much prefers the colder, more southern waters of Tasmania". The meaning which it was intended to convey was that it was not

commonly taken on the eastern coast of Australia, generally the New South Wales region. It was not desired to impose political limits to its distribution southwards, hence the inclusion of the Victorian coast.

This crayfish occurs abundantly in Bass Strait where thousands are taken off the Victorian coastline.

E.C.P.