REVIIEWS

TRADITIONAL BUSH MEDICINES:
AN ABORIGINAL
PHARMACOPOEIA

COLLATED AND RESEARCHED BY ANDY
BARR, JOAN CHAPMAN, NICK SMITH AND
MAREE BEVERIDGE. GREENHOUSE
256 PAGES.

In recent years the Western World has witnessed a growing concern about the natural environment, termed by some the "Green Revolution." This has included a growing awareness of the value of natural products and, in turn, spawned an interest in the potential commercial exploitation of medicinal substances used by indigenous people. In 1978, the World Health Organisation initiated a programme to start evaluating and utilising folk medicines as alternative approach to regional health problems. During recent years in Australia several books have been written on the possible uses of the Aboriginal pharmacopoeia in Western medicine. One such example is Traditional Bush Medicines.

This book is set out to present an account of Aboriginal medicines of the Northern Territory. Over 80 plant species used in the preparation of medicines are discussed in detail. These are arranged in an alphabetical series according to species. Each entry contains biological data which provides a description of morphology, habitat and distribution; therapeutic data concerning the active chemical constituents; and an account of Aboriginal preparation and use of the medicine. The only cultural information supplied is some of the local Aboriginal plant names and the communities to which the Aboriginal advisers belonged. The entry for each medicinal plant is accompanied by a botanical sketch and several colour photographs, including habit forms and close-ups. The appendices contain additional pharmacological information.

Among the more interesting examples of medicines discussed are those used for the treatment of common ailments. Colds and headaches, for instance, can be treated by drinking the liquid produced by pouring water over the dried leaves of the narrow-leaf fuschia bush. A treatment for diarrhoea is to sip the liquid strained from boiled scrapings of the inner bark of a northern species of fig. Skin lesions may be dealt with by dabbing them with charcoal made from the wood of the kapok mangrove. The prickles of a dead finish wattle are used for the removal of warts; inserted in the base of the wart they are left there until the wart starts to bleed.

The medicinal data was collated by a team that included botanists and pharmacists. Significantly, however, there does not appear to have been any input from a person with anthropological training. The structure of the book reflects a merger of botany with pharmacy. Each plant listed has a botanical description of the species along with an analysis of its chemical composition. This book is essentially a listing of medicinal plants chosen by the research team for the possible chemical basis of their efficacy. In the preface it is stated:

Any endeavour to determine the therapeutic effectiveness of Aboriginal traditional medicines cannot include the esoteric power and mysticism of deeply held beliefs that are neither analysable nor reproducible. So while the metaphysical can be respected, only the physical can be studied by modern scientific methods.

Conventional medicine demands quantitative evaluation of the active constituents in the use of plants. Standards of preparation and dose can then be determined. Although the compilers of this work obviously consulted widely with the Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory, the fact that they selected only medicines with a suspected
chemical basis greatly decreases its ethnobotanic flavour.

Due to its methodology *Traditional Bush Medicines* cannot be said to present an Aboriginal view of medicinal and healing practices. To understand Aboriginal uses of medicine one must consider Aboriginal concepts about the cause of disease, the properties of medicines (many of which are tied to Aboriginal mythological and cosmological systems), as well as the important sociological role of Aboriginal healers. A chapter treating these issues would have greatly increased the value of this book as it would have provided the reader with a greater insight into the nature of Aboriginal relationships to the Australian landscape. However, although a somewhat Eurocentric view of Aboriginal medicinal practices, the book does provide some new data and hints at the complexity of Aboriginal knowledge of the environment.

*Philip A. Clarke*

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**THE MAKING OF THE ABORIGINES**

**BAIN ATTWOOD, ALLEN & UNWIN, SYDNEY, 1989. 181 PAGES.**

This book signals an important development in the study of Aboriginal history. Namely, the growing ability among historians to analyse the cultures of both the 'colonising' Europeans and the 'invaded' Aborigines and to begin to understand the complexity of the contact that has taken place and still is taking place between the two. In *The Making of the Aborigines*, Bain Attwood concentrates on ideological change and the development of a new identity among aboriginal people in nineteenth century Australia. He structures his book around the following assumption:

...the aboriginal peoples who lived in this continent 40,000 years or more before the coming of the Europeans in 1788 were not the homogeneous group implied by the name 'Aborigines'; rather, they were named and have named themselves 'Aborigines', 'blacks', 'Kooris' or 'Murris' etc. only in the context of colonisation and of their ensuing relationship with Europeans - who, conversely, came to be 'Australians'. (Attwood 1989: x)

One of the main techniques he uses to develop his argument, is to construct detailed analyses of the lives of key people. He provides illuminating descriptions of change in Aboriginal society by following the lives of Aboriginal people living through the traumatic times of colonial Australia. He also traces the lives of important Europeans of the period, such as the Missionary Friedrich Hagenauer.

Henry Reylonds, in his book *The Other Side of the Frontier*, was the first to give prominence to the Aboriginal reactions to the early