

Simply a handy-book for boys. Donald Macdonald and *The Bush Boy's Book*

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In October 1911 newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne carried reviews of *The Bush Boy's Book* (from hereon Bush Boy's) by Donald Macdonald.

Under this title Mr. Donald Macdonald, the well-known member of the *Argus* literary staff, has issued a handbook of very practical value in all matters relating to Australian bush craft ... The handbook is the sort of publication that everyone should have in his pocket on setting out for an excursion into the bush, or to the seaside ...¹

The book is compiled mainly for boys, and consequently is plain and simple in form, but it does not alter the fact that the adult can learn just as much from its letterpress and many diagrams as can the juvenile enthusiast.²

The book is indeed a manual for camping in the bush covering everything from how to choose a site to dealing with snakes.

The book is in the genre of writing about camping. There were newspaper articles dealing with cooking in the bush camp prior to Macdonald's book. In 1906 *The Australasian* published Bush Cooks.³ In 1909 *The Mercury* published Camping Out.⁴ In 1911 *The Herald* published Cooking In Camp.⁵ Macdonald's was the earliest book on the subject of camping. Almost half of its 260 pages concern food – what to bring, what to shoot or catch, and how to cook it. It is with these this article is concerned.

The cover of the book depicts a young man in what looks very much like a Scout's uniform, though any insignia have been removed, standing under a gum tree one hand on his hip the other touching the brim of his hat, mountain ranges in the background, looking out at the buyer. An archetypical Bush Boy.

Warning: I have cited words directly from a range of texts. There is one which is offensive to Indigenous Australians.

Donald Macdonald & The Bush Boy's Book

Macdonald began his career as a journalist first with the *Corowa Free Press* and in 1881 the Melbourne *Argus*.

His early sketches of country life and his Nature reflections in the *Argus* and *Australasian* were easy, unstudied reveries, tinged with humour. Pieces on subjects as diverse as the red kangaroo, life in the Riverina and Sunday in Sydney were seen by the author as 'moments of respite from the duties of daily journalism'. A selection published as *Gum Boughs and Wattle Bloom* (1887) had a remarkable success.⁶

¹ The Bush Boys Book, *Hamilton Spectator* 3 October 1911 p.4

² Bush Boys, *The Age* 7 October 1911 p.4

³ Bush Cooks, Country Sketches, *The Australasian* 26 May 1906

⁴ Camping Out, *The Mercury* 9 October 1909 p.11

⁵ Cooking in Camp *The Herald* 30 December 1911

⁶ This background material was sourced at the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

He was the first Australian journalist to go to the South African war. On his return he began a weekly column in the *Argus* called 'Nature Notes and Queries'. The 'Nature Notes' column became 'Notes for Boys' in 1909 which evolved into *The Bush Boy's Book* two years later.

Of the Bush Boy's purpose he wrote:

This is intended to be simply a handy-book for boys. (It) deals with subjects which, from experience, are I think likely to interest boys.⁷

Fire

Fire is at the heart of cooking in the bush. Throughout the book are descriptions of fire and its uses when camping .

... have the fire in a hollow – the logs crossed above it so that as the logs burn across the centre they keep slipping into the fire underneath. This is the aboriginals' way.^{8 9}

The fire for the grill should have neither smoke nor flame The flame will start up when the fat drips from the meat in the fire, that cannot be helped .¹⁰

The best fuel for grilling, if you can get it, is dry pine cones or honeysuckle cones. Along the eastern shore of Port Phillip, and on most of the southern coastline there are groves of banksias, and you will find a litter of dry cones underneath them.¹¹

If you attempt to use a camp fire for cooking, except when it is almost burned down, you have neither a good camp fire nor a good cooking fire. It is much better to have a separate for cooking – and never a big one. A slow fire is absolutely necessary for boiling or grilling, though in frying it is not so important.¹²

He writes of the dangers of an unsupervised fire and of leaving camp while there are still coals burning in the fire

Nothing is so disastrous as a bush fire. As soon as you begin camping, make up your mind that no carelessness on your part will ever lead to such a calamity.¹³

This was a new discussion in the field where fires behaved themselves. I think it speaks to the depth of Macdonald's love of and immersion in the bush.

Cooking equipment

His suggestions here are minimal but suitable for preparing the meals he discusses : a frying pan, one or two billies¹⁴ a double foldable grill¹⁵ and a small butcher's knife¹⁶ . In the three earlier newspaper articles the suggested cooking equipment is much the same.

⁷ Introduction, *Bush Boys* 1911 unpaginated

⁸ Macdonald 1911 pp.22 -23

⁹ In three instances Indigenous practices are referred to, one unfortunately using racist language.

¹⁰ Macdonald 1911 p.38

¹¹ Macdonald 1911 pp. 34 - 35

¹² Macdonald 1911 p.35

¹³ Macdonald 1911 p.16

¹⁴ Macdonald 1911 p.34

¹⁵ Macdonald 1911 p.38

¹⁶ Macdonald 1911 p.50

Macdonald has the space to describe more cooking gear that repurposed existing materials:

- (a) kerosene tin, cheap, is equally good for a carrier, a camp pot, or water bucket ... you can pack a lot of stuff into them for the trip, that may may not be carried in any more convenient way.¹⁷

A bush safe, Macdonald wrote:

... is a necessity, for one of the pests of the bush in summer time is the blow fly ... A bag safe swinging in the wind keeps (what's stored in the safe) cool and sweet. A bran bag makes a very good safe ... The advantage of the bran bag is that it's light texture allows the air to pass through, and keeps the blow flies outside.¹⁸

Showing his bushcraft Macdonald describes and sketches, among the fifty-odd drawings in the book - how to make a tripod from trimmed branches of nearby trees:

Put the tripod with the upper third of the long pole over the spot where you wish to build the fire. On it you can hang kettles or cans ... you can cook half a dozen different things at one time, giving each its required heat.¹⁹

Meats

Macdonald gives short directions for cooking corned beef, pork, grilled chops, and steak.²⁰ He does so also for sheep's fry, pigs cheeks and small birds.²¹

Australian Wild Game

This chapter is sandwiched between two on guns and shooting – Out With The Gun and The Boy Rifle Shot. Having been told how to shoot, this is about hunting wild game. I think this placement that leads to this chapter being about hunting the game and has nothing to say about cooking them.

Macdonald begins with a defence of state laws on seasons for hunting wild game not from an ethic of conservation but how well the laws work to having an annual stock for shooting.

Every boy who ever carries a gun should know the game laws of his State and remember them ... Game that is being threatened with extinction, as all game would be if we were allowed to shoot as pleased, are protected all the year round to give them a chance to multiply again.²²

Possums have become so scarce even in the great gum forests of Australia that I think they may no longer be regarded as animals that provide sport ... The professional tracker, in his search for fur has ransacked nearly every forest, and possums are so rare that they are now protected by law for the whole of the year.²³

There are notes on hunting wild ducks but no recipes.

¹⁷ Macdonald 1911 p.23

¹⁸ Macdonald 1911 pp.25 - 26

¹⁹ Macdonald 1911 p.47

²⁰ Macdonald 1911 p.36

²¹ Macdonald 1911 pp. 40 -41

²² Macdonald 1911 p.72

²³ Macdonald 1911 p.80

Similarly there are notes on hunting quail but no recipes. It gives MacDonald scope, however, to talk about hunting dogs.

The best sport, of course, is to be had with trained dogs, and there is no greater pleasure than to see a couple of well-broken pointers or setters working quail.²⁴

Kangaroo is only mentioned in relation to the ban on hunting them in Victoria.

There is an entry for wallabies who are better snared than shot. But no recipes for them are discussed.

He advocates hunting the fox. 'My advice in every shooting boy is to kill a fox on sight wherever you can find him. They are making havoc with our native game and rapidly becoming a public pest.'²⁵

All things considered, and with almost any kind of game, you will find stalking and still hunting more agreeable sport than the battue²⁶ in any form, which always suggests to me the kind of sport that you might expect from shooting sheep in a crush or spearing bullocks in the city abattoirs.²⁷

Fish

This chapter is the longest and most detailed in Bush Boy's because 'The boy camper of to-day and of days to come depends much more on his fishing rod than upon his gun for camp supplies.'²⁸

He discusses the Conger, Skate, Leather Jacket, Catfish, English Trout, the Sea Schnapper, Bream, Barracouta, Whiting, Sea Salmon, Crayfish, Flathead, Yellow Tail, and Flounder - bait-for each, how to catch them, recounts his own experience with the fish.

As an example, here's some what he says of the eel:

It is a curious fact that many of the finest fishes in both salt and fresh water are by most people under-valued. Take the eel as I know none, with the exception of the ocean skate, that is really better than the eel ...²⁹

I have many pleasant boyish memories of eel-fishing. In summer and while the water is clear they bite only after dark. ... My favourite plan as a boy was to catch with hand lines, having a lead sinker at the end and two or three hooks, worm-baited, fastened at intervals of a couple of feet from the sinker. When fishing on dark nights even with a fire, a good plan is to lop a piece of white paper into the spare line coiled on the bank. As soon as the eel bites, the paper moves and at once catches your eye in the darkness.³⁰

And whether you fry or stew your eel, when you have caught him, make no mistake he is a delicate, dainty and wholesome fish. The boy who has a prejudice against eels is much to be pitied.³¹

²⁴ Macdonald 1911 p.78

²⁵ Macdonald 1911 p.78

²⁶ A technique in hunting where game is flushed out of safety by human beaters towards the hunters.

²⁷ Macdonald 1911 p.78

²⁸ Macdonald 1911 p. 91

²⁹ Macdonald 1911 pp. 90-91

³⁰ Macdonald 1911 p. 91

³¹ Macdonald 1911 p. 93

Vegetables

This chapter gives brief instructions on how to cook common vegetables mainly by boiling them. Beetroot, cabbage, new potatoes, spinach (including silver beet, the thinnings of turnips, the tops pinched off beans, young nettles, milk thistle and young vegetable marrows) are all mentioned.^{32 33}

Of more interest to me is a brief list of native plants that can be used for lack of vegetables.

There are few good substitutes for vegetables amongst Australian wild plants. The very young fronds of bracken or tree ferns may be boiled like asparagus, and the soft heart near the crown, baked. The ordinary nettle makes very good spinach, and there is a weed known as “fat hen” which can be used in the same way, The nettle, however, is the more reliable. Milk thistle, or “sow thistles”, when young, make a first-rate spinach. I have known them to be specially cultivated in Melbourne.³⁴

Pudding

They are not worth the trouble says Macdonald. If the camp is to last a week or so bring cake from home or make rice or sago. ‘Almost everyone can make it.’³⁵

Cooking ways

He discusses in broad terms methods for cooking meat, fish and birds. Mostly it’s grilled, stewed, broiled or fried. He describes two Indigenous ways of cooking.

... a good aboriginal way of cooking them (birds) is to draw the birds without plucking them, roll them in paper or a cloth, and bake them in a hole in the fire ... When they are properly baked in this way. The skin and feathers come cleanly away from the flesh.³⁶

Knead clay into a paste the consistency of, say, putty. Cover each bird or fish about an inch thick with the moist clay so that it is completely enveloped, then lay them on the previously-prepared fire, and in 20 to 25 minutes they were cooked to a turn. The clay is quite hard and when you crack it, the skin adheres to the clay. The niggers of the far north and north - west showed me this process.³⁷

Doing a Perish

‘Doing a perish’ is the expressive way bushmen have of describing the suffering of a lost man who may be at the last extremity for the want of food and water.³⁸

Here Macdonald describes how to find water using birds as guides, how to filter it when found, and also how to get water from the roots of mallees. Water sources also attract snakes and

³² Macdonald 1911 pp. 40 - 41

³³ Macdonald doesn’t have a list of what foodstuffs the camper should take. Piecing it together from his cookery suggestions and other sources it could include Beetroot, cabbage, new potatoes, spinach. silver beet, turnips, dripping for frying, flour (for bread) it looks like he imagines it would include a range of common vegetables.

³⁴ Macdonald 1911 pp.50 - 51

³⁵ Macdonald 1911 p. 37

³⁶ Macdonald 1911 pp.50

³⁷ Macdonald 1911 p. 51

³⁸ Macdonald 1911 p. 188

goanna, he writes, which can be dispatched with a blow to their head. A waddy³⁹ is more effective in bringing down birds than ‘stones, spears and all that sort of thing’.⁴⁰

Should the lost individual be on the coast ‘there is always abundance of food to be gathered at low tide’ – limpets, periwinkles, mutton fish. Crabs come out from fissures or lie close to the surface of the receding water.⁴¹

‘In range country where ferns are to be had, the heart of a tree fern can be baked ... almost every kind of fern are indeed a good vegetable’,⁴² Australia has three kinds of edible mushrooms and Macdonald describes them and suggests they be cooked directly on coals.⁴³

Sorrel leaves, sour grass, yams, the fruit of the she-oak are all edible. Berries of the boobyala (native juniper) can be eaten raw. Wild honey from imported bees gone feral is readily available.⁴⁴

Provisions

Macdonald doesn’t have a list of what foodstuffs the camper should take. Piecing it together from his cookery suggestions and other sources in the book it could include: chops, mutton, pork, steaks, pig’s cheeks, sheep’s fry, ham, corned beef, bacon, beetroot, cabbage, onions, new potatoes, spinach, silver beet, turnips, beans, peas, pumpkins, dripping for frying, bread, butter, eggs, mustard, pepper, salt, sugar.

Advertisements

Most of the advertisers in the book take their lead from the content. J. S. Scott advertises Fishing, Sandworms and Shrimps, and Tackle. There is a price list which can be sent only if the person seeking it mentions “Bush Boy’s Book”. P. H. McElroy advertises he has all the Sundries and Parts to Build a Boat or Canoe. He also has Canoes in Stock. Donald Mackintosh ‘of shooting fame’ advertises “Mac’s All Rounder Gun” Specially built for Australia. Vacuum Oil Make(s) Your Camp Life Comfortable with Oil Cook Stoves, The Rayo Lantern, and Vacuum Leather Oil which Preserves your Boots and keeps them easy and which is Used by many Government Survey Parties and Explorers. Chas M. Read Stores advertise that they are Head Quarters for Official (scouting) Equipment. Swallow and Ariell’s World Renowned Biscuits and Cakes shows a trio of scouts outside their tent - incipient Bush Boys - with no sign of the eponymous biscuits.

Macdonald has a notice among the advertisements for a proposed future book – Young Guard’s Guide . To my knowledge the book did not go ahead.

Bedding Down

Macdonald’s book was the first book to deal comprehensively with the subject of camping. When first published reviews said it was ‘ the sort of publication that everyone should have in his pocket on setting out for an excursion into the bush, or to the seaside or to the beach.’ Evidently the reviewer was right. The book went through four editions which speaks to the relevance of the book to the camper of those times. Reading the book so much of its matter on food holds true that arguably it can play the same role for the camper of today.

³⁹ A waddy is a carved hunting stick for throwing at animals and birds to bring them down or kill them.

⁴⁰ Macdonald 1911 p. 192

⁴¹ Macdonald 1911 p. 193

⁴² Macdonald 1911 p. 193

⁴³ Macdonald 1911 p. 193

⁴⁴ Macdonald 1911 p.37