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**Under the Eye of the Master:  
The Colonisation of Aboriginality 1770-1870**

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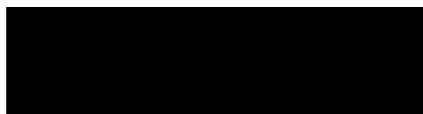
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## Abstract

In this thesis I pursue two interrelated questions: what was the connection between ethnology and colonial domination and what kinds of possibilities for relating to the Aborigines did these connections open and foreclose? I seek a resolution by tracing the local development of the science of man and exploring its points of articulation with political forms of domination in the period 1770 to 1870. I demonstrate that more intimate connections between knowledge and power developed in the second quarter of the nineteenth century with profound implications for the treatment of indigenous peoples. From the knowledge generated by the so-called agents of protection and civilisation in the 1820s and 1830s emerged the very notion of the 'Aboriginal Race' that was responsible for the disappearance of the egalitarian impulse from official policy. By 'demonstrating' that the Aborigines were 'peculiarly constituted', these agents paved the way for more elaborate institutional forms of surveillance and led to the exclusion of other (potentially less destructive) conceptions of Aboriginality. To them can be attributed the range of special measures introduced after 1840 whose primary object was to master the 'unregenerate habits' of the Aborigines and dislocate them from their cultural identity. As a potential alternative to this politics of mastery, I allude to the possibility of a more positive politics of recognition built into the Romantic tradition. Without overlooking the way in which the Romantics tended to either idealise or aestheticise Aboriginality, I attribute to them the same kind of recognition of and respect for difference that forms the basis of contemporary postcolonial approaches to otherness. I suggest that by attending to the strengths and weaknesses of their approach (strengths and weaknesses that have resurfaced in contemporary criticism) it may be possible to develop a more responsible way of relating to Aboriginal peoples.

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## Introduction

### Discovering the Other, Discovering the Self

In October 1984, a so-called 'lost tribe' of hunting and gathering Aboriginal people, members of the Pintubi language group, rejoined their relatives of the Western Desert. Not surprisingly, the meaning and significance of this 'contact-event' was contested among government agencies, the media, anthropologists and, of course, (though we are still inclined to forget) the Pintubi themselves. According to Fred Myers, an American anthropologist invited to act as a consultant for the Joint Working Party of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Central Land Council, the local Pintubi 'defined the newly contacted people as "relatives" (*walytja*)'.<sup>1</sup> From their perspective, these were people to whom they already owed a responsibility and with whom they enjoyed a long relationship, interrupted only by the fact that they were accidentally left behind when the others moved.<sup>2</sup> As they saw it, the event was perhaps cause for celebration, but it did not constitute a 'discovery'. Since the new arrivals were necessarily 'understood by the Pintubi as known people with individual histories',<sup>3</sup> as Myers put it, there was nothing in their return to excite sensation. Others, apparently motivated by a different sense of responsibility, had interests in making interpretations and discoveries of their own.

For the then Federal Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, the event became an opportunity to seek redemption for the sins of the colonial past. 'We want to make sure', he said, 'that this group's introduction to modern Australia is better than the introduction of Aboriginal people generally to white Australians since 1788'.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps in memory of the many other 'lost tribes' whose 'disappearance' James Bonwick had mourned over a hundred years before,<sup>5</sup> Holding was keen to protect the Pintubi from those who might disregard their rights or endanger their welfare. Paternalist to the last, he

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<sup>1</sup> F.R. Myers, 'Locating ethnographic practice: romance, reality and politics in the outback', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 15, No. 4, November, 1988, p. 614.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 614

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 614.

<sup>4</sup> M. O'Niell, 'Nine ancient desert people get their first sight of white man', *The Age*, 24 October, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> See J. Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, London, 1870, preface.

gave no indication that the Pintubi either might wish or be able to regulate their relationship to 'modern Australia' themselves. If the 'lost tribe' was to be properly safeguarded, it seemed, government needed to take control of their affairs. For this reason the whereabouts of the new arrivals was to remain confidential. Unfortunately, the press had already been leaked the location by a departmental official and a reporter from the Melbourne *Herald* had flown to the site the weekend prior to the official press release.<sup>6</sup> Within a matter of days, Holding was receiving criticism from a number of quarters for turning the event into a media circus and using it to further his own interests in the controversial land rights debate.<sup>7</sup>

Inevitably the media's voracious appetite for 'news' ran counter to the Pintubi stipulation that the event was in fact 'no news'. According to Myers, the banner headline of the Melbourne *Herald*, 'We Find Lost Tribe', was tantamount to an expression of media ownership of the event that was 'directly in opposition to the Pintubi desire for privacy as a form of control'.<sup>8</sup> For the press, of course, there were many possible stories, but old themes and stereotypes displayed their durability. *The Age* editorial for 25 October, instructively entitled, 'History made in the desert', offered the tired, but evidently not completely worn out, idealisation of the 'primitive' as happy innocent:

they and their ancestors have got along for 40 000 years without the benefits of white civilisation. No-one has asked them to fill in an assets test, lodge a tax rebate or front up to the ballot box to elect a candidate whom they have probably never met. In the desert they have not had to worry about the cost of living, how best to bridge the Medigap, and the best package for their retirement years. Theirs has been a much more basic struggle with the elements.<sup>9</sup>

To this putatively ironic comparison of the joys of the people with history and the people without, Chris Armstrong added his mournful reflection on a world simultaneously discovered and lost:

While most Pintubi yearn to return to traditional ways, they will continue to travel by four-wheel drive, eat white flour and draw welfare cheques. I suppose it must be thus. Primal man no longer roams the arid reaches

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<sup>6</sup> G. Roberts, 'How the lost Pintubi tribe (and a boy named Thomas) found Clyde Holding', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 October, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> See R. Frail, 'Minister accused of "lost tribe" stunt', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 October, 1984, pp. 1-2; and M. O'Neill, 'Holding under new fire in desert blacks affair', *The Age*, 26 October, 1984, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> See 'We find lost tribe', *The Herald Sun*, 24 October, 1984, p. 1; and Myers, 'Locating ethnographic practice', p. 615.

<sup>9</sup> Editorial, 'History made in the desert', *The Age*, 25 October, 1984, p. 13.

west of Lake Mackay. Gentle lord of spinifex and sand dune the world  
will not see his like again. I weep for him.<sup>10</sup>

For the *Herald Sun* even such trite romanticisations proved out of reach. Underneath the photograph of the 'lost tribe' that adorned the front page of 24 October, the editors placed the following enlightening caption: 'Last week they roamed in the desert...today, clothed in civilisation, they listen to pop music'.<sup>11</sup>

Against such manipulations, the approach taken by those whose 'specialised knowledge' authorised them to pass comment was apparently refreshingly considerate. Anthropologists and ethnologists from the Australian National University (ANU) to the University of Western Australia (UWA) united with various Aboriginal groups in their condemnation of the popular representation of the newly arrived Pintubi family as objects of 'primeval curiosity'. In his comments on the event, a senior lecturer in anthropology at the ANU suggested that 'the main interest for anthropologists would be a humanitarian one, to ensure that these people were not completely overwhelmed by curiosity from the outside world'.<sup>12</sup> For him, as for other anthropologists, the respectful approach was to treat the Pintubi as 'just another group who have relatives in the community they have contacted'.<sup>13</sup> An attitude that led the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* to suggest that members of the academic community had finally learnt to balance their scientific and humanitarian interests.<sup>14</sup> Given the fact that the very discipline of anthropology had been built upon a wholly unrestrained curiosity about 'primitive' others, it was of some moment to see its exponents adopt the outlook once pleaded by Jonathan Swift: 'man is first a human being and then a scientist: the priorities can never be sensibly reversed'.<sup>15</sup>

A more cynical disposition may perhaps lead us to question whether the ethnographic imperative which sent anthropologists out in search of the 'wild, unspotted savage' in the 1930s had finally given way to a sensitivity to Aboriginal demands for autonomy and humanitarian respect. A hostile debate, carried on in that same year, between scientists and sections of the Aboriginal community over the right to study

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<sup>10</sup> C. Armstrong, 'Living among the last of the desert nomads', *The Age* (Saturday Extra), 27 October, 1984, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> 'We find lost tribe', *The Herald Sun*, 24 October, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Frail, 'Minister accused of "lost tribe" stunt', p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Editorial, 'Aborigines as living fossils', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 October, 1984, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> G.S. Rousseau, 'Science', in P. Rogers (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century*, Methuen & Co., London, 1978, p. 161.

Aboriginal skeletal remains and other artefacts, is perhaps insufficient evidence to suggest that the response of the academy might have been different had the newly arrived Pintubi been of greater anthropological significance. It is possibly enough, however, to venture that the agreement in the Pintubi and anthropological interpretations of the 'contact-event' was more coincidental than axiomatic.<sup>16</sup> For if the truth be told, there was not really a great deal at stake for the anthropologists in the 'discovery' of the 'lost tribe'. Having already extensively studied Pintubi culture, there was little possibility that they would learn anything new by the appearance of another family.<sup>17</sup> In his comments on the 'contact-event', Peterson 'warned against expectations that the family would shed some historic light on the nature of man, because essentially their culture was no different from the Pintubi culture in general'.<sup>18</sup> In much the same way, the Professor of Anthropology at UWA, Bob Tonkinson, down-played the significance of the new arrivals by asserting a prior knowledge: 'There were regular signs over the years of their whereabouts. We've known about them'.<sup>19</sup>

Doubtless there is evidence enough in all this to lend support to the view that after two centuries of cultural negotiations we are still uncertain what to make of (or do with) the Aborigines. If the concept of discovery could be said to be premised upon the notion of bringing to light something which was already there — of recognising it — that which the European has made of the Aborigines has invariably done much less and much more. In 'the discovery the *self* makes of the *other*',<sup>20</sup> as Todorov has put it, interests have frequently been played out that have less to do with recognising who the Aborigines are and more to do with turning them into something else. For more than two centuries the discoverers have made for them an unending parade of guises to be put on and taken off as the mood or the need arises. All of which might merely be a matter of intellectual curiosity were it not for the fact that what is said about the Aborigines by those who presume to speak for them, has tended to impact substantially upon their conditions of existence.<sup>21</sup> If

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<sup>16</sup> See B. Birnbauer, 'Blacks resent scientists: officer', *The Age*, 3 October, 1984, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Frail, 'Minister accused of "lost tribe" stunt', p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> M. O'Niell, 'Holding used Pintubis: blacks', *The Age*, 25 October, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Roberts, 'How the lost Pintubi tribe (and a boy named Thomas) found Clyde Holding', p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> T. Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Harper & Row, New York, 1984, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> As Jeremy Beckett has noted, constructions of Aboriginal identity 'have provided the cultural context in which European have acted upon them'. See J. Beckett, 'The past in the present; the present in the past: constructing a national Aboriginality', in J. Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, Australian Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, p. 192.

the case of the 'lost tribe' teaches us anything, it is that the possession of knowledge and the exercise of power are often closely aligned. Even at this late stage, the 'real problem', as Edward Said has put it, 'remains to haunt us: the relationship between anthropology as an ongoing enterprise and, on the other hand, empire as an on-going concern'.<sup>22</sup>

Considered in this light, perhaps the more important question is not what are we to make of the Aborigines, but what are we to make of ourselves. By turning the tables as it were, by reversing the anthropological gaze, it is possible to bring into focus the cultural predispositions and political interests of those who have made an industry out of the study and management of the Aborigines. It is in the space opened up by this attempt to see in the representations we make of the other an image of ourselves that this thesis takes shape. It takes as its particular focus two interrelated questions. Firstly, what was the relationship between scientific knowledge and government policy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in colonial Australia? And, secondly, what implications did that relationship have for the ways in which Aboriginal peoples were treated?

The method I use to tackle these issues takes its bearings from the culturalism of Bernard Smith and the materialism of Henry Reynolds, but is fundamentally differentiated from them. Although the work of both authors has been profoundly significant, their tendency to see representations of the Aborigines in terms of certain cultural forms on the one hand and certain material processes on the other, makes it difficult to bring culture and imperialism together in an interactive way. In the former case, conceptions of Aboriginality tend to be reduced to a set of ideas reflective of certain European tastes and traditions and, in the latter case, to ideological positions reflective of certain colonial processes of dispossession.<sup>23</sup> What fails to emerge (and what cannot possibly emerge) in either approach is the kind of reciprocal relations between knowledge and power that are built up and consolidated in the process of colonisation. In order to expose these, it is necessary to pursue (at a fundamentally empirical and institutional level) the strategies of

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<sup>22</sup> E.W. Said, 'Representing the colonised: anthropology's interlocutors', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, Winter 1989, p. 217.

<sup>23</sup> Although Smith recognises that the representations of the Aborigines were only made possible by the process of colonisation, he tends to examine them primarily in terms of certain fundamental cultural traditions like neoclassicism and Christianity. Reynolds is much more inclined to treat representations as the ideological expression of material interests. Hence his suggestion that in the process of colonisation racism was as functional as the gun: 'one clears the land, the other the conscience'. See B. Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Harper & Row, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1984, passim; and H. Reynolds, *Frontier*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 83-130.

power that led to the accumulation of knowledge about the Aborigines and the structures of knowledge that led to the extension of power over them.<sup>24</sup> In adopting this approach, I follow a path already partly marked out by Christian Alexander and John Lechte, but not developed by those writers in any systematic way.<sup>25</sup> What has been missing from postcolonial discussions about power, knowledge and Aborigines is a detailed analysis of colonial processes of domination. This thesis aims to provide that analysis. It undertakes a thorough-going investigation into the development of ethnological science in Australia and explores its connections with political processes of domination in the period 1770 to 1870.

The central tenet of this study is that the knowledge of the Aborigines built up in the colony was simultaneously the product of certain relations of power and the means by which that power was extended and refined over time. I argue that a crucial historical rupture in scientific practice and government policy took place in the second quarter of the nineteenth century that carried profound implications for the treatment of indigenous peoples. Prior to that period, the relationship between power and knowledge was relatively contingent. Obviously it was the process of colonisation that granted naturalists access to their so-called 'objects of investigation'. By sponsoring voyages of exploration, the colonial power extended the reach of scientific vision and gave it an opportunity to test its presumptions about the noble and ignoble savage. Yet the very nature of scientific knowledge at the time restricted its value as an instrument of colonisation. Concerned primarily with listing the visible differences among the different 'native tribes', the natural history of man made little contribution to the techniques used for the civilisation of the Aborigines or the strategies adopted for their protection. At worst, the science provided a justification for the process of dispossession by assuming civilisation to be the natural capacity (and therefore proper end) of all men. At best, it reinforced the view that the natives of New Holland were worthy recipients of all the rights and all the responsibilities of the social contract.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For this conception I have obviously drawn upon the work of Michel Foucault. See, M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by C. Gordon, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, p. 133.

<sup>25</sup> See C. Alexander, 'Power and the Australian Aborigines: the Aboriginal effect', in J. Allen and P. Patton (eds), *Beyond Marxism? Intervention After Marx*, Intervention Publications, Leichardt, 1983, pp. 74-88; and J. Lechte, 'Ethnocentrism, racism, genocide...', in M. De Lepervanche and G. Bottomley, *The Cultural Construction of Race*, Meglamedia, Annandale, 1988, pp. 32-45.

<sup>26</sup> I use the word 'man' in this thesis in line with contemporary scientific approaches which were, of course, deeply gendered.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a more complex and intimate set of relations between science and government emerged with devastating consequences for the indigenous inhabitants themselves. From the 'experiments in civilisation' undertaken in the 1820s and 1830s, a more permanent and more extensive institutional network was established for the accumulation and systematisation of knowledge about the Aborigines than hitherto existed. Although it was not their fundamental purpose, the missions, schools and protectorates, served as a veritable laboratory for scientific study. In them, the officers of government entrusted with the civilisation and protection of the indigenous inhabitants were able to undertake a more thorough interrogation of the 'savage mind' than was previously possible. With more continuous opportunities for investigation, such officers were not only able to observe and describe the characteristic features of the Aborigines, but to dissect and analyse their cultural organisation in accordance with certain new ethnological techniques. From these practical researches a technical understanding of the mechanics of racial distinction emerged that not only undermined earlier assumptions about the moral equality of the Aborigines, but provided a veritable technology for their cultural dispossession. As government accepted the proposition that the Aborigines were 'peculiarly constituted', it abandoned its former policy of non-discrimination and began to treat them as a special case. Utilising the 'expert knowledge' supplied by the process of experimentation itself, it established a more rigorous and coercive regime of management designed to dislocate the indigenous inhabitants (particularly the children) from their cultural traditions. At that moment the Aborigines ceased to be subjects to be governed and became instead outcasts to be administered.

The thesis is divided into four sections. In the first of these (which includes chapter one) I provide a theoretical context for the empirical analysis that follows by examining the postcolonial 'crisis of authority' and its implications for contemporary approaches to the study of the other. I begin by setting out the basis upon which postcolonial critics reject the type of positivist epistemology that has historically underpinned social sciences like anthropology. At this point I outline the suggestion that such monological knowledge systematically excludes the voice of the Aborigines and makes possible the exercise of power over them. The attempt to decide whether or not such critics are justified in that belief becomes the basis for the extended historical analysis of scientific practices and government policies in sections two and three. The bulk of this first section is devoted to an examination of the two other modes of understanding that postcolonial critics have put

forward as alternatives to the positivist: the poststructuralist and the hermeneutic. I argue that the poststructuralist position offers a number of valuable insights, but ultimately works to undermine the very possibility of cross-cultural communication. By contrast, I argue that the hermeneutic approach, or at least a critical variant of it, makes possible a politics of recognition based upon a dialogue in which there is a presumption of equal worth.

The following two sections of the thesis investigate whether the postcolonial critics examined in chapter one are justified in the view that anthropological discourse forms little more than an instrument of colonial domination. Section two (which includes chapters two and three) focuses upon the systems of classification used by colonial scientists in their attempts to determine the origins and development of the Aborigines as a means of articulating colonial conceptions of 'race'. I argue that a significant transformation occurs in the study of man between 1825 and 1845, a rupture that fundamentally alters the way in which the indigenous inhabitants of Australia were understood. The phase of scientific investigation prior to this break forms the subject of chapter two. It suggests that until the 1840s colonial naturalists generally sought to establish the geographical origin of the New Hollanders and their rank in the scale of civilisation on the basis of nothing more than their 'external characteristics'. If they saw differences between themselves and their 'objects of investigation', they scarcely imagined that these went deeper than the surface of the skin. Inevitably there were some suggestions that the 'natives' constituted a connecting link between man and the higher order simians. But, for the most part, it was accepted that they were possessed of all the faculties that education would expand and civilisation refine. In short, at this point what separated the New Hollander from the European was little more than the process of enlightenment itself.

Chapter three examines the displacement of this system of classification and the emergence of a more modern conception of race. It suggests that during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, as government established the institutional foundations for a more thorough investigation into the nature of the Aborigines, the new ethnological sciences of physiology, sociology and philology began to gain a foothold. Based upon an archaeological (as opposed to a taxonomic) principle, these new sciences established distinctions less on the basis of 'external characters' than on the basis of 'internal structures'. In this system it was no longer sufficient to simply observe and describe signs displayed on the surface of being. In order to establish the racial affiliations or level of

development of a particular nation or tribe, it was necessary to dissect and analyse their animal economy, social system and grammatical construction. According to this ethnological approach, differences between human groups revealed at the level of internal structure were suggestive of different geological stages of development. The term race served as an index, not of the position occupied by a particular nation or tribe in a continuous scale of civilisation, but of its place in the discontinuous history of the human species. Within this schema the indigenous inhabitants of Australia were no longer 'natural man' but 'original man'. In them, naturalists imagined they had found a race of men who departed from the general course of human development at the very earliest stage.

Section three (which includes chapters four and five) charts the parallel shift that takes place in the colonial mode of power during the nineteenth century. Chapter four deals with the first phase in the evolution of the government approach towards the Aborigines. It demonstrates that prior to the emergence of the notion of the 'Aboriginal Race' in the 1840s, official policy towards the 'natives of New Holland' remained wedded to the notion of moral equality. During that period, black and white were placed on more or less equal terms with respect to the law. Having assumed that differences exhibited by the New Hollanders consisted merely in the fact that they were unenlightened, government saw no fundamental barriers to their incorporation into the social contract. All that appeared necessary to unite them to the settlement and bring them to a sense of their rights and responsibilities was a proximity to civilisation itself. Despite the violence that came to characterise relations between Aborigines and settlers on the frontier, therefore, government sought little more than to protect the rights of its subjects and the defend the law of the realm. Whether through processes of conciliation or coercion, its critical objective was nothing more or less than to secure its black and white subjects from insult and injury by maximising the visibility of sovereign power.

Chapter five examines the change in government policy that emerged as a consequence of the 'discovery' of the 'Aboriginal Race' outlined in chapter three. It suggests that the failure of the civilising experiments of the 1820s and 1830s, was taken as evidence that the Aborigines were not simply deficient in education but constituted altogether differently from the European. Although officials clung on to the notion of the universality of man, they increasingly assumed that the 'Aboriginal Race' required more than moral instruction to either advance in civilisation or be preserved from extinction. On this basis a gradual shift took place in official policy from moral equality to moral

discrimination. Although government did not entirely abandon the hope of incorporating the Aborigines into the social contract, it increasingly assumed that such a possibility was dependent upon reconstituting them in their very being. To this end, 'protective' measures were adopted designed to fracture the Aborigines from their cultural identity. Drawing upon the expertise of its practical ethnologists, government enacted a discriminatory legislative regime in which the Aborigines were increasingly segregated in physical and moral terms and subjected to disciplinary regimes of one kind or another. No longer subjects bearing rights, they had become objects to be administered on the basis of what others imagined was in their best interests.

Section four (which includes chapter six) examines some of the ethical implications of this interrelated shift in scientific conceptions and government policy. It suggests that the racist politics that emerged in the 1840s paved the way for more elaborate institutional forms of surveillance and led to the exclusion of other (potentially less destructive) conceptions of Aboriginality. Spurred on by the belief that it was impossible to render the Aborigines productive or preserve them from extinction without severing them from their traditions, government abandoned its emphasis on defending their rights and sought instead to gain a mastery over their 'unregenerate habits'. Utilising the knowledge supplied by its agents of protection and civilisation, it enacted a legislative regime whose fundamental purpose was to dislocate the Aborigines from their cultural identity. Against this politics of mastery, I allude to the possibility of a more positive politics of recognition that emerges from the Romantic tradition. Returning to considerations introduced in section one, I suggest that the Romantic approach to the Aborigines was based upon the same type of respect for difference that forms the basis of certain postcolonial approaches to otherness. I conclude by suggesting that it may be possible to develop a more responsible way of relating to Aboriginal peoples by accepting the assumption of equal worth that underpins the Romantic approach while avoiding the aestheticism characteristic, not only of nineteenth century representations of Aborigines, but strangely enough of poststructuralist critiques of such representations as well.

Section I

Politics, History, Culture

Let us therefore beware of confusing savage man with the man we have before our eyes.

J.J. Rousseau, *A Discourse On Inequality*

## Politics, History, Culture

The question of representation that is fundamentally at stake in this thesis is sufficiently complex to warrant approaching it elliptically. My point of departure is a short essay, published some years ago now, by the prominent art historian and cultural critic, Bernard Smith. The essay in question examines some sketches of the Aborigines made by Sydney Parkinson, artist to Joseph Banks during Cook's first voyage to the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> To follow the course taken by Smith (and that is what I wish to do here) is to pass these images through the prism of art history and watch them refract into their constituent cultural traces and elements. Yet if it is the images themselves that will preoccupy our attention, it is worthwhile pausing briefly, as Smith himself does, to locate them within a broader context. For there is something so immediately obvious about these sketches that we have to work hard to keep it in view: they were drawn by Parkinson on the east coast of New Holland in 1770. Admittedly this is hardly a startling revelation. But without it we are in danger of overlooking the very thing which made this pictorial legacy possible: the global extension of European power. The broad context of these representations of the Aborigines is the massive expansion of European trade and capitalist enterprise in the late eighteenth century which undermined the social order of other civilisations and transformed the relationship between Europe and the world from one of equality to one of domination.<sup>2</sup> It is the British Empire which puts Parkinson on the coast of New South Wales and it is the British Empire which allows him to position himself in a relationship of subject to object with respect to the Aborigines. If the images are replete with cultural signs of other kinds, therefore, they are also significant of a disequilibrium of power.<sup>3</sup>

Being there, and enjoying all the technological advantages that made it possible to be there, was of course only one of the factors effecting the process of representation. The fact that there are only five drawings of the Aborigines is indicative of the less than ideal circumstances in which they were produced. By the time the *Endeavour* arrived on the east coast of Australia the company had already lost the services of its skilled figure

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<sup>1</sup> See B. Smith, 'The first European depictions', in I. Donaldson and T. Donaldson (eds), *Seeing the First Australians*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848*, Mentor Books, New York, 1962, pp. 42-43.

<sup>3</sup> Crucially for Smith, the relationship between Parkinson and the Aborigines was not only characterised by an inequality in power. The very nature of artistic work forced Parkinson, as it did Hodges and Webber after him, to cultivate cordial and amicable relationships with the people he was attempting to depict. See Smith, 'The first European depictions', p. 29.

draughtsman. Alexander Buchan, appointed to the task by Banks, had died a few days after the *Endeavour* reached Tahiti and his makeshift replacement, Herman Sporing, was apparently 'not much good at this kind of drawing'. The best of the three, according to Smith, was Parkinson, but he too had received no formal instruction in figure composition. Parkinson's professional skill lay in botanical draughtsmanship and it is unlikely, even if he was more capable, that he would have been allowed to expend his energies in the field of ethnography. Owing in part to the preoccupations of Joseph Banks and in part to the general conditions of science at the time, Parkinson's first duty, was to provide sketches of plants collected on the voyage. Other drawings, like those of the Aborigines, were made in his spare time and of this, on account of the backlog of plants he was obliged to sketch before they withered and faded, there was precious little. As if to make matters worse, opportunities for observing the Aborigines were limited at best. Judging from the official journals of the *Endeavour* voyage, 'Cook and his company had difficulty in making contact with Aborigines of a kind stable enough and amicable enough to permit detailed drawings to be produced'. Before Parkinson ever put pen to paper, therefore, his cultural legacy was already in the grip of the vagaries of history.<sup>4</sup>

To acknowledge the political and historical circumstances in which they were produced is not, of course, to say anything about the accuracy of the drawings themselves. If he had limited time and limited opportunity surely Parkinson still saw enough of the Aborigines to capture them in his sketch book. And if he was not appropriately trained in figure drawing, then so much the better: unconstrained by matters of composition, form and style his pencil could trace the lines of his subjects that much more faithfully. Certainly this is what the 'advertisement' in his published *Journal*, alerting readers to his 'strict veracity', would have us believe.<sup>5</sup> Yet telling the truth about something, even under the most favourable conditions, is never quite so simple. In at least one of his drawings, Parkinson appears to have allowed his religious beliefs to colour his perception. Amidst a collection of sketches depicting various aspects of the material culture of the Aborigines, we find a 'New Hollander' with a crucifix figure superimposed upon his chest. The simplest (but probably least satisfying) explanation, according to Smith, is that the man's breast marking reminded Parkinson of a crucifix and, 'wishing to preserve the original

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> See the 'Advertisement' in S. Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas in His Majesty's Ship the Endeavour*, C. Dilly, London, 1784. Reprinted by Caliban Books, London, 1984.

perception, he drew them in that way'.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is also possible that Parkinson deployed the symbol as a sign of sympathetic identification: 'sympathy for the lost souls of pagan brothers which generated the missionary enterprise that was yet to come to the Pacific'.<sup>7</sup> As the most devout of all the experimental men aboard the *Endeavour*, Parkinson was already predisposed to the rich symbolism of Christianity. While it was not unusual for him to write at length about the visible characteristics of the 'natives' he encountered, his vision of man certainly extended beyond their physical differences. Like the evangelists that followed, he stood firm in the view that beneath the dark skin there lay an equally dark soul desperately in need of God's protection and salvation.

If such a view does underpin Parkinson's depiction of the Aborigines, according to Smith, then the images which actually found their way into his published *Journal* stand at one further remove from the original encounter. For while it seems reasonably clear that he was not wholly unacquainted with neo-classical conventions of composition, 'none of Parkinson's surviving field drawings resort to the vocabulary of postures provided by classical statuary for presenting full length figures'.<sup>8</sup> In his published *Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*, however, the conventions of the 'grand style' are everywhere in evidence. Rather than religious symbols or ethnographic details it is the general truths of action — heroism, courage, valour — which are seized upon to capture the essence of savage man. In the face of this discrepancy, according to Smith, it is more than likely that these figures owe their stance and posture to the engraver Thomas Chambers and not to Sydney Parkinson. As an Associate of the Royal Academy and an exhibitor with the Society of Artists, Chambers was not only far more exposed to the influences of classicism than Parkinson, but predisposed to gloss the field images to lend a certain elegance and style to the quarto publication. Given 'the high status of history painting, the currency of the grand style, the neo-classical taste of the engraver, and the conventions of fine book-illustration', he had every reason to romanticise the Aborigines and turn them into that fabled figure of Rousseau's imagination: the noble savage.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, 'The first European depictions', p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 'The first European depictions', pp. 30-31. This practice of enhancing drawings to cater to the 'virtuosi and men of taste for whom the image of the native as a noble savage still held a strong quasi-aesthetic appeal' is dealt with at more length elsewhere. See B. Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Harper & Row, Sydney, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1984, pp. 171-173.

Doubtless this commentary does not exhaust the possible interpretations which could be made of Parkinson's representations. A less selective reading (and I have been more selective than Smith himself), would probably draw attention to the fact that the drawings and engravings are all made by men and of men. A circumstance which probably not only reflected the limited opportunities for observation that were available (Banks and Cook report that the native women were generally hidden from view) but gender conceptions current in eighteenth century British society. The possibility of other readings notwithstanding, however, the lesson that can be drawn from Parkinson's drawings is reasonably clear: representations of the Aborigines are not always, perhaps not ever, exactly as they seem. In this one example, and the history of European-Aboriginal relations has sponsored many, there is abundant confirmation of a point made by John Berger more than twenty years ago: 'The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe'.<sup>10</sup> Much as those involved in recording the nature of the Aborigines during the course of the last two centuries may have strived for detachment and objectivity, they could never entirely disengage themselves from the range of conditions — political, historical, cultural — that located them and irredeemably shaped their perception of the other.<sup>11</sup> Whether incorporated within a Christian eschatology of sin and redemption or wrapped up in the vocabulary or postures derived from classical statuary, representations of the Aborigines have often revealed as much about the European observer as they have about their putative object.

The implications of this revelation can scarcely be understated. By shifting attention from what is seen to the way in which it is seen, Smith not only turns the tables on the European masters, but offers up the possibility of a certain kind of emancipation. By recognising the range of influences at work in these drawings and engravings, he allows the Aborigines to break out of the moulds in which Europeans have so often imprisoned them. In little more than ten pages of commentary the stereotypes of the ignoble and noble savages are irredeemably shattered. And yet, lurking at the margins of this narrative, lies a set of questions which threaten to upset the whole process of demystification. Do we now know the Aborigines so well that we can recognise the distortions of the past when we see them? Is it possible that in our critique of the

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<sup>10</sup> J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC and Penguin Books, London, 1977, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> I. Donaldson and T. Donaldson, 'First sight', in Donaldson and Donaldson (eds), *Seeing the First Australians*, p. 15.

misrepresentations of the past, we are once again revealing more about ourselves than the Aborigines? And, if so, must our criticisms be subjected to criticism and so on *ad infinitum*? Once upon a time it would have fallen to science to distinguish between the real and the imaginary. For the academic pioneers that first began to ask questions about representations of the Aborigines, scholars like Bernard Smith and D.J. Mulvaney, the way was still open for the eye that saw truly. For all its faults, the 'dry light of science' could at least be trusted to chase away the shadows of Christianity and Romanticism.<sup>12</sup> Yet what if science itself was a distorting medium, a way of seeing subject to its own kind of stigmatism? What if the study of man that shattered the illusions brought with it illusions every bit as misconceived and every bit as dangerous as those it dislodged?

This is the predicament into which postcolonial criticism has delivered us. With sciences like anthropology now also consigned to the ranks of ideology, scholars in the interdisciplinary field of Aboriginal studies have been forced to attend in earnest to the politics of knowledge. For some, not surprisingly, dealing with the epistemological and political foundations of scholarship is an uncomfortable business best left in the hands of philosophers or those who pass themselves off as such. Rather than search for a way through the labyrinth of representation, they tend to opt for simply getting on with the job — whatever that happens to be.<sup>13</sup> Doubtless such a view is not entirely without merit in the context of a rampant and sometimes quite debilitating preoccupation with introspection. But it does not help us to avoid lapsing back into the errors of the past. Much as there is something curiously self-defeating in an intellectual self-consciousness so chastened by anxieties about imposing on others that it refuses any attempt to understand them at all, the need to think about contemporary criticism in the context of the complex relationship between knowledge and power remains imperative. Unless scholars are self-reflective about their position in the colonial process they are ever in danger of reproducing relations of domination and subordination among the coloniser and the

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<sup>12</sup> See Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, p. 335; and D.J. Mulvaney, 'The Australian Aborigines 1606-1929: Opinion and Fieldwork', *Historical Studies: Selected Articles, First Series*, compiled by J.J. Eastwood and F.B. Smith, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1967, pp. 1-57.

<sup>13</sup> As Talal Asad has noted, 'there is a strange reluctance on the part of most professional anthropologists to consider seriously the power structure within which their discipline has taken shape'. T. Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Ithaca Press, London, 1973, p. 15.

colonised. The challenge now facing postcolonial scholars, in the words of Edward Said, is nothing more or less than 'the creation of new objects for a new kind of knowledge'.<sup>14</sup>

It is the possibility of that knowledge and, more specifically, the consequences of its failure which lies at the heart of this thesis. By tracing the history of the connections between ethnological science and colonial policy, I seek to determine whether it is possible either to know without imprisoning or to liberate without knowing. In order to establish a context for the historical analysis that follows, however, I take a preliminary detour through the field of postcolonial criticism. The aim of such an analysis is to explore, albeit in a preliminary fashion, an answer to the question that has begun to pose itself in all its force: is it possible to reach out towards the other or are we forever condemned to reach in towards ourselves?

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<sup>14</sup> E.W. Said, 'Orientalism reconsidered', *Cultural Critique*, No. 1, Fall 1985, p. 91.

## Chapter I

### Between Speech and Silence:

#### The Postcolonial Critic and the Politics of Knowledge

The deconstruction of Aboriginality has become a popular pastime. At least in the last ten years there has been no shortage of critics seeking to liberate the other from the prisons of the text by decolonising the essentialist images that even now continue to circulate in a whole range of cultural media. Gratifying as this activity may be, however, it tends to leave unresolved the question of what mode of relating to the other might now be appropriate. After the demolition work is done, how are we to deal with the fact that our knowledge 'is always', as James Clifford has suggested, 'caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures'?<sup>1</sup> Local critics who have ventured responses to this question tend to fall into two camps: a poststructuralist and a hermeneutic. The first, attempts to avoid the prisons of representation (even those Aboriginal people seek to impose upon themselves), by arguing for a communicative model of polyvocality. In this approach, no attempt is made to privilege one voice over another in the fear that such action will inevitably lead to the exclusion of difference. The second opts for a model of dialogue in which different speaking positions interact in a mutually transforming way. Although it remains sceptical of the notion of objectivity, it holds onto the possibility of establishing consensual forms of knowledge as a basis for political action.

In what follows I attempt to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of these two responses. In order to set a context for this discussion (a context which will be filled out in the body of the thesis), I begin by sketching the nature of the postcolonial problematic. I suggest that postcolonial criticism is based upon a rejection of the kind of monological knowledge embodied in the positivist tradition. What drives postcolonial critics to seek other ways of knowing is the recognition that positivism imposes silence on its 'objects of investigation' and allows for their strategic manipulation and control. I go on to deal with the poststructuralist and the hermeneutic traditions, paying rather more attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Clifford, 'Introduction: partial truths', in J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, p. 2.

latter than the former. I conclude by suggesting that the poststructuralist inclination to sponsor a plurality of voices, works to eliminate the possibility of cross-cultural communication. By contrast the hermeneutic approach, or a critical variant of it possibly informed by poststructuralist critiques, opens the possibility for a mutual recognition independent of processes of political domination.

## I

### The Problem of Silence

The driving force behind the postcolonial turn in Aboriginal studies has been a thoroughgoing problematisation of practices of representation.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to an earlier generation of scholars which tended to accept the gradual evolution of knowledge towards objectivity, postcolonial critics have refused the very notion of an understanding cleansed of its worldly impurities. For them, the notion that knowledge can achieve objectivity by transcending its embeddedness in what Paul Ricoeur has called the 'flesh of the world',<sup>3</sup> is at best an intellectual chimera and at worst an intellectual ruse. Not that they always completely discount the utility of conventional techniques for limiting the extent to which 'subjective views' spill over into 'objective facts'. For some the very possibility of knowledge, albeit partial knowledge, still relies on certain methodological checks and balances developed within, and increasingly shared between, the social sciences. Yet even when their value is conceded, none of the conventional precautions — avoiding abstraction, checking bias, sticking to the facts, immersion in the culture — are thought sufficient to sustain the illusion that it is possible to know the Aborigines, as Arthur Mee once suggested of Daisy Bates, 'as they know themselves'.<sup>4</sup> Even those who continue to

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<sup>2</sup> In line with changing intellectual fashions, postcolonial critics within the field of Aboriginal studies have at different times drawn upon and engaged with the work of John Berger, Benedict Anderson, Edward Said and Michel Foucault. See I. Donaldson and T. Donaldson (eds), *Seeing the First Australians*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985; B. Reece, 'Inventing Aborigines', *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 11, No. 1-2, 1987, pp. 14-23; M. De Lepervanche and G. Bottomley (eds), *The Cultural Construction of Race*, Meglamedia, Annandale, 1988; J. Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, Australian Studies Press, Canberra, 1988; and B. Attwood and J. Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, La Trobe University Press in Association with the National Centre of Australian Studies, Bundoora, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> P. Ricoeur cited in M. Jay, 'Ideology and ocularcentrism: is there anything behind the mirror's tain?', in C.C. Lemert (ed.), *Intellectuals and Politics: Social Theory in a Changing World*, Sage Publication, Newbury Park, 1991, p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> A. Mee, 'Introduction: Kabbarli', in D. Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines*, Panther, London, 1972, p. 18.

invoke it as a regulative ideal recognise that the 'native point of view' can be nothing more than the illusion created by those sophisticated textual conjuring tricks which authors, and anthropologists especially, have used to establish their right to speak about the other.<sup>5</sup>

With this rejection of the notion of transparency between subject and object has come a politicisation of both the form and content of knowledge within the social sciences. As postcolonial critics would have it, the kind of positivism that has, historically speaking, characterised scholarly studies of the other such as anthropology is, by its very nature, exclusive. Since it takes the form of a monologue emanating from a single detached observer, it systematically excludes the possibility of dialogue with its 'objects of investigation' and denies them any control over the discourse that claims to represent them. It is to this monological approach, according to postcolonial critics, that it is possible to attribute the whole phenomena of 'Aboriginalism' — that edifice of popular and scientific knowledge about the Aborigines founded during the colonial period and subsequently expanded and refined by the emergence of modern disciplines like anthropology which denies the indigenes either the right or the capacity to speak on their own behalf.<sup>6</sup> In constituting the Aborigines rather as an object to be talked about than a subject to be talked to, the social sciences have reduced them to silence and allowed them to be 'fetishised and controlled' in accordance with the coloniser's endless fascination with the exotic.<sup>7</sup> The consequence has been an objectification of the Aborigines and the institutionalisation of a colonial power relationship that condemns Aboriginal people to suffer under the repressive power of a voice that is not their own.

As well as drawing attention to the inherently repressive nature of monological (positivist) epistemology, postcolonial critics have begun to explore the points of articulation between the kinds of knowledge produced and the exercise of colonial power. Rather than a realm of pure ideas, knowledge produced within fields like anthropology (considered here as an umbrella for disciplines as diverse as biology, sociology and philology) has come to be seen as part of the cultural machinery of colonisation itself.

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<sup>5</sup> See C. Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988. It is worth noting in passing that Geertz does not see the textual or literary dimension of anthropological work as a barrier to gaining an understanding of the other.

<sup>6</sup> See B. Hodge and V. Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Allen & Unwin, Nth. Sydney, 1991, pp. xiii, 27-28; and B. Attwood, 'Introduction' in Attwood and Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. i-iii.

<sup>7</sup> Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. xiii.

While no consensus has emerged among critics as to the precise relationship between the exercise of colonial power and the development of colonial science, it is widely accepted that these disciplines form part of what Edward Said has called a 'political vision of reality',<sup>8</sup> a way of seeing articulated with, and thus to a greater or lesser extent tainted by, European processes of imperialism and colonialism. For some this means little more than that representations of the Aborigines have tended to be complicit with the exercise of colonial power. As they see it, scholarly knowledge of the Aborigines constitutes a kind of second-order power relation which has done little more than provide rational justifications for the foundational act of dispossession and the exploitative set of social relations that have gone along with it.<sup>9</sup> For others, however (and this is the position which I will elaborate in this thesis), representations of the Aborigines are not only an effect of colonial power but constitutive of colonial power. According to this view, the social sciences represent integrated networks of ideas and practices that have played a productive role, not only in the process of dispossession, but in the development of complex systems of administration and instruction for the surveillance and disciplining of indigenous peoples.<sup>10</sup>

After all the celebration that has tended to accompany these deconstructions of the form and content of anthropological discourse, however, postcolonial scholars have found themselves confronting a somewhat disturbing question: under what conditions and according to what rules is the study of the Aborigines henceforth to proceed? Having highlighted the dangers of positivism and the often dreadful consequences which attend a knowledge which is monological in nature, it has drawn into question the very nature of the disciplines which have hitherto pronounced so confidently and authoritatively upon the Aborigines. Whether willingly or unwillingly, scholars have been forced to ponder in earnest the role of the social sciences in both the development and the perpetuation of the system of colonial domination and to consider their own role in that on-going colonial encounter called Australia.<sup>11</sup> Confronting them now, as never before, is what might be called the problem of silence: the need to develop a mode of understanding that can

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<sup>8</sup> E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> See Attwood, 'Introduction', p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, J. Lechte, 'Ethnocentrism, racism, genocide...', in De Lepervanche and Bottomley (eds), *The Cultural Construction of Race*, pp. 32-45; and B. Morris, 'Frontier colonialism as a culture of terror', in Attwood and Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 72-88.

<sup>11</sup> See T. Rowse, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1993, p. 129.

liberate the speech of the silenced and enhance the possibilities of political autonomy.<sup>12</sup> Important as it has been (and still is) to dismantle the cultural machinery of colonisation, therefore, scholars cannot avoid working through the foundations and implications of their own critical practice. If the aim of postcolonial critics is to construct a new and less dominating way of knowing, they must be prepared to confront at the most profound level the issue which lies at the core of their problematic: 'the dilemma of how one can ever escape the limitations of one's own culture in order to know the culture of the other'.<sup>13</sup>

In the remaining sections I intend to outline the two main responses to this problem that have emerged within local postcolonial criticism. For despite a considerable amount of blurring at the level of practical criticism and a fair measure of confusion and ambivalence besides, scholars have generally drawn either upon poststructuralist or hermeneutic theory to steer a path through the shoals of power and knowledge. Although I will draw upon certain writers extensively to illustrate the distinctions between these two approaches, my aim here is not to distribute critics into one category or another. In no sense is this a roll call of critical styles. The task at hand is rather to investigate how each of these approaches negotiates the politics of knowledge in the wake of the so-called 'postcolonial crisis of authority'<sup>14</sup> and to assess what the political implications of negotiating it in those ways might be. Ultimately, I will be suggesting that postcolonial critiques informed by poststructuralist theory do not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of silence. Despite the valuable insights that they generate, they tend to fall victim either to epistemological fallacy or political misconception (or both). With them the 'liberation' of the silenced other takes the form of an interplay of voices which, for all its advantages, ends up eliminating the very possibility of a politics of recognition in which Aboriginal people can make ethical and political claims upon the state. By contrast, the hermeneutic approach, or at least a critical variant of it, uses dialogue to open up the possibility, if not of mutual understanding, then at least of reciprocal recognition among different cultures.

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<sup>12</sup> While I am indebted to the work of Michelle Wallace for the notion of the 'problem of silence', this outline of the postcolonial problematic closely follows that given by Edward Said and adapted by Bain Attwood. See M. Wallace cited in S. Muecke, 'Lonely representations: Aboriginality and cultural studies', in Attwood and Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, p. 32; E.W. Said, 'Orientalism reconsidered', *Cultural Critique*, No. 1, Fall 1985, pp. 89-108; and Attwood, 'Introduction', pp. i-xvi.

<sup>13</sup> Lechte, 'Ethnocentrism, racism, genocide...', p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1988, p. 8.

## II

### The Hall of Mirrors

For postcolonial critics like Stephen Muecke and, if somewhat more ambivalently, Bain Attwood, who draw their inspiration from the semiotic critique of positivist epistemology, the problems inherent in any act of representation are acute indeed.<sup>15</sup> For them the issue at stake is not simply one of framing or perspective, degrees of transparency and opacity, but the very relation between language and society which underpins and legitimates representational practice itself. Taking their cue from the Saussurean view that language is not a referential system, a neutral medium which reveals the world through expression, but a differential system, a network of signs whose relationship to the world is entirely arbitrary, they bring into question the very idea that knowledge can be evaluated in terms of a correspondence between what is said about the world (signifier) and what the world actually is (signified).<sup>16</sup> For if meaning is wholly a function of the arbitrary network of signs itself, it can no longer be assumed, as it is within conventional criticism, 'that *things*, those concepts and/or objects on which an understanding of the world is built, exist at all before they are articulated in discourse'.<sup>17</sup> Even if we are prepared to accept, as Attwood apparently does, that things preserve a residual autonomy from language as some sort of unnameable raw matter, they cannot be used as the measure of our knowledge of them, because it is knowledge, working in the circuits of language, which 'establishes all the meanings that they have'.<sup>18</sup> In this kind of analysis there is no possibility of ever reaching a signified, no possibility of ever touching the world.<sup>19</sup> The mirror which language holds up to nature is not a flat reflecting glass, but a concave or convex optic in which what counts

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<sup>15</sup> Attwood is much less consistent than Muecke in his conceptualisation of the relationship between world and text. While his critique of the discourse of Aboriginality or what he calls 'Aboriginalism' clearly owes a debt to the poststructuralism of Foucault, he is keen to resist the descent into relativism that such epistemological scepticism tends to imply. See Attwood, 'Introduction', p. xii-xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', pp. 33, 37. For a more detailed account of this approach to language see J. Sturrock, *Structuralism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Fontana Press, London, 1993, p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Attwood, 'Introduction', p. i.

<sup>19</sup> Hence the shift from notions of representation, where objects exist outside language as things to be seen through it, to discourse, where objects exist inside language as things that are signified by it. See Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 35; and T. Goldie, 'Signifier resignified: Aborigines in Australian literature', in A. Rutherford (ed.), *Aboriginal Culture Today*, Dangaroo Press — Kunapipi, Sydney, 1991, p. 59.

as 'truth' wholly depends upon the materiality of the medium of expression: the tain of the mirror itself.<sup>20</sup>

One of the necessary consequences of this reconceptualisation of the relationship between words and things for Aboriginal studies is a shift towards a non-normative form of criticism. For once it is accepted that Aboriginality is a product of knowledge rather than something which exists prior to it,<sup>21</sup> the whole notion of measuring the truth of a particular representation of the Aborigines, of ranking it in relation to others according to how closely it approximates the 'real thing', becomes indefensible. If every conception of Aboriginality that is invoked as a base or standard for measuring others must itself be the product of a particular discursive formation, evaluation will ever founder for want of a true measure. As if imprisoned in a hall of mirrors, critics will be unable to exceed the limitations established by the set of available images or discourses themselves in order to find an image of Aboriginality that is not somehow an illusion. To be sure, they can compare and contrast the different images or discourses one to another and to enumerate the series of their differences. But unless they can escape from the realm of discourse, unless they can find a way out of the hall of mirrors, they will never be able to discover the real nature of the Aborigines. Instead they will have to accept, as Muecke himself does, that 'No one discourse is necessarily or absolutely better than another' and, consequently, that there is 'no privileged place where knowledge is gathering for a final moment of enlightenment'.<sup>22</sup>

If, for the semiotician, the very idea of legitimating a particular discourse by appealing to something which exists outside it (something beyond the hall of mirrors formed by 'the prison-house of language')<sup>23</sup> is inherently paradoxical, this does not mean that criticism is thereby brought to an end. In a move that has seen the status of the critic elevated rather than diminished, the endlessly fascinating but epistemologically bankrupt attempt to ascertain who the Aborigines really are (and, by implication, who we really are) has been displaced in favour of an analysis of discursive practices themselves. Whereas the

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<sup>20</sup> See M. Jay, 'Scopic regimes of modernity', in S. Lash and J. Friedman (eds), *Modernity and Identity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 187.

<sup>21</sup> See S. Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, NSW University Press, Kensington, 1992, p. 19; and Attwood, 'Introduction', p. i.

<sup>22</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> F. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1974.

problem for conventional criticism is one of ensuring a certain correspondence between representations of the Aborigines and the Aborigines themselves, the problem for semiotic criticism is what makes it possible to sustain a discourse about the Aborigines at all.<sup>24</sup> Rather than expend its energies in the futile task of 'endlessly weighing up "good" and "bad" representations',<sup>25</sup> semiotics tries to attend to the politics of representation itself. What is fundamentally at stake in this approach is not the veracity of a particular discourse about 'the other' (the truth of what it says), but its manner of functioning (the way in which it works). In the words of Muecke himself: 'It will not be part of the problem whether an advertisement showing a black woman dressed as Ms High Achiever is a "positive" image or not. The problem is rather how that image got produced, within the available discourses, and what other images might feasibly be substituted'.<sup>26</sup>

In this kind of semiotic analysis there are two rather distinct models for approaching the issue of textual production. In the first, which Muecke variously describes as the 'linguistic' or 'structuralist' model, criticism departs from more conventional, positivist approaches by refusing to treat language 'as a transparent medium permitting the co-realisation of the author's ideas and values and the immediate experience of reality'.<sup>27</sup> Here the key to interpretation is to be found neither in that which supposedly precedes the work, the intention of the author, nor in that which accompanies it, the social context in which it is produced. Indeed the prevailing tendency to read texts in terms of these experiential domains is taken as evidence of the dominance of a certain kind of realist rhetoric which it is the aim of linguistic analysis to depose. The proper, in fact the only legitimate, function of criticism within the structuralist model is to read representations in terms of the set of structural conditions which govern their enunciation. Working on the Saussurean assumption that there is an infinitely generative body of rules (*langue*) lying behind each utterance (*parole*), linguistic analysis attempts to explain texts by rewriting them in terms of the formal possibilities of the discursive code within which they are produced.<sup>28</sup> In this way attention is drawn to those rhetorical devices that arrest 'the otherwise inexhaustible

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<sup>24</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37. As Terry Goldie has written also, 'The problem is not the negative or positive aura associated with the image but rather the image itself'. Goldie, 'Signifier resignified', p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> I. Hunter, 'After representation: recent discussions of the relations between language and literature', *Economy and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 4, November 1984, p. 414.

<sup>28</sup> S. Muecke, 'Ideology reiterated: the uses of Aboriginal oral narrative', *Southern Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1, March 1983, p. 86.

process of signification', freeing the critic to explore the infinite range of other possible meanings that are available within the text.<sup>29</sup>

While it may be superior to more traditional forms of criticism, however, this linguistic model does not, according to Muecke, give a satisfactory account of the intimate relationship between power and knowledge. Since the problem of representation, at least as he sets it out, is not just formal (how are different discourses of Aboriginality produced) but also political (why this discourse of Aboriginality rather than another), criticism cannot confine itself to an examination of the restriction of meaning generated by certain modes of writing. In order to be adequate to its object, discourse analysis must turn from the linguistic processes which make it possible for people to say something (which is largely a question of grammar), towards the political apparatuses through which they acquire the right to say it (which is largely a question of power). Given that no speaker is in command of the entire formal system of possibilities which a certain abstract code or grammar makes possible, there is little value in reading 'texts' in terms of the range of things which could have been said but in fact were not.<sup>30</sup> The more interesting, and for Muecke the more politically astute, approach is to regard statements as motivated selections within a limited range of discursive options. In this way the critic can avoid the timeless formalism that derives from continually referring specific utterances (*parole*) back to those general grammatical rules which allow for the production of meaning (*langue*). Instead, statements can be interpreted in terms of 'institutional organisations of power and knowledge as they appear in particular societies at particular times'.<sup>31</sup> This would then be a non-linguistic or poststructuralist form of analysis.<sup>32</sup>

Inevitably it is difficult to discern what the liberatory possibilities of this critical approach are in the abstract. In order to assess how adequate poststructuralism (or at least this variant of it) is as an instrument for dealing with the 'problem of silence', it will be necessary to examine the series of concrete analyses which constitutes the main body of Muecke's highly innovative and provocative work to date. The principle which I will use

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<sup>29</sup> T. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, Verso, London, 1991, pp. 196-197.

<sup>30</sup> As Milner has persuasively argued, support for this kind of carnivalesque eruption of signification is generally linked to a preference for a certain kind of modernist or non-realist aesthetic, one which links subversion and gratification together in a moment of subversion and pleasure (*jouissance*). See A. Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, Allen & Unwin, Nth. Sydney, 1991, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these two approaches readers should consult the article by Ian Hunter upon which Muecke draws. See Hunter, 'After representation', pp. 397-430.

to order these analyses will be logical rather than chronological. Adopting a metaphor utilised by poststructuralists themselves, I will try to pursue Muecke along his 'line of flight', to follow the tracks he leaves, and more particularly the places he rejects, as he picks his way through the politics of knowledge. In approaching his work in this way it is not my intention to conform to his own spatial sense of criticism as a form of nomadic inscription. The point is rather to provide a context in which such a style of criticism might make sense. For in an entirely non-metaphorical way, Muecke's critical position is achieved through a series of negations. Each new set of discursive analyses that he makes works to deny the possibilities of liberation which the previous ones appeared to open up. At each point where we might reasonably expect him to take a stand, he moves off to another location, only once again to shift ground. In the end it will become alarmingly apparent that Muecke does not wish to stand in one place at all — or at least not for very long. At that point it will become possible to assess the limitations of the epistemological swag that Muecke carries with him. In particular, it will then be possible to judge whether it is possible to achieve any kind of fit between a poststructuralist theory of knowledge and a postcolonial politics of liberation.<sup>33</sup>

### III

#### Anthropology and the Double Bind of Speech and Silence

A useful starting point in this journey is an article from 1982 dealing with the dominant (European) discourses on Aborigines: 'the Anthropological, the Romantic and the Racist'.<sup>34</sup> In discussing these three 'discursive formations', Muecke immediately distinguishes himself from more conventional critics by refusing to treat anthropology as a corrective to the distortions of the other two. Rather than a window onto the world of the first Australians as is so often claimed, anthropology is shown to be deeply ideological at both the epistemological and methodological levels. In the first case, the problem lies in a certain kind of philosophical dogmatism. As Muecke would have it, anthropology tends to

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<sup>33</sup> The approach which I have adopted here owes a considerable debt to Charles Taylor's seminal discussion of the work of Michel Foucault. While I cannot claim that my analysis is faithful to Taylor's own, it does at least share his sense of the moves which poststructuralists tend to make in their critical appraisals. See C. Taylor, 'Foucault on freedom and truth', in D.C. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> See S. Muecke, 'Available discourses on Aborigines', in P. Botsman (ed.), *Theoretical Strategies*, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney, 1982, pp. 98-111.

confuse the empirical and the transcendental dimensions of thought by presupposing a universal concept of humanity in its examination of specific cultural forms. By adopting an unchanging human essence as its point of departure, it necessarily confines the scope of its inquiry to the ways in which this essence is manifested in different societies.<sup>35</sup> However different each cultural case study may at first appear, it ultimately becomes nothing more than one among many 'variations on the common theme of man's adjustment to his natural and social environment'.<sup>36</sup> The concept of man is thus taken for granted at the very moment when the discovery of cultural diversity should be drawing it into question. Regardless of how significant the empirical differences between cultures that emerge in the fieldwork situation, they are never considered to be irreducible. Predisposed to toiling 'under the *one* sign of Man', as Muecke puts it, the discipline of anthropology ensures that 'sameness will always be discovered'.<sup>37</sup>

Substantial problems also arise at the methodological level. For while anthropology is unable to proceed without soliciting information from the people it attempts to understand, it never allows them to speak in their own terms or on their own behalf. In order to legitimate its status as a science, anthropology must reinterpret and restructure what it learns from its informants in terms of a set of questions, always formulated in advance, that serve no other purpose than to feed the obsessions of anthropology itself. Even as the discipline strives to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the other, therefore, it perpetuates a position of authority over its 'objects of study' by placing them in a kind of 'double bind'. Their scientific fate is to be incorporated into a discursive relation in which they are simultaneously required to 'keep talking' and to 'remain quiet'.<sup>38</sup> Akin in this sense to the Romantic and the racist discourses to which it is conventionally opposed, anthropology 'excludes the possibility of dialogue with Aborigines' and works to divert attention from issues that are important to them. Ethically unsound in itself, this presumption of authority becomes even more significant when it is remembered just how closely anthropology works in conjunction with other 'official discourses' like history,

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101. For an extended discussion see M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York, 1973, pp. 340-343.

<sup>36</sup> R.M. and C.H. Berndt cited in Muecke, 'Available discourses', p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> K. Benterrak, S. Muecke and P. Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, with R. Keogh, Butcher Joe (Nangan), and E.M. Lohe, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, Freemantle, 1984, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

sociology and the law.<sup>39</sup> For there are no shortage of examples in Australian history (although Muecke himself does not mention any) of governments intervening with disastrous consequences into the lives of indigenous peoples on the basis of what anthropologists thought they knew about them.

While Muecke is by no means alone in expressing these kinds of reservations about the discipline of anthropology, we should not be too quick to equate his position with more mainstream critiques of the discipline.<sup>40</sup> If he is willing to accept that anthropologists can still be of use in working on issues that are of value to Aboriginal people, we can safely assume that the great emancipatory promise of anthropology to extend our understanding of, and thereby increase our respect for, indigenous peoples is for him a false one.<sup>41</sup> Despite what anthropologists themselves frequently claim, according to Muecke, the discourse they articulate (or which articulates them) is neither a more epistemologically rigorous nor more ethically sound form of knowledge than any of the other available discourses on Aborigines.<sup>42</sup> That it is frequently characterised as such only demonstrates how effective it has hitherto been in marginalising its competitors and arrogating to itself exclusive rights to represent 'the other'. For Muecke, it is symptomatic of the relative power of the social sciences that while statements about Aborigines continue to be produced within other discursive formations, 'only anthropology has the monopoly on the "truth", the "true" way of discussing Aboriginal affairs as far as other powerful institutions are concerned'.<sup>43</sup> What this privileged position within the Western economy of discourses tends to obscure is the fact that anthropological knowledge is itself

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<sup>39</sup> Muecke, 'Available discourses', pp. 101-103.

<sup>40</sup> While critics like Gillian Cowlshaw have attacked the ideology of anthropology, their focus has been to discover why the emancipatory potential of the 'conceptual structure' (scientism) and 'moral program' (humanitarianism) of anthropology was left unrealised during the functionalist ascendancy. See G. Cowlshaw, 'Aborigines and anthropologists', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 1, 1986, pp. 2-13; G. Cowlshaw, 'Colour, culture and the Aboriginalists', *Man* (NS), No. 22, 1987, pp. 221-237; G. Cowlshaw, 'Helping anthropologists: cultural continuity in the constructions of Aboriginalists', *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1990, pp. 1-28; and G. Cowlshaw, 'Studying Aborigines: changing canons in anthropology and history', in Attwood and Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 20-32.

<sup>41</sup> Muecke, 'Available discourses', p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> As Muecke has suggested, anthropology is simply 'one of the ways things are "known" about Other Peoples'. The knowledge that it generates has no validity outside what, following Foucault, he has called its particular 'régime of truth'. See Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p. 5; and Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 174.

<sup>43</sup> Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 184.

the product of a certain 'set of discursive practices which depend on relationships of dominance in the colonial encounter'.<sup>44</sup>

Even those who are sympathetic to some of these concerns may struggle to accept the Foucaultian thesis (for this appears to be where Muecke is heading) that anthropology, like many other social sciences, presents 'a dangerous facade of universally valid knowledge behind which in reality is hidden the facticity of domination of knowledge rooted in the will-to-power'.<sup>45</sup> While it is difficult to resist claims that the mainstream functionalist tradition of which Muecke is so critical failed Aboriginal people dismally in several crucial respects, it takes something of a leap of faith to reduce it to an instance of pure ideology — at least on the evidence that Muecke has given. If functionalist anthropology was insufficiently critical of its own philosophical presuppositions, if it failed to problematise the position from which it was speaking, it is doubtless also the case that there were currents of anthropological thought that opposed colonial policies and practices of domination.<sup>46</sup> Without by any means wishing to suggest that the social sciences should be protected from criticism, there would seem to be some grounds for supporting a more self-critical form of anthropology; one that renounced both the myth of the static traditional Aboriginal culture and the right of anthropology to speak on behalf of its 'objects of study'. An anthropology, in short, that approached Aboriginal society 'as a living response to stable or changing conditions' and allowed Aborigines to enter into anthropological discourse as 'critical subjects'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Muecke, 'Available discourses', p. 101.

<sup>45</sup> J. Habermas, 'Taking aim at the heart of the present', in Hoy (ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, p. 107.

<sup>46</sup> As Talal Asad has suggested 'I believe it is a mistake to view social anthropology in the colonial era as primarily an aid to colonial administration or as the simple reflection of colonial ideology. I say this not because I subscribe to the anthropological establishment's comfortable view of itself, but because bourgeois consciousness, of which social anthropology is merely one fragment, has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities — and therefore the potentialities for transcending itself'. See T. Asad 'Introduction' in T. Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Ithaca Press, London, 1973, p. 18; and Attwood, 'Introduction', p. xi.

<sup>47</sup> See G. Cowlshaw, 'Australian Aboriginal studies: the anthropologists' accounts', in De Lepervanche and Bottomley (eds), *The Cultural Construction of Race*, p. 74; and Cowlshaw, 'Helping anthropologists', p. 19. For an illustration of how these principles might work in practice see G. Cowlshaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.

#### IV

#### Writing Against Silence

If, for the moment, we are willing to suppress doubts about this kind of Foucaultian critique and go along with Muecke in repudiating the discourse of anthropology, we may yet expect him to see possibilities in the efforts of contemporary Aboriginal people to struggle against white domination and oppression by engaging in a process of what André Brink has called 'writing against silence'.<sup>48</sup> To the extent that the fundamental assumption underpinning colonial discourses such as 'Aboriginalism' is the credo: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented', dialogue has come to be seen as both the index and the condition of liberation for 'the other'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, so long as the fundamental problem of representation, 'of who speaks and how',<sup>50</sup> is left unexamined there is little advantage to be derived from isolated attempts to draw attention to the relationship between anthropology and the domination of indigenous people. As Muecke has suggested, 'one has to bear in mind how easily that story can be told by the "empowered" non-Aboriginal subject, while the Other continues to be unable to speak, unable to enter into theory, and unable to find a place for "authentic" speech to be inserted in the hegemonic regimes of discourse'.<sup>51</sup> Only by clearing a space for the subaltern voice, a space in which the other can not only enter into the writing of history as a kind of 'counter-memory'<sup>52</sup> but also challenge conventional ways of telling history, is it possible to restore some control to indigenous peoples and make the notion of self-determination something more than an enticing idea. In line with Salman Rushdie, it has become

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<sup>48</sup> A. Brink, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, p. 172.

<sup>49</sup> This quote from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* serves as an epigram for Said's path breaking book on the discourse of Orientalism and sets up the importance of dialogue and exchange for the postcolonial moment. See, Said, *Orientalism*, p. xii; Said, 'Orientalism reconsidered', pp. 91, 93, 97; Muecke, 'Available discourses', p. 109; and Attwood, 'Introduction', p. xi.

<sup>50</sup> Attwood, 'Introduction', p. x.

<sup>51</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 43.

<sup>52</sup> See K. Trees, 'Counter memories: history and identity in Aboriginal literature', in D. Bird and D. Haskell (eds), *Whose Place?: A Study of Sally Morgan's My Place*, Angus & Robertson, Pymble, 1992, pp. 55-65.

axiomatic that 'liberation' depends upon those in the periphery being able to write back to, and, of course, be read in, the centre.<sup>53</sup>

Here again, however, the poststructuralist critic disappoints conventional expectations. Although the whole thrust of postcolonial criticism has been to restore autonomy to indigenous peoples and to dismantle that system of cultural domination which positions the coloniser and the colonised in a relation of speaking subject to mute object, Muecke is unwilling to treat the appearance of Aboriginal literature or Aboriginal history (the genres tend to be mixed) as an unequivocal cause for celebration. Since, for him, there is no guarantee that the texts which indigenous authors produce will not themselves be complicit with colonial systems of domination, 'expression' cannot in itself be considered a sufficient index of liberation from 'repression'. Unless it too wishes to abet domination, criticism cannot simply set speech against silence, visibility against invisibility, and privilege the former over the latter in a wholly unreflective way. In order to assess whether Aboriginal texts remain caught within a colonial system of control that continues to define both the occasion and the manner in which the other is allowed to speak, it is necessary to give a critical account of the mode of self-expression itself. As Muecke has suggested, the obvious corollary of clearing a space in which the other can speak or be seen is to ask 'in what manner would one want to be heard or visible, in the western economy of discourses?'<sup>54</sup>

Dealing with such a question involves re-thinking the very notion of the text as a space for self-expression. For the radical critic, the biggest limitation of conventional approaches to Aboriginal literature is that they tend to treat the text as an unproblematic realm of individual creativity. Part and parcel of recuperating an Aboriginal narrative as a 'work of art' or a piece of 'literature', according to Muecke, is to incorporate it within a discourse of the aesthetic that reduces it to the imaginative work of the author-creator.<sup>55</sup> In this 'romantic discourse' the text is seen as a kind of neutral container into which authors simply empty themselves. Blind to the influence exerted by form and context, it focuses upon the content of the narrative as the manifestation of an expressive power, as if

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<sup>53</sup> Rushdie's aphorism 'the Empire writes back to the Centre' is used as an epigram in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London, 1993.

<sup>54</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> See Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p. 79; and Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature and the repressive hypothesis', *Southerly*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 1988, p. 406.

the meaning of that narrative was not itself thoroughly constrained, confined, or channelled by forces outside the control of the author. For Muecke it is precisely that which escapes the author (or is disguised by a reading strategy that forever refers meaning back to the author) that is crucial in the production of texts. Since what is said always depends upon what is not said, the most important dimension of a text is often less what it reveals than what it conceals, less what it expresses than what it represses. Indeed rather than 'a place where the desire to speak is liberated', the text may in fact be more profitably 'seen as a site of multiple constraints pertaining both to form and contextual relations'.<sup>56</sup> According to this view, the meanings that a text takes on are always heavily dependent upon the intersection of the set of formal characteristics — genre, style, narrative — and the set of institutional apparatuses — publishers, distributors, marketing agents, retailers, schools, universities — through which it is produced and according to which it is consumed.

On first glance such an approach does not seem far removed from a kind of historical sociology that tries to read the 'text' in terms of its 'context'. Yet if the language of production deployed by Muecke here has a familiar (and perhaps comforting) ring, we should not be too quick to jump to conclusions. Despite the decidedly Marxist overtones of his terminology, Muecke is in no way interested in reducing, in however dialectical a way, Aboriginal texts to the forces and relations of production of the capitalist system. If he falls back upon the notion of the 'social text' it is rather as a means of avoiding the notion of the 'self-identical transcendental subject'<sup>57</sup> that sustains the Romantic aesthetic than of rekindling the Marxist distinction between base and superstructure. For him there is no suggestion that the two terms — society and text — stand in a relation of cause and effect. While it is certainly necessary for the critic to extend beyond an analysis of what lies between the dust covers of any given text, such a move 'is not', as Muecke has put it, 'just a question of adding a "sociological" dimension to an already adequate literary aesthetic'. The point is to see 'social conditions of production and circulation as a necessary part of the aesthetic'.<sup>58</sup> For him, institutional apparatuses are not so much forces

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<sup>56</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 417.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 417-418.

<sup>58</sup> There may be some parallel between Muecke's notion of the 'social text' and that of Stephen Greenblatt. According to the latter author a particular image, representation, or discourse is not only the product of social relations, but a social relation in itself, 'linked to the group understandings, status hierarchies, resistances, and conflicts that exist in other spheres of the culture in which it circulates'. See

that surround the text as forces that are embedded in it. While they do not entirely determine what a text can be, they do effect how it is read at any given moment, and as such are crucial to its production and consumption both as a commodity in the material sense and as a repository of meanings.<sup>59</sup> Critiques of Aboriginal texts that fail to recognise this (and for Muecke this seems to be most of them) will inevitably fail to give an adequate account of their manner of functioning. Precisely what this means for the interpretation of Aboriginal literature will hopefully become evident through an examination of his critique of one example of resistance through writing: Sally Morgan's *My Place*.<sup>60</sup>

While Muecke has approached Morgan's book with a scepticism born of its commercial success, it is not the popularity of the book which, in itself, is the cause of his concern. The issue is rather the disjunction that appears to exist between the political charge set off by the contents of the book and its ready acceptance among those who are ostensibly the very target of the explosion. For if it is true that *My Place* is, as one critic put it, 'an eye-opener to a shameful past many white Australians would sooner ignore or forget',<sup>61</sup> then the popularity of the book among a predominantly non-Aboriginal audience constitutes something of an anomaly. Apparently (and perhaps justifiably) not prepared to countenance the idea that white Australia has begun to acknowledge and make amends for the sins of the past, Muecke makes no attempt to respond to claims that the popular reception of *My Place* is suggestive of 'a renewed questioning of the meanings of identity in Australia'.<sup>62</sup> Much as it may gratify our sense of ourselves as a progressive nation, admissions of past (though usually not present) iniquities do not, for him, it would seem, ring true. Despite all the congratulatory rhetoric that has surrounded the extensive distribution of the book, the discordance between its ready acceptance by white readers and reviewers and its largely unflattering representation of white society sets up a tension at the ideological level which, in the words of Muecke, 'can only make the radical critic uneasy'.<sup>63</sup> A necessary part of understanding Morgan's text as a political event is thus to

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Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', pp. 417-418; and S. Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 417.

<sup>60</sup> S. Morgan, *My Place*, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, Freemantle, 1987.

<sup>61</sup> J. Broun, 'Unmaking white myths: your laws, my place', in Bird and Haskell (eds), *Whose Place?*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>62</sup> See for instance, J. Newman, 'Race, gender and identity: *My Place* as autobiography', in Bird and Haskell (eds), *Whose Place?*, p. 66.

<sup>63</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 415.

give an account of how a book which posits Australia as a thoroughly oppressive society can be taken to heart by so many members of that society.

While providing such an account demands a more critical examination of *My Place* than has generally been the norm, it is safe to assume that Muecke is not motivated by a desire to cut 'a black tall poppy' down to size.<sup>64</sup> If Morgan's book is his principal target in the first instance, it is only so because its very status as a best seller brings into sharp relief a larger set of issues concerning the political valency that can be attached to Aboriginal literature in its conditions of production and consumption.<sup>65</sup> Given that *My Place* constitutes an attempt 'to let people know what has been done to Aboriginal people in the past, to tell a black version of history and in this way to somehow right those injustices',<sup>66</sup> its success cannot but focus attention on an issue at the very heart of the postcolonial problematic: the political salience and emancipatory potential of the aesthetic. Like a great deal of other black writing, *My Place* has tended to be interpreted (not least of all by Morgan herself) as an act of resistance against white domination and oppression. As with many liberationist accounts of the rise of Aboriginal literature itself, the formula: 'out of repression, expression' has served generally as an explanation of Morgan's text.<sup>67</sup> Yet whether *My Place* or the genre of which it forms a part is either produced out of conditions of repression or achieves the liberation to which it lays claim is, for Muecke at least, a matter of contention. For him the question which needs to be addressed is whether expression is necessarily subversive of colonial forms of domination or simply a rhetoric which deflects attention from the powerful constraints which act upon Aboriginal literature at both the 'formal' and the 'contextual' level.

The first move in Muecke's critical examination of *My Place* is to foreground what Fredric Jameson has called 'the interpretative categories or codes through which we receive the text',<sup>68</sup> the forms that confer meaning and give the narrative its distinctive

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<sup>64</sup> Academic criticism of *My Place* led Elizabeth Reed to ponder whether Sally Morgan had become 'something of a Nyungar tall poppy'. While I think (and possibly Reed thinks) that this undersells the kind of arguments which Muecke and Attwood are making, I am far from rejecting *in toto* the analysis of those arguments she has provided. See E. Reed, 'Sally Morgan: a black tall poppy?', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 101, October 1993, pp. 637-640.

<sup>65</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 405. Muecke also undertakes a critique of Cleopatra Ward's *Wandering Girl*, but in light of the significantly greater critical attention which *My Place* has received, I will confine my comments to the latter text.

<sup>66</sup> Broun, 'Unmaking white myths', p. 25.

<sup>67</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 405.

<sup>68</sup> F. Jameson cited in Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p. 84.

shape. And here the radical postcolonial critic begins to unravel the paradox behind the success of the book. What drives the narrative structure of 'the novel' and ensures its ready acceptance among both a 'popular' and an 'educated' audience, according to Muecke, is the conjunction it establishes between a literary form that is 'quasi-documentary' and a politics that is 'liberationist'. Readers (presumably mainly non-indigenous readers) are willing to embrace Morgan's portrayal of Aboriginality as a key by which to re-assemble the jigsaw of her life because they are already receptive to the two central rhetorical devices of her text. First, an autobiographical realism, especially of the 'quasi-ethnographic' kind, in which a shift from ignorance to knowledge is achieved through a process of self-discovery. And, second, a concept of subjectivity, especially of the 'feminist' kind, in which a shift from repression to liberation is achieved through an act of self-expression.<sup>69</sup> To the extent that these two devices help to integrate the personal ('a post-Freudian journey of self-discovery') and the political (an 'Aboriginal coming-to-consciousness') they provide a powerful, and by no means unfamiliar, architecture of resistance. Since it is the discovery of her Aboriginality that gives Morgan a place to belong, the narrative is readily interpretable as an act of resistance in which her real nature is finally freed from the shackles of colonial domination. Given 'the usual absence or at best marginal hearing of Aboriginal women', *My Place* has come to be seen, not only as a literary occasion, but as 'a political act, part of an oppositional and anti-hegemonic struggle'.<sup>70</sup>

For the radical critic the 'real' situation is, as we have come to expect, contrawise. Rather than actually facilitate the emancipation of indigenous peoples, this 'liberatory romance' only diverts attention from the formal and contextual constraints that are at work in the text. To begin with, according to Muecke, Morgan's autobiography takes the form of a confession. It is by telling the truth, by unburdening her soul, that she hopes to escape from a colonial order of power that enslaves her. To confess the secrets of the family, to allow them to surface from the depths of repression, is from her perspective tantamount to achieving a kind of liberation from domination.<sup>71</sup> Yet what such an

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<sup>69</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 409.

<sup>70</sup> J. Pettman, 'Gendered knowledges: Aboriginal women and the politics of feminism', in Attwood and Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, p. 129.

<sup>71</sup> Muecke's analysis here owes a great deal to Foucault's discussion of 'the confession' in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. See Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 410; and M. Foucault, *The*

approach fails to acknowledge, according to Muecke, is that the very concept of truth, and thus the confessional form that produces it, is thoroughly imbued with relations of power that do not necessarily work in the interests of indigenous people. If the confession is, as Foucault has suggested, 'a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship',<sup>72</sup> there are good reasons to be sceptical about its emancipatory potential. Since there is always someone who solicits the confession and someone who, upon hearing it, offers up the possibility of consolation and reconciliation, it may be necessary to ask at the very outset who stands to benefit from the revelation of secrets. Doubtless the critical reception of *My Place* would lead us to assume that it is indigenous people themselves who stand to gain the most.<sup>73</sup> And yet, asks Muecke, might not the contrary in fact be the case? If the confession is a mode of expression in which 'dealing with difficulty involves first of all dealing with oneself', it will tend to shift the burden of responsibility from the oppressor to the oppressed — a move that has perhaps made Morgan's autobiography a far less bitter pill for white Australians to swallow than it might otherwise have been.

At the contextual level also, what this mobilisation of the Romantic notion of the expressive self tends to do, according to Muecke, is to deflect attention from the set of institutional relations which serve as the condition of possibility for *My Place*. 'Writers and readers can applaud the ethical reconstructions of autobiography', he suggests, precisely because they leave vacant the field of social determinations about production and consumption which would allow us to interrogate the persistence of specific colonialist and racist ideas'.<sup>74</sup> And of these, it would seem, there is no shortage. For if it is true, as Judith Brett has argued, that 'within the text of the novel' there are only authentic Aboriginal relations, 'outside the text there is a whole series of well-meaning whites bringing us the book'.<sup>75</sup> Aside from 'Morgan's friend who encouraged her to publish', there is 'the "white" publishing house and its sympathetic and sensitive editors, and last but not least the white reviewer for whom the book becomes an occasion to drive home gratuitously a moral lesson about how we should take up the burden of guilt for the

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*History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1987, pp. 58-73.

<sup>72</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 61.

<sup>73</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', pp. 410-411.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 416.

wrongs of the past'.<sup>76</sup> Extrapolating from this analysis, Muecke suggests that it would be wrong to assume that the appearance of Aboriginal literature over the last two decades has been solely in response to 'conditions of repression and struggle'. Among other things, it also reflects the fact that the publishing industry is 'in a state of readiness, even eagerness, to publish work by Aboriginal writers'.<sup>77</sup> And for Muecke, it is precisely this eagerness which should remind us that, in the case of books like *My Place*, the 'general situation of acceptance tends to hide a more complex series of apparatuses of exclusion and co-option'.<sup>78</sup>

Importantly for Muecke this set of discursive relations does not exhaust the critical possibilities of the text. Although, to a large extent, the meanings of *My Place* are pre-determined by the Romantic discourse of the aesthetic, there are other ways of engaging with the text, other ways of constructing meaning from it, that are not quite so determined. Naturally, to the extent that the 'interpretative devices' of a culture are constituted by the dominant class there will be 'no form of access to interpretations through which those on the outside can understand their conditions of existence in their own terms'.<sup>79</sup> Yet since in practice 'Aboriginal writers *do* engage with specific issues of representation and control' and 'it is in the nature of the process of signification in language to exclude totalisation', their texts can be read in ways that are potentially subversive of the dominant codes.<sup>80</sup> It does not matter that the narrators in question may not have intended to dislodge or undermine the dominant ideological formation through their work. Since the 'texts are *there*, in circulation', according to Muecke, 'they can be marshalled to any cause within the limits currently imposed by critical protocols'.<sup>81</sup> Whatever the intention of the author may have been (for it is something which can never be known with certainty), it is still possible for the radical critic to locate those 'unconscious' or 'culturally subsumed' aspects of the work that tend to be passed over or forgotten by more conventional commentary. For the poststructuralist, it seems, the art of subversion is largely a matter of reading against the grain. Rather than follow the dominant European Romantic discourse, it is open to the critic to perform what Muecke calls an

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 408.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 417; and Muecke, 'Ideology reiterated', p. 99.

<sup>81</sup> Muecke, 'Ideology reiterated', p. 97.

'Aboriginal' or 'Aboriginalising' reading of the text; one which is located within a different circuit of power and, consequently, 'relatively undetermined by the available reading strategies'.<sup>82</sup>

In terms of *My Place* this amounts to a recovery or recuperation of the more traditional set of Aboriginal discursive practices that are latent within it. Inscribed alongside the Romantic discourse of liberation, according to Muecke, lies a certain 'Aboriginal aesthetic' which can be accessed at a range of different levels — generic, political, stylistic — in the text. While the novel is largely overdetermined by the autobiographical genre, for instance, it differs from standard European autobiographies in one important sense: it is a collective storytelling occasion in which the narrative does not belong solely to the 'author'. In line with traditional Aboriginal textual convention, a process of deferment takes place in which the accounts of those who exercise certain rights to the story — Sally Morgan, Gladys Milroy, Arthur Corunna, Daisy Corunna — are presented in accordance with the appropriate sequence of custodial authority.<sup>83</sup> In much the same way, but this time on the political level, the apparent unwillingness of Daisy Corunna to disclose her 'secrets' to her grand daughter Sally can be constructed in terms of a more traditional 'Aboriginal discursive strategy'. For might it not be, asks Muecke, that the difficulty which the narrator has in getting Daisy to produce her story constitutes an act of resistance to 'the very form of the confessional (a non-Aboriginal genre) and the power relations which it implies?' If 'the shift from Sally to her grandmother represents a shift to more traditional Aboriginality', her silence can be readily recuperated within an indigenous political strategy, one in which resistance 'would take the form of non-disclosure in the face of the demand to speak'.<sup>84</sup> Finally, at the level of literary form, the 'occasional' rather than 'universal' style which characterises *My Place* can also be seen to be suggestive of a subversive textual practice. For despite the more general thematic of suffering and resistance which have often been read into the book,<sup>85</sup> 'its openly confessional style coupled with plain description does not, according to Muecke, 'encourage any general metaphorical shift towards interpretations of "the human

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<sup>82</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', pp. 417, 415.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 410-411.

<sup>85</sup> See for instance, F. De Groen, 'Healing, wholeness and holiness in *My Place*', in Bird and Haskell (eds), *Whose Place?*, p. 34.

condition" or any other such universal'. Instead, like a veritable family album, 'it functions in relation to specific events in one life and a set of lives'.<sup>86</sup>

The immediate temptation here is to see these oppositional formations as so many manifestations of an authentic Aboriginality; one to which *My Place* aspires but is unable to fully realise because it is overdetermined by a Romantic concept of the expressive self drawn from the discursive arsenal of European culture. Giving in to such a temptation (and I am not convinced that Muecke himself entirely resists it) would see the reader treat those 'subsumed', 'unconscious' or 'Aboriginal' aspects of the text — the narrative structure of deferment, the political practice of non-disclosure, the stylistic principle of occasionality — as signs of a true 'Aboriginal aesthetic'.<sup>87</sup> A corrective image of what a real Aboriginal text should look like could then be constructed that would allow the critic to discriminate in a thoroughly conventional way between those aspects of *My Place* that were faithful to Aboriginal modes of discourse and those that were not. In this scenario, the oppositional value of Morgan's text would no longer consist in its capacity to focus attention upon the shameful history of colonialism. Rather, it would lie in its capacity to resist being framed by, or speaking in terms of, the discourses of the coloniser. Put simply, the value of *My Place* in the struggle for Aboriginal autonomy would be measured by the extent to which it did not fall victim to what has often been seen as the most insidious form of colonial domination: 'the black voice that speaks white words'.<sup>88</sup> Such an approach would run parallel to the discourse of Romanticism in its appeal to an underlying nature as the key to liberation, but it would undermine its cultural bias by trading self for collectivity, confession for secrecy, universality for occasionality. Black literature and black versions of history would be seen to be truly emancipatory to the extent that they displaced the 'Romantic aesthetic' in favour of the 'Aboriginal aesthetic' and thereby enabled indigenous people to speak in a language and in a form that is truly their own.

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<sup>86</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 414.

<sup>87</sup> In various places Muecke has defined the 'Aboriginal aesthetic' in terms of the following series of oppositions: authorship/custodianship, confession/secrecy, universal/occasional. See *ibid.*, pp. 406, 410-411, 414; Muecke, 'Ideology reiterated', pp. 92-95; and S. Muecke, 'Two texts (and one other)', in Rutherford (ed.), *Aboriginal Culture Today*, pp. 53-59.

<sup>88</sup> T. Fry and A. Willis cited in Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p. 165. In this instance Muecke disapproves of Fry and Willis' desire to prevent the 'induction of Aboriginal subjects into the dominant culture's value system' on the basis that it militates against those 'who might want to be induced into such a system'. That he can at the same time be critical of the overdetermination of *My Place* by the dominant, European conception of the aesthetic is highly suggestive of the mobility of his style of critique. For him, it appears different, even apparently contradictory, positions can be taken up at different times according to the exigencies of the situation.

As it turns out, however, the utility of this 'Aboriginal reading' for Muecke lies not in the recovery of a more authentic Aboriginality, but in the recovery of difference. If it works to subvert power, it is not because it moves out of the text (towards the real), but because it moves into it in a different way. For him, the value of the traditional Aboriginal discursive practices either located in or capable of being read into *My Place* lies precisely in their ability to make things visible from another perspective. If they are capable of dislodging the Romantic aesthetic, it is not because they represent a more authentic expression of Aboriginality. To approach the problem in that way would be to fall back into the representationalist fallacy. Rather, their power to disrupt or to decentre turns upon the contrapuntal relation they maintain with the dominant European aesthetic. It is because the 'Aboriginal aesthetic' serves as a rhetorical counterpoint within the text that it is possible for Muecke to perform what, borrowing from Andrew Milner, we might label his 'disruptively immanent critique'.<sup>89</sup> In showing that there is another way in which the text can be interpreted, an Aboriginal reading reveals just how culturally relative and just how politically saturated the process of reading and its many hypostases — representing, interpreting, looking — actually are. The Romantic aesthetic comes unstuck, not because it is shown to be less correct than the Aboriginal aesthetic, but because it is shown to be tied to a particular, and thus necessarily limited, 'régime of truth'.

At first glance the poststructuralist idea of critique as a form of 'demystification through relativisation',<sup>90</sup> would seem to be an eminently applicable description to Muecke's reading of *My Place*. Yet it is evident that he has more in mind than to demonstrate the cultural relativity of different discursive formations. If he is keen to show that there are at least two ways of reading the text, it is not merely in the hope that they will cancel each other out. Between the Romantic and the Aboriginal aesthetic, the weight of judgement is decidedly in favour of the latter. And this not because it is more correct necessarily, but because it allows Muecke to make a strategic intervention into what, for him at least, is an enduring problem for Aboriginal people: the never-ending demands placed upon them to tell their stories and perform their cultural traditions. From his perspective, it is no longer the case that Aboriginal writers are either 'unheard of or radically unacceptable'. Instead they are 'called upon to speak on all occasions and on

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<sup>89</sup> Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, p. 75.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

every occasion'. Perhaps more than ever before, he suggests, Aboriginality now stands 'as a social "truth" which must be uttered', as if only through its confession (though Muecke does not put it in precisely this way), can Aborigines regain their dignity and white Australia receive its absolution.<sup>91</sup> Against this background it is worthwhile asking whether silence may not be a more powerful form of resistance than speech. Without allowing it to become reified through an appeal to an ontological ground, a deconstructive inversion which equates silence with liberation and speech with repression may provide the most political efficacious response to the current predicament. As Muecke sees it, silence might be adopted in the current historical juncture as a means of subverting the relentless pressure exerted upon indigenous people to confess their cultural identity and history of suffering.<sup>92</sup>

In this set of critical moves lies the kernel of what Muecke has elsewhere called a 'strategic nomadology', a form of criticism which first attempts to render explicit, and then make the best of, a situation that other discourses expressly aim to hide: the imprisonment of knowledge within the hall of mirrors. Clearly for Muecke there is no escape from the realm of ideological reflections. Convinced, in the words of Martin Jay, that our 'knowledge of nature, or anything else for that matter, is always already "linguistic" in the strong sense of the term', he rejects the idea that it is possible to measure our knowledge of the world against the world itself. The best that can be hoped for is to overcome 'the false belief that we can bracket our rhetorical mediations and see the world straight'.<sup>93</sup> For Muecke, it would seem, criticism is at its most radical (its least imperial), not when it searches for the final truth, but when it denies the very possibility of doing so by refusing 'to participate in power relations which gravitate and draw everything towards a centre'.<sup>94</sup> Radical criticism demystifies by establishing a kind of 'double vision', a juxtaposition of forms, in which different meanings can emerge without any of them being regarded as unequivocally better.<sup>95</sup> Indeed the advantage of the nomadological approach for Muecke is precisely that it continually sets up other ways of seeing and thereby blocks any appeals to an ultimate and unified truth. At base, it is 'an

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<sup>91</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', p. 413.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 410-411.

<sup>93</sup> Jay, 'Ideology and ocularcentrism', p. 149.

<sup>94</sup> A. Lattas, 'Primitivism in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*', *Social Analysis*, No. 30, December 1991, p. 98.

<sup>95</sup> Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, pp. 148-151.

aesthetic/political stance' which is 'constantly in flight from ideas or practices associated with the singular, the original, the uniform, the central authority, the hierarchy'.<sup>96</sup>

Of course to define it merely in terms of movement is to neglect the other axis of Muecke's 'strategic nomadology'. If, for him, the will to truth is closely associated with the will to power, it is not to be assumed that critics should eschew knowledge altogether in fear of perpetuating the system of colonial domination. While the attempt to generate an objective account of Aboriginality from some point outside discourse can never be anything but a flawed and dangerous enterprise, there is much to be said for temporarily taking up a position within the limits of the available discursive formations in accordance with certain strategic objectives. As Muecke sees it, 'Intellectuals are not operating in universal knowledge with a universal method. They are strategists who take sides in debates and struggles'.<sup>97</sup> In order to alter the distribution of power in the field of knowledge that bears upon the conditions of existence of indigenous people, it is not only necessary for them to unveil the game of truth for what it is, but to play it with transgressive fervour. Although there is no philosophical justification for privileging one representation of Aboriginality over another, intellectuals can still engage in what Gayatri Spivak has called 'strategic essentialism': a mode of critique that would make pragmatic decisions as to what conception of Aboriginality was likely to produce the most desirable political effects in the face of specific problems.<sup>98</sup> That is the limited but important power of intellectuals. Rather than tell the real truth about the world, they can 'intervene in a situation and tell a story which can change the conventions for understanding things'.<sup>99</sup>

## V

### Speaking in Tongues: Paradoxes of Nomadology

In the same way that the ease with which *My Place* has been accepted by a white audience makes Muecke the radical critic 'uneasy', it is the considerable appeal and seductiveness of this 'strategic nomadology' which should invite closer critical scrutiny. To begin with it

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>98</sup> See G.C. Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, edited by Sarah Harasym, Routledge, New York, 1990, pp. 10-12; and Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 33.

<sup>99</sup> Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 173.

may be worthwhile asking whether the nomadological position is not either self-defeating or contradictory on an epistemological level. Despite certain impressions to the contrary, Muecke cannot lay claim to an Archimedean point from which to watch the battle of images and make strategic forays as necessary. If we believe all his strictures about discourse, there is no possibility of him standing outside the hall of mirrors in which he has imprisoned knowledge. He is in there with us. But with this exception: he sees it for what it is, he knows it is a hall of mirrors. But how does he see it? How can he know it? If everything has the character of an illusion, then Muecke's claim that everything is an illusion must itself be an illusion. As many commentators on poststructuralism have noted, there is an inherent contradiction in being able to see truly that our vision of the world is irredeemably distorted. Like the theorists he draws upon for inspiration, Muecke inevitably comes up against the time honoured problem of all radical scepticism: how can the assertions of the sceptic be judged to be either true or false when the very basis for discriminating between the two is denied?<sup>100</sup> Having taken the most radical stance on the epistemological question of how one can know the culture of the other, he inevitably undermines the very basis upon which his own discourse could be acceptable. For if what the radical critic says is true then it must also be false.

Nor can this problem of self-contradiction be resolved by appealing to certain pragmatic political goals. Regardless of how sympathetic we may be to the notion of Aboriginal autonomy which appears to animate Muecke's critical practice, it cannot guide our selections among the available discourses on Aborigines. For rather than provide a solution, as Eagleton has correctly noted, the pragmatist move 'simply pushes the question back a step: if what validates my social interpretations are the political ends they serve, how am I to validate these ends?'<sup>101</sup> In order to justify the notion of Aboriginal autonomy on the basis of its political utility, the critic must be able to distinguish between a beneficial (good) political outcome and an unbeneficial (bad) one and to do so is to presuppose that there are certain criteria, independent of the particular discursive formation in which they appear, for making these sort of discriminations. For the conventional critic such criteria could be supplied by appealing to the devastating effects which the loss of autonomy has had for indigenous people in Australia. For poststructuralists like Muecke, however, no

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<sup>100</sup> See Jay, 'Ideology and ocularcentrism', p. 150.

<sup>101</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 205.

such appeal to the ground of history is available. Even if he were convinced that physical and cultural processes of dislocation and dispossession had been detrimental to Aboriginal communities (as indeed he appears to be),<sup>102</sup> he cannot use them as a legitimation for the idea of Aboriginal sovereignty for the simple reason that such processes are on his reading only 'true' in the context of a certain discursive formation (perhaps the black arm band view of history?).<sup>103</sup> To draw upon Eagleton once more, in this kind of analysis no recourse can be taken 'to the way things are in society, for the way things are is just the way you construct them to be'. The only basis upon which critics can make selections between competing discourses is to appeal to their own political ends and interests, with the additional proviso that these do not derive from some social reality but are instead just 'given'.<sup>104</sup>

In fairness to Muecke's position it may be countered that criticisms of this type amount to little more than an attempt to make poststructuralists conform to the rules of a discourse whose very authority they set out to challenge. Possibly there is an implicit imperialism in forcing poststructuralism to 'speak its truth' in the conventional idioms of political reflection.<sup>105</sup> To demand that Muecke give an account of his position in terms of the foundational distinctions of Western philosophical thought — rational/irrational, legitimate/illegitimate — is to demand that he accommodate himself to precisely the cognitive machinery that he has already rejected on the basis that it serves as an instrument of domination. Indeed, to the extent that Muecke's politics emerges from the recognition that the will to truth can be equated with the will to power, attempts to bring him to account philosophically, to draw him back within the circle of epistemology, could readily be seen to bear out the 'truth' of his position. For is this not a perfect example, to paraphrase Foucault, of reason imposing its form over that which was not designed to

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<sup>102</sup> It is instructive that whenever Muecke attempts to explain why he is critical of the available discourses on the Aborigines he refers to 'the destructive pressures of white society', even though, strictly speaking, the notion that these pressures are real (as opposed to discursive constructions) is inconsistent with his theoretical premises. See for instance, Muecke, 'Ideology reiterated', p. 97; and Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, pp. 149, 185.

<sup>103</sup> Clearly I am playing devil's advocate here but such a characterisation is entirely consistent with Muecke's view that the kind of oppositional history which one finds in a text like Reynolds' *The Other Side of the Frontier*, draws its strength, not so much from the discovery of a new truth, but from the 'social formation which is operating now'. See Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 127; and H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1982.

<sup>104</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 205.

<sup>105</sup> See S.K. White, 'Poststructuralism and political reflection', *Political Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 2, May 1988, pp. 186-187.

receive it?<sup>106</sup> Is it not a means of disciplining poststructuralism, of forcing it to return to the fold of logocentric thinking? In a sense, asking Muecke to defend his position in terms of the standard cognitive machinery of Western philosophy is akin to asking him to drive the square peg into the round hole. If he cannot do it we triumphantly proclaim his position to be incoherent and if he can do it we triumphantly declare the peg to have been round after all. Either way the hegemony of truth is restored and the valuable insights of poststructuralism re-appropriated within a more acceptable mode of thought.

If this poststructuralist counter-claim is not wholly satisfying, it may yet be enough to induce us to bracket epistemological considerations momentarily and turn our attention to the political foundations and implications of Muecke's position. It will be immediately apparent that the poststructuralist emphasis upon movement draws its strength from a monolithic concept of power as constraint. Since, for the radical critic, every knowledge claim is based upon an exclusion of one kind or another there is something intrinsically repressive about the search for truth, for consensus, for common standards. From Muecke's perspective, to take a stance, even an oppositional stance, is to abet domination; domination of a radically different kind to what previously existed perhaps, but domination nonetheless. To his way of seeing, power is always about staking out territory, putting up fences, restricting movement. In the very metaphor of 'the state' he perceives a form of authority which 'stabilises a sense of presence', which exercises power because it knows 'exactly where it stands'.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, as the radical critic would have it, the power of the modern state, like that of the Medusa, derives from being able to impose immobility, to turn things to stone with its gaze. It maintains control, imposes fixity, by endlessly refining its strategies of surveillance and extending them anonymously throughout the social network.<sup>108</sup> Subverting the power of the state and of stasis, is thus a matter of undermining the process of consolidation whose principal agent is the truth.

As a form of political action, therefore, strategic nomadology could be characterised less as an emancipation through the truth than as an emancipation from the

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<sup>106</sup> W.E. Connolly, 'Taylor, Foucault, and otherness', *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 3, August 1985, p. 366.

<sup>107</sup> Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 219.

<sup>108</sup> As Muecke would have it, 'The evolution of power has been shown as progressing towards greater and greater efficiency, towards increased *fixity* of the people (*what you are, where you live, etc.*) and towards greater surveillance of the people'. Muecke is obviously once again drawing here upon the work of Michel Foucault. See *ibid.*, pp. 217-218; and M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991.

truth. Since, for Muecke, knowledge and power are inextricably and dangerously intertwined, the idea of the intellectual as 'the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power'<sup>109</sup> is utterly misconceived. Not only for him is it impossible to rescue truth from power, the very idea of liberation through the truth is a profound and dangerous illusion. As far as he is concerned, the political value of the nomadological approach, its counter-ideological effect, lies precisely in its refusal to fix things in place. In strategic nomadology 'the subversive act is the act of sliding between categories and identities, sliding past or between their imprisoning form'.<sup>110</sup> For where there are only different positions to be taken up depending on the circumstances, the possibility of being held in constraint by the truth are kept to a minimum. One strikes against power, not by setting one 'over-arching theory' against another but by undertaking 'local and strategic movements' which unsettle the dominant discourses.<sup>111</sup> Much in the manner of nomads themselves (which on Muecke's reading are remarkably poststructuralist),<sup>112</sup> therefore, radical criticism is subversive because it keeps things 'on the move'.<sup>113</sup> Closure is avoided through a 'process of constant displacement' that has us shift from one speaking position to the next in an endless guerilla action.<sup>114</sup>

The issue at the heart of the 'problem of silence' for Muecke is thus not so much how to facilitate dialogue (which presupposes consensus) as how to represent polyvocality.<sup>115</sup> And of this the Aboriginal aesthetic, itself fundamentally nomadological, provides something of a model. As the radical critic would have it, 'Western understandings of textual productions have tended, in the past, to emphasise the monologue emanating from a single source (the "author")'. By contrast, the practice of Aboriginal culture 'fits in better with an understanding of the dialogical nature of language and of the text as polyphonic (an amalgam of different voices)'.<sup>116</sup> Processes of

<sup>109</sup> E.W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. xiv.

<sup>110</sup> Lattas, 'Primitivism in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*', p. 100.

<sup>111</sup> Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 22. As Charles Taylor has suggested, for poststructuralism 'there is no question of a new form, just a kind of resistance movement, a set of destabilising actions, always local-specific, within the dominant form'. See Taylor, 'Foucault on freedom and truth', p. 95.

<sup>112</sup> See, for instance, Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, pp. 4-5; Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, pp. 216-227; and Lattas, 'Primitivism in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*', p. 101.

<sup>113</sup> Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 15.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>115</sup> In this Muecke follows a certain school of ethnography. See F. Myers, 'Locating ethnographic practice: romance, reality, and politics in the outback', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 15, No. 4, November 1988, p. 611; and Clifford, 'Introduction: partial truths', p. 12.

<sup>116</sup> Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, p. 242.

domination and exclusion are avoided in Aboriginal narratives because series is privileged over hierarchy, metonymy over metaphor, and glancing over gazing. Unlike modern Western discourses, authority is passed from one speaker to the next, each story is a new departure, and perceptions 'come in flashes' that disrupt the steady gaze.<sup>117</sup> If the postcolonial text is to replicate this form (and this, I would suggest, is precisely what Muecke's collaborative *Reading the Country* attempts to do), it must abandon any attempt to create unity or harmony between different perspectives, to encapture the voice of the other through the means of interpretation.<sup>118</sup> Thinking more nomadically involves fashioning the text as a polyvocal encounter, an open forum in which a variety of different voices co-exist within a pluralist frame. With Muecke as with Roland Barthes, it would seem, 'the Biblical myth is reversed, the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages *working side by side*: the text of pleasure is a sanctioned Babel'.<sup>119</sup>

The problem with this approach is that it cannot identify what is to be gained by slipping into the interstices of different discourses. Clearly Muecke does not wish to specify what it is that must be protected in fear of establishing yet another form of domination. But, as Charles Taylor has suggested, unless there is something to be defended against power, something like a desire, a purpose, an aspiration or an interest, running from its effects does not really make much sense.<sup>120</sup> If there is no authentic core of human experience (based either in tradition or history) to be safe-guarded, resistance can be nothing other than an idle pursuit, a futile alternation between different voices which offers no other return save perhaps the uncertain pleasure of movement itself (and why on Muecke's understanding would we even want that?). In a sense, the nomadological approach conforms to the classical liberal notion of negative liberty, but with this crucial difference: it cannot specify why we should be afraid of tyranny. Having refused the idea that there is something about human beings generally, and Aboriginal culture specifically, that must be rescued from power, Muecke is unable to provide any reason why a form of

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<sup>117</sup> See Muecke, 'Two texts (and one other)', pp. 53-59.

<sup>118</sup> Whether or not *Reading the Country* actually succeeds in doing this is a moot point. As Muecke in fact concedes in a postscript to the book, it is his voice, and more specifically his concept of nomadology, which tends to provide a framework for the paintings of Krim Benterrak and the oral narratives of Paddy Roe. See Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, pp. 11, 230-232.

<sup>119</sup> See R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller, The Noonday Press, New York, 1991, pp. 3-4; and Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, pp. 23, 187.

<sup>120</sup> Taylor, 'Foucault on freedom and truth', p. 91.

criticism which seeks to prevent discourses from congealing into truth is inherently better than one that does. By adhering to the Foucaultian notion of 'régimes of truth', Muecke in fact deprives himself of the very normative yardstick that would make his refusal of an ultimate and unified authority either comprehensible or worthwhile. To become a nomad, at least in the sense that Muecke uses the term, is to follow a road which not only goes nowhere, but goes nowhere for no reason.

The political implications of this refusal of the notion of authenticity for Aboriginal people are at best disquieting. Despite Muecke's desire not to compromise a sense of Aboriginal identity,<sup>121</sup> his nomadological model works against the very possibility of Aboriginal people making ethical or political claims against the state on the basis of their cultural identity. For if, as he suggests, 'Aboriginality is nothing more or less than a strategic logocentre',<sup>122</sup> a political site in which different voices compete for control, it can never function (as Sally Morgan among others tries to make it function) as a basis for identification and resistance. To be sure, indigenous people can invoke different concepts of their culture to further their political interests, and Muecke willingly concedes 'that there are sound strategic reasons for Aborigines investing in essentialist versions of Aboriginality'.<sup>123</sup> But neither an essentialist version of Aboriginal culture nor a more differentiated one, can be assumed to reflect an actual ontological entity that needs to be protected against colonial power. Instead, Aboriginality must be seen as 'a range of subject positions which can be dynamically entered into' depending upon the political exigencies of the occasion.<sup>124</sup> Now not only does this view make a mockery of the whole struggle for recognition waged by Aboriginal people, it turns their cultural aspirations into matters of political interest pure and simple. In proclaiming Aboriginality nothing more than an instrument of struggle, a strategic *topos* calculated to achieve certain political objectives, Muecke removes the very rationale for that struggle as it is waged by indigenous people. Doubtless such a view would find ready adherents among those who already believe that Aboriginality is little more than a justification for a minority group claiming special privileges. But it tends to rule out the possibility of indigenous people

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<sup>121</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 40.

<sup>122</sup> S. Muecke, 'Studying the other: dialogue with a postgrad', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, May 1993, p. 327.

<sup>123</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely representations', p. 42.

<sup>124</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature', pp. 417-418.

appealing to the very conditions which make their pursuit of such things as land rights legitimate: the nature of Aboriginal culture and the history of dispossession in Australia.<sup>125</sup>

This is the situation, then, in which Muecke's explicit theoretical statements (and my slightly selective reading of his texts) leaves us. Yet there remains a certain tension in his work (a necessary tension I would suggest) which neither he nor I can completely eradicate. At times Muecke seems torn between a critique of representation as such and an appeal to a more politically informed, culturally sensitive form of representation.<sup>126</sup> Although on the rhetorical level his position is Foucaultian through and through, there are moments when he seems to be alluding to the possibility of something else. What, for instance, is to be made of his discussion of 'Aboriginal English' at the end of *Reading the Country*, where he explains and legitimates the linguistic conventions that have been used in the reproduction of Paddy Roe's stories? Might it be that there are procedures that can be legitimately adopted that would allow us to record, interpret and understand Aboriginal oral narratives without distorting, debasing or otherwise denaturing them? Might it be that there are good and bad ways to record these narratives and that the difference will depend very much upon a sensitive understanding of the lived cultural practices of indigenous people?<sup>127</sup> In raising these questions it is not my intention to turn Muecke into a hermeneutic critic after all. He is clearly far from that. But it is certainly instructive that there is an important place left within *Reading the Country* for conversations between the authors, for dialogues where a certain 'fusion of horizons' takes place, collective understandings that in no way paper over the authentic differences between the participants.<sup>128</sup> It is this sense of communication, so patently absent from so much of Muecke's work, that needs to be theorised and turned to account politically.

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<sup>125</sup> See, for instance, H. Creamer, 'Aboriginality in New South Wales: beyond the image of cultureless outcasts', in Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present*, pp. 45-63.

<sup>126</sup> James Clifford has identified a tension of a parallel sort in Said's *Orientalism*. See Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, pp. 258-264.

<sup>127</sup> See Benterrak et al., *Reading the Country*, pp. 150-151, 241-243.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 168-173.

## VI

### The Window of Understanding

If the epistemological foundations upon which a form of communication that might allow common understandings to emerge is rarely given systematic articulation in local postcolonial criticism, it is more or less implicit in a great deal of recent work in the field of Aboriginal studies.<sup>129</sup> This work, implicitly grounded in the hermeneutic tradition, does not try to evade the fact that knowledge is fundamentally interpretative. Indeed, rather than revitalise the positivist myth of transparency, it recognises that 'there is always an act of translation when European Australians represent Aborigines and Aboriginality'.<sup>130</sup> Such a recognition does not, however, lead such critics to imprison knowledge within a hall of mirrors in which there is no possibility of determining whether one image of 'the other' is more distorted or faithful than the next. In refusing the correspondence theory of truth, at least for the social sciences, hermeneutics does not seek to collapse knowledge into ideology. A different mode of knowing, one that retains as its regulative ideal a form of consensual understanding, remains available. The guiding metaphor here is not the hall of mirrors and its endless play of illusions, but the window and its variable framing devices. Hermeneutics describes an interpretative process in which adjustments can be made for the stigmatism of vision by drawing attention to the way in which knowledge is framed by the position of the knower. Genuine understanding remains a possibility because the historical and cultural framework that defines the space in which things appear to the interpreter is continually brought into question. It is because it establishes the conditions for 'a critical self-examination of one's culturally and historically specific position',<sup>131</sup> as Attwood has put it, that hermeneutics can, if not wholly transcend the inherent limitations of different perspectives, at least open up the possibility of establishing some common ground between them.

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<sup>129</sup> The work of some anthropologists and archaeologists seems to be exemplary in this respect. See C. Pardoe, 'Arches of Radian, corridors of power: reflections on current archaeological practice', in Attwood and Arnold, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 132-141; and Myers, 'Locating ethnographic practice', pp. 609-625.

<sup>130</sup> Attwood, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, p. xiv.

The path followed in this interpretative methodology has some familiar reference points. Once again it is positivism or what might be called the correspondence theory of truth which provides a critical counterpoint. In hermeneutics, as in poststructuralism, little credence is given to the notion that it is possible to separate the knower and the known, to describe, in an objective, neutral fashion what Richard Harvey Brown has called 'a self-subsisting social world-out-there'.<sup>132</sup> Since interpretation always starts from somewhere, there is no escape from the grip of perspective, no Archimedean point from which to survey the world with cool detachment and panoramic vision. Beginnings, as Said has recognised, are all important.<sup>133</sup> To the extent that this interpretative strategy acknowledges that perspective is inescapable, however, it does not conclude that all representations are equally flawed. Naturally the interpreter carries a particular set of pre-reflective prejudices to the text or text-analogue under examination. There is always an horizon of understanding or tradition which constitutes an undisclosed set of background assumptions for interpretation. But, as Nicholas Smith has recently suggested, without this horizon the interpreter would have no tools for 'reading', no point of access to unfamiliar (because historically or culturally distant) texts at all. What distinguishes hermeneutic criticism is the recognition that 'understanding only issues from within or between tradition(s), and that without prejudices, the human enquirer would be without any "windows" to the world'.<sup>134</sup>

If hermeneutics accepts tradition as a point of departure for analysis, it does not remain constrained by the limitations it sets. To do so would be to stay forever uncomprehending of those who see the world in ways which are either substantially different from or utterly incompatible with our own.<sup>135</sup> A critical part of the process of understanding is to open tradition up to the challenge of different perspectives. Within hermeneutic criticism this invariably takes the form of a dialogue in which self and other appear, not so much as subject and object but as participants in a conversation. Such a model, as Smith puts it, 'aims at truth which is disclosed through a fusion of the horizons

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<sup>132</sup> R.H. Brown, 'Positivism, relativism, and narrative in the logic of the historical sciences', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 92, No. 4, 1987, p. 915.

<sup>133</sup> See E.W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1975.

<sup>134</sup> N. Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 26-27.

<sup>135</sup> C. Taylor, 'Interpretation and the sciences of man', *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Issue No. 97, September 1971, p. 47.

between interpreter and interpreted by way of a genuinely dialogic interaction between the carriers of tradition'.<sup>136</sup> Rather than attempting to crowd the conversation with voices, therefore, hermeneutic criticism sets in chain a process of negotiation between speaking positions reaching towards, if never quite achieving, mutuality and consensus. As in a conversation, it orchestrates a dynamic interchange between different traditions in which it becomes possible to understand a foreign horizon without attempting the impossible task of abandoning our own.<sup>137</sup> In short, for the hermeneutic critic, dialogue is the condition of possibility for the transcendence of ethnocentrism. To avoid drifting back into a situation where 'the other' is spoken for rather than to, knowledge is posited as that which is acquired through disclosure in conversation rather than that which is acquired through correspondence in representation.

One of the distinct advantages of this dialogical, as opposed to monological, conception of knowledge is its productive, practical character. Since there is a self-reflective aspect built into the very structure of hermeneutic interpretation, the transformative potential of communication is always maximised. Whereas poststructuralism tends towards a static 'interplay' of voices, hermeneutics forges a dynamic exchange of voices. To be sure, it too is concerned with movement. But it is movement of a fundamentally different kind to that which shifts endlessly from one hermetically sealed position to another. In the dialogical interaction of self and other, in the alternation between speech and silence, hermeneutics does not so much secure perpetual change, as mutual transformation. Ideally the interpreter is 'pulled towards an expanded horizon that cannot be anticipated prior to a dialogical interaction'. Through the process of interpretation 'both interpreter and interpreted are mutually transformed in a non-arbitrary, practically efficacious, truth-disclosive manner'.<sup>138</sup> In this model of communication, in other words, it is not enough to simply open up a space in which different voices can be heard. It is also necessary for those positions to confront one another, to engage with their differences, and become altered by the dialogue itself. What is at stake for the hermeneutic critic is a shift in epistemological gravity from 'foundations' to 'transitions'.<sup>139</sup> The great power of communication consists in its ability to open up the

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<sup>136</sup> Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics*, p. 27.

<sup>137</sup> P.R. Harrison, 'Narrativity and interpretation: on hermeneutical and structuralist approaches to culture', *Thesis Eleven*, No. 22, 1989, p. 69.

<sup>138</sup> Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics*, p. 27.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

possibility of knowing what it is to be other than oneself. It is a radical form of interpretation, to borrow a phrase from Levinas, because it 'is a movement of the same onto the other which never returns to the same'.<sup>140</sup>

Naturally it would be wrong to presume that the conditions of such a dialogue are always available, that all one has to do, as it were, is to start talking. Such a strategy of interpretation will be inadequate to the extent that it is assumed that 'meaningful communication always already exists or can be realised through interpretative effort alone'.<sup>141</sup> Indeed, as Said has argued in a series of stinging attacks against the interpretative pyrotechnics of Clifford Geertz, hermeneutic approaches which focus upon the 'poetics' of representation, to the exclusion of the 'politics' of representation, are often in danger of overlooking or abetting colonial forms of domination. What Geertz and others like him have failed to recognise, according to Said, is that representation is not simply a theoretical quandary, but a political issue of the first importance:

In such cases it is irresistible to argue that the vogue for thick descriptions and blurred genres acts to shut and block out the clamour of voices on the outside asking for their claims about empire and domination to be considered. The native point of view, despite the way it has often been portrayed, is not an ethnographic fact only, is not a hermeneutical construct primarily or even principally; it is in large measure a continuing, protracted, and sustained adversarial resistance to the discipline and praxis of anthropology (as representative of 'outside' power) itself, anthropology not as textuality but as an often direct agent of political dominance.<sup>142</sup>

In the context of a disequilibrium of power, like that between coloniser and colonised, it may not be enough to simply hone a pre-existing set of interpretative skills. It may also be necessary to critically examine the conditions under which the dialogue itself occurs. The precondition to a genuine 'fusion of horizons' between 'the self' and 'the other' is an emancipation from the larger structural constraints, the asymmetrical relations of power, that place unseen limits on the possibility of constructive dialogue.

It is not my intention here to examine what the political preconditions of a more or less undistorted form of communication might be. Suffice to say that it is an interpretative method of this kind which holds the greatest promise for opening up a genuine 'politics of

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<sup>140</sup> Muecke, 'Studying the other', p. 325.

<sup>141</sup> Jay, 'Ideology and occularcentrism', p. 152.

<sup>142</sup> E.W. Said, 'Representing the colonised: anthropology's interlocutors', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, Winter 1989, pp. 219-220.

recognition'. Since hermeneutics assumes that identities are constructed, not simply in texts, but in life, it is prepared to acknowledge that cultural differences may need to be actively protected (by, for example, collective cultural rights) in order to sustain the conditions of genuine dialogue. Built into the hermeneutic method is not simply an acceptance of the right of the other to make speech claims, but an acceptance of the need to ensure that conditions exist in which participants to the dialogue are genuinely able to make such claims. This does not mean that a positive evaluation of all aspects of the culture of 'the other' is automatic. It would be self-defeating to prejudge the result of the conversation by assuming from the outset, as poststructuralism seems to do, that all voices have an equal right to be heard. Yet, as Taylor puts it, there is something 'midway between the inauthentic and homogenising demand for recognition of equal worth on the one hand, and the self-immurement within ethnocentric standards, on the other' and that something is the 'presumption of equal worth'.<sup>143</sup> We must begin our engagement with the other, not with 'peremptory and inauthentic judgements of equal value', but with 'a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our horizons in the resulting fusions'.<sup>144</sup> We do not have to like everything about other cultures, just as we do not have to like everything about our own, but if we are prepared to approach them with a presumption of equal worth we may at least create conditions in which it is possible to respect difference and act accordingly.

It is with this ideal in mind, that I will approach the historical analysis that follows. In exploring the relations that develop between scientific knowledge and government practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I attempt to elucidate what prevented such an approach to otherness emerging in colonial society and what the consequences of that failure were for the indigenous peoples of Australia.

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<sup>143</sup> C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited and introduced by Amy Gutman, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p. 72.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.

## Section II

### The Laboratory of Nature

Ye primal tribes, lords of this old domain,  
Swift-footed hunters of the pathless plain,  
Unshackled wanderers, enthusiasts free,  
Pure native sons of savage liberty,  
Who hold all things in common, earth, sea, air,  
Or only occupy the nightly lair,  
Whereon each sleeps; who own no chieftain's pow'r,  
Save his, that's mightiest of the passing hour;  
Say — whence your ancient lineage, what your name  
And from what shores your rough forefathers came?  
Untutor'd children, fresh from Nature's mould,  
No songs have ye to trace the time of old :—  
No hidden themes, like these, employ your care,  
For you enough the knowledge that ye are :—  
Let Learning's sons, who would this secret scan,  
Unlock its mystic casket if they can...

W.C. Wentworth, *Australasia*, 1823

## The Laboratory of Nature

It is commonly accepted that the central problem in the natural history of man during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the unity of the species.<sup>1</sup> As the age of discovery revealed the full extent of human diversity, naturalists struggled to ascertain whether the differences exhibited by the various peoples of the earth were more consistent with a continuous series of environmental modifications (monogenesis) or several discontinuous sets of biological lineages (polygenesis). For the religious philosopher, of course, the question had already been satisfactorily answered by the most supreme authority of all: the divine himself. According to the orthodox account of the origins of man contained in the book of Genesis, there was little doubt 'that all men, however now diversified, [were] of one family, and the offspring of the same original pair'.<sup>2</sup> When it came to the natural philosopher, however, the situation was somewhat different. For even when scientists defended the common origin of man (which was often), they were keen to demonstrate by 'ordinary' rather than 'extraordinary' means, by reference to the book of nature rather than the book of God, what Christians were largely prepared to take on faith. As James Cowles Prichard, perhaps the most acclaimed British ethnographer of the early nineteenth century, suggested in 1826, 'in those inquiries in which the ordinary lights of reason and philosophy are capable of guiding us to the truth, I apprehend that we may safely venture to seek it under their direction'. Even if the account of the descent of man given in the books of revelation appeared consistent with the physical evidence, it was still incumbent upon naturalists (who to this extent could be taken to be illuminating rather than supplanting the genius of God) to elucidate the subject according to 'the ordinary methods of observation and experience'.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of this question of the unity of the species the indigenous inhabitants of New Holland were by no means without interest. As Peron, the resident zoologist on the Baudin expedition, made clear, the natives recently discovered in the region of the *Terra Australis* provided an extraordinary opportunity for students of the natural history of man:

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<sup>1</sup> G.W. Stocking Jr., *Victorian Anthropology*, The Free Press, New York, 1987, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> W. Hamilton, *Practical Discourses, Intended for Circulation in the Interior of New South Wales*, Kemp and Fairfax, Sydney, 1843, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> J.C. Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, Vol. I, John & Arthur Arch, London, 1826, p. 7.

Never perhaps has so immense a quarry been opened up for philosophy. Everything is curious in such a being, everything interesting: his antiquity, his origin, the changes in his affairs and his traditions in this regard, his customs, his language, his feelings, his ideas, his physical constitution, his increase in numbers, his infirmities, his longevity, his relationship to climate etc. etc. One must consider everything in order to study, analyse and meditate deeply upon each of these different questions. This is the story of Nature and of all mankind.<sup>4</sup>

In this allusion to the figure of 'natural man' Peron not only revealed something of the philosophic attitude (indigenous peoples being little more than a treasure trove for scientific investigation), but highlighted the basis for the endless series of observations on the Aborigines compiled during the colonial period. For the natural historian, the interest attached to 'savages' was largely a function of the special light they shed on the story of the human species. That the indigenous inhabitants of New Holland were considered 'an interesting field of investigation' depended largely on the 'fact' that they were 'purely the children of Nature', a people 'unmodified by the forms and customs of civilisation and refinement'.<sup>5</sup> Having supposedly been divided 'for many ages from the rest of the world', they provided colonial naturalists with a unique opportunity for 'the study of human nature in its wild and untutored state, and in its gradual approaches to civilisation'.<sup>6</sup>

Inevitably the question of the origins of the Aborigines was subject to considerable dispute. While few ever seriously doubted that they were the 'same people' from one end of the continent to the other (Van Diemen's Land being considered a special case), their connections with the rest of mankind were far less clear. Prior to the voyage of the *Endeavour*, it was customary to treat the New Hollanders as 'a race of Negroes'.<sup>7</sup> Yet as closer contact with the indigenous inhabitants of the southern continent afforded more opportunities for observation, opinion differed not only as to what their precise origin might have been — African, Malay, Indian — but as to whether they were connected with the other races of men at all. As late as 1845, the Polish explorer Strzelecki was forced to admit that the origin of the Aborigines, like that of most things in creation, was involved in

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<sup>4</sup> N.J.B. Plomley (ed.), *The Baudin Expedition and the Tasmanian Aborigines, 1802*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1983, pp. 82-83.

<sup>5</sup> Aeneas, 'Phrenology: No. VII', *The Colonial Literary Journal*, Vol. I, No. 10, 1843, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Callender, *Terra Australis Cognita or Voyages to the Terra Australis*, Vol. III, A. Donaldson, London, 1768. Reprinted by N. Israel, Amsterdam, 1967, p. 736; and R. Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1830. Archival Facsimiles Limited, Alburgh, 1987, p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Hence Buffon: 'The natives of New Holland have a strong analogy to the Hottentots'. See *Compte de Buffon, Natural History, General and Particular*, Vol. III, with Notes and Observations by William

'impenetrable obscurity'. Those who had attempted 'to trace their migrations, or to detect the links that connect them with any of the predominant and primitive races of mankind', he suggested, had 'not succeeded more satisfactorily than a naturalist would, who might attempt to account for the existence of the *Marsupials* and the *Orinthorhynchus* in Terra Australis'.<sup>8</sup> In this dark realm of lost traditions and long forgotten ancestors there was no powerful beam to guide scientific research. Since the Aborigines, unlike the Maoris, appeared to have 'no legends whatever of their former origin'<sup>9</sup> the scientist was forced to draw conclusions from their appearance, customs and language and in those three fields there was sufficient ambiguity to leave a wide field for philosophic and speculative inquiry.

This dispute about the origins of the Aborigines has by no means been neglected in contemporary scholarship.<sup>10</sup> Yet to follow the intricacies of these debates is to neglect perhaps the most important dimension of colonial intellectual practice: the criteria by which the identity and difference of the Aborigines was itself determined.<sup>11</sup> For it is only by examining the architecture of the system of classification itself, the basis upon which an order was established among the different peoples of the earth, that it is possible to get a sense of the idea of 'race' at work in colonial society and the changes which it underwent over time. In what follows, then, it is the systems employed to classify human beings rather than the results of those classifications which forms the principal focus. Working on the assumption, one which owes its inspiration to Foucault's *The Order of Things*, that it is often the criteria by which things are arranged, rather than the resulting arrangement itself, which provides the greatest insight into intellectual practice, the priority frequently given to content over form is here inverted.<sup>12</sup> Where reference is made to actual

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Smellie, T. Cadwell & W. Davies, London, 1812, p. 339; and Callender, *Terra Australis Cognita*, Vol. III, p. 741.

<sup>8</sup> P.E. de Strachan's *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1845. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 19, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1967, p. 333.

<sup>9</sup> G.F. Angus,  *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. II, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1847. Australiana Facsimile Editions, No. 184, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1969, p. 274.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance H. Reynolds, 'Racial thought in early colonial Australia', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1974, pp. 45-53; and D.J. Mulvaney, 'The Australian Aborigines, 1606-1929: Opinion and Fieldwork', in *Historical Studies: Selected Articles*, First Series compiled by J.J. Eastwood and F.B. Smith, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1967, pp. 1-57.

<sup>11</sup> Although both Mulvaney and Reynolds were clearly aware of the basis upon which classification was undertaken neither paid it any systematic attention.

<sup>12</sup> Not only the title, but many of the substantive points enumerated in this chapter, owe a debt to *The Order of Things*. While the author is in no position to comment upon the bigger thesis contained in that text dealing with an epistemic change in Western thought between 1760 and 1820, he has found

hypotheses about the origins of the Aborigines, it is neither to highlight points of substantive agreement or disagreement between colonial naturalists (of which there were many) nor to draw attention to the limitations and inaccuracies of contemporary intellectual practice (of which there were also many). The point is rather to highlight, by examining shifts in the criteria according to which the Aborigines were consistently differentiated from and ranked among the range of human types, a radical change in colonial conceptions of race.

That change can be framed in terms of a shift in designation from 'natural man' to 'original man'. Until the 1820s (and generally for several decades after that), it was generally assumed that the native inhabitants of New Holland were not so much fundamentally different from their European counterparts as less civilised than them. If they lacked the sophistication of the new arrivals, it was not because they were different in their underlying capacities, but because their ascent up the scale of civilisation had been barred by the limitations of their environment. In them, colonial naturalists imagined they saw human nature displayed in its most artless colouring. From the 1820s on, the difference between the Aborigine and the European began to be seen in an altogether more radical light. Although local scientists did not necessarily doubt that the Aborigines were members of the same species, they increasingly assumed that 'savage man' was constituted rather differently from themselves. As distinctions were discovered, not only at the level of 'external characters', but at the level of 'internal structures', the fundamental continuity of the order of civilisation began to break down. Even those who continued to assume that the European and the Aborigine were once possessed of a common nature, were led to assume that centuries of exposure to different conditions had given rise to peculiarities that had become fixed by hereditary transmission. If the Aborigines were related to the Europeans, it was no longer as a base point of their own nature, but as shadow of what they had once been.

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Foucault's analyses of language, political economy and natural history particularly helpful in coming to terms with colonial ethnographic practice. See M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage books, New York, 1973, *passim*.

## Chapter II

### The Natural History of Man

#### I

#### Taxonomy

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the system of classification employed by naturalists to differentiate among the races of men and distribute them into a limited number of basic types was fundamentally comparative in nature. During that period the idea of labelling things by locating their own unique signature had more or less been abandoned. Few if any continued to assume that it was possible to find the proper name of something through a careful consideration of the thing itself. Instead, much in the way that colours are differentiated by the series of contrasts established between them (the designation 'red' only acquiring significance when set against other terms like 'blue' or 'yellow'), ethnographic classifications were based upon the systematic tabulation of a set of negative distinctions. Groups were differentiated, not on the basis of some positive mark, some peculiar feature that immediately set them apart from the others, but on the basis of those surface characteristics which the science of natural history itself established as points of distinction between them. Irrespective of whether races were assumed to be varieties within a single species (monogenesis) or species within a single genus (polygenesis), therefore, the identity of a particular nation or tribe could not be established in isolation. To discover the fundamental type to which it belonged, to give it a name (and that was the whole point of natural history), it was necessary to compare it with others. As Buffon suggested in his discussion of the natural history of man, 'All our knowledge is ultimately derived from comparison. What is absolutely incomparable, must be incomprehensible'.<sup>1</sup>

At base this taxonomic method of classification was grounded upon two interrelated processes: an inventory of individual features (paradigmatic operation) and an assessment of their overall significance in the determination of identities and differences

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<sup>1</sup> See *Compte de Buffon, Natural History, General and Particular*, translated with notes and observations by William Smellie, Vol. III, T. Cadwell & W. Davies, London, 1812, p. 97.

(syntagmatic operation). Under the first operation naturalists were required to generate as accurate a list as possible of the central features of the particular nation or tribe under observation. Naturally compiling such a list was not simply a matter of recording everything there was to see about a certain group of people. What made a particular feature worthy of remark, what transformed it from a simple attribute into what was generally referred to as a 'distinguishing character', was the fact that it carried a certain value as a means of differentiating between human types. Under ideal circumstances the selection of such a character would have been based upon the system of nature itself. Ultimately what naturalists were attempting to do in establishing their taxonomic systems was unveil the marks of distinction which God himself had left upon the surface of beings as a sign of their general and specific names. Yet all that was actually required was that the character in question be sufficiently variable in its range of appearance for it to function as a criteria for systematically distinguishing between types. When it came to trying to collect and 'put into method'<sup>2</sup> their observations on a certain nation or tribe, therefore, naturalists tended to restrict their inventories to those features in which it was customary for variation in appearance to imply a change in type (for example, whether the 'hair type' was lank, woolly, frizzled or straight, or the 'mode of life' hunting and fishing, pastoralism, agriculture or commerce). Only in this way could they form a reasonably reliable presumption as to identity and difference and not be distracted by casual resemblances.

The second operation within the taxonomic process required naturalists to assess the overall significance of the series of distinguishing characteristics. Having undertaken a point by point, character by character, evaluation of a particular nation or tribe, it was then necessary to make a general assessment as to their similarity to one or other of the fundamental types within the classificatory schema. Naturally the identity of a particular group could not be asserted on the basis of one or two points of agreement alone. Since the taxonomic system did not attribute particular significance to any one character, a few isolated resemblances were an insufficient basis upon which to claim an identity with one or other of the fundamental types. On balance, these points of similarity were more likely to reflect a casual variation rather than an essential identity.<sup>3</sup> To make an accurate

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<sup>2</sup> Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 15 May, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Thus Dawson attributed the difference in complexion exhibited by the indigenous inhabitants of Australia rather to 'the accidental varieties which we observe throughout the whole economy of nature'

assessment as to type it was necessary to inventory the entire visible field of characters and attempt to establish a certain statistical resemblance among the available options. A name could then be attached to the nation or tribe under observation that set its place in the table of identities and differences. Precisely what this name was did not really matter. While it was customary to use geographical indicators — European, African, American — in the manner of Linneaus, for instance, it was equally possible to use a chromatic scale — black, brown, white, red — in the manner of Pickering as a means of differentiating types.<sup>4</sup> The important thing was not so much the name selected, but that it was consistently used to designate a certain constellation of distinguishing characters.

Thus constituted, the taxonomic system of classification could serve two rather different ends: it could be employed either 'to facilitate the distinction between objects' or 'to ascertain their relations in the scale of beings'.<sup>5</sup> In the first case the process of classification was used to further what Lapérouse considered to be the critical objective of modern explorers: to complete the natural history of man and establish the racial affinities between geographically remote nations.<sup>6</sup> By comparing groups across the range of significant ethnographic characteristics naturalists hoped to form a reasonably reliable presumption of racial identity. And since higher densities of resemblance suggested closer affinities, it was even possible to reconstruct the patterns of migration by which members of the same stock gradually dispersed from their geographical centre and became distributed in space. In the second case, taxonomy was used to ascertain the position of a particular nation within what Wentworth described as 'the gradutory scale of the human species'.<sup>7</sup> Here the purpose of classification was less to establish connections between geographically remote nations, than to construct a hierarchy among them by assessing the comparative sophistication of their customs and manners. In this mode it was civilisation rather than geographic space that formed the continuous foundation from which naturalists

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than to the intermixture of two distinct races. See R. Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1830. Reprinted by Archival Facsimiles Limited, Alburgh, 1987, p. 338.

<sup>4</sup> See D. Boorstin, *The Discoverers*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 464; and C. Pickering, *The Races of Man and Their Geographical Distribution*, Charles C. Little & Brown, Boston, 1848, pp. 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> See W. Smellie in Buffon, *Natural History*, p. xv; and P.P. King, *Narrative of a Survey of the Intertropical and Western Coasts of Australia*, Vol. I, John Murray, London, 1827. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 30. Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1969, p. xxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Lapérouse cited in R.J. King (ed.), *The Secret History of the Convict Colony*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, pp. 66-67.

<sup>7</sup> W.C. Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales and its Dependent Settlements in Van Diemen's Land*, G. & W.B. Whittaker, London, 1819, p. 4.

would carve out a range of distinct types. To classify nations as to their degree of civilisation was to lay them out across the scale of progress that extended from the most happy and refined at one end to the most miserable and savage at the other.

It was according to this method then that colonial naturalists from Banks and Cook (1770s) to Cunningham and King (1820s) attempted to establish the origins and status of the Aborigines. Taking their lead from one of the great natural historians of the age, they tended to examine the various tribes of New Holland with whom they came into contact during their voyages of exploration with an eye to identifying both their 'characteristic difference', the signs which indicated their position within a table of human types, and their 'comparative perfection', the signs which indicated their rank in the scale of human advancement. Inevitably each of these tasks incorporated both an 'internal' (in which the tribes inhabiting the different parts of the continent were compared among themselves) and an 'external' (in which the New Hollander was compared with other nations) aspect.<sup>8</sup> With regards to questions of geographical origin it was conventional to simultaneously inquire if the natives were the same across the whole continent and whether any of them could be identified with more remote groups. Similarly it was not unusual for naturalists to rank the different tribes they encountered along the coast or in the interior according to their degree of civilisation while at the same time positioning them collectively within the order of civilisation. In either case, however, the method of classification by which the origins and status of the New Hollanders was ascertained remained the same. Derived from the science of natural history, it turned above all else on the systematic comparison of visible characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In his attempt to determine whether all the natives of New Holland were one and the same people, for instance, Banks referred not only to those described by Dampier, but to the various groups he himself had seen on different parts of the coast of New Holland. See J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768-1771*, Vol. II, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1962, pp. 111, 124.

<sup>9</sup> As Michel Foucault has observed, the whole science of natural history consisted in 'nothing more than the nomination of the visible'. See M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York, 1973, p. 132

## II

### Observation and Description

Inevitably this emphasis upon comparison placed experience and expertise at a premium. Since only observers schooled in natural history or with access to the work of certain authorities were capable of recognising those signs which constituted the basis for discriminating between things and ranking them in a hierarchical series, the 'gentleman' in the field was likely to fall prey to many mistakes. As one contributor to *The Voyage of Governor Phillip* was at pains to point out, the 'great advantage of the scientific eye over that of the unlearned observer in viewing the productions of nature' lay in its ability to discriminate between what was significant and what was insignificant for the purposes of classification. Whereas the former tended to be misled by 'trivial resemblances' the latter was able to alight upon those signs that were 'really characteristic'.<sup>10</sup> For this reason some naturalists preferred either to send 'non-descript' or unclassified specimens to England so that specialists could complete their history (as did White) or 'reserve for another time' their further examination so that 'with modern works before [their] eyes, and after hearing the opinion of savants, it would be possible to fix with precision the class, genus and species of each' (as did Cavanilles).<sup>11</sup> Although this problem of making reliable distinctions amidst the array of casual resemblances was particularly felt in the field of botany where the number of fundamental types was far greater, it was by no means unknown in the department of ethnography.<sup>12</sup> Thus it was according to Joseph Banks that William Dampier had been misled by 'the similitude in complexion between [the New Hollanders] and the natives of Africa' into thinking they were the same people, characterised, like them, by 'woolly hair' and the 'want of two fore teeth'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay; With an Account of the Establishment of the Colonies of Port Jackson & Norfolk Island; Compiled from Authentic Papers, which have been Obtained from the Several Departments*, John Stockdale, 1789. Reprinted by Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1970, p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance J. White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales with Sixty-Five Plates of Nondescript Animals, Birds, Lizards, Serpents, Curious Cones of Trees and other Natural Productions*, J. Debrett, London, 1790. Republished by Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1962, p. 191; and Cavanilles, 'Observations on the soil, natives and plants of Port Jackson and Botany Bay', in King (ed.), *The Secret History of the Convict Colony*, p. 157.

<sup>12</sup> Linnaeus believed there were only five human types: Wild Man, American, European, Asiatic and African. See Boorstin, *The Discoverers*, p. 464.

<sup>13</sup> Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, Vol. II, pp. 111-112.

If inexperience certainly prevented colonial naturalists from making the most of their unique opportunities for observation, it did not constitute an insurmountable barrier to them engaging in ethnographic practice. Since the characters that differentiated one race from another were displayed entirely on the surface of being, finding a place for the natives of New Holland in the order of things was fundamentally a matter of observation and description. To be sure, experience could assist naturalists in both the recognition of distinguishing features and the determination of their overall significance. In the first place, their knowledge of the network of contrasting characters that constituted the system of classification enabled them to place a kind of primary filter upon the field of visibility. Rather than inventory the complete range of features displayed by a particular tribe or nation, they could confidently limit their observations to those things that were taxonomically significant. At the same time, knowledge of the full table of racial distinctions ensured that they were far less likely to make erroneous judgements as to type. Aware of the entire configuration of characters that differentiated one from another, they were unlikely to assert an identity as to geographical origin or degree of civilisation unless they could establish a general resemblance. Such advantages notwithstanding, expertise was by no means the *sine qua non* of the study of man. Given that it was the 'simple record of facts', in the words of R.G. Latham, that constituted ethnography,<sup>14</sup> naturalists did not really need to do anything more than record what they saw to make a contribution to the science.

One of the important consequences of this low threshold for undertaking scientific inquiry was that it required very little institutional infrastructure and remained relatively open to the casual observer. Since a reasonably reliable list of 'distinctive characteristics' could be compiled without either sustained contact with the object under investigation nor any particular scientific training, there was nothing to prevent amateur naturalists (and most colonial ethnographers fitted within that category) from engaging in the scientific enterprise. Particularly with people like the New Hollanders whose mode of life was assumed to be relatively unsophisticated, compiling a complete and accurate description of their customs and manners appeared by no means difficult. As one contributor to *The Voyage of Governor Phillip* suggested, 'The whole, indeed, that can be known of a people, among whom civilisation and the arts of life have made so small a progress must

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<sup>14</sup> R.G. Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, John Van Voorst, London, 1850, p. 561.

amount to very little'.<sup>15</sup> Provided naturalists paid attention to every minute circumstance and kept a detailed journal of their observations, therefore, they could hope to be of some assistance in resolving questions about the origins and status of the natives of New Holland. So it was that each 'traveller' or 'explorer' who ventured beyond the known areas of the colony during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was encouraged to give as extensive a description as possible of the various peoples they encountered. In particular they were to obtain any information which bore upon the 'characteristic difference' and 'comparative perfection' of the different tribes.<sup>16</sup>

If it was true that colonial naturalists were either occasionally misled by trivial resemblances or too inexperienced to extend their observations beyond mere description, they were thus not precluded from accumulating useful information. Even those who were unable to determine the racial origins of the New Hollanders and establish their place in the order of civilisation with any real precision, were still capable of constructing an inventory of those signs which served as the marks of distinction among men. In fact judging from the formal consistency of many of their observations, unaccountable in terms of mere inter-textual borrowing and transcription, these early ethnographers were in fact working according to a more systematic natural history than has generally been acknowledged.<sup>17</sup> In almost all their accounts, a common understanding of the characters upon which the origins of the Aborigines and their position in the chain of creation was to be established demonstrated a working knowledge of the taxonomic system. Admittedly the exact terminology and nomenclature employed by more sophisticated practitioners of the science was rarely in evidence. Only on a few occasions did early colonial observations upon the indigenes attain the degree of precision which trained scientists especially aimed at. Yet doubtless all those attempts, akin to the one we find in Tench, to detail the 'distinctive characteristics' of the natives and determine their 'general advancement and

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<sup>15</sup> *The Voyage of Governor Phillip*, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance, J. Oxley, *Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales*, John Murray, London, 1820. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 16, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964, pp. 360-361; and King, *Narrative of a Survey of the Intertropical and Western Coasts of Australia*, Vol. I, 1827. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 30, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1969, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>17</sup> While the work of B. Smith and D.J. Mulvaney went a long way towards recognising the significance of natural history in the representation of indigenous peoples, neither sought to give a systematic account of its general principals. See B. Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd Edition, Harper & Row, Sydney, 1984, *passim*; and D.J. Mulvaney, 'The Australian Aborigines', pp. 1-57. For a more recent discussion which fails on the same count see, S. Martin, *A New Land: European Perceptions of Australia 1788-1850*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1993, pp. 83-103.

acquisitions' were grounded in the same scientific assumptions which marked the work of more sophisticated ethnographers like J.R. Forster.<sup>18</sup>

### III

#### The Geographical Distribution of Man

In an effort to resolve the vexed question of the unity of the species, natural historians in the age of discovery undertook the colossal task of tracing all the tribes and nations of the earth back to their point of origin. Within the confines of the major continents the assignment was a relatively straightforward one. For where processes of migration were unbroken by significant physical barriers and climatic conditions remained practically the same, it was generally possible to identify a continuum of ethnographic modifications in which one group shaded into the next by imperceptible degrees. So it was for Buffon that all the American tribes, subject to a relatively uniform set of environmental conditions (customs and climate), could be readily identified as having sprung from the same original stock.<sup>19</sup> Between, and sometimes even within, the great land masses, however, the connections between the various tribes and nations was often tenuous and difficult to establish. Since accidents (wars, natural catastrophes, shipwrecks) and physical barriers (mountains, deserts, oceans) were capable of disrupting the smooth distribution of people, contiguity in space did not always provide a reliable guide to the real relations among nations. On more than one occasion scientists exploring the natural history of man were deeply disappointed in their presumption that geographical proximity implied a common origin.<sup>20</sup> If they were to trace the natives of New Holland back to their source, therefore, they needed to uncover the twisted and broken patterns of migration that had led them to their current position. And for that they required a method of classification that could unlock the system by which nature defined the identity and difference of the races of men.

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<sup>18</sup> See W. Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, pp. 274-281; and J.R. Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World, On Physical Geography, Natural History, and Ethic Philosophy*, G. Robinson, London, 1778, pp. 212ff.

<sup>19</sup> Buffon, *Natural History*, pp. 428-429.

<sup>20</sup> See J. Henderson, *Observations on the Colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1832. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 103, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1965, p. 145.

Under the taxonomic system employed by naturalists generally and colonial ethnographers specifically, racial affinities were established through the comparison and tabulation of 'distinguishing characters'.<sup>21</sup> By undertaking an inventory of those features which served as signs for differentiating between human types — the characters of their 'persons', the 'articles' of their customs and manners, the 'words' of their language — naturalists hoped to discover the interconnections between the various peoples of the earth and thus ultimately whether they could be traced back to a single origin. The characters that were selected for this purpose were necessarily quite specific. Since even members of the same variety of the same species were capable of undergoing a certain degree of morphological modification when exposed to different environmental influences, identities and differences could not be established on the basis of any and every visible feature. In order to avoid being distracted and misled by casual resemblances, it was necessary for naturalists to distinguish between those attributes that were 'radical' (more or less permanent or intrinsic to a particular race) and those that were 'accidental' (the mere product of custom and climate). Regardless of whether the particular element under consideration was the 'character' of their persons, the 'articles' of their customs and manners or the 'words' of their language, the consideration was the same. Given that time, operating both in the form of accidents and the slower workings of environmental influences, was capable of altering the distinguishing characteristics of a particular group, caution needed to be exercised as to the significance attached to one or the other.

Within this system of classification the strength of connection between two distinct nations or tribes turned upon the density of similar characteristics. By calculating the statistical level of resemblance shown by two groups it was possible, not only to assess whether they belonged to the same original stock, but to speculate as to the passage of migration by which they had come to be distributed in space. Where there was a high level of statistical resemblance among two groups it was reasonable to form a presumption that they derived from the same origin. For this reason geographic considerations and ethnographic comparisons were at this period still closely allied. Since at the very least the assertion of an identity between two remote groups depended upon the possibility of

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance J. Douglas, 'Hints offered to the consideration of Captain Cooke, Mr Bankes, Doctor Solander, and the other Gentlemen who go upon the Expedition on Board the *Endeavour*', Appendix II, in Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery*, Vol. I, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1955, p. 517; King, *Narrative of a Survey*, Vol. I, p. xxxiii; and R. Mudie, *The Picture of Australia*, Whittaker, Treacher, & Co., London, 1829, p. 203.

migrating from one place to the other, proximity in space continued to provide naturalists with a rough guide in their attempts to establish connections among the various peoples of the earth. But given that geographical contiguity was notoriously unreliable even in continental areas, it was the examination of distinguishing characters that became the principal means of establishing a common origin. Only by systematically comparing groups across a range of characters and assessing their general resemblance could naturalists hope to resolve what Barron Field called 'the great mystery of the peopling of the world'.<sup>22</sup> In what follows, then, I propose to consider how each of these groups of characters — persons, manners, words — were applied to the natives of New Holland and what conclusions colonial naturalists were able to draw from them as to origins and migrations.

Early attempts to establish the identity of the New Hollanders through what the President of the Royal Society, James Douglas, called the 'character of their persons',<sup>23</sup> were dependent upon the complete description of all the details relating to the 'conformation' or 'figure' of the nation or tribe in question. Following the general plan for the natural history of man laid down by Linneaus and Buffon, it was primarily the external characters or physiognomy rather than the internal structure or anatomy that carried the burden of identification.<sup>24</sup> To the extent that anatomical or physiological considerations featured in the observations of naturalists at all, it was only to demonstrate that the natives of New Holland were rightly regarded as members of the human species. At no stage was it assumed that varieties within that species might be anatomically differentiated in the same way as the different types within a genus appeared to be. In order to establish connections between 'races', therefore, it was only necessary to compare, and as fully as possible, that series of physical signs which presented themselves to the naked eye: stature or size, complexion or colour, and features or form (lips, teeth, eyes, nose, hair, beards). Naturally, as Callender argued, these 'little circumstances' could 'seem tedious to such as read only for amusement'. Yet they were 'of very great importance to such as have

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<sup>22</sup> B. Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', in B. Field (ed.), *Geographical Memoirs on New South Wales*, John Murray, London, 1825, p. 195.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas, 'Hints offered to the consideration of Captain Cooke', p. 517.

<sup>24</sup> See J.A. Meigs, 'The cranial characteristics of the races of men', in J.C. Nott and G.R. Gliddon, *Indigenous Races of the Earth; Or New Chapters of Ethnological Inquiry*, J.B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1857, p. 215; and Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World*, pp. 256-257.

discoveries in view'.<sup>25</sup> For, provided due allowance was made for the impact of climate and custom, physical resemblance established a prima facie case of an identity of geographical origin. If two peoples were in fact derived from the same original stock, they were likely to resemble each other in most, if not all, of their distinguishing physical characters.

In many instances, as when Grant proclaimed that 'most of those [he] saw, either here or elsewhere, [had] short curled hair, but not at all resembling the wool of the African negroes', or Wentworth suggested that 'their features bear a strong resemblance to the African negro; they have the same flat nose, large nostrils, wide mouth and thick lips; but the hair is not woolly', the comparative nature of colonial ethnographic observation was evident enough.<sup>26</sup> In these instances, determining the external identity of the natives of the southern continent was clearly dependent as much on what they were as on what they were not. Yet even where a lack of knowledge or some other circumstance prevented authors from bringing geographically remote people together in the same pages of their journal or annal for the purposes of classification, comparison continued to act as the underlying foundation of ethnographic description. Partly this was because the characters generally used to differentiate between varieties of the human species formed the principle of selection according to which information about the natives of New Holland tended to be collected, but partly also because without a measure of comparison, without the possibility of declaring a particular characteristic exhibited in one people to be the same as or different from that of another, the information itself was largely meaningless. Only where a certain sign was capable of serving as an index of distinction did it carry the necessary ethnographic value to become a defining 'characteristic'. Descriptions of the New Hollanders such as the one we find in Tench, for instance, suggesting that the 'covering of their heads' was 'hair' rather than 'wool', only made sense when it was understood that the European had the former and the Negro the latter; only made sense,

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<sup>25</sup> J. Callender, *Terra Australis Cognita or Voyages to the Terra Australis*, Vol. I, A. Donaldson, Edinburgh, 1768. Reprinted by N. Israel & Da Capo Press, New York, 1967, p. 377.

<sup>26</sup> See J. Grant, *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery, Performed in His Majesty's Vessel The Lady Nelson*, C. Roworth, London, 1803, p. 116; and Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description*, p. 4. Comparisons of this sort recur throughout the early accounts of the natives of New South Wales. See, for instance, Cavanilles, 'Observations on the soil, natives and plants of Port Jackson and Botany Bay', pp. 159-160; Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, Vol. II, p. 124; and Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, Vol. I, p. 312.

that is, in a context where hair (its texture and colour) functioned as a sign of racial identity.<sup>27</sup>

In much the same way as the 'person' of the New Hollanders was brought within a system of identities and differences by the description and comparison of a certain series of physical 'characters', their 'customs and manners' became available for the purposes of classification after being disaggregated into a set of supposedly universal comparative elements. In almost every account more or less the same elements or 'articles', as Collins called them — government, religion, habitations, mode of living (dealing with food, the means of procuring it, and dressing it), weapons (offensive and defensive), arts and amusements, domestic life (dealing with courtship and marriage, child rearing, relations between the sexes), diseases, manufactures or mechanic arts, property — were used to assess whether or not two or more distinct tribes or nations could be declared the same.<sup>28</sup> Inevitably differences in nomenclature, reflecting either a change in terminology or the appearance or disappearance of a certain element within the comparative grid, opened certain fields of inquiry in some accounts that remained closed in others. Since no two authors inventoried the 'articles' of native society in precisely the same way it was inevitable that slight variations would arise in the form of ethnographic encoding. Yet, by and large, and making due allowance for the different opportunities they enjoyed for observation, ethnographers from Banks to King, built their accounts of the 'customs and manners' of the New Hollanders upon a formally equivalent series of social distinctions. In all their accounts a similar list of social articles was used to establish racial affiliations.

Attempts to use customs and manners to determine the origins of the natives of New Holland generated mixed results for colonial naturalists. Somewhat inevitably they had more success employing it as a criteria of identity and difference within the geographical confines of the southern continent than outside it. Already in Banks the similarity of customary forms among the various tribes inhabiting the coastal region formed an important pillar in his argument for their common origin. In defence of his claim that the natives contacted along the whole length of the east coast of New Holland were the same people, he suggested that 'their houses were the same, they notchd (sic) large

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<sup>27</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 274.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, D. Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, A.H. & A.W. Reed in Association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, 1975, pp. 451-514; and Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, pp. 283-291.

trees in the same manner and even the bags they carried their furniture in were of exactly the same manufacture, something between netting and Knitting which I have no where else seen in the intermediate places'.<sup>29</sup> Similarly Flinders, drawing both on the physical and social evidence, remarked:

It was with some surprise that I saw the natives of the east coast of New South Wales so nearly portrayed (sic) in those of the south-western extremity of New Holland. These do not, indeed, extract one of the upper front teeth at the age of puberty, as is generally practised at Port Jackson, nor do they make use of the *womerah*, or throwing stick; but their colour, the texture of the hair, and personal appearance are the same; their songs run in the same cadence; the manner of painting themselves is similar their belts and fillets of hair are made in the same way, and worn in the same manner.<sup>30</sup>

When it came to establishing the place from which the natives of New Holland had originally migrated, however, only single instances of resemblance were ever found. While the discovery that a certain tribe of Hottentots near Orange river had 'lost the first joint of the little finger' in the same manner as the natives of New Holland (Phillip), that the natives of Caledon Bay on the north coast of the southern continent practised 'the Jewish and Mahometan rite of circumcision' (Flinders) or that others on the east coast made ovens 'similar to those used by the natives of Ta-hei-te' (King) were certainly 'curious coincidences', for instance, they provided little insight into the question of origins.<sup>31</sup> Generally more confounding than enlightening, and in any event hardly enough to form any inference as to identity and difference, they tended to play a subordinate role in the formation of hypotheses as to geographical connections.

Finally ethnographers imagined language in general and resemblances in vocabulary in particular to be 'of the greatest importance in their researches into the origin of the various nations that have been discovered'.<sup>32</sup> Naturally this did not mean that any similarity was sufficient to establish an identity or that all the words of the language carried the same burden of significance. Since, according to Forster, it had 'always been customary among the more critical and chaste historians, to reckon all such nations as

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<sup>29</sup> Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, Vol. II, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> M. Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, Vol. I, W. Bulmer & Co., London, 1814. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 37. Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1966, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> *The Voyage of Governor Phillip*, p. 42n; Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, Vol. II, p. 212; and King, *Narrative of a Survey*, Vol. I, p. 203.

<sup>32</sup> Hawkesworth, *The Voyage of the Endeavour*, p. 645.

[spoke] the *same general language*, to be of the same tribe or race', identity and difference could not be determined on the basis of one or two similarities alone.<sup>33</sup> Only where the resemblance of the words was sufficiently broad to be inexplicable in terms of the accidents of foreign invasion or local invention was there a *prima facie* case for identification. Hence, as King put it, 'The aboriginal connection of Australia with other lands must be proved, as far as language is concerned, by a general resemblance of the words, and not merely by a few examples of coincidence which can only be considered as accidental'.<sup>34</sup> In this determination, however, not all the words of the native language or idiom carried the same weight in the determination of identities and differences. Since a certain amount of variation in vocabulary arising from accidental or local circumstances was in fact to be expected, differences among incidental words formed no barrier to identification. In order to establish a connection between two discrete peoples it was only necessary that, as Tench put it, the 'common and necessary words', those which tended to be 'used in life' (and thus remain relatively constant), were the same.<sup>35</sup> Even tribes or nations separated by large distances could be expected to have retained the same word for things such as sun and moon if, as was commonly assumed of the various tribes of New Hollanders, they belonged to the same stock.

Within colonial journals, observations upon the language of the New Hollanders were thus confined largely to its words and their meanings rather than, as would later be the case, to its underlying principles, the way in which the words were linked together in a grammatical system. Apparently the principal task of the early ethnographer in gathering a 'specimen of the language' was not to penetrate to the hidden rules governing its organisation (as did many of the missionaries during the second quarter of the nineteenth century), but to compile a vocabulary, a list of words and the things they designated.<sup>36</sup> Just

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<sup>33</sup> Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World*, p. 276.

<sup>34</sup> King, *Narrative of a Survey*, Vol. II, p. 636.

<sup>35</sup> Hence the astonishment expressed by both Collins and Tench that 'people living at the distance of only fifty or sixty miles should call the sun and moon by different names'. See Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 230; and Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, p. 506.

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, Vol. I, pp. 398-399; Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas in His Majesty's Ship the Endeavour*, C. Dilly, London, 1784. Reprinted by Caliban books, London, 1984, pp.148-149; Hunter, *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island*, J. Stockdale, London, 1793. Republished as *An Historical Journal of Events at Sydney and at Sea 1787-1792*, Angus & Robertson, 1968, pp. 270-275; R.J.B. Knight and A. Frost (eds), *The Journal of Daniel Paine 1794-1797*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1983, pp. 41-42; Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, pp. 507-513; Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, Vol I, p. 67 and Vol. II, p. 215; and King, *Narrative of a Survey*, Vol. II, pp. 632-636.

as the character of their persons was brought within the table of racial types through a certain set of isolated signs, so too was their language made available for comparison by the simple and unconnected consideration of the words themselves. Certainly caution had to be exercised to ensure that signifiers and the things they signified were appropriately attested. Given that the only 'method' of compiling a vocabulary — 'inquiring of them what in their Language signified such a thing' — was 'obnoxious to many mistakes' it was important to be extremely circumspect in the process of recording.<sup>37</sup> Generally speaking it was only too easy to mistake the properties of something for the thing itself (brown or wood for spear) or be misled when attempting to ascertain the names for things 'which depend on action, or address themselves only to the mind' (throwing, spearing).<sup>38</sup> Hazardous as it might be to compile, however, a comparative table of words from different tribes and nations mediated in each instance by their English equivalents provided a sure method of determining relationships.

By compiling the series of distinguishing characters revealed in each of these ethnographic domains — persons, customs, language — it was possible for naturalists to make a general assessment as to the origin of the particular nation or tribe under observation. The greater the statistical resemblance between two groups over the entire range of characteristics the greater the presumption that they derived from a common stock. Of course to assert an identity at the level of the racial type it was not necessary that two groups appear exactly the same. Since local variations were always possible where two groups were separated for any length of time, it was unreasonable to expect an exact conformation in any but the most proximate groups. On the whole, however, it could be safely assumed that members of the same fundamental type would continue to appear more similar to each other than to any other group within the genus or species of mankind. As J.R. Forster noted in the course of his reflections on the natives of the New Hebrides:

These few instances will sufficiently prove that customs, manners, diseases, peculiar to one country, are often found at a great distance in another Nation; and that nevertheless this Argument of similarity of Manners, will not always prove that one Nation is descended from another. If almost all the customs are the same or nearly so; if the language corresponds; if there is a probability of their migration to the

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<sup>37</sup> Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, Vol. II, p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 136; and Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, p. 506.

more remote parts, these arguments together have some weight in proving a relation between these Nations, but never one single custom, or a few words may be used as Arguments in favour of it.<sup>39</sup>

So long as naturalists provided a reliable tabulation of distinguishing characters, however, it was possible to determine the affinity of even geographically remote groups with some degree of precision.

Taken as a whole, the results of investigations pursued under the three heads of persons, customs and words with regard to the internal identity of the natives were at best equivocal and at worst suggestive of a need to revise and qualify the criteria and principles of ethnographic classification. For most early naturalists, basing their conclusions largely on the strength of the geographical, physical and social evidence, there appeared little doubt that all the native inhabitants of Australia (those of Van Diemen's Land excepted) were derived from the same stock. With the exception of Cunningham, who, on the basis of what he assumed were significant variations in colour, pronounced the mainland 'aborigines' a 'cross between the Malay and the Oriental negro of New Guinea',<sup>40</sup> naturalists from Flinders to Dawson, invariably supported the view that they were the 'same people' from one end of the continent to the other.<sup>41</sup> If the physical and social evidence appeared more or less to coincide, however, the same could not be said of the linguistic. Thus while Flinders was prepared to accept a general 'similarity of person and manner' among the various inhabitants contacted during his circumnavigation, he discovered 'the most essential differences' in the words of their language: 'I do not know that the language of any two parts of Terra Australis, however near, has been found entirely the same; for even at Botany Bay, Port Jackson, and Broken Bay, not only the dialect, but many words are radically different'.<sup>42</sup> So strongly did Mudie feel this contradiction between the physical and social evidence on the one hand and the linguistic evidence on the other, he found it necessary to set aside 'all the speculations as to whence

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<sup>39</sup> M.E. Hoare (ed.), *The Resolution Journal of Johann Reinhold Forster, 1792-1795*, Vol. I, The Hakluyt Society, London, 1982, p. 112.

<sup>40</sup> Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales*, p. 183.

<sup>41</sup> See Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, Vol. II, p. 123., Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, Vol. II, p. 214; and Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, p. 337.

<sup>42</sup> According to King also a 'great dissimilarity' existed 'in the languages of the several tribes' for whom vocabularies had been compiled; the 'anomaly' perhaps best exemplified by the fact that 'within two hundred miles of Port Jackson, the natives of three tribes, Port Macquarie, Burrah-Burrah, and Limestone Creek, signify the hair, by the words *wollack*, *mundar*, and *bulla-ye-ga*'. See Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, Vol. I, pp. 66-67, Vol. II, pp. 213-214; and King, *Narrative of a Survey*, p. 636.

the Australians came from' and to concentrate instead on 'what they are'.<sup>43</sup> Doubtless equally perplexed, Flinders had nevertheless found another way out of the problem. After surveying all the possible causes for the amount of linguistic variation — mistakes in recording, the deliberate deception of the natives — he took the evidence to confirm 'one part of an observation, the truth of which seems to be generally admitted: that although similarity of language in two nations proves their origin to be the same, yet dissimilarity of language is no proof of the contrary position'.<sup>44</sup>

If colonial ethnographers were confident that the various tribes in New Holland were all derived from the same stock, they had more difficulty establishing connections between them and the surrounding peoples. Prior to the voyage of the *Endeavour*, and primarily on the strength of the account of their 'personal characteristics' given by Dampier, the New Hollanders were generally regarded as 'a race of *Negroes*'.<sup>45</sup> Yet as Banks, Cook, and many who came after them, never failed to remark, the native inhabitants of New South Wales were the colour of 'wood soot or dark chocolate' rather than 'black' and their hair was 'lank and curled' rather than 'woolly and frizzled'; both of which indicated a Malay instead of an African origin.<sup>46</sup> Although this hypothesis was unequivocally supported by Dawson some forty years later, however, it had by no means succeeded in generating a consensus during the intervening period.<sup>47</sup> According to Wentworth and others, for instance, the strongest association appeared to be with the natives of New Holland and those of New Guinea.<sup>48</sup> As if to compound the problem still further, the linguistic evidence relevant to resolving the problem of the origin of the 'aborigines' provided few clues at all. Although the bounds of linguistic research were extended during the course of the nineteenth century, little had been discovered to disturb Collins' claim that the native tongue had 'no analogy with any other known language (at

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<sup>43</sup> 'In language', proclaimed Mudie, 'they are many races; in form, appearance, and habits, they are only one'. Mudie, *The Picture of Australia*, pp. 203-205.

<sup>44</sup> Flinders, *Voyage to Terra Australis*, Vol. I, pp. 66-67, Vol. II, pp. 213-214.

<sup>45</sup> Hence Buffon: 'The natives of New Holland have a strong analogy to the Hottentots'. See Buffon, *Natural History*, Vol. III, p. 339; and Callender, *Terra Australis Cognita*, Vol. III, p. 741.

<sup>46</sup> See Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, Vol. I, p. 358; Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, p. 124; and Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 274.

<sup>47</sup> 'I cannot but believe', wrote Dawson, 'that they are the unmixed descendants of the Malays, to whom they bear a closer resemblance in colour, hair, and features, than to any other people.' See Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, p. 339.

<sup>48</sup> 'These people bear no resemblance to any of the inhabitants of the surrounding islands', wrote Westgarth, 'except those of New Guinea, which is only separated from New Holland by a narrow strait'. See Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description*, p. 5; and King, *Narrative of a Survey*, pp. 636-637.

least as far as my knowledge of any other language extends), one or two instances excepted'.<sup>49</sup> All in all, the question of 'from whence the original stock was derived' appeared no closer to resolution in the 1830s than it had been over a decade earlier when Wentworth declared it 'one of those geographical problems, which in all probability will never be satisfactorily solved'.<sup>50</sup>

#### IV

#### The Order of Civilisation

This attempt to ascertain the geographic origins of the New Hollanders by searching for resemblances among their distinguishing characters, was almost invariably complemented by a second form of systematic classification. In almost all the accounts of colonial naturalists, there was an attempt, not simply to ascertain the racial connections of the natives of New Holland, but to determine their rank within the Great Chain of Being. Within that grand metaphor of creation, the human family occupied a critical juncture: the middle link between the earthy and divine creatures, the bridge between matter and spirit. Shading by imperceptible degrees at the one end into the apes and at the other into the angels, mankind defined an area of enormous range in progress and attainments.<sup>51</sup> To travel along the scale of the species (itself a contentious notion given the putative continuity of the Great Chain) from the lowest to the highest type was to move from an image of humanity in its most 'natural' or 'rude' form to one of humanity in its most 'artificial' or 'polished'. The position occupied by any particular nation or tribe within the scale was thus a function of the extent to which it had advanced 'beyond mere animal life'.<sup>52</sup> Each progressive position suggested a higher degree of intelligence and consequently a higher degree of sophistication and happiness. To be placed at the bottom of the series, as the New Hollanders, from Dampier onwards, so often were, was to

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<sup>49</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, pp. 506, 513.

<sup>50</sup> Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> For general discussions of the Great Chain of Being, see A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1933, *passim*; and E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 33. There is a passing reference to the 'chain of creation' and the 'scale of beings' in Banks and Forster respectively. See Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, vol. II, p. 108; and Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World*, pp. 256-257.

<sup>52</sup> Hawkesworth, *The Voyage of the Endeavour*, p. 537.

suggest a proximity to the brute creation, the general implication of which was unbridled misery and destitution.<sup>53</sup>

The principal used by naturalists to divide up this great expanse between the bestial and the celestial was nothing less than the idea of civilisation itself — or at least the operational form of it embodied in the peoples of the old world.<sup>54</sup> Since, at this stage, it was assumed that civilisation was not simply the level of development or state of refinement currently achieved by the European nations, but a universal potential exhibited in higher or lower forms of complexity in all human social life, it tended to function simultaneously as the thing to be measured and the measure of all things. From it were derived the very criteria according to which the different races of men were parcelled up into discrete developmental stages and distributed into a hierarchical series of types. Unlike its counterpart which used the more or less neutral notion of geographical space as the basis of establishing a continuous order among men, therefore, the gradatory scale of the human species was deeply ethnocentric. In effect it was European customs and manners that provided the foundational point in the developmental series (though the last in the history of progress) against which the attainments of all other races could be differentiated by degrees. The position occupied by a particular tribe or nation within the developmental series depended upon the extent to which it resembled the exemplary form of civilised life: European man. Just how civilisation was 'naturalised' within this taxonomic system will become evident through the following detailed examination of the specific characters used to signify the position of a particular tribe or nation within the order of civilisation: personal artifice, social development, linguistic perfection.

Attempts to discover a hierarchical order among the varieties of the human species on the basis of their physical appearance turned, as they did in the other departments of ethnographic inquiry as well, on the extent to which the particular tribe or nation under observation had raised itself above what Hawkesworth called the 'commoners of nature': the beasts.<sup>55</sup> On the basis of the presence or absence of artificial contrivances of one sort or another — clothing, ornamentation — ethnographers sought to assess how far a certain

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<sup>53</sup> Dampier's description of the Aborigines as 'the miserablest People in the world' is almost too well known to bear reiteration. See W. Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World*, Adam & Charles Black, London, 1937, p. 312.

<sup>54</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the importance of the concept of civilisation to the developmental tradition, see Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, pp. 10-25.

<sup>55</sup> J. Hawkesworth, *The Voyage of the Endeavour*, W.R. Smith & Paterson, 1773, p. 522.

people had improved upon the simple gifts of nature. Given that it tended to function as a metaphor for civilisation itself, clothing was generally perceived to be the most critical personal index of civility. In general naturalists treated the manner of dress adopted by a particular group as a measure of the progress it had made, not only in manufacturing, but in virtue and aesthetics also. Time and time again, garments were assessed as much on the basis of their ingenuity and practical utility (the sophistication of the manufacturing skill they embodied and the protection they afforded people from inhospitable climatic conditions), as on the basis of their decency and elegance.<sup>56</sup> To be clothed not simply as a means of protection against the elements (which was merely the first stage in the development of dress), but in accordance with variations in occasion and fashion, was to approach that epitome of civilisation: European man. For the same reasons naturalists paid great attention to the various artificial contrivances worn by the indigenous peoples they encountered — jewellery, scarification, tattoos — as a means of assessing their relative progression in matters of taste.

In descriptions of the 'personal appearance' of the natives up to and even after the 1830s, therefore, we should not be surprised that not only those physical 'characters' — stature, complexion, features — which were assumed to be indicative of racial connections, but also those — dress, ornamentation — which indicated rank in the scale of civilisation became important. Inevitably the complete absence of clothing, let alone a variation of attire in accordance with season or custom, reserved a place for the New Hollanders at the very base of human achievements.<sup>57</sup> In his recurring usage of 'quite naked' and 'entirely naked' (as if the noun itself was insufficient to convey the fact), Sydney Parkinson, artist to Joseph Banks during Cook's first voyage to the Pacific, offered a glimpse not only of the significance attached to adornment and dress as a index of civilisation, but also of the ingrained moral and aesthetic prejudices which marked virtually all of the early accounts of the indigenous inhabitants.<sup>58</sup> If the nakedness of the natives became a kind of metaphor for their lack of progress, however, it was not the only index of their barbarity that occasioned remark. Other signs of savagery, the ornaments 'impressed upon the skin itself', which, in the eyes of many, only tended to add to their

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<sup>56</sup> See Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World*, pp. 286-287; and E. Hawkins, 'Journey from Sydney to Bathurst in 1822', in G. Mackaness (ed.), *Fourteen Journeys Over the Blue Mountains of New South Wales 1813-1841*, Horwitz-Grahame, Sydney, 1965, p. 125.

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, p. 58.

<sup>58</sup> Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*, pp. 133, 134, 137, 141, 157.

'natural deformity',<sup>59</sup> also indicated the extent to which the New Hollanders were removed from the physical practices and habits of civilised people.<sup>60</sup> So marked was this distinction in their physical appearance, in fact, that on more than one occasion the natives were assimilated, not to the other human beings with whom they supposedly shared a space in the chain of creation, but to the material or merely sensual beings that occupied the next link below. Thus Cavanilles: 'There are in truth between them and the apes essential differences in exterior form, and greater still in anatomy, but neither the Kaffirs, nor the Hottentots, nor the wretches of Tierra del Feugo approach as much to the Orangutan as do the natives of New Holland'.<sup>61</sup>

Although in measuring the social development of the natives of New Holland colonial naturalists tended to refer to every single article of their customs and manners, it was customary for more sophisticated practitioners of the science to employ a more precise nomenclature of social development. For them, determining the place of a particular nation in the order of civilisation turned upon two fundamental conditions: mode of living (which set limits upon population) and mode of government (which provided the means of regulating the population). In the first case, since they assumed the series of stages through which the European nations had passed in their progress towards civilisation were universal, naturalists believed it possible to arrange the various groups contacted during the age of discovery according to their own developmental trajectory. As they saw it, each new form of subsistence — hunting and fishing, pastoralism, agriculture, commerce — either allowed for, or was in fact caused by, an increase of population and this increase in population in turn generated an increase in civilisation and cultivation. In a sense, therefore, the 'mode of living' of a particular nation provided a shorthand description of its position in the scale of human advancement.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, to the extent that different forms of government — despotic, monarchic, democratic — were seen to be reflective of a certain level of social development, they could function as a means by which to rank nations in a hierarchical series. 'The first symptom of advancement in a savage

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<sup>59</sup> W. Dampier, *A Voyage to New Holland*, The Argonaut Press, London, 1939, p. 102.

<sup>60</sup> See Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, pp. 456-458; and *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, p. 76.

<sup>61</sup> Cavanilles, 'Observations on the soil, natives and plants of Port Jackson and Botany Bay', p. 159. See also, Hawkins, 'Journey from Sydney to Bathurst in 1822', pp. 125-126.

<sup>62</sup> This series of socio-economic stages appears in a number of early colonial publications. See for instance, Hawkins, 'Journey from Sydney to Bathurst in 1822', p. 158; and Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description*, p. 79.

body', claimed Cunningham, 'was the establishment of chiefs, either elected or hereditary, to whom all pay submission, and to whose protection they trust their persons and properties'.<sup>63</sup> And from that first step towards the establishment of a system of rule it was possible to chart a whole series of developments culminating in gradual refinement and perfection of the laws governing the polity.

With these conceptions of development in mind, the rather bleak picture conveyed by ethnographers of the customs and manners of what one 'gentleman' referred to as 'the Botany Bay savage' was only to be expected.<sup>64</sup> Excepting the apparent anomalies that they 'were not without notions of sculpture' (and thus of artifice) or some conception of property (both 'personal' and 'real'), every article used to describe the social life, habits or dispositions of the natives served as a testimony to the fact that they remained in a 'genuine state of nature'.<sup>65</sup> While few writers gave an exhaustive assessment of all aspects of their manners, the composite image which emerged from their various accounts was one of utter barbarism. Hence: their population was scanty; their mode of government or subordination was consistent with that which nature affords the strong over the weak, the father over his children, and the husband over his wife; their form of religion, a collection of vague 'superstitions' almost wholly divorced from the central tenets of Christianity; their habitations, only such bark huts or caves, 'rude as imagination can conceive', that a wandering or unsettled nation could countenance; their mode of living, based upon the precarious and monotonous subsistence afforded by hunting and fishing rather than the regular and varied supply secured by pastoralism, agriculture, or commerce; their domestic life, founded upon the brutal, cruel and promiscuous enslavement of several wives to a single husband rather than the legitimate union of the two sexes; their mechanics or manufactures, wholly comprised of a few canoes, nets, hooks and lines, which displayed little art or ingenuity; their amusements, confined primarily to song and dance rather than the more sophisticated arts; and, finally, their weapons, consisting only of spears, darts,

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<sup>63</sup> Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales*, Vol. II, p. 204.

<sup>64</sup> *An Account of the English Colony at Botany Bay, And Other Settlements in New South Wales, From their First Establishment to the Present Time; With Remarks on the Manners, Customs, Dispositions, &c. of the Natives, By a Gentleman Just Returned from the Settlement who held an Official Situation There*, J. Bailey, London, 1808, p. 23.

<sup>65</sup> Grant, *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery*, p. 167. The anomaly of sculpture among the untutored sons of nature was noted in *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, p. 58; and *An Account of the English Colony at Botany Bay*, p. 73. Similarly, Collins' discussion of native property was not without a hint of the unexpected: 'But, strange as it may appear, they have also their real estates'. See

shields and clubs, as simple and crude as the people were benighted.<sup>66</sup> Regardless of whether commentators perceived mode of living (Wentworth) or mode of government (Cunningham), as the driving principle behind all the other aspects of indigenous society, therefore, the position attained by the New Hollanders was precisely the same. For both men the natives of the southern continent were distinguished for being at the 'very zero of civilisation'.<sup>67</sup>

In the same way that 'persons' and 'customs' were capable of indicating the position occupied by a particular nation in a hierarchical series of attainments, so too was 'language' measurable as to its degree of perfection and refinement. Although colonial ethnographers did not deny that the human species was unique in its capacity for speech (for speech was nothing else but thought externalised in signs), their approach to the native tongue suggested that they, along with certain European theorists, did not think that language came into being fully formed. Instead, from a series of primitive gestures, cries, groans and grunts (not wholly unlike those used by some animals), it was assumed to have gradually evolved, as circumstances necessitated, into more and more sophisticated and nuanced forms of representation.<sup>68</sup> Among tribes and nations which had been exposed to entirely different conditions, therefore, it was reasonable to expect different degrees of development, which could be measured by attending to certain linguistic characteristics. Firstly, since it was assumed that speech and the rules by which it was conducted would only have developed by degrees, whether a language was oral or written (this latter condition itself being susceptible to a number of subsidiary divisions),

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Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, p. 497; and *An Account of the English Colony at Botany Bay*, p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> See Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, pp. 454, 460, 463, 498; *An Account of the English Colony at Botany Bay*, pp. 23, 77; Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, pp. 281, 283, 290-291; Knight and Frost (eds), *The Journal of Daniel Paine 1794-1797*, p. 41; G.B. Worgan, *Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon*, The Library Council of New South Wales in Association with the Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1978, pp. 15-16; Cavanilles, 'Observations on the soil, natives and plants of Port Jackson and Botany Bay', pp. 160, 162; M.A. Parker, *A Voyage Round the World in the Gorgon Man of War: Captain John Parker. Performed and Written by his Widow; for the Advantage of a Numerous Family*, J. Nichols, London, 1795. Revised with a commentary by G. Fry of the Australian National Maritime Museum, Harden House, Sydney, 1991, pp. 97-98; G. Barrington, *A Voyage to New South Wales*, View Productions, Sydney, 1985, pp. 56, 74-75; and King, *Narrative of a Survey*, pp. 43-44, 175-176.

<sup>67</sup> Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales*, p. 202.

<sup>68</sup> For this view of the origins and development of language see E.B. de Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, a facsimile reproduction of the translation of Thomas Nugent with an introduction by Robert G. Weyant, Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, Gainesville Florida, 1971, pp. 176-181.

provided an important primary insight into its state of refinement.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, and once again on the premise that it began in a kind of pre-verbal designation, languages could be measured according to the barbarity of their sounds, as given by the proportion of vowels to consonants. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, languages could be assessed as to whether they were circumscribed or copious. Since the growth of language involved a move from the concrete to the abstract, the sophistication of languages could be measured according to the number and type of words they contained.<sup>70</sup>

Although colonial ethnographers frequently noted that the language of the New Hollanders was unwritten their attention was more conspicuously directed to the other two indices of civilisation. With regard to the first of these, that of sonority, it was generally conceded that while the natives of the southern continent uttered their words 'vociferously', in the manner of most uncivilised people, their language was by no means barbarous. Although, at first, as Tench pointed out, 'their combinations of words' and 'the manner [in which] they uttered them' had encouraged some observers to stigmatise the native tongue as 'harsh and barbarous in its sounds', a rather different impression was conveyed when 'their proper names of men and places' as well as 'many of their phrases, and a majority of their words' were 'simply and unconnectedly considered'. Approached in that way their languages were found 'to abound with vowels' and to produce sounds so 'mellifluous' and 'sonorous' that some naturalists even likened it to 'well-composed music'.<sup>71</sup> If the sound of the language suggested a greater degree of civility than the persons or manners of the New Hollanders may have led observers to expect, however, the conclusion was not unequivocally supported by observations on its adequacy for representing things or concepts. While Cook had discovered that 'they could easily repeat many words after us', giving prima facie evidence that their own language was very

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<sup>69</sup> In the instructions issued by the President of the Royal Society, for instance, Cook and the other gentlemen on the Endeavour were asked to record whether the natives have 'any method of communicating their thoughts at a distance, as the Mexicans are said to have done by painting, and the Peruvians by Quipos'. Douglas, 'Hints offered to the consideration of Captain Cooke', p. 516.

<sup>70</sup> See Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, p. 182.

<sup>71</sup> See Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, pp. 291-292; A. Malaspina, 'Loose notes on the English colony of Port Jackson', in King, *The Secret History of the Convict Colony*, p. 149; Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*, p. 147; Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, p. 506; and Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, p. 66. Interestingly on two occasions Hawkesworth recorded it as a 'harsh, dissonant language'. See Hawkesworth, *The Voyage of the Endeavour*, pp. 493, 577.

copious,<sup>72</sup> Tench reminded his readers that opinions had 'greatly differed' as to whether or not this was in fact the case. Prepared, for the most part, to reserve his own judgement on the matter, the language was to his mind nevertheless 'notoriously defective' in at least one particular: the natives 'cannot count with precision more than *four*'.<sup>73</sup> Others, like Grant, were even less generous: 'his language, as he can have very little to communicate or to discuss, must be greatly circumscribed; confined to a very few words, liable to be exchanged for new ones as objects arise or vary from time to time'.<sup>74</sup>

By contrast to all the confusion and dissent which characterised investigations into the origins of the New Hollanders, general assessments of their position in the scale of nations showed a remarkable uniformity. Almost invariably the overall impression created by the evident lack of sophistication and complexity in the person, manners and language of the natives, was of a race of beings fully deserving a position at the bottom of the scale of the human species. According to Daniel Paine, the New Hollanders were 'the most irrational and ill formed Human beings on the face of the Earth destitute in every Thought for future Comfort and deriving as yet no benefit from Civilisation'.<sup>75</sup> Nor was Cavanilles any less damning: 'In no part of my voyages have I seen our nature more degraded, or individuals more ugly or savage than in New Holland. They appear to occupy the last grade of man before passing on to the ape family by the most perfect of these, which is the Orangutan'.<sup>76</sup> For Tench also, despite the fact that his account of the customs and manners of the natives of New South Wales showed more balance and restraint than most, a position among the more savage nations was scarcely in doubt:

If they be considered as a nation, whose general advancement and acquisitions are to be weighed, they certainly rank very low, even in the scale of savages. They may perhaps dispute the right of precedency with the Hottentots, or the shivering tribes who inhabit the shores of Magellan. But how inferior do they show when compared with the subtle African; the patient watchful American; or the elegant timid islander of the South Seas.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, Vol. I, p. 358. For the connection between this ability to repeat words and the copious nature of the language, see Callender, *Terra Australis Cognita*, Vol. I, p. 374.

<sup>73</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 293.

<sup>74</sup> Grant, *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery*, p. 168.

<sup>75</sup> Knight and Frost (eds), *The Journal of Daniel Paine*, p. 39.

<sup>76</sup> Cavanilles, 'Observations on the soil, natives and plants of Port Jackson and Botany Bay', p. 159.

<sup>77</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 281.

On the basis of these and many similar accounts, the natives of New Holland found themselves permanently entrenched at the bottom of the scale of rationality. When in 1845 the Reverend William Schmidt declared that there was 'no doubt that they are the lowest in the scale of the human race', he was speaking the authorised text of academic and popular currency.<sup>78</sup>

To be sure there were those like Banks, Cook, and, in some passages, Peron, who attempted to invert the implicit normative principle of the distinction between nature and art by proclaiming the natives of New Holland 'far more happier than we Europeans'.<sup>79</sup> Falling in line with the fashionable idea of the 'noble savage', one which, as West would later point out, owed a great deal to the speculations of European philosophers such as Rousseau,<sup>80</sup> early ethnographers occasionally imagined the benefits of the state of nature to outweigh those of civilisation. Yet even these naturalists shared with their less primitivist ethnographers a sense of a series of types ranging from barbarism to civilisation, where the New Hollanders were located at the bottom and Europeans at the top. Indeed, since what made the indigenous inhabitants of the southern continent so attractive in their eyes was precisely the lack of 'luxuries' and 'conveniences' encumbering life, or, as Banks put it, the absence of 'anxieties attending upon riches', their view of the position of the indigenous inhabitants of New Holland in the order of civilisation was hardly different from that provided a century earlier by Dampier himself.<sup>81</sup> 'If he is the most independent who has the fewest wants, the houseless Australian is certainly our superior',<sup>82</sup> suggested Hawkins; yet that 'if', which went to the very heart of the argument between the realists and the romantics (for want of a better set of terms), had no bearing upon the position of the natives in the chain of creation. Indicative only of a difference of opinion as regards the relative advantages and disadvantages of the savage way of life, it

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<sup>78</sup> W. Schmidt in Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, p. 962.

<sup>79</sup> See Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, Vol. I, p. 399; Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, Vol. II, p. 130; and M.F. Peron, *A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere, Performed by the Order of the Emperor Napoleon, During the Years 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804*, Translated from the French, R. Phillips, London, 1809. Republished by Marsh Walsh Publishing, North Melbourne, 1975, pp. 180-181.

<sup>80</sup> J. West, *The History of Tasmania*, Edited by A.G.L. Shaw, Angus & Robertson, 1971 [1852], p. 260.

<sup>81</sup> At one point Banks even proclaimed the Aborigines to be 'but one degree removed (sic) from Brutes'. See Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, Vol. II, pp. 116, 130.

<sup>82</sup> Hawkins, 'Journey from Sydney to Bathurst in 1822', p. 128.

did nothing to disturb the conventional view that the New Hollanders were at the furthest remove from European civilisation in the gradatory scale of man.

## V

### Natural Man

The application of the taxonomic system of natural history to the natives of New Holland did not rule out the possibility that they might belong to a separate species. In the first place the difficulty of tracing racial connections beyond the geographical reaches of the southern continent made it hard to conclusively assert their identity with any of the fundamental human types. Even those naturalists like Henderson who refused to believe that the native inhabitants were original to the country acknowledged that there were difficulties in providing a satisfactory account of how they came to be there:

Considerable interest has already been excited regarding the secondary origin of the natives of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, or the country from whence these savage tribes have formerly been imported. This has been in consequence of the difference in their habits and customs, from the natives of the surrounding islands; from the decided peculiarity observable in the other animal and vegetable productions; and lastly from their being supposed the only people who entertained no idea of a being superior to themselves.<sup>83</sup>

In the same way, the apparent lack of development evident among the New Hollanders raised questions about their right to lay claim to a common origin. Since, under the notion of the Great Chain of Being, it was assumed that the higher order simians would merge through a series of almost imperceptible gradations with the lower orders of men, it was not beyond the bounds of reason to suggest that the New Hollanders were, in the words of Hodgson, 'a species of *simia acaudata*, or tail-less monkey'.<sup>84</sup> Thus while neither he nor most other colonial naturalists actually agreed with the assertion that the natives of the southern continent represented some kind of connecting link between the human and brute

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<sup>83</sup> See Henderson, *Observations on the Colonies*, p. 145.

<sup>84</sup> C.P. Hodgson, *Reminiscences of Australia, With Hints on the Squatters Life*, W.N. Wright, London, 1846, p. 253.

creation, it was sufficiently within the field of possibility for them to feel the need to refute it as an explanation.<sup>85</sup>

If the question whether the natives of New Holland represented a distinct species remained an open one, however, mainstream scientific opinion was decidedly weighted in favour of a common origin. Given that a fundamental change in the distinguishing characteristics of the natives would have been necessary to adduce their membership of a different order of beings (like the existence of a tail), few naturalists seriously doubted that the New Hollander and the European were members of the same species.<sup>86</sup> Evidently there were significant differences between the two races across the entire range of their distinguishing characters. But if a simple juxtaposition of these polar points in the scale of man would have belied a common origin, their underlying unity became readily apparent when due consideration was given to the various forms that filled the intervening spaces. Thus while a 'comparison of the Tasmanian with the European would discredit a common root', wrote John West, 'the wide spread family of man exhibits all the shades and varieties, by which the extremes are connected'.<sup>87</sup> However remote they may have been from the geographical centre of human origins and however lowly they might be ranked in the order of civilisation, there was nothing about the New Hollanders to take them out of the 'ordinary class of beings'.<sup>88</sup> All that could be reliably inferred from their distinguishing characteristics was that they occupied a unique position in the history of the species. For in them naturalists believed they had found a near perfect exemplar of that first and most fascinating point in the developmental sequence of civilisation: natural man.

To suggest that the Aborigines were a distinct race of humanity in this context was thus merely to indicate a certain variation in their visible characteristics and attainments. It is in fact indicative of the contemporary understanding of human differences that at least until the 1830s (and probably for a decade or so thereafter) the only features subject to measurement within the taxonomic system of classification were those so-called

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<sup>85</sup> See Cavanilles, 'Observations on the soil, natives and plants of Port Jackson and Botany Bay', p. 159; Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, pp. 455, 459; Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales*, p. 202; and Mudie, *The Picture of Australia*, p. 267.

<sup>86</sup> As Stocking has suggested 'eighteenth century anthropology did not seriously question the basic unity of all the diverse groups who had been contacted in the age of discovery', G. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, The Free Press, New York, 1987, p. 17.

<sup>87</sup> J. West, *The History of Tasmania*, edited by A.G.L. Shaw, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1971, p. 319.

<sup>88</sup> Mudie, *The Picture of Australia*, pp. 212-213.

'distinguishing characters' whose presence or absence did nothing to suggest a change in the underlying nature of man. If naturalists accepted that history was capable of leaving its fingerprints on the surface of being, they scarcely countenanced the possibility that changes could occur at that deeper intellectual level where the true distinction between man and beast was thought to reside. Since, for them, human nature was a constant rather than a variable, it was impossible 'to arrive at the conception of a history of human nature itself'.<sup>89</sup> While the casual observer might sometimes blur the distinction between the human and simian forms on the basis of their physical appearance, every member of the former species could be expected to display the rudiments of those things that were ever likely to be unknown among the animals: ornaments, customs, speech. This was not, of course, to suggest that local circumstance were incapable of affecting the appearance and development of man. Ultimately all the visible differences among men could be traced back to variations in climate and custom. Yet to the extent that they were operative, such environmental influences could do no more than assist or retard the development of the intellectual capacities. So it was that McCombie believed that the minds of the natives of New Holland might 'resemble rather a treasure which has been hermetically sealed *ab initio*, than a vacuum where all is void'.<sup>90</sup>

To students of the natural history of man, therefore, progress remained an inherent possibility. Even the most debased and destitute of savages (as the New Hollanders were commonly denominated), were still considered to be capable of improvement. 'Let those who have been born in more favoured lands', wrote that great colonial exponent of enlightenment humanism, Watkin Tench,

and who have profited by more enlightened systems, compassionate but not despise, their destitute and obscure situation. Children of the same omniscient paternal care, let them recollect, that by the fortuitous advantage of birth alone, they possess superiority; that untaught, unaccommodated man, is the same in Pall Mall, as in the wilderness of New South Wales.<sup>91</sup>

In this understanding of man, civilisation was not something peculiar to one race but, in the words of George Stocking, 'part of the "natural" capacity of all men'.<sup>92</sup> If it appeared

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<sup>89</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 84.

<sup>90</sup> J. McCombie, *Adventures of a Colonist; or, Godfrey Arabin the Settler*, John & Daniel A. Darling, London, 1845, pp. 254-255.

<sup>91</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, pp. 293-294.

<sup>92</sup> Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution*, p. 34.

in one geographical area rather than another, it was merely because the environmental conditions at that location were more favourable to its emergence. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the early colonists tended to assume that there was nothing to prevent the New Hollanders from becoming industrious and useful members of colonial society. 'Born with all those powers which education expands, and all those sensations which culture refines',<sup>93</sup> they required little more than the proximity of civilisation to polish their manners and raise them from their savage state. By the process of enlightenment itself they would learn to appreciate the advantages of a settled existence and give their consent to the laws by which it was secured.

During the course of the nineteenth century this confidence in the common nature of man would begin to be eroded. As the new ethnological sciences — physiology, sociology, philology — began to filter into colonial scientific practice and government established the necessary institutional foundations in which they could flourish, a whole new system of classification began to emerge. Based upon an archaeological (as opposed to a taxonomic) principle, this new system attempted to establish the origins and status of different nations and tribes less on the basis of their surface characteristics than on the basis of their underlying organic structure. Rather than persons, customs and words it was the laws governing the animal economy, social system and grammatical construction that became the basis of differentiating races and distributing them into a hierarchical series. Thus classification ceased to be a matter of referring the visible back to itself in an endless process of displacement from one type to another. Instead, scientists were required to descend into the very depths of human beings and uncover the hidden laws regulating the structure and function of their physical, social and linguistic systems. In this way ethnologists were inevitably led to abandon their faith in the constancy of the organic structure of the species. As analyses exposed them to a history in the very heart of human nature itself, a new, more radical, concept of race was born. And with that came an entirely new conception of the means that would be necessary to civilise the Aborigines and bring them within the scope of the colonial social contract.

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<sup>93</sup> Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, p. 287.

## Chapter III

### The Origin of the Species

Between 1825 and 1845 a new system of classification, one based upon an archaeological rather than a taxonomic principle, emerged and consolidated itself in colonial natural history. Not surprisingly, given the general reluctance of field naturalists to engage in abstract commentary, this radical scientific development was not marked by a great deal of philosophical self-reflection. A few scattered and somewhat oblique remarks on the inadequacy of the previous system in the work of Field, Strzelecki, and a few others, were all that contemporary commentators generally saw fit to record of their changing assumptions about practices of classification in the science of man.<sup>1</sup> If the new approach was formally manifested in their accounts, it was primarily through an increased level of specialisation (physiology, sociology, and philology emerging as distinct branches of scientific knowledge) and the emergence of a new vocabulary of analysis (the distinction between surface and depth being one of its principle features). This lack of philosophical or interpretative material notwithstanding, however, the difference between what might be called the ethnographic accounts of the 1820s and the ethnological ones of the 1840s was sufficiently marked to leave little doubt of a systemic change. Between the likes of Flinders, King and Cunningham, and Field, Grey, and Threlkeld, a whole new basis for establishing connections between nations and tribes emerged.

Naturally this shift to a new system of classification did not occur overnight or in all the departments of natural history simultaneously. Although most commentaries published towards the middle of the nineteenth century indicated a shift in emphasis in one domain of inquiry or another — physical, social, linguistic — attempts to establish the identity and rank of the Aborigines still frequently turned on the characters of distinction derived from the earlier taxonomic systems. Notwithstanding the fact that the new ethnological sciences of physiology, sociology, and philology had already left their mark on the work of many of their contemporaries, writers like Meredith and Hodgson, Dredge

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<sup>1</sup> See B. Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', in B. Field (ed.), *Geographical Memoirs on New South Wales; By Various Hands*, John Murray, London, 1825, pp. 197, 200-202; and P.E. de Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. Accompanied by a Geological Map, Sections, and Diagrams, and Figures of the Organic Remains*,

and Earl, remained fundamentally tied to the old way of classifying things. For them, the origins of the Aborigines and their place in the scale of races could still be determined by attending to such things as the texture of their hair, the mode of their government, and the sonority of their nouns.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, so prevalent were the references to such signs even in the 1840s that Barron Field's attempt to deploy physiological, as opposed to physiognomical, evidence two decades earlier would have appeared altogether aberrant, were it not for naturalists like Henderson and Threlkeld who gave expression to some of the insights and terminology of the new sciences during the intervening period. Acting in some ways as a link between the first expressions of ethnology in the 1820s and its more complete realisation in the 1840s, these writers served to confirm that changing theoretical approaches emanating from Europe were continuing to filter, albeit slowly and imperfectly, into the mainstream of colonial scientific practice.<sup>3</sup>

The product of that process of filtration was nothing more or less than a new concept of race. As colonial ethnologists incorporated the insights of the new sciences of physiology, sociology and philology, they began to accept that the real distinction between the races of men (and hence the true criteria of classification) lay in their 'internal structures' rather than their 'external characters'. While surface features were capable of being effaced and modified by time, the underlying organisation of human beings, was understood to be of a more permanent nature. Only in the principles regulating their 'animal economy', 'social system' and 'grammatical construction', did nations and tribes properly reveal who they were. Inevitably some ethnologists considered this organisation original to the race while others saw it as the product of a process of adaptation to local conditions over countless centuries. In either event, however, it was acknowledged that it was the internal structures of being that provided the key to determining lines of descent

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Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1845. *Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 19*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1967, p. 338n.

<sup>2</sup> C. Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales, During a Residence in that Colony From 1839 to 1844*, John Murray, London, 1844. Facsimile Edition by Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1973, pp. 95-96; J. Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines of New South Wales*, James Harrison, Geelong, 1845, pp. 5-8; C.P. Hodgson, *Reminiscences of Australia, with Hints on the Squatters Life*, W.N. Wright, London, 1846, pp. 223, 247-248; and G.W. Earl, 'On the Aboriginal Tribes of the Northern Coast of Australia', *The Journal of the Royal Geographic Society of London*, Vol. 16, 1846, pp. 242-243.

<sup>3</sup> See Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', pp. 195-196; J. Henderson, *Observations on the Colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1832, *Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 103*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1965, pp. 143-153; 179-180; and L.E. Threlkeld, *An Australian Grammar, Comprehending the Principles and Natural Rules of the Language, as Spoken by the Aborigines, In the Vicinity of Hunter's River, Lake Macquarie*, Stephen & Stokes, Sydney, 1834.

and stages of development. Only by dissecting and analysing nations and tribes in the very structures of their being was it possible to understand the nature of their racial distinction. If studies of the natives of New Holland began to run into hundreds (rather than tens) of pages, therefore, it was not because colonial scientists had suddenly become more curious, but because a new kind of object had been brought under examination: the 'Aboriginal Race'.

## I

### Archaeology

At the centre of the new mode of classification lay a shift in emphasis from 'external character' to 'internal structure'.<sup>4</sup> As early as the 1820s colonial scientists were beginning to follow the lead of their European counterparts in suggesting that visible characteristics were too variable in their expression to provide a reliable guide to the determination of identities and differences. Using a genealogical analogy that was to become widespread in the study of languages particularly, these continental scholars had attempted to demonstrate that appearance was by no means always the surest method of establishing relations among men. For just as it was possible for two brothers to appear different while being more closely affiliated than someone from another family who looked more similar to one or other of them than they did to each other, so too was it possible for two nations or tribes to appear different that were in fact intimately related.<sup>5</sup> While some similarities in character — persons, manners, words — could certainly to be expected among two nations or tribes who were closely related, they were of little value in determining affiliations among peoples more remotely connected. Particularly since the normal range of variations exhibited by a particular type could be extended by accidental and environmental forces, even tribes occupying the same continent (and this applied to the

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<sup>4</sup> Traces of this distinction between 'external character' and 'internal structure' are visible in a whole range of documents relating to the Aborigines from the 1820s on. For a more direct or explicit discussion of the distinction see J.A. Meigs, 'The cranial characteristics of the races of men', in J.C. Nott and G.R. Gliddon, *Indigenous Races of the Earth; Or New Chapters of Ethnological Inquiry*, J.B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1857, p. 228.

<sup>5</sup> See R.G. Latham, *Opuscula: Essays Chiefly Philological and Ethnological*, Williams & Northgate, London, 1860, p. 146.

tribes of Australia) could appear quite different in many of their distinguishing characteristics.<sup>6</sup> In order to establish a reliable foundation for the organisation of identities and differences, it was thus necessary to delve beneath the external characters towards a set of structural distinctions less liable to be modified by time.

From the 1820s on, then, ethriologists began to classify peoples less on the basis of a certain list of elements than according to the way in which they were organised in the performance of certain functions. Increasingly it was not the elements themselves — persons, customs, words — but the more or less permanent mechanisms by which these were related — animal economy, social system, grammatical construction — that were assumed to provide a reliable guide to racial connections. In this classificatory schema, affiliations were revealed at the core of being (the organisation of the parts), variations at its extremities (the parts themselves). Differences displayed on the surface provided no barrier to identification so long as they were an expression of an analogous structural relation. The existence of customary practices of circumcision on the one hand and the alluviation of teeth on the other did not belie the essential identity of the different Aboriginal tribes of Australia, for instance, because they were merely two instances of an identical social institution (initiation) performing an identical function (the regulation of sacred knowledge). Naturally the precise nature of the elements composing the structure and the ways in which they were combined varied from one department of ethnology to another. Yet regardless of whether it was the organs of the animal economy (as in the work of Field), the institutions of the social system (as in the work of Grey) or the inflections of the grammatical construction (as in the work of Threlkeld), the centrality of the notion of organic structure remained the same. Comprised of groups of elements linked together by the functions they performed within an integrated system, it defined a radical dimension of humanity, the variability of which among different races provided a true foundation for systematic classification.

Naturally this emphasis upon 'internal structures' did not work to eclipse 'external characters' altogether. To the extent that the latter acted, like the tip of an iceberg, as the

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<sup>6</sup> As J.C. Prichard suggested in relation to languages: 'A careful analysis will often detect analogies of such kind as to afford undoubted evidence of primitive affinity between languages which have acquired in the lapse of time and the course of events great differences, and when each dialect has become unintelligible to people who speak another of the same stock'. J.C. Prichard, 'On the relations of ethnology to other branches of knowledge', *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*, Vol. I, Papers from Vols. I and II, 1844-1850, p. 316

visible point of a largely invisible structure, they continued to serve as signs of racial distinction. The fundamental difference was that their power of differentiation no longer derived simply from their value as characters or elements within a comparative system of signs. If they were able to function as the criteria by which to differentiate between races it was not because they were significant in and of themselves but because they were articulated with an internal (and thus not immediately visible) system or structure. Having supposed 'an adaptation between the peripheral conformation and central organic structure',<sup>7</sup> in the words of Meigs, ethnologists were able to treat particular visible signs as a key to more significant variations in the internal structure. Inevitably these characters tended to be fundamentally different from those used previously. In the field of physiology, for instance, cranial features displaced such things as hair type as the basis for establishing connections.<sup>8</sup> But by correlating a certain change in external characters with a certain change in the functioning of the underlying animal economy, social system or grammatical structure, it was possible to make assessments as to relationships without actually having to observe all those structural conditions themselves. What was central to the new system of ethnological classification, therefore, was not so much the wholesale replacement of character by structure, but the subordination of the former to the latter.

By searching for analogies between organic structures among the different peoples of the earth ethnologists hoped do either one of two things. They could attempt to establish connections between peoples by tracing their affiliations and lines of descent through the ages or they could establish their position with the historical development of the species by assessing their level of complexity. In the first case, organic structures were used to help piece together the primeval distribution of races on the surface of the earth. By tracing the familial relations or consanguinity of different nations and tribes, ethnologists hoped to recover a lost history of human associations and thereby resolve the question of monogenesis. In the second case, organic structures were used in a more straightforward typological way to indicate the point at which a particular nations or tribe had broken away from the general course of human development. By arranging races as a series of geological strata, ethnologists endeavoured to reconstruct the very history of the species. In either event, however, the principle by which peoples were related was

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<sup>7</sup> Meigs, 'The cranial characteristics of the races of men', p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance, Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', p. 197.

temporal rather than spatial. If two nations or tribes were placed adjacent to one another on the basis of the resemblances in their organic structures, it was not because they occupied proximate positions in a continuous field of variations, but because they were formed one after the other in a sequence of temporal successions. In short, while natural history was essentially a taxonomic science, ethnology was an archaeological one. As J.C. Prichard pointed out in his anniversary address to the Ethnological Society of London in 1848, 'Geology is the archaeology of the globe — ethnology that of its human inhabitants'.<sup>9</sup>

## II

### Dissection and Analysis

As structure displaced character as the hallmark of the system of classification, the study of man ceased to be simply a matter of looking. Given that connections between nations and tribes were revealed at the level of the organic structure, the pursuit of knowledge depended less, as Bernard Smith has put it, upon 'the graphic delineation of surfaces' and more upon 'an analytic interpretation of the structure of things'.<sup>10</sup> In order to arrive at a correct sense of the significant, observation needed (at least metaphorically speaking) to plumb the very depths of being and unlock its hidden secrets before it could return to the surface and make sense of the visible characters. In each of the new ethnological sciences — physiology, sociology, philology — it was the invisible 'skeleton' of the phenomena under examination that provided the key to the meaning of everything that could be seen at the level of the 'flesh'.<sup>11</sup> Not until ethnologists began to understand the various permutations and combinations of the structural order could they avoid being continually distracted (and continually confounded) by casual variations deposited on the surface of being by the workings of time. This was not to say that the structures themselves were wholly impervious to history. But since they tended to be subject to regular laws of

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<sup>9</sup> Prichard, 'On the relations of ethnology to other branches of knowledge', p. 303.

<sup>10</sup> B. Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Harper & Row, Sydney, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1984, p. 337.

<sup>11</sup> This metaphorical relation was obviously most applicable to the science of physiology, but ethnologists also used it in other departments of inquiry as well, references occasionally being made, for instance, to such things as the 'grammatical skeleton'. See J. Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, London, 1870. Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York, 1967, p. 242.

development they provided a far more reliable measure of the relationship of nations and tribes than such things as 'the accidents of straight or woolly hair'.<sup>12</sup> In short, from the 1820s on, scientific vision was mediated by a concept of structure that foreclosed the possibility of continually referring the visible back to itself. Instead ethnologists were forced to dissect and analyse the economies, systems and constructions of the objects under examination.

The implications of this development were twofold. In the first place, it rendered the study of man an increasingly specialised pursuit. Although some of the analyses undertaken by ethnologists continued to be based upon observations supplied by 'travellers and residents',<sup>13</sup> the need to articulate these with the underlying organic structures of being — animal economy, social system, grammatical construction — ensured that the science was no longer readily available to the 'gentleman observer'. As the emphasis placed upon structural differentiation began to change the whole order of the significant, a far more sophisticated set of terms descriptive of racial differences emerged that substantially limited both the possibility and the utility of untrained observation. With regard to the animal economy, for instance, it was no longer simply the colour of the skin or the character of the hair that needed to be observed. Instead, physiologists were required to measure the full range of cranial bones — frontal bone (forming the forehead), occipital bone (forming the back of the head), parietal bones (forming the sides of the skull), malar bones (cheek bones), upper maxillary bone (in which were inserted the teeth of the upper jaw) — and compare and contrast the various diameters and angles they afforded.<sup>14</sup> It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that in the series of questions relating to 'physical characters' circulated by the Victorian Legislative Council Select Committee in 1859, respondents tended to leave numerous questions unanswered on account of their lack of anatomical knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

In the second place, the study of man began to require the kind of laboratory type conditions provided by an institutional setting like a mission or a school. Since it was

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<sup>12</sup> Field, 'On the Aborigines of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land', p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia*, Vol. II, T. & W. Boone, London, 1841, p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> See R.G. Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, John Van Voorst, London, 1850, pp. 4-7.

<sup>15</sup> See *Report of the Select Committee of the Victorian Legislative Council on the Condition of the Aborigines; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendices*, ordered by the Council to be Printed, 3 February, 1859, John Ferres, Melbourne, 1859, p. 45.

necessary to understand the structural relations underlying the visible characters of the physical, social and linguistic order, endless casual observations recorded in brief encounters were of little value. To proceed towards a proper knowledge of the racial affiliations of the Aborigines and their place in the history of the species, it was necessary to actively interrogate their nature over an extended period of time. For the phrenologist, of course, a set of callipers and a compliant (or dead) subject were all that was really required to pursue their inquiries. Provided they could take the series of cranial measurements necessary to indicate the configuration of internal organs that lay beneath, the remaining work of analysis could be done within their private study. Yet for those interested in establishing the laws regulating the social system or the grammatical construction, it was necessary to observe and interrogate their objects of investigation on a regular basis. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the vocabularies and grammars put together by the missionaries and protectors in the second quarter of the nineteenth century were far superior in their systematicity and sophistication to any others. Having enjoyed continuous contact with the Aborigines in a particular locale they were not only able to compile extensive lists of words and the things they signified, but to reduce the language to a system and determine the precise rules by which it was constructed.<sup>16</sup>

### III

#### The Primeval Distribution of Man

Like the other archaeological sciences to which it was allied, ethnology was essentially 'an attempt to recover lost history'.<sup>17</sup> Whereas its predecessor was concerned only with the present relations between nations and tribes (their geographical distribution), it sought to establish historical connections between the peoples of the earth dating back to the very first ages of man (their primeval distribution). As one of the leading authorities of the age,

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<sup>16</sup> The following extract from Threlkeld's journal, the end of a long passage outlining the means he used to obtain the native language, is exemplary of the kind of relationship that was necessary: 'The Aborigines soon ascertained my wish to be able to converse with them in their own tongue, and it afforded them much amusement to correct my blunders, point out my errors, not unfrequently ending with the unclassical reprimand of — "What for you so stupid, you very stupid fellow". The women and children were the most patient in hearing and answering questions, the females especially in persevering to make me understand the meaning of a phrase'. N. Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E. Threlkeld: Missionary to the Aborigines 1824-1859*, Australian Aboriginal Studies No. 40, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1974, Vol. I, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, p. 241.

J.C. Prichard, remarked in his anniversary address to the Ethnological Society of London in 1847,

Ethnology is the history of human races, or the various tribes of men who constitute the population of the world. It comprehends all that can be learned as to their origin and relations to each other. It is distinct from natural history inasmuch as the object of its investigation is not *what is*, but *what has been*.<sup>18</sup>

In this attempt to recover the lost history, to reunite relations long forgotten, it was not the surface characters but the deeper structural relations of the animal economy, social system and grammatical organisation that were most important. This did not mean, of course, that ethnologists discounted the differences introduced during the historic period. In the five thousand years since the Flood, the combined effect of 'minor catastrophes' and the action of 'human passions' (migration and colonisation) had been responsible for dispersing mankind to the four corners of the earth and introducing the 'minor distinctions' that were detectable even in tribes that belonged to the same original stock.<sup>19</sup> But since discrete races had been known since the very beginning of recorded history, it was impossible to tell whether mankind constituted a single species with strongly marked varieties or several species of a single genus without delving into the more impervious structural relations of the physical, social and linguistic order. So it was that the attempt to determine the affiliations of the Aborigines increasingly turned upon physiological, sociological and philological researches.

In this endeavour, geographical considerations ceased to exercise the significance which they had formerly. In some instances, of course, the limitations upon processes of migration imposed by geographical necessities continued to provide a more or less reliable means of establishing affiliations between nations and tribes. Even where these could not be attested by positive historical information or written authority, the apparent agreement between geographical conditions and the technical capacity of a particular nation or tribe (eg. their skill in navigation) were such that it was possible to account for the dispersion of a race without taking recourse to any flights of fancy. In other places, however, the

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<sup>18</sup> J.C. Prichard, 'On the relations of ethnology to other branches of knowledge', *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London, Papers From Vols I & II, 1844-1850, Vol. I, p. 302.*

<sup>19</sup> See C.H. Smith, *The Natural History of the Human Species: Its Typical Forms, Primeval Distribution, Filiations and Migrations*, W.H. Lizars, Edinburgh, 1848, p. 20.

geographic and the ethnological evidence was not so easily harmonised.<sup>20</sup> Although normal patterns of migration could, according to Bonwick,

explain the presence of the Celt in the oak forests of England, on the heather hills of Scotland, in the bogs of Ireland, and in the sunny vales of France, we cannot so easily connect the Tasmanians with the Negritos of Luzon, the New Caledonians with the Andamaners, and all with the dark race of Southern India, or even Eastern Africa. Could we pass them onward by the monsoons or trade winds, in good ships, provided with food for the voyage, our difficulties would diminish; but, without these valuable aids to migration, we are puzzled with so many *island foci* of the Black people.<sup>21</sup>

Attempts to explain these phenomena within the limitations set by current geographical conditions, invariably drew natural historians into tortured and fabulous speculations. Unable to account for the existence of the 'Papuan' in such numerous and remote lands, for instance, the Reverend Dr. Lang supposed him to be the abject descendant of 'the comparatively civilised, as well as bold, intrepid navigator of a long bygone age'. In a similar fashion others tried to account for the existence of the New Hollanders by suggesting that a few helpless individuals from neighbouring lands had been overtaken by an unexpected tempest and cast up upon its shores.<sup>22</sup>

When colonial ethnologists attempted to establish the racial affiliations of the Aborigines, therefore, it was increasingly with the aid of geology rather than geography. In order to account for their existence in a place in which they could not conceivably have arrived by conventional means, it was necessary to return to epochs when the geographical features of the earth were markedly different from what they had then become. According to Bonwick, for instance, many problems could be resolved by assuming that there had been a more intimate connection between both New Holland and New Guinea and New Zealand and Tasmania in a prior epoch than might then be supposed.<sup>23</sup> In a similar fashion some years earlier Barron Field had attempted to overcome the obvious implausibility of his suggestion that the Aborigines were of African origin by invoking Humboldt's suggestion that 'The distribution of organic beings on the globe depends not only on very complicated climatic circumstances, but also on geological causes, with which we are

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, pp. 247-248.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 252.

entirely unacquainted, because they are connected with the original state of our planet'.<sup>24</sup> If geological considerations could help in the resolution of certain paradoxes relating to the primeval distribution of races, however it was still primarily the ethnological structures — animal economy, social system, grammatical construction — that were used to establish affiliations between nations and tribes. Assumed themselves to supply evidence of certain geological strata in the history of man, they became the principle means for colonial ethnologists to determine the affiliations and line of descent of the Aborigines. It is thus worthwhile dealing with each of these in turn.

Until at least the second decade of the nineteenth century, the only physical indices used by colonial naturalists to determine the identity and difference of a particular tribe were those visible characters (hair, skin, stature) that could be compared according to a series of quantifiable measures (size, shape, texture, colour).<sup>25</sup> From Field onward, as the science of physiology or animal economy began to impact upon techniques of classification, the signs of physical distinction among men underwent a complete transformation. Increasingly, it was not the external characters but the groups of internal organs performing functions essential to the living being — intellection, procreation, digestion, locomotion, respiration — that were assumed to carry racial significance. In this system, visible signs of physical distinction were only important to the extent that they indicated marked differences in one or other of the organic systems comprising the animal economy. If the shape of the cranium or the so-called circumstances connected with breeding (time and frequency, period of utero-gestation, number of progeny), began to be invoked for the purposes of classification by colonial ethnologists, it was only because variations in those characteristics indicated differences in the intellectual and procreative capacities of the Aborigines respectively.<sup>26</sup> From those signs, and those only, it was

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<sup>24</sup> Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', pp. 200-202.

<sup>25</sup> Although anatomical observations appear in the journals of Flinders and Grant, they were not the work of either author and for the most part out of keeping with their classificatory practice. See Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, Vol. I, p. 68; and Grant *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>26</sup> See Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', pp. 197, 207; Henderson, *Observations on the Colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 144-145; J.L. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia; With an Account of the Coasts and Rivers Explored and Surveyed During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle in the Years 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43*, Vol. I, T. & W. Boone, London, 1846. *Australiana Facsimile Editions* No. 33, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1969, p. 89; and Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 335. Similarly Latham noted distinctions in the structure of the teeth of the Aborigines because they were indicative of the digestive function. See Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, p. 244.

possible to detect such essential or radical (as opposed to the casual or accidental) peculiarities as could serve to establish affiliations between the indigenous inhabitants of the southern continent and the other races of men.

Inevitably it was the intellectual functions that became the most important of the organic structures of the body in establishing relations of consanguinity between different nations and tribes. Since the brain was assumed to be 'the index to the entire economy', the various diameters and angles supplied by the bones of the cranium became the principal physiological means for establishing lines of descent.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that considerable variations in cranial structure appeared to exist even between individuals of the same race, colonial phrenologists, following the lead of J.F. Blumenbach, supposed that 'the cerebral development of each variety of the human species must follow a certain method, indicative of its peculiar traits of character'.<sup>28</sup> On the basis of a whole series of assumptions adopted from the craniological system of Gall, they imagined the unique character of the Aborigines would be distinctly figured in the cranial form.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of whether the measure of the intellectual faculties was taken merely from the facial angle (in the manner of Camper) or from a wider range of external indices (in the manner of Blumenbach), the implication remained the same. As long as the osseous framework in which the brain was housed had not been modified either by accidents or processes of adaptation, an analogous organic configuration implied derivation from a common stock.<sup>30</sup> All that was needed in order to determine the origins of the Aborigines (and this was precisely the approach taken by Field) was to compare the osteological structure of their cranium with those of Blumenbach's five primitive types — Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malayan, American — and find the best fit.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, p. 4; and Meigs, 'The cranial characteristics of the races of men', pp. 221-222.

<sup>28</sup> Æneas, 'Phrenology: No. II', *The Colonial Literary Journal*, Vol. I, No. V, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Phrenology was putatively based upon the following 'physiological laws': the brain was the seat of the mind, the volume of the brain bore some relation to the mental powers of an individual, the mind was not a single organ but a collection or congeries of organs providing for each internal operation and each external sense, each organ had a precise location in the brain, there was a constant relation between the size of a particular organ and the power of its manifestation, and, finally, that the size of each organ could be inferred from the outward shape of the skull. See Æneas, 'Phrenology: No. I', *The Colonial Literary Journal*, Vol. I, No. IV, p. 58; and *Some Account of Dr. Gall's New Theory of Physiognomy, Founded Upon the Anatomy and Physiology of the Brain, and the Form of the Skull*, Longman, Hurst, Rees & Ormie, London, 1807, pp. 26-54.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the different approaches of Camper and Blumenbach see Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, Vol. I, pp. 158-165.

<sup>31</sup> See Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', p. 196.

Part of the problem of such an approach was of course the difficulty posed by processes of subsequent development. Given that local circumstances were, over an extended period of time, capable of 'calling forth' alterations in the animal economy (the intellectual faculties included) calculated to fit the nation or tribe in question to its particular abode, an identity of cranial forms among two peoples was no guarantee that they were descended from a common stock. Even though it appeared the variations introduced into the structure as it 'adapted to the necessity of local circumstances' obeyed 'certain laws', these were too imperfectly known to enable physiologists to work backwards towards an original configuration, by calculating the length of time necessary to produce a certain change in the cranial form of a particular people.<sup>32</sup> Even Blumenbach, according to Prichard, aware that 'the figure of the skull' was 'far from being constant and invariable' recognised that the examination of the cranial morphology of races merely afforded a general idea of their 'character of organisation' and permitted no conclusive evidence as to consanguinity or familial relationship.<sup>33</sup> At least for the time being, therefore, phrenological analyses could only supply an inference of affiliation that needed to be supported by other researches.

The development of sociology brought with it changes in social classificatory practices of precisely the same order as those introduced by physiology. To the extent that early colonial naturalists had used social indices as a means of determining the identity and rank of the Aborigines it was by way of resemblances in particular customs and manners. Where two tribes or nations more or less agreed across the range of their social articles — government, religion, domestic life, habitations, mode of living, arts and amusements, weapons — there was a presumption of a common origin. Beginning with Grey, attempts to determine the affiliations of the various native tribes of Australia turned upon a rather different set of criteria. Increasingly it was not isolated customs, but the collection of 'institutions' that worked to maintain the integrity of the social system as a whole that formed the basis of classification. Two tribes were deemed to be related to the extent that they appeared analogous in the various 'institutions' — clanship or caste, totem or

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<sup>32</sup> Since Prichard assumed that all the 'specific diversities' resulting from 'adaptations' were already present in the genus and merely 'called forth' by local circumstances his belief that changes could occur in the animal economy was still somewhat removed from the notion of evolution by natural selection. See Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, Vol. II, pp. 558-571. For claims about rates of change among languages, see Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, p. 565

<sup>33</sup> Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, Vol. I, pp. 170-172.

kobong, property, initiation, marriage, punishment, superstitions — that, taken together, constituted the indigenous 'social system'. As integrated groups of elements that performed certain functions essential to the integrity and survival of the tribe — maintenance of order and harmony, distribution of property, crossing of blood, preservation of food — these 'institutions' enjoyed precisely the same status as the groups of organs comprising the animal economy. Assumed to be more or less permanent, they provided a means of establishing affiliations between peoples who, on the surface of things, could appear to be quite diverse.<sup>34</sup>

From the 1840s, the question as to whether the Aborigines were derived from the same stock was thus determined less on the basis of similarities or differences in particular customs and manners, and more on the basis of the institutions according to which their social life was organised. Naturally certain institutions, simply because they were considered more integral to the ongoing survival of the social system itself, were seen to be more important than others in the determination of lines of descent. Just as the organs of the intellection took precedence over those connected with locomotion or digestion because they constituted the key to the whole economy, so too did the institutions of consanguinity, kobong, and landed property tend to overshadow the others because they provided the very conditions of possibility for human association.<sup>35</sup> Yet the critical innovation of this sociology consisted in nothing more than subordination of the external characteristics (customs and manners) to the internal structures (the relations of institutions within a system). At least in the work of Grey and Long, visible differences in the manners of remote tribes were significant for the purposes of determining community of origin only to the extent that they indicated a change in the structure of a particular

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<sup>34</sup> See Grey, *Journal of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, Vol. II, pp. 217-245; E.J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia*, Vol. II, T. & W. Boone, London, 1845. Australian Facsimile Editions No. 7, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964, pp. 151-152, 391-392, 406-409; W. Hull, *Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales. Deduced from Certain of their Customs, Superstitions, and Existing Caves and Drawings, in Connection with those of the Nations of Antiquity*, William Clarke, Melbourne, 1846; Long, cited in Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, pp. 240-244; J. MacGillivray, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Rattlesnake, Commanded by the Late Captain Owen Stanley, R.N., F.R.S. Etc. During the Years 1846-1850*, Vol. II, T & W. Boone, London, 1852, pp. 1-32; and L. Leichardt cited in D. Bunce, *Language of the Aborigines of the Colony of Victoria, and other Australian Districts; With Parallel Translations and Familiar Specimens in Dialogue, as a Guide to Aboriginal Protectors, and others Engaged in Ameliorating their Condition*, 2nd. Edition, Thomas Brown, Geelong, 1859, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> According to Strzelecki, for instance, 'The foundation of their social edifice may, like that of civilised nations, be said to rest on an inherent sense of the rights of property'. See Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 340.

social institution. External variations, such as the taboo on certain foods among some tribes and its ready consumption among others, ceased to be a barrier to establishing an affiliation because they did not involve a modification in the nature or object, the structure or function, of the institution in question — in this case 'the kobong'.<sup>36</sup>

Once again, a similar configuration of social 'institutions' was not unequivocal evidence that two nations or tribes were linked by way of descent. Since, as Latham pointed out, 'common conditions develop common habits',<sup>37</sup> it was almost impossible to tell, independently of other considerations, whether an analogy between two social systems was indicative of their derivation from a common stock or, as Strzelecki put it, the result of 'similar interests, passions, propensities, or exigencies'.<sup>38</sup> While it was doubtless uncontroversial to attribute, in the manner of Eyre, the existence of similar 'habits', 'laws', and 'traditions', among the different tribes inhabiting Australia, to a community of origin, the question was rather more complex when it came to external relations.<sup>39</sup> On no account did this mean that all writers refused to conjecture upon the foreign affiliations of the natives of New Holland. In Hull, for instance, on the basis that few, if any, of their customs and ceremonies did not bear some analogy with those practised by 'the Ancient Inhabitants of the Eastern World', the 'Aboriginal Natives' were deemed in all probability to have descended from that quarter.<sup>40</sup> Yet within the work of ethnologists like Grey, there was a marked reserve about inferring anything about the external affiliations of the natives on the basis of evident similarities in their social structure. Although fully recognising that many of the institutions governing the social system of the natives of Australia were 'coincidental' with those of the 'North American

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<sup>36</sup> See Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, pp. 219-220, 275; MacGillivray, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Rattlesnake*, p. 14; and Long cited in Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, pp. 239-240. It is worthwhile noting that such differences in form were seized upon in order to solve the question of migration. Both Westgarth and Eyre used the facts relating to the diffusion of certain customs across the different tribes as a means of explaining the peopling of the continent. See Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia*, Vol. II, p. 48; Westgarth, *Australia Felix; Or, a Historical and Descriptive Account of the Settlement of Port Phillip, New South Wales: Including Full Particulars of the Manners and Condition of the Aboriginal Natives*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1848, p. 48.

<sup>37</sup> Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, p. 562.

<sup>38</sup> Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 341.

<sup>39</sup> Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery*, Vol. II, pp. 151, 154.

<sup>40</sup> Hull, *Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales*, p. i.

Indians', for instance, he tended to leave it to others to speculate as to a community of origin.<sup>41</sup>

At around the same time, a similar change in the conceptualisation of the Aboriginal language, indicating the influence of the nascent science of comparative grammar or philology, began to mark attempts to employ linguistic evidence to determine whether the various tribes of Australia were derived from the same stock. Among early commentators on the Aboriginal language racial identity was given by a comparison of vocabularies. Where a certain level of statistical resemblance was found among the words of nations or tribes a community of origin was generally assumed to exist. From the publication of Threlkeld's *An Australian Grammar* in 1834, it was less the unit of representation formed by the signifier and the signified, and more the system, the body of philological rules, that became the criterion for determining a relation.<sup>42</sup> From that point on, Aboriginal languages were conceived as patterned systems of sounds which obeyed certain laws in their composition and development. The true import of linguistic evidence for the purposes of classification (and this was precisely what Strzelecki insisted upon) could thus only be understood from a detailed knowledge of the 'pronunciation' and the 'syntax' of the 'dialect' in question.<sup>43</sup> Without a working knowledge of the rules by which the sounds making up the language were pronounced (orthography) or of the means by which they were linked together into syllables and words, phrases and sentences (grammar), a wholly unreliable impression of the degree of affiliation between two nations and tribes was likely to be formed. Indeed, it was precisely for this reason, according to Strzelecki, that European visitors, on the basis of 'some hundred words, analogous in sound, construction, and meaning', had 'jumped to the conclusion' that a 'common root' was spoken all over the country.<sup>44</sup>

On the basis of this new way of conceptualising language, two different forms of analysis became fundamental to the determination of primeval affiliations: the comparison of vocabularies and the comparison of grammatical inflections. Even after 1840, words continued to serve, and in works like the *Descriptive Vocabulary* of George Fletcher

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<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, Vol. II, pp. 226-227.

<sup>42</sup> L.E. Threlkeld, *An Australian Grammar, Comprehending the Principles and Natural Rules of the Language, as Spoken by the Aborigines, In the Vicinity of Hunter's River, Lake Macquarie*, Stephen & Stokes, Sydney, 1834.

<sup>43</sup> See Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 337.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 337.

Moore exclusively so, as a basis for the establishing affinities among people sufficiently proximate within a particular line of descent for resemblances to be displayed on the 'surface' of their language.<sup>45</sup> So long as certain concessions were made to the fact that 'local terms' were likely to be 'introduced into different districts' over the course of time, the comparison of vocabularies still served as a useful tool for establishing whether two or more 'languages' were allied in some form or another.<sup>46</sup> Yet between the vocabularies compiled in the 1820s and those compiled in the 1840s a new element appeared which fundamentally changed the basis upon which words were able to determine relationships. Whereas the former expressed words as a unit of letters, more or less permanent and immutable in form and meaning, the latter expressed them as groups of sounds, capable of undergoing precise variations (sometimes with and sometimes without a change in meaning) in accordance with certain orthographic rules. From that point on the determination of relations turned less on a coincidence of words and more on a coincidence in the forms and combinations of sounds. Hence even Moore, who preferred to say nothing about the grammar of the native language spoken in the vicinity of Western Australia, provided an extensive analysis of the sounds of the letters and of the modifications which they underwent in different dialects.<sup>47</sup>

Although, for the most part, resemblances in words, provided they were ascertained according to the principles set down by a consistent orthography, served for the purposes of identification among languages that were very closely allied, they were generally wholly inadequate to the task of establishing more remote affiliations. Since it was possible, as Bopp had shown for the Indo-European idioms, that an affinity in internal organisation could exist between two or more languages that, at least on the face of things, appeared quite diverse, ethnological investigations needed to extend not simply to tonal analyses but also to structural ones.<sup>48</sup> As Schürman suggested in the introduction to his volume on the Parkalla Language, 'In forming an opinion on the affinity of languages or dialects, one has to look not only to the number of similar words, but still more to the

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<sup>45</sup> See G.F. Moore, *A Descriptive Vocabulary of the Language in Common Use Amongst the Aborigines of Western Australia*, W.M. S. Orr & Co., London, 1842.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, pp. vi-ix.

<sup>48</sup> W.B. Winning, *A Manual of Comparative Philology, in which the Affinity of the Indo-European Languages is Illustrated, and Applied to the Primeval History of Europe, Italy, and Rome*, J.G. & F. Rivington, London, 1838, p. 52.

grammatical structure and idiom'.<sup>49</sup> At this deeper level, that of the grammatical functions performed by inflections of the root, affinities could be revealed which had nothing to do with words and their significations. Radical distinctions in vocabulary notwithstanding, two or more languages could be allied according to the way in which their verbal and substantive roots were modified as to person or tense, number or gender, by processes of inflection. Among pioneer colonial philologists like Threlkeld, Schürmann and Tiechermann it was thus the various changes to the roots effected by the agglutination of affixes (prefixes and suffixes) which provided the key to discovering the family of languages to which the Aboriginal tongue belonged.<sup>50</sup> Whenever they attempted to establish linguistic connections between the Aborigines and the inhabitants of other regions (or, for that matter, to definitively prove the derivation of the different Australian dialects from a common root), it was invariably by reference to the grammatical functions performed by inflectional modifications.<sup>51</sup>

If the grammatical construction of languages appeared for the most part to be enduring and constant, it was still susceptible to changes that could confound a supposition as to affiliation. As Prichard suggested in 1848: 'It is only when we have good reasons for believing that no contingent event has interfered to change the original speech of any particular race, or supplant it by the idiom of a different tribe, that we can be justified in founding on such ground an argument as to affinity of descent'.<sup>52</sup> Yet, at least from appearances, the problems presented to the philologist in this regard were not as serious as those confronting researchers in the other ethnological sciences. Since, as Latham insisted, 'nothing but imitation determines the use of similar combinations of articulate sounds in different languages', changes introduced into a language after it broke off from its parent stock did not provide a significant obstacle to the determination of its

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<sup>49</sup> See C.W. Schürman, *A Vocabulary of the Parkalla Language. Spoken by the Natives Inhabiting the Western Shores of Spencer's Gulf*, George Dehane, Adelaide, 1844, p. iv.

<sup>50</sup> See L.E. Threlkeld, *A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language*, Kemp & Fairfax, Sydney, 1850; Threlkeld, *An Australian Grammar*; Schürmann, *A Vocabulary of the Parkalla Language*; and C.G. Tiechermann and C.W. Schürmann, *Outlines of a Grammar, Vocabulary and Phraseology, of the Aboriginal Language of South Australia, Spoken by the Native in and for Some Distance Around Adelaide*, Robert Thomas & Co., Adelaide, 1840. South Australian Facsimile Editions, No. 39, Public Library of South Australia, Adelaide, 1962.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Threlkeld, *A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language*, pp. 65-82; and Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, p. 210.

<sup>52</sup> Prichard, 'On the relations of ethnology to other branches of knowledge', p. 316.

affiliations.<sup>53</sup> 'Just as two brothers will always be two brothers notwithstanding differences of stature, feature and disposition' he declared,

so will two languages which have parted from the common stock within the same decennium, be more closely allied to each other, at any time and at all times, than two languages separated within the same century; and two languages separated within the same century, will always be more cognate than two within the same millennium.<sup>54</sup>

While it was doubtless true that of two tongues 'separated at the same time from a common stock, one may change rapidly, and the other slowly', and hence display 'a dissimilar physiognomy at the end of a given period' their, 'ethnological relation' would remain unchanged: 'They would still have the same affiliation with the same mother-tongue, dating from nearly the same epoch'.<sup>55</sup>

There is little doubt that the analyses pursued in these three ethnological sciences helped to resolve many of the contradictory pieces of evidence that confounded earlier attempts to establish a common origin for the various tribes inhabiting the southern continent. In its own way, each of the departments of ethnology worked to confirm that the tribes of New Holland were derived from a common stock, but nowhere were their results more pronounced, perhaps, than in relation to the 'Aboriginal language'. For earlier natural historians like King, variations in the languages spoken by different tribes had been extremely difficult to reconcile with other evidence suggesting they were derived from a common origin. Basing his assessment upon a comparison of the words alone, he found a great dissimilarity even among tribes located in relatively proximate positions.<sup>56</sup> Once due attention was paid to the grammatical construction of the different tongues spoken throughout the country, however, many of these anomalies began to disappear. In comparing the languages at Swan River and King George's Sound, for instance, Grey was able to reconcile a number of apparent differences by attending to certain consistent changes in the use of their inflections. Apparently among the latter tribe the terminating syllable of all names was dropped, turning Kat-ta (the head) into Kat, Meer-ra (the throwing stick) into Meer. On the basis of such analyses he believed it could confidently

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<sup>53</sup> Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, p. 562.

<sup>54</sup> Latham, *Opuscula*, p. 146.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>56</sup> See P.P. King, *Narrative of a Survey of the Intertropical and Western Coasts of Australia*, Vol. II, John Murray, London, 1827. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 30, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1969, p. 636.

be asserted 'that a language the same in root is spoken throughout the vast extent of country'.<sup>57</sup>

If structural analysis had added considerable weight to the presumption of a common origin among all the tribes of the southern continent, the question of external identity remained at least as confusing at the middle of the century as it had at the beginning. So confounded had attempts to derive the racial affiliations of the Aborigines become by the late 1840s, that both Westgarth and Hull described them rather as 'an interesting subject of philosophic and speculative inquiry' than as one which was likely to be resolved by concrete methods of investigation.<sup>58</sup> Of course, for many, like West, the difficulty in establishing affiliations for the 'Aboriginal tribes' outside Australia did not provide any evidence that they were a separate species. For them, a common primary origin for the Aborigines was assured by the fact that 'nature mingles none but kindred blood'.<sup>59</sup> Since even this criteria was beginning to be doubted by the more sophisticated ethnologists, however, the 'half-caste' children that formed the product of the 'illicit intercourse' carried on between settlers and Aborigines was still no guarantee that they belonged to the same order of creation.<sup>60</sup>

#### IV

#### The History of Mankind

Running parallel to this often highly complex search for relations of affiliations among the various peoples of the earth, was another form of classification which also found expression in colonial ethnology. In contrast to that which attempted to establish the primeval distribution of races, this second mode of establishing relationships was not so much genealogical as typological. In this system, the point was not to discern the historical affiliations between the different peoples of the earth and trace their lines of descent in the manner of a family tree. Instead, the ethnologist was merely required to distribute them into a collection of fundamental types representative of the stage they occupied in history

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<sup>57</sup> Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, Vol. II, pp. 210, 216.

<sup>58</sup> See Hull, *Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives*, pp. i-ii; and W. Westgarth, *Report on the Condition, Capabilities, and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines*, William Clarke, Melbourne, 1846, p. i.

<sup>59</sup> West, *The History of Tasmania*, p. 319.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance, Smith, *The Natural History of the Human Species*, pp. 119-120.

of the species. Level of developmental not consanguinity was the most important consideration.<sup>61</sup> To this extent, it did not matter whether the features observed in a particular nation or tribe were the product of their original descent or the effect of certain subsequent environmental and accidental circumstances. Since the only question was whether the group under examination had attained a particular level of development in their various organic structures, no attention needed to be given to determining whether such development represented a significant modification on their original form. All that was necessary to locate them within their allotted compartment of history was to assess the complexity of their organisation and the fullness of its development.

Despite certain evident similarities, this ethnological schema was substantially different from that previously deployed by natural historians like Collins and Tench. Rather than more or less sophisticated versions of what was essentially the same thing, each stage of development now represented an entity in its own right. Where two peoples were seen to belong to the same tier in what Meigs described as 'the great natural scale of the human family',<sup>62</sup> it was no longer because they had reached the same point of progress in the continuous scale of civilisation. Rather it was because they occupied the same discrete geological strata in the discontinuous series of stages that marked the progress of mankind from the ancient to the modern form. Inevitably these developmental stages continued to be seen in progressive terms. If nothing else, modern man was assumed to enjoy a greater variety of potential adaptations than his predecessors. Yet since each stage in the succession was merely representative of a certain configuration of elements — organs, institutions, inflections — it was effectively already integral and complete. Within this schema, as Bonwick acknowledged, the complexity of organisation and fullness of development displayed by a certain people in its organisation, suggested nothing more or less than a 'relative place in a chronology'.<sup>63</sup> Ideally what such classifications were intended to show (something clearly evident in the social analyses of Grey and the linguistic analyses of Threlkeld) was simply the antiquity of the particular nation or tribe in question. How the Aborigines fared within this typology will become evident through an examination of each of the three ethnological sciences.

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<sup>61</sup> As Latham had observed, 'Two languages may be in the same stage (and, as such, agree), yet be very distant from each other in respect to affiliation or affinity'. See Latham, *Opuscula*, p. 150.

<sup>62</sup> Meigs, 'The cranial characteristics of the races of men', p. 224.

<sup>63</sup> Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, p. 261.

Within the science of the animal economy, the level of development of a particular race was thought to be given in the relative weighting of the organs connected to 'external operations' (sense) and 'internal operations' (reason). Included in the former group, those by which man was 'immediately enabled to enter into connection with the external world', were the organs of sexual love, parental and filial love, friendship or fidelity, fighting, slaughter, address (cunning), cupidity, good-nature, mimicry or imitation, vain-glory or vanity, and constancy or firmness. Among the latter were two further sub-groups of organs divided according to those by which man acquired 'a more familiar acquaintance' with objects known to him by means of the external senses — aptness to learn and retain things, aptness to learn and retain places, aptness to recollect persons, sense of colour, aptness to learn and retain music, aptness to learn and retain numbers (apparently poorly developed in animals and seldom found among Negroes), aptness to learn and retain words, aptness to learn and retain languages, mechanic art, prudence or circumspection, and loftiness — and those which 'constituted the peculiar prerogative and glory of the human race' — rhetorical acuteness, metaphysical subtlety, wit, and theosophy.<sup>64</sup> Among all sentient beings sensations received through the organs of external sense (located predominantly in the posterior parts of the head) were capable of being 'metamorphosed' through the organs of internal sense (located predominantly in the anterior parts of the head) into ideas or thoughts of one kind or another. Yet just as 'the higher excellence, and more perfect construction of the internal sense', more commonly referred to as 'the power of thinking', divided man from the brute creation and accounted for his superiority over it, so too did the relative weighting of the various organs of reason and sense, mental powers and animal propensities, exhibited in different nations serve to divide them among themselves and account for the mode of life led by each.<sup>65</sup>

From the 1820s onwards, such phrenological indicators were consistently employed (and with thoroughly predictable results) to demonstrate a marked peculiarity in the craniological organisation of the Aborigines. Regardless of whether it was assumed that the mental development of a particular race was a response to the circumstances in which they were placed, that certain external factors allowed particular mental faculties to be 'called into service' (as did Westgarth), or that each race had originally been endowed

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<sup>64</sup> See, *Some Account of Dr. Gall's New Theory of Physiognomy*, pp. 33, 80-130.

<sup>65</sup> See, *ibid.*, pp. 59-60; and Meigs, 'The cranial characteristics of the races of men', pp. 221-222.

with those intellectual faculties which enabled it to survive in the situation in which they found themselves (as did Field), colonial ethnologists frequently assumed that the organs connected to the higher intellectual functions among the natives of New Holland were relatively deficient.<sup>66</sup> According to Field, for instance, 'the Australians' had 'quick conceptions, and ready powers of imitation' (organs connected to the 'external sense'), but 'no reflection, judgement, or foresight' (organs connected to the 'internal sense').<sup>67</sup> Similarly Æneas was of the opinion that 'the great preponderancy of brain in the New Hollander, as in all savage nations, lies in the posterior parts of the head — the seat of the passions, and inferior sentiments; the moral and intellectual portions, with few exceptions, are very deficient'.<sup>68</sup> Even Parker, who refused to 'lay much stress upon phrenological developments, as indicating an unvarying character and uncontrollable propensities', was prepared to accept a physiological explanation for the evident lack of moral sentiment among the Aborigines: 'So far as I have been able to investigate the subject, the greatest deficiencies in the developments of the aboriginal cranium are in those organs which are regarded as indicative of moral qualities'.<sup>69</sup>

While they were by no means as rigorously formulated as those put forward in physiology or philology, the laws of development given by the science of sociology were used in a similar fashion to position the Aborigines within the history of development. If Grey, Hull and, to a lesser extent, Strzelecki, saw analogies between the social system of the natives of Australia and that of the Indians of America, it was not necessarily because they imagined them to have a similar origin, but because they considered them, in Strzelecki's words, of the same 'social age'.<sup>70</sup> Working on the assumption that a certain configuration of institutions was indicative of a certain stage of social development in the course of human progress (the causes contributing to this development being to this extent irrelevant), they took manifest similarities in 'laws of relationship' (Grey) and 'practices connected with the rights of hospitality' (Strzelecki) as signs of a fundamental, and previously hidden, connection between the Aborigines and other primitive nations. For the

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<sup>66</sup> See Westgarth, *Australia Felix*, pp. 64-65; and Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', pp. 224-225.

<sup>67</sup> Field, 'On the Aborigines of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', pp. 225-226.

<sup>68</sup> Æneas, 'Phrenology: No. VIII', *The Colonial Literary Journal*, Vol. I, No. 11, p. 172.

<sup>69</sup> E.S. Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, Hugh M'Coll, Melbourne, 1854, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> See Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, pp. 227, 229; and Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 341.

purposes of typological classification all that mattered was that two groups of people or two nations had reached precisely the same point in the progress of their religious and social institutions. Hence in Grey, the discovery of certain laws relating to 'consanguinity' and 'kobong' among the native inhabitants of Australia not only made it possible to draw analogies with the New World tribes of America, but also with the Old World tribes of the ancient testament. Regardless of whether one consulted the *Archæologia Americana* or the book of Genesis, it was possible to find the same principles regulating relationship and marriage; all of which tended to suggest that the key institutions of the Aboriginal social system, along with those of the American Indians, dated from a very remote epoch.<sup>71</sup>

Doubtless of the three sciences of man incorporated under the umbrella of ethnology, it was philology which provided the most consistent and rigorous set of categories for distributing the different races of men into a developmental series. Focusing upon the 'method by which the relations between the different words that constitute sentences [was] indicated', three primary grammatical types, indicative of three historical epochs in the development of language, had been distinguished by Latham and others: aptotic (pre-inflectional), of which Chinese was a sample, inflectional (comprised of two sub-groups: agglutinate and amalgamate), of which Greek and Latin were samples, and anaptotic (post-inflectional), of which English was a sample.<sup>72</sup> Among languages of the aptotic type, grammatical modifications, the transitions of syntax expressive of 'different conditions and relations of actions and objects', were effected by the combination of separate words rather than by changes to the words themselves. With inflectional languages, by contrast, such modifications in respect to 'time, agency and relation' were effected by 'altering the form of the original word' through the superaddition of various affixes. Languages were classed as agglutinate where inflection could still be 'shown to have arisen out of the juxtaposition and composition of different words', and amalgamate where the system of inflection had been perfected to the extent that the words which previously served as adjuncts to the radical were no longer distinguishable as separate and independent. With anaptotic languages, those comprising the last stage in this

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<sup>71</sup> Grey in fact claimed that the social institutions of the Aborigines were representative of an 'ancient system'. See Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, Vol. II, pp. 223, 227-228, 242, 334-335, 343; and Strzelecki, *Physical Description*, pp. 340-341.

<sup>72</sup> See Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, p. 9; Latham, *Opuscula*, pp. 148-149; and A. Murray, 'On the distribution and classification of tongues', in J.C. Nott and G.R. Gliddon (eds), *Indigenous Races of the Earth*, J.B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1857, pp. 29-30.

developmental sequence, grammatical modifications were once again performed by the juxtaposition of distinct words, auxiliary verbs and prepositions doing the work of inflections expressive of case and tense, rather affixes to the radical. Whereas aptotic languages like the Chinese lacked inflections because they had never been developed, however, anaptotic languages like the English lacked them because they had lost those which they once possessed.<sup>73</sup> Described as 'the continual march from synthesis towards analysis', this history of language was, as Murray declared, representative of the process by which intuition was displaced by reasoning.<sup>74</sup>

In order to discover the appropriate compartment in which to class the Aboriginal language, therefore, colonial ethnologists were drawn less to its sonority or copiousness (although assessments dependent upon those criteria persisted)<sup>75</sup> and more to the laws by which it effected certain grammatical modifications. For writers like Strzelecki this grammatical construction served simply as a means towards a typological classification: 'From a partial knowledge of it, I should be rather disposed to class the Australian language (*i.e.*, that of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land,) among those called Transpositive [what Latham called inflectional], — those which are independent of articles and pronouns, the case and person being determined by the difference in the inflexion'.<sup>76</sup> For Threlkeld and others however, the way in which a particular language effected modifications as to tense, number and case, was valuable not simply because it allowed ethnologists to undertake a classification according to primary type, but because it permitted assessments of an historical or geological nature. To the extent that the different primary types served to indicate a developmental sequence in the organic development of language in the way that Latham later conjectured, it was possible to employ them, not so much for the purpose of establishing racial affiliations, but for the purpose of determining the antiquity of the race in question. Hence in the philological analysis of Threlkeld, as in the anthropological analysis of Grey, analogies were sought not simply among the geographically contiguous nations of the New World — Tahitian, Malayan, Somoan, Rarotongan, New Zealand — from whom the Aborigines may have descended, but also

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<sup>73</sup> Latham, *The Natural History of the Varieties of Man*, pp. 9-12.

<sup>74</sup> Murray, 'On the distribution and classification of tongues', pp. 29-30.

<sup>75</sup> See for instance, Westgarth, *Australia Felix*, p. 51.

<sup>76</sup> Strzelecki, *Physical Description*, p. 336.

among the remote nations of the Old World — Hebrew, Greek, Latin — with whom they appeared to share a certain geological strata in the history of language.<sup>77</sup>

In one sense, the position of Aborigines in the scale of humanity was not fundamentally changed by the introduction of the notion of organic structure and the new modes of classification that it entailed. For the most part they were still considered to be the least developed of all the peoples of the earth. According to Hull, for instance (and he can be assumed to be fairly representative) there was 'Probably no race or tribe of the human kind (the Vedahs of Ceylon excepted)', which had 'ever sunk so low in moral degradation or intellectual power, as the various families of Aborigines of the Colonies and Districts of New South Wales'.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, however, the new classificatory schema introduced two new elements into colonial conceptions of the Aborigines that were not without their impact upon the way in which they were treated within colonial society. In the first place, it was now assumed that their peculiar organisation was not so much deficient as admirably adapted for the purposes of survival in the circumstances in which they found themselves. If the development of the native tribes had been arrested by the limitations of their environment, their mode of life was nevertheless, as Westgarth put it, 'the elaboration of a stunted perfection' which emitted 'a semi-lustre of its own'.<sup>79</sup> In the second place, the position of the Aborigines at the bottom of the scale of human types no longer signified that they were merely without civilisation. Rather it suggested that they were an ancient race, perhaps the oldest in the world, whose mind was constituted entirely differently from that of modern man.

## V

### Original Man

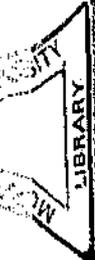
In the two decades between 1825 and 1845 a far more radical concept of 'race' entrenched itself in colonial natural history and challenged the assumption that Aborigines and Europeans were possessed of a common nature. By the end of that period, colonial scientists (or at least the more sophisticated among them) no longer assumed that the

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<sup>77</sup> Threlkeld, *An Australian Grammar*, p. x.

<sup>78</sup> Hull, *Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales*, pp. i-ii.

<sup>79</sup> Westgarth, *Australia Felix*, pp. 44-45, 119-120.



differences between themselves and the Aborigines consisted in a series of surface distinctions reflective of environmental conditions. Although they did not altogether discount the value of visible characters as signs of distinction, they recognised that the differences between the two races went much deeper than the type of their hair or the number of words in their language. At least from the ethnological perspective, the systematic investigations into the nature of the Aborigines made possible by the civilising experiments of the 1830s and 1840s provided conclusive evidence that they were constituted altogether differently from the European. Increasingly it appeared (and the failure of those experiments only served to confirm the supposition), that it was not just the 'external characters' of the Aborigines that distinguished them from the settlers but their 'internal structures' as well. In their animal economy (as displayed in the conformation of the skull), social system (as displayed in the arrangement of institutions), and grammatical structure (as displayed in the relations of inflections), the Aborigines were shown to possess a radically different mind to the European. Regardless of the precise terms ethnologists used to encapsulate this distinction — 'the instinctive and mental faculties peculiar to each race' (Strzelecki), the 'savage mind' (Grey), or the 'mental intercourse inherited from their forefathers' (Schürmann) — they all agreed that a new entity had made its appearance in the laboratory of nature: Aboriginality.<sup>80</sup>

Inevitably the recognition of these structural peculiarities added a certain respectability and intellectual merit to the notion of polygenesis. Since the definition of a species was based upon the notion of a peculiarity of structure that was constant and undeviating, even those who defended the notion of a common origin for man recognised that there were good reasons to assume that the Aborigines represented a separate creation. As the great ethnologist Dr. Latham suggested, for instance, 'the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land, commonly called Tasmanians, have a fair claim, when considered by themselves, to be looked upon as members of a separate species'.<sup>81</sup> Obviously, given the irreligious nature of such assertions, ethnologists were frequently cautious in making statements that ran directly counter to the biblical account of human origins contained in

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<sup>80</sup> See Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 338n; Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, p. 223; and Schürman, *A Vocabulary of the Parkalla Language*, p. vi.

<sup>81</sup> R.G. Latham cited in Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, p. 212.



the book of Genesis.<sup>82</sup> Yet as the nineteenth century wore on, polygenist notions were no longer as radically unacceptable as they had once been. As Bonwick declared in 1870, 'It has become customary of late years to speak of the Tasmanians and Australians as of a distinct species of man, though Dr. Waitz goes further in polygenistic ideas, and writes: "New Holland and Van Diemen's Land are not connected, anthropologically considered"' <sup>83</sup>

If the belief that the Aborigines represented a distinct creation gained a certain amount of intellectual respectability, it was also possible to explain the structural peculiarities they manifested in terms of a process of adaptation to environmental conditions. For ethnologists this was not simply a case, as it had been for natural historians some time earlier, of local circumstances either facilitating or arresting the development of a reasoning capacity that remained fundamentally constant regardless. Rather it was a matter of environmental conditions actually 'calling forth' a certain organic modification in the race. In the course of adapting themselves to local circumstances (an active rather than a passive process), the intellectual faculties of a particular nation or tribe were themselves liable to undergo significant change. As a certain group adjusted to the conditions in which they found themselves, they inevitably began to exercise and develop those intellectual organs most valuable to their survival. To each set of environmental relations there was thus likely to be a corresponding form of organic development. Provided those conditions remained constant, modifications necessary for survival were likely to become engrafted into the constitution through processes of hereditary transmission until they became constitutive of the very nature of the race. So it was, according to the phrenologists, that the intellectual capacities of the Aborigines, for all their deficiencies when compared with those of a European, were still 'admirably adapted' to the state of life in which 'it pleased God to place them'.<sup>84</sup>

In this account of the cause of the racial differences, the length of time necessary to bring about the kind of structural differences exhibited by Aboriginal and European man

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<sup>82</sup> Although Strzelecki declared that 'on such subjects as the origin of a human race, we must be satisfied with the simple declaration of Scripture', there were many suggestions in his work of a less orthodox kind. See Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, pp. 333, 343.

<sup>83</sup> Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origins of the Tasmanians*, p. 211.

<sup>84</sup> See Æneas, 'Phrenology: No. VIII', p. 173; 'A few words on the Aborigines of Australia', p. 57; Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, p. 338n; and Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, p. 3.



appeared to be almost inconceivably vast. Since the current varieties of men appeared to have remained permanent during the historic period, the development of such racial distinctions were of a remoter date even than the last great cataclysm that disrupted the earth and scattered its peoples: the Flood.<sup>85</sup> As Sir Charles Lyell observed,

If the various races were all descended from a single pair, we must allow for a vast series of antecedent ages, in the course of which long-continued influence of external circumstances gave rise to peculiarities increased in many successive generations, and at length fixed by hereditary transmission.<sup>86</sup>

According to this way of thinking, the different races of men could be conceptualised in terms of a series of archaeological layers in which the most primitive forms of organisation (like the pre-inflectional stage in the development of language) also represented the most ancient. To the extent that the organic structures of the Aborigines were the least developed of all the races of men, therefore, it was reasonable to assume that they were of the greatest antiquity. In them, as the following passage from Bonwick demonstrates, ethnologists assumed that they had found an exemplar of original man, frozen at the earliest stage of development by the isolation and limited variety of adaptations of the Australian environment:

I do not say, or imply, the Tasmanian were the first people God made; but they may have been so, as far as we moderns perceive. No race presents itself to us of a greater relative antiquity. They lived throughout all history. In their Eucalypti retreats, they dreamed on as a people while the pyramids were reared, while Chinese struggled for a home in the Flowery Land, while the rudest huts of Nimrod rose by the Euphrates, while the ancestors of Pericles ate their acorn suppers, and alike during the infant weakness and maturer glories of old Rome.<sup>87</sup>

Even on the most favourable reading of the potential of the Aborigines for development in nature, it was unreasonable to expect that proximity to civilisation alone would be sufficient to reclaim them from their barbarism. At the very least, as even many Christians recognised, it would take several generations of persevering labour under strictly controlled conditions before the missionaries could gain sufficient purchase upon the 'Aboriginal mind' to supply their want of reflective capacities and render them

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<sup>85</sup> See Smith, *The Natural History of the Human Species*, p. 130.

<sup>86</sup> C. Lyell cited in Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origins of the Tasmanians*, p. 212.

<sup>87</sup> Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, p. 266.



responsible beings.<sup>88</sup> As Westgarth pointed out in his report on the condition of the Aborigines in 1846:

Their peculiar habits and ideas, the result of physical and psychological laws operating throughout many successive generations, are permanently engrafted in their constitution, and are not to be eradicated without the long continued use of counteracting moral and physical appliances, involving a far greater lapse of time than is usually considered necessary in the estimate of the philanthropist or the missionary.<sup>89</sup>

If civilisation remained a possibility at all, it was no longer simply a matter of supplementing a certain raw human nature through conventional forms of education. To reclaim the Aborigines from their condition of barbarism it was necessary to reconstitute them in the very core of their being. Since, as George Stocking has put it, 'The savage mind had been "investigated" and found wanting',<sup>90</sup> the ascent of the Aborigines up the scale of social evolution could neither be readily relied upon nor achieved by the same methods that had previously been deployed. A new object of investigation had emerged and a new object demanded new forms of regulation and control.

While the question of the origins of the Aborigines may have been no closer to resolution in 1870 than it had been in 1830, the emergence of ethnological science had the most serious repercussions for colonial race relations. With the development of those sciences came not simply a shift in techniques of classification, but a fundamental change in the way in which the phenomena of race was conceptualised and understood. In essence, the 1840s opened up the possibility for a kind of racist politics that had not previously existed within the colony. For from that period on, the 'racial traits' or 'peculiar habits' of the Aborigines were increasingly invoked as a justification to deny them the rights enjoyed by other subjects (and previously themselves). Deemed to have stagnated at the very earliest stage of human history, they were seen to be not simply less

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<sup>88</sup> See for instance the testimony of the Reverend William Schmidt of the Moreton Bay Mission in the Report From the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, NSWLCV&P, 1845, p. 962.

<sup>89</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 36.

<sup>90</sup> G.S. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture and Evolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 41.

civilised than the European, but of a wholly different nature. And, it was on that basis that the most coercive and restrictive measures would be introduced against them in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

## Section III

### The Realm of Surveillance

Their migratory habits were unfavourable to official supervision.

J. West, *The History of Tasmania*, 1852

## The Realm of Surveillance

While colonial naturalists were ostensibly preoccupied with the complex question of monogenesis, colonial officials were required to keep somewhat more practical considerations in mind. For them it was not so much the relationship between the Aborigines and the rest of mankind, but the relationship between the Aborigines and the settlers that was fundamentally at stake. Once the decision to establish a permanent British settlement in New Holland was taken, it became necessary to set the terms of amalgamation between what Tench called 'its old and new masters'.<sup>1</sup> In effecting this objective, government was consistently concerned to afford the Aborigines all the benefits of civilisation which made their dispossession justifiable. Since the very legitimacy of its occupation was based upon improving the condition of the original inhabitants, the process of their incorporation within the British Empire was a matter of anxious deliberation from the very outset. In the instructions issued by the Home Government, officials were consistently encouraged 'to endeavour by every possible means to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoying all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them'.<sup>2</sup> If the use of force was the only real means of underwriting the subjection of the natives of New Holland, then colonial officials went to great lengths to ensure that their reconciliation with the settlers was as peaceful as possible. In effect, at the same moment that the British Government took possession of their country, it assumed responsibility for their care and protection.

Although the Aborigines did not cease to be a source of great anxiety for government, the problems posed by their amalgamation with the settlers did not remain constant throughout the early period of settlement. At least until the 1840s in New South Wales (and for some time thereafter in many of the other colonies) the fundamental issue confronting the Colonial Government in its dealings with the natives was the protection of order and justice. With no mutually recognisable laws yet available to regulate the social intercourse of black and white, violence remained an ever present (and frequently realised) possibility. Doubtless in some areas Aborigines and settlers reached a peaceful accommodation of some kind or other. Yet for the most part, whenever the rate of

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<sup>1</sup> W. Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance, Instructions to Governor Phillip, 23 April, 1787, *HRNSW*, Vol. I, Part II, p. 52; and Instructions to Governor Darling, 16 July, 1825, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 125.

settlement outstripped the capacity of the Sovereign to command obedience through the threat of overwhelming force, private subjects (both black and white) did not hesitate to take matters of security into their own hands. In the remote areas of the colonies, beyond what were called the boundaries of location, a brutal and intractable petty warfare frequently took hold that threatened to result in the wholesale extermination of the indigenous inhabitants. In this context, official policy with regard to the Aborigines was fundamentally directed, not so much towards changing the law, as to rendering it operative. Whether through processes of conciliation or coercion, government attempted to induce the Aborigines to become a party to the social contract and thereby bring an end to the acts of outrage committed both by and on them.

While questions of order and justice by no means disappeared as the nineteenth century wore on, they did not retain the same degree of prominence. By the time Sir George Gipps resigned his Commission as Governor of New South Wales in 1846, the primary problem facing the Colonial Government in its dealings with the Aborigines was no longer that of securing them against violence (based on fears about their extermination) but of ameliorating their condition (based on fears about their extinction). In one sense of course the problem was the same: government wished to fulfil its moral obligations to the indigenous inhabitants it had dispossessed and thereby legitimate its own rule by protecting them from harm. Yet the cause of the threat to the survival of the Aborigines was perceived to be fundamentally different in the latter case. As the colonial authorities became apprised of both the failure of their experiments in civilisation and the rapid decrease of the indigenous population in the 1840s, they began to see the 'Aboriginal problem' in terms of race rather than criminality. If the Aborigines were in danger of disappearing from the face of the earth it was not so much because they were being killed at alarming rates in frontier collisions, but because they were unable to adapt to their new conditions of existence. The problem, in short, was one of health and welfare rather than one of law and order. Given what was increasingly seen as the peculiar susceptibility of the Aborigines to the diseases and vices that were taking their toll upon the population, government began to see its principal role as the preservation of their lives rather than the protection of their rights.

With this shift in the nature of the 'Aboriginal problem' came both a reconceptualisation of the notion of protection and a corresponding reorganisation of the apparatuses of power. From the arrival of the First Fleet until the 1840s, the policy of

protection and the institutional forms which came to surround it — particularly the Protectorate and the Border Police — were based upon defending the law of the realm. In order to secure both the persons and property of British subjects and the exclusive right of the Sovereign to administer justice, officials sought to strengthen those 'artificial chains' that held Aborigines and settlers together in a fragile social contract. By extending the limits of the Sovereign power and maximising its visibility throughout the colony they hoped to deter acts of outrage and restore the peace and good order of the settlement. From the 1840s on, by contrast, government ceased to be concerned simply with maintaining relations of subordination between subject and Sovereign. Having assumed that the biggest threat to the survival of the indigenes resided in their own nature, government began to see protection not simply in terms of policing a space, but in terms of policing an identity. To preserve the indigenous race from extinction it was necessary to draw them into a series of institutional formations modelled on the missionary reserve where they could be subjected to continuous surveillance and have their health and welfare administered by experts. At this moment the whole order of visibility began to be reversed. Rather than the Sovereign it was now the Aborigines themselves that needed to be seen.

With this change in orientation from the protection of rights to the protection of life, the axis of inclusion and exclusion within the colonial polity shifted dramatically. Whereas formerly government had tended to distinguish between subjects on the basis of their legal status (law abiding/criminal) they now distinguished between them on the basis of their race. In opposition to the moral equality which had characterised government policy until the 1840s, the Aborigines became a special case, entitled to greater levels of assistance and subject to greater restrictions on their field of autonomy.<sup>3</sup> As officials focused upon their social needs rather than their political rights in an effort to stave off the process of extinction, they were increasingly consigned to a subordinate status within the colonial regime. From the 1840s on, a system of 'welfare colonialism' gradually took hold in which the special circumstances of the Aborigines were no longer the basis upon which they might lay claim to additional rights and privileges (in particular native title), but the basis upon which they were to be denied those enjoyed by 'normal' (white) subjects.

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<sup>3</sup> With the introduction of special legislation, according to Jeremy Beckett, agencies were given powers over the persons and property of the Aborigines, 'comparable only to those which the orphan and the insane were subject'. See J. Beckett, 'Aboriginality, citizenship and the nation state', *Social Analysis*, No. 24, December 1988, p. 7.

Through a series of special legislative enactments culminating in the Victorian *Native Protection Bill* of 1869, government formally announced its departure from the policy of non-discrimination and entered into the new era of utilitarian social regulation. Thus began that long phase (extending perhaps to 1962) in which the Aborigines were forced to live as outcasts rather than as citizens. Regarded as a special case, they were progressively segregated from white society in both legal and spatial terms and forced to live under the shadow of the institutional forms of regulation and control formed by the mission and the reserve.

## Chapter IV

### The Aborigines Question

At a very early stage in the history of the British occupation of Australia the Aborigines began to pose a problem to the settlers. Although the proclamation of British Sovereignty over the territory of New Holland had effectively brought the indigenous inhabitants within the allegiance of the empire, their new status as subjects of the Crown proved neither a guarantee of them behaving as such nor of others treating them accordingly. Before long, hostilities broke out between black and white of such an aggravated nature as to pose a serious threat to what Governor Darling described as the 'first objects' of the Colonial Government: 'the tranquillity and prosperity of the Country'.<sup>1</sup> Although extremely anxious to relieve the disordered and disturbed state of the remote districts of the colonies by delivering upon its promise to protect its subjects (both black and white), the Colonial Government sought no retreat from the principle of moral equality when it came to the administration of crime and punishment.<sup>2</sup> Believing, with Reverend Cartwright, that it would be 'an additional gem to the British Crown to admit the sable proprietors of the Land to the rank of British Subjects',<sup>3</sup> it concentrated its efforts upon uniting them to the settlement through processes of pacification and moral instruction. For as long as the susceptibility of the Aborigines to civilisation continued to be relied upon (and the hope did not begin to evaporate until the middle of the 1840s),<sup>4</sup> every effort was made to quieten their hostile disposition and wean them from that lamentable state of ignorance and barbarism in which they had supposedly been found. Whether by conciliating their affections through communication or enforcing their subjugation through force, government aimed to induce the Aborigines to abandon their 'lawless habits' and place themselves entirely under the protection of the new masters of the land.

In all of this it was the Aborigines, rather than the forces that were usurping their autonomy, that were the subject in question. Although the colonial authorities did not

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<sup>1</sup> Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 May, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> What I have in mind here is the following formulation by William Goodwin: 'By moral equality I understand, the propriety of applying one unalterable rule of justice to every case that may arise'. W. Goodwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, edited by F.E.L. Priestly, Vol. I, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, [1797] 1946, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> See Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 24 February, 1820, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. X, p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> See Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 20 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 436.

exculpate either settlers or officials from responsibility for the breakdown in relations between black and white (indeed often quite the opposite), British settlement itself, and the right of the government to administer it, invariably remained beyond question. Much as the Colonial and Home Governments regretted the awful destruction of native lives and endeavoured in good conscience to devise some measure to prevent it, they were unwilling to check the rapid dispersal of the settlement which was its primary cause. Even in its most expansive form, official solicitude about the fate of the Aborigines only ever extended to the means by which, not the fact that, they were being incorporated into the British Empire. So confident were the Governors up to and including Sir George Gipps that settlement was in the best interest of the natives, they were in the habit of attributing the hostile disposition they evinced to a misinterpretation of the kind and pacific intentions of the authorities rather than to the process of dispossession. In a bitterly ironic twist it was the Aborigines that became the problem and government the solution.<sup>5</sup> All that was needed to resolve what would become known as the 'Aborigines Question' was to facilitate the moral improvement of the natives to the extent that they came, not only to recognise the laws of Britain, but to value them as the source of their comfort and security.<sup>6</sup> Whatever measures were pursued to secure the allegiance of the Aborigines to the foreign power which was in the process of usurping them were thus deemed to have been undertaken for their benefit and on their account.

## I

### The Social Contract

It is now well known that when Britain acquired those parts of the continent of New Holland forming the territory of New South Wales, it did not recognise (or at least not initially) the claims of the Aborigines either as sovereigns or proprietors of the soil. Instead, in accordance with the right of discovery or simple occupation provided under

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<sup>5</sup> As Jeremy Beckett has noted, 'As the Australian nation has taken form, the situation of the Aborigines in relation to it has become a problem, in the sense of being something that requires the state to find a solution'. J. Beckett, 'Aboriginality, citizenship and the nation state', *Social Analysis*, No. 24, December 1988, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance, *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question, with the Minutes of Evidence*, Ordered by the Council to be Printed, 12 October, 1838, J. Spilsbury, Sydney, 1838.

the law of nations, it assumed unqualified dominion or sovereignty over the whole of their ancient possessions. To Cook and the settlers who consummated his 'discovery', New Holland was, in short, *Terra Nullius*, 'uninhabited' or 'waste' land in which the native inhabitants, having failed to cultivate the soil or otherwise improve it by their labour, were unable to claim true and legal possession.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, the legitimacy and propriety of that right of occupation did not go wholly unchallenged within the colony itself. On at least two occasions the government was forced to explicitly combat the view that more limited rights of cession (proceeding from the conclusion of a treaty) or of conquest (proceeding from military victory) represented the entitlements of the Crown in New South Wales more accurately.<sup>8</sup> Yet if such different conceptions of the true nature of British title and, consequently, of the rights and duties of the indigenous inhabitants, found advocates in the colony from time to time, they never obtained the legitimacy which derived from the sanction of the Home Office. While moves were eventually made to provide for the common law proprietary interests of the original inhabitants,<sup>9</sup> the British government refused to retreat from its assumption of unreserved sovereignty in order to accommodate Aboriginal 'usages and customs' dating back to 'time immemorial'. Having established its sovereign rights to New Holland against the other European nations, it eliminated any pre-existing system or

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<sup>7</sup> In a letter from the Law Officers of the British settlement to Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies, dated 15 February, 1819, the nature of possession was clearly defined: 'That part of New South Wales possessed by His Majesty, not having been acquired by conquest or cession was taken possession of by him as desert and uninhabited, and subsequently colonised from this country'. Law Officers to Earl Bathurst, 15 February, 1819, *HRA*, Series IV, Vol. I, p. 330.

<sup>8</sup> The two occasions were the attempt by John Batman to take possession 'of a tract of Land on the South Western Coast of New Holland in virtue of a Treaty with a Tribe of Aboriginal Natives' in 1835 and the trial of the Aboriginal native, 'Borijon', held in September 1841 in which Mr. Justice Willis implied that the indigenes were a conquered people by expressing 'very strongly his doubts of the competency of the court to try the Aborigines for offences committed *inter se*'. For the official response to Batman's Treaty see Sir Richard Bourke to Lord Glenelg, 10 October, 1835, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XVIII, pp. 153-155; and Lord Glenelg to Sir Richard Bourke, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XVIII, p. 379. For a discussion of the whole question of crimes committed by the Aborigines among themselves, see Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 7 April, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 312; Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 24 January, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, pp. 653-658; Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 2 July, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 133; and Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 22 March, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII, p. 502.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to recognise from the outset that the British assertion of unreserved sovereignty did not amount to wholesale dispossession. As Henry Reynolds has persuasively argued, the proprietary right of the indigenes to the occupation and enjoyment of the land (their native title) was not only protected under the law of nations, but eventually formally recognised by the Home Office in such documents as the *Letters Patent* establishing the colony of South Australia. See *Letters Patent Erecting and Establishing the Province of South Australia 19 February 1836*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964; H. Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 133-161; and H. Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1987, *passim*.

systems of indigenous rule and established British law within the country 'without reference to any other Law or Laws'.<sup>10</sup>

From a strictly legal point of view, the logical consequence of this staggering act of annexation was the wholesale incorporation of the Aborigines into the colonial body politic. Despite the disposition which the settlers sometimes evinced to treat the indigenes as 'aliens', open enemies of the government against whom war could be levied with impunity, the law of nations prescribed a rather different relationship. In assuming an unreserved right of occupation over their native soil, the Home Office became bound to admit the Aborigines to the ever-swelling ranks of the British Commonwealth. 'Your Commission as Governor of N.S. Wales asserts H.M.'s Sovereignty over every part of the Continent of New Holland', the Secretary for War and Colonies, Lord Glenelg, reminded Governor Bourke in July 1837, 'Hence I conceive it follows that all the natives inhabiting those Territories must be considered as Subjects of the Queen, and as within H.M.'s Allegiance'.<sup>11</sup> Although the Aborigines themselves appeared either 'ignorant' of, or fundamentally opposed to, their new status, government considered itself both legally and morally obliged to discount all differences of race, colour or origin and place the indigenes on exactly the same footing as the settlers themselves. Like the archetypal figure of justice, blindfolded to signify that all were equal in the eyes of the law, the Colonial Government declared itself 'no respecter of persons'.<sup>12</sup> Neither on legal nor moral grounds did it discover any justification for retreating from the general policy of encouraging the indigenous inhabitants of Britain's occupied territories to become 'embodied into her empire'.<sup>13</sup>

Implicit within this foundational act of legal incorporation was a social contract in the classical mould with duties to be discharged by 'Subject' and 'Sovereign' alike. For their part, the Aborigines were required to follow the path which (presumably) the settlers had themselves taken some time ago and renounce the irregularities characteristic of the savage way of life. Notwithstanding the fact that the early Governors were willing to make temporary allowances for their ignorance, to liberally indulge their traditional 'customs

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<sup>10</sup> See Colonial Secretary Thomson to Sir James Dowling, 4 January, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 655.

<sup>11</sup> Lord Glenelg to Sir Richard Bourke, 26 July, 1837, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Goodwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> W.C. Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical, and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales*, G. & W.B. Whittaker, London, 1819, p. 162.

and usages' while they remained unable to avail themselves of official protection, none were prepared to allow them to continue in the unrestrained exercise of their individual liberty. In exchange for those positive rights which the assumption of British sovereignty over their country allowed them to lay claim, they were required to forego their wild, sanguinary habits and abandon the lawless condition of the state of nature.<sup>14</sup> That, in short, was the deal on offer. If the natives of New Holland wanted to imitate their white brethren and enjoy the security of person and property attendant upon living under a common power (and it was generally assumed they did), they too had to shoulder their civic duties and accept what Dawson called 'the restraints of civilised life'.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, like any other subject of settled society, they were expected to submit themselves to the will of the Sovereign or, in what amounted to the same thing, to obey the law.<sup>16</sup> As Sir George Gipps emphatically declared, while the Aborigines were certainly 'entitled in every respect to the benefit and protection of English Law', they were 'amenable also to the penalties which are imposed on infractions of the Law, whether the offence be committed against one of themselves or against White Men'.<sup>17</sup> Only in that way could the Colonial Government ward against that state of lawlessness and disorder described by Hobbes as the 'dissolute condition of masterlesse men'.<sup>18</sup>

In return for their submission, the Crown promised to protect the Aborigines, to secure their persons and property against insult and injury, by extending them all the rights and privileges available within the law. In principle the entitlements of the natives were, in this respect, no different from the settlers themselves. As early as 1802 Governor King made it quite clear that any of 'His Majesty's Subjects', either resident or stationary in the colony, were forbidden 'from using any act of Injustice or wanton Cruelty towards the Natives on pain of being dealt with in the same manner as if such act of Injustice or

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<sup>14</sup> See Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 18 March, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 54; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 June, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, pp. 139-145; and Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 May, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 269.

<sup>15</sup> R. Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1830. Archival Facsimiles Limited, 1987, p. 291.

<sup>16</sup> Although the case for indulgence was clearly established, the behaviour of the natives still needed to be compatible with 'a due regard for the lives and property of others' or 'the general safety'. See Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements); House of Commons, 26 June 1837 (extract), in *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 65; and Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 22 July, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 246.

<sup>17</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 7 April, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 312.

<sup>18</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited with an introduction by C.B. Macpherson, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 238.

wanton Cruelty should be committed against the Persons and Estates of any of His Majesty's Subjects'.<sup>19</sup> In practice, as both the Colonial and Home authorities were forced to acknowledge, the situation was not so straightforward. Since the 'Black Natives' of New Holland were precluded from giving evidence in a court of law because they 'have not that sense of religion, which authorises the taking of an oath by any form',<sup>20</sup> they did not enjoy the full complement of rights in the first instance. Even though it was something of a moot point whether the disqualification of this evidence worked to the advantage or disadvantage of the indigenes, it set them apart from other subjects of the Crown and made the full enjoyment of their subjecthood contingent upon their further progress in civilisation.<sup>21</sup> Such 'anomalies' notwithstanding, however, the colonial authorities held firm to the idea that justice should be administered impartially. So long as the Aborigines acted quietly and peaceably, they were 'entitled to the same protection as any other Class of Her Majesty's subjects'.<sup>22</sup>

The cement holding this (not entirely metaphorical)<sup>23</sup> social contract together was a complex mixture of civility and force. As far as the early Governors were concerned, the lamentable state of ignorance and barbarism in which they had discovered the Aborigines did not provide a significant barrier to their incorporation into the British empire. Since moral instruction imparted the necessary strength of mind to still the restless passions, it was really only an appreciation of the advantages of civilisation and the blessings of

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<sup>19</sup> Governor King to Lord Hobart, 30 October, 1802, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. III, pp. 592-593.

<sup>20</sup> Attorney-General Bannister to Under Secretary Horton, 16 August, 1824, *HRA*, Series IV, Vol. I, p. 554.

<sup>21</sup> See Governor King to Earl Camden, 20 July, 1805, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. V, pp. 502-504; Attorney-General Bannister to Under Secretary Horton, 16 August, 1824, *HRA*, Series IV, Vol. I, pp. 554-555; Marquess of Normandy to Sir George Gipps 17 July, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 243; Marquess of Normandy to Sir George Gipps, 31 August, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, pp. 302-305; Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 10 February, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 498; Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 11 August, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 756; Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 7 April, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 313; Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 6 July, 1843, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII, p. 9; Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 9 July, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII, p. 659; Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps 31 August, 1845, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIV, p. 500; and Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 25 June, 1847, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, pp. 632-633. For an annotated documentation of these issues see J. Woolmington (ed.), *Aborigines in Colonial Society: 1788-1850*, Cassell Australia, Nth. Melbourne, 1973, pp. 127-146.

<sup>22</sup> Colonial Secretary Thompson to Sir James Dowling, 14 January, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 655.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly enough, for Macquarie the social contract was not simply a metaphorical construct. On 28 December, 1814, during 'a general meeting or Congress of the Natives inhabiting the Country lying between the Blue Mountains and Port Jackson....several propositions were made to the Natives in respect to their discontinuing their present wandering predatory habits and becoming *regular Settlers*'. See

Christian truth, which stood in the way of the Aborigines assuming their proper place as loyal subjects within colonial society. Once exposed to the 'customs of the civilised world' and brought up to the principles of Christianity, with 'all its consequences and happy results', they would soon 'know the necessity' of becoming obedient to the laws from which they received 'protection from oppression'.<sup>24</sup> Naturally the civilising effects of religion and education could not be counted upon in the first instance. As the Aborigines were scarcely emerged from the savage state of nature, some (generally unspecified) period of association with Europeans was considered necessary to polish their 'native rudeness and barbarism'.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, however, their progress in civilisation would provide a secure foundation for the order and tranquillity of the settlement. As civil habits, or what Sturt called 'those finer qualifications and principles on which both moral feeling and social order are based',<sup>26</sup> gradually took hold upon their minds, mutual trust and amity could be counted upon among black and white.

Beyond this, force or the threat thereof was to underwrite the delicate peace and insure the colony against any threat the natives might pose to the settlers and the settlers to the natives.<sup>27</sup> Should the power of civility fall short of its object, then organised terror, and more specifically the fear of death, would be used to deter outrage and induce both Aborigines and settlers to uphold the legal instruments that defined the boundaries of their artificial association. Not surprisingly, officials hoped that they would not have to resort to such coercive measures in order to generate legal restraint among the heterogenous population of the colony. Yet they were not above threatening and, where necessary, inflicting, the 'severest punishments'<sup>28</sup> in order to underwrite the 'peace and good order' of the settlement. Among both black and white, fear of official retaliation was to serve as the final guarantor of obedience. Such anti-social passions as escaped the self-restraint

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Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 June, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 144; and Major-General Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 27 July, 1822, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. X, p. 677.

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix to Lieutenant R. Sadlier's Evidence, in *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question*, (1838), p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> D.D. Mann, *The Present Picture of New South Wales*, John Booth, London, 1811, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> C. Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, Vol. II, T. & W. Boone, London, 1849. *Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 5*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1965, p. 284.

<sup>27</sup> So confident was Phillip that the settlement had 'nothing to apprehend' from the natives that he went so far as to declare that 'a less force will be wanted for the security of the settlement than what I considered as necessary soon after my arrival in this country, although that was not considerable'. See Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 30 October, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 95; and Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 13 February, 1790, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Governor Phillip to Lord Grenville, 7 November, 1791, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 293.

which accompanied, and to a large extent defined, the progress of civilisation among mankind, were to be suppressed by an appeal to the most fundamental passion of all: self-preservation. By striking terror into their hearts, the strong arm of power would deter natives and settlers from committing private or unauthorised acts of violence and force them to conduct their relations, not as they saw fit, but on the terms laid down by the Sovereign. In the colony of New South Wales, as in the *Leviathan*, the protection of rights by fear of an overarching power was to be coextensive with the protection of public judgement against the dictates of private conscience.<sup>29</sup>

## II

### The State of Nature

Despite the sanguine expectations of the early Governors, the social contract almost immediately began to unravel along what was certainly the weakest of its seams: that connecting black and white. Even before the settlement was a year old, the robberies and depredations perpetrated by the convicts upon the natives had so soured relations that the latter were already in the habit of attacking 'any straggler they [met] unarmed'.<sup>30</sup> Naturally, at that early stage, outbreaks of violence were not so extensive, and thus not so critical to the security of the settlement, as they would later become. Sorry to report it as he was, Governor Phillip still regarded the inclination of the natives to destroy wandering cattle and to attack those reckless individuals (usually convicts) who went some distance from the camp in order to plunder them of their possessions as at worst an inconvenience and at best a means of curtailing an illicit trade in stolen goods.<sup>31</sup> Yet with the extension of farming along the banks of the Hawkesbury, Nepean and Grose in the first decades of settlement and the spectacular growth of the pastoral industry during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the violence which inevitably attended 'unsupervised' contact

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<sup>29</sup> For this reading of Hobbes, see N. Jacobson, *Pride and Solace: The Functions and Limits of Political Theory*, Methuen, New York, 1986, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> Governor Phillip to Lord Stanley, 30 October, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> For more detailed reports of these early incidents see Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 9 July, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, pp. 47-48; Governor Phillip to Secretary Stephens, 10 July, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 62; Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 28 September, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 76; Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 30 October, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 96; and Governor Phillip to Secretary Stephens, 16 November, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 100.

between Aborigines and settlers found all too frequent opportunity for expression.<sup>32</sup> As the white population dispersed and the prosperity of the colonies became increasingly dependent upon cultivating and depasturing the outlying districts,<sup>33</sup> acts of atrocity committed either by or on the Aborigines tended to be as regular as they were bloody. Particularly in the remote areas, beyond what were called the 'boundaries of location', it was by no means uncommon for the natives to break out 'in open hostility against the British Settlers'<sup>34</sup> and, needless to say, suffer most cruelly for it.

While colonists on the fringes of settlement were in the habit of attributing the outbreak of violence to the inherent cruelty of savages, official inquiries into the origins of the 'hostilities' generally revealed that it was the settlers rather than the Aborigines who had been the 'original aggressors'.<sup>35</sup> If the natives were quick to revenge insults, it was the brutal treatment they received at the hands of the more unprincipled portion of the white population (usually seamen and convict stock-keepers) which had inflamed their 'savage disposition' and incited them to barbarous acts of retaliation. As Lieutenant-Governor Arthur informed the Right Honourable Sir George Murray in 1830:

That the lawless convicts, who have from time to time absconded, together with the distant convict store-keepers in the interior, and the sealers employed in remote parts of the coast, have, from the earliest period, acted with great inhumanity towards the black natives, particularly in seizing their women, there can be no doubt; and these outrages have, it is evident, first excited, what they were naturally calculated to produce in the minds of savages, the strongest feelings of hatred and revenge.<sup>36</sup>

In this scenario, the source of provocation on both sides was insults sustained to person and property. At the hands of the most unsavoury of the new arrivals, the Aborigines had been subjected to every kind of physical injury (including death), deprived of their chattels

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance, Governor Hunter to the Duke of Portland, 2 January, 1800, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. II, pp. 401-423; Sir Thomas Brisbane to Earl Bathurst, 3 November, 1824, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XI, pp. 409-411; Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 21 July, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, pp. 508-511; Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 2 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 386; and Sir Charles Fitz Roy to Earl Grey, 17 May, 1847, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, pp. 558-572.

<sup>33</sup> See for instance, Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 25 April, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 397.

<sup>34</sup> Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 18 March, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance, Governor Phillip to Secretary Stephens, July 10, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 62; Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Right Hon. W. Huskisson, 17 April, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, p. 179; and Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 21 December, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 440.

<sup>36</sup> Extract of a Despatch from Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to the Right Hon. Sir George Murray, 15 April, 1830, in J. Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, John Richardson, Royal Exchange, London, 1832, pp. 199-200.

(under which head officials included 'their women') and regularly denied access to their traditional haunts.<sup>37</sup> In retaliation they had struck out against the settlers in the most aggressive fashion, inflicting every conceivable insult upon their persons and carrying out endless depredations upon their livestock and crops. The inevitable result was a self-perpetuating cycle of violence in which the original cause of the hostility soon disappeared amidst a twisted and knotted chain of bloody vengeance. In the end, as Judge-Advocate Atkins noted, it was 'vain to make it a Question from whence those excesses originated — from the inherent brutality of the Natives or from the real or supposed Injuries they may have sustained from the settlers'.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the immediate cause that had induced the natives to adopt a hostile attitude towards the settlers, the acts of violence committed both by them and on them signified a breakdown of the social contract that urgently needed to be remedied.

At an early stage in the history of settlement, then, evidence was not lacking to suggest that neither the force of civility nor the force of arms had been sufficient to generate restraint among black and white. Even those who continued to assume that the natives were likely to remain peaceably disposed until 'ill-used and robbed', were persuaded that contact with civilisation had not eliminated their capacity for sanguinary excess.<sup>39</sup> Even if it was true, as many asserted, that most of the barbarous acts they perpetrated were the result of provocation, melancholy instances were not wanting to show that they were still capable of, if not pre-disposed to, the 'most ungrateful and Treacherous Conduct'.<sup>40</sup> While what Harris called that 'internal impulse' and 'habit of conformity to social rule' could (at least in principle) be taken for granted among their more civilised brethren, different imperatives appeared to motivate the savage natives of

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<sup>37</sup> The tendency of stockmen and sealers to kidnap and interfere with Aboriginal women was long considered the immediate cause of the hostile disposition evinced by the natives. Yet it was also accepted that the exclusion of the Aborigines from their traditional haunts ill-disposed them towards the settlers. See Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 30 October, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 96; Governor Hunter to the Duke of Portland, 2 January, 1800, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. II, p. 413; Governor King to Lord Hobart, 20 December, 1804, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. V, pp. 166-167; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 7 May, 1814, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. VIII, p. 250; Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 May, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 270; Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 27 April, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 398; Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 1 April, 1846, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, p. 13; and Mr R. Bligh to Colonial Secretary Thomson, 29 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 398.

<sup>38</sup> Judge-Advocate Atkin's Opinion on the Treatment of the Natives, in Governor King to Earl Camden, 20 July, 1805, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. V, p. 502.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance, Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 13 February, 1790, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> See Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 13 February, 1790, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 158; and Governor King to Earl Camden, 30 April, 1805, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. V, p. 306.

New Holland.<sup>41</sup> With no abstract respect for truth, and consequently no moral abhorrence of deceit, they were quite capable of behaving in the most regular and peaceable manner, 'so long as they were held in restraint by the presence of a sufficient number of observers'. Yet as soon as the external impediments to their unbridled passions were removed, they were ready to put to death, 'with the utmost wantonness and inhumanity', settlers who had not only never given them 'the slightest provocation' but treated them with great kindness and humanity.<sup>42</sup> As far as the hostile natives of New Holland were concerned, wrote Majoribanks, 'obedience to the laws of Britain extends only so far as they see a necessity for submission, from their dread of superior power'.<sup>43</sup>

If such outrageous behaviour was to be expected from savages, however, the same could not be said for their more refined brethren. 'Compare an European with these wild creatures', claimed the explorer D.G. Brock, 'the one possessed of principles, in a lesser or greater degree, which would in some measure regulate his passions — the other altogether the creature of impulse and passion'.<sup>44</sup> Yet whenever they were left to forge their relationships with the natives without fear of censure, 'the whites', or at least certain classes of them, belied their more civilised inheritance by striking against their indigenous opponents with the most 'relentless cruelty'.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, there were occasions when the new arrivals did not have recourse to acts of violence. And it was by no means unknown for individuals (although the explorers tended to acquit themselves better in this regard than the squatters) to resist the use of force and come to an amicable arrangement with the original possessors of the soil.<sup>46</sup> But, to the dismay of government, the approach adopted by those most often in contact with the natives was generally far from ideal. Too often white man showed himself as an arrant wolf, an unprincipled usurper whose lawless outrages were both 'repugnant to humanity and disgraceful to the British character'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed in their clashes with the Aborigines the settlers often embodied, and in exaggerated

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<sup>41</sup> A. Harris (An Emigrant Mechanic), *Settlers and Convicts*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1964, p. 206.

<sup>42</sup> Extract from the *Report of the Aborigines Committee (VDL)*, 19 March, 1830, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>43</sup> A. Majoribanks, *Travels in New South Wales*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1851, p. 92.

<sup>44</sup> D.G. Brock, *To the Desert with Sturt: A Diary of the 1844 Expedition*, Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, Adelaide, 1975, p. 109.

<sup>45</sup> T. Bartlett, *New Holland: Its Colonisation, Productions and Resources, &c*, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, London, 1843, p. 66.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance, Reynolds, *Frontier*, p. 157.

<sup>47</sup> Extract from the *Report of the Aborigines Committee (VDL)*, 19 March, 1830, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 207.

form, precisely the lack of restraint they detected and deplored in their adversaries. As Brock himself admitted while reminiscing over a former 'scene of strife and blood' along the banks of the Murray River, 'The white man has been cruel, more cruel, than any savage'.<sup>48</sup>

Naturally the propensity for violence shown by both Aborigines and settlers would have been of much less consequence had the government been capable of fulfilling its contractual obligations and delivering on its promises of protection. Yet in the frequent collisions and affrays that took place beyond the boundaries of location there was abundant evidence, not only of the collapse of civility in relations between black and white, but of the failure of the Colonial Government to restrain the impulse of passion through the threat of overwhelming force. Even in the first year of settlement, with a relatively small population to control, the authorities had proved themselves incapable of regulating the intersection of black and white. In October 1788, Governor Phillip wrote to Lord Sydney informing him that 'though the strictest orders have been given to keep the convicts within bounds, neither the fear of death or punishment prevents their going out in the night; and one has been killed since the Sirius sailed'.<sup>49</sup> With the development of the colony during the nineteenth century the limitations of the colonial power to punish were ever more painfully exposed. Despite regular pleas from the settlers in the outlying districts for 'each party to be kept in awe by a superior and responsible force',<sup>50</sup> government was regularly unable to ensure that contact between Aborigines and settlers took place in conformity with the laws of Britain. Beyond the frontier, as the *Report From the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)* of 1837 rightly noted, justice was invariably 'feebly administered'.<sup>51</sup>

As the authorities saw it, two interrelated factors had conspired to render its power to command obedience through overwhelming force nugatory: the 'dispersal' of the settlement and the 'species of warfare' which the Aborigines were waging against the settlers. With regard to the first, the problem was not so much the lack of will to punish as a lack of capacity to punish. While in 'the vicinity of the towns' it was 'comparatively easy

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<sup>48</sup> Brock, *To the Desert with Sturt*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>49</sup> Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 30 October, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 96.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance, the Memorial Addressed to His Excellency Sir George Gipps in *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question* (1838), p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements); House of Commons, 26 June, 1837, (extract) in *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 65.

to enforce an observance of the British laws' through the deployment of 'a certain judicial force', attempting 'even partially to attain this object in the remote and thinly settled districts' was a rather different matter.<sup>52</sup> Numerous official proclamations impressing upon subjects the serious consequences likely to ensue from their taking matters of security into their own hands notwithstanding, deterrence tended to fall victim to the vagaries of overextension. When it came to the unlocated areas of the colonies, as Governor Gipps confessed to Lord Glenelg in July 1838, government simply did not command sufficient force to protect the natives against insult and injury or to secure the settlers in the peaceable possession of their estates:

Your Lordship must be aware that it is quite out of the power of the Government to give the proprietors or their Flocks the protection they desire; even if we were restrained by no sense of humanity towards the Blacks, the resources of the Government would be quite insufficient to keep Military parties always in advance of persons, who are migrating in search of pasturage, advancing often 50 miles in a single season, and in the case of Port Phillip having stretched to a distance beyond our former limits of between three and four hundred miles in the last three years.<sup>53</sup>

While the precise district of the colony exposed to the 'ravages of the natives' changed over time, that was where the novelty of the problem ended. From the outset the whole manner in which the colonisation of New Holland was undertaken ensured that the government was unable either to deter the commission of outrages or bring those who perpetrated them to justice. As Governor Darling freely admitted in 1826, to venture beyond the 'located' parts of the colonies was in effect to enter 'Lands beyond the boundaries of effective control'.<sup>54</sup>

Inevitably the problems which attended the dispersal of the white population were compounded by the nature of the conflict itself. For if there was 'no decided movement among the native tribes; nor, although cunning and artful in the extreme, any such systematic warfare exhibited by any of them, as need excite the least apprehension in the

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<sup>52</sup> Captain Grey to Lord John Russell, 4 June, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 21 July, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 509. See also, Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April, 1817, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 364; Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 May, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 271; Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 27 April, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 398; J.H. Wedge to Lord Glenelg, 22 April, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 450; and Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 25 August, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 776.

<sup>54</sup> Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 May, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 271.

Government',<sup>55</sup> the threat they posed was in some ways rather worse than better as a consequence. What made the hostilities of the natives so unsettling to the public and so difficult to manage from the point of view of the authorities, was that they took the form of a series of random, and thus thoroughly unpredictable, outrages. For protracted periods across all the colonies, the Aborigines revenged their 'real or imagined' injuries, not with the certainty and discrimination of an antagonist defending a clearly demarcated line, but with the 'inconstancy' and 'treachery' of the most untrustworthy of foes. Apparently like all savages they acted upon the impulse of passion, retaliated indiscriminately (thereby drawing even the most respectable of settlers into the affray) and, despite the best efforts of the authorities to apprehend them, were generally sufficiently cunning in their movements to escape detection. At the same time that the early Governors assured their superiors that there was nothing to 'apprehend' from the natives 'as a body', therefore, they also declared their exasperation and impotence in the face of the latter's guerilla style tactics. 'The species of warfare which we are carrying on with them is of the most distressing nature' wrote the Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land to Sir George Murray in 1829, 'they suddenly appear, commit some act of outrage and then as suddenly vanish: if pursued it seems impossible to surround and capture them, and if the Parties fire the possibility is that Women and even children are the victims'.<sup>56</sup>

Unable to secure the peace and tranquillity of the settlement through either civility or force, the Colonial Government faced two problems simultaneously: rebellion and sedition. If, for the most part, it was conceded that the animosity of the natives was the result of ill-treatment, they were nevertheless painfully aware that the continuation of their customary modes of retaliation put them not simply in breach of this or that Public Order, but in utter defiance of the law and the moral principles encoded within it. Beyond the superadded quality of savagery which, in the minds of the settlers, invariably characterised their crimes, lurked a spirit of revolt bordering upon outright rebellion which, as one of the first historians of Tasmania, John West, acknowledged, made them even more fearful than the lawless bushrangers:

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<sup>55</sup> Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, 4 November, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, p. 626. See also Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 13 February, 1790, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 157; Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 October, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 609; and J.H. Wedge to Lord John Russell, 12 December, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 448.

<sup>56</sup> Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, 12 September, 1829, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XV, p. 446. See also, Reynolds, *Frontier*, pp. 7-9.

the fierce robbers, of European origin, who had infested the land, were not half so terrible: these were at least restrained by early associations and national sympathies; often by conscience, even by each other. But the natives now united the antipathy of a national foe, and the rapacity of a banditti, with the spite of individual revenge: they were at once a people in arms, and a distributed band of assassins.<sup>57</sup>

Without going so far as to concede that the 'hostile natives' of New Holland were in fact contesting the sovereignty of the land piecemeal (for that would suggest the British were engaged in a process of conquest rather than mere occupation), officials were at times more than ready to avow that they had so 'flagrantly revolted against and abused' government protection as to entirely forfeit their civil rights and immunities. While they could not be classed as a foreign enemy *per se*, they could certainly be treated as 'open and avowed Enemies of the Peace and good Order of Society' whose aggressions were sufficiently outrageous as to warrant the most coercive measures being introduced against them.<sup>58</sup>

If the problem with the natives was that they refused (whether through ignorance or caprice) to acknowledge the terms of social contract at all, the problem with the settlers was that they assumed a right to renounce it whenever it failed to secure them in the peaceful enjoyment of their estates. Among the squatters in particular, as the following plea for official interference, prepared by 'owners of livestock in the north-western districts' in 1838, bears witness, it was generally understood that the absence of a recognised authority, however regrettable, left subjects a wide field for their own exertions:

Your memorialists deplore the absolute necessity which has driven them to defend themselves, arising from the absence of any other power, to which they could apply for protection. Men who feel their own strength will not easily submit to rapine and murder, and by denying them legal protection, they are driven to their own resources, and your Excellency cannot but be aware of the fearful consequences likely to result from men acting under exasperated feelings, and subject to no control, but their hatred heightened by fear, leading (even ourselves) to habits that must make every lover of good government shudder.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> J. West, *The History of Tasmania*, edited by A.G.L. Shaw, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, [1852] 1971, p. 282.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance, Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April, 1817, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 363.

<sup>59</sup> See *Report From the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question* (1838), pp. 39-40; Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 21 July, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, pp. 508-509; and Phillip G. King *et al* to Sir George Gipps, 8 June, 1838, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, pp. 349-351.

From the point of view of the Colonial Government, the problem was not that settlers living beyond the boundaries of location sought to protect themselves against the 'ravages' of the natives. Given the limitations of their own power, the authorities not only respected the right of self defence, but positively encouraged subjects to adopt such measures as might be necessary for their own security.<sup>60</sup> The contentious issue was rather the frequency with which the squatters exceeded their authority in this regard. Apparently unwilling to tolerate any threat to their persons and property, they were in the habit of taking the business of defending and avenging themselves into their own hands 'without', in the words of accomplished ethnologist and Governor of South Australia, George Grey, 'regarding whether or not the laws will bear them harmless in so doing'.<sup>61</sup> Despite frequent declarations outlining the extent to which 'the Settlers could be justified by law, in making use of arms to drive off the Natives'<sup>62</sup> those on the margins of settlement were not above seeking a more permanent solution to the 'Aboriginal problem'. As J.H. Wedge informed Lord John Russell in 1841, 'They (the Squatters) are determined (as they pay for protection and receive none) to exterminate this hostile tribe, without such protection is given them as will enable them to live in comparative security'.<sup>63</sup>

While Aboriginal society was frequently represented as an exemplary expression of the 'state of nature', therefore, it was not so much the native way of life as the association formed by Aborigines and settlers at a distance from protection which most deserved the title.<sup>64</sup> Whenever the rate of settlement outstripped the capacity of the Sovereign to protect its subjects (and that was often), an 'indiscriminate and lawless warfare'<sup>65</sup> took

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<sup>60</sup> See for instance, Governor Darling to Under Secretary Hay, 11 September, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 577

<sup>61</sup> A more liberal reading of this problem would see it extended to the indisposition of the settlers in general to provide the authorities with any information on the murder of Aborigines. Governor Grey to Lord John Russell, 3 August, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 696. For the tendency of the settlers to take matters into their own hands see Attorney General Bannister to Governor Darling, 5 September, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, pp. 577-578; J.H. Wedge to Lord John Russell, 8 February, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 242; and Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 11 August, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 199. For references to the 'indisposition' of the settlers to give information about the murder of Aboriginal subjects see the case involving Lieutenant Lowe. Governor Darling to Under Secretary Hay, 23 March, 1827, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIII, p. 179; and Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 4 June, 1827, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIII, pp. 400-405.

<sup>62</sup> See for instance, Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Viscount Goderich, January 10, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> J.H. Wedge to Lord John Russell, 8 February, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 242.

<sup>64</sup> See for instance, W. Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961, pp. 288-289; and D. Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, A.H. & A.W. Reed in Association with The Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, 1975, p. 452.

<sup>65</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question* (1838), p. 40.

hold which tended to vindicate the notion that 'men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all'.<sup>66</sup> To be sure, the disorder of the frontier was not seen as proof that society could only exist in the presence of an over-arching authority. Since conflict erupted almost exclusively along 'racial' lines, a great deal of weight was attached to the fact that Aborigines and settlers lacked those kindred sympathies and bonds of association which served to restrain members of the same nation in their dealings with each other. Yet in so far as it was confined to relations between black and white, life beyond the boundaries of location closely resembled that pre-social state of continual war which Hobbes described with considerable horror in the pages of *Leviathan*. With no other protection for black and white in the outlying districts than that afforded by their own strength of arms, 'continual feare and danger of violent death'<sup>67</sup> was more the norm than the exception. Especially in the wake of some of the more spectacular collisions, those for which history has reserved the title of 'massacre', the two races were not simply stirred into a state of 'great excitement', as Majoribanks put it, but 'lived in constant dread of each other'.<sup>68</sup> In some cases relations degenerated to such an extent that it 'became a question, which race should perish, and every man's verdict was in favour of his own'.<sup>69</sup>

### III

#### Moral Equality

Despite its firm commitment to the principle of strict justice, the Colonial Government did make certain special concessions to the Aborigines of both a legal and practical nature in an attempt to arrest the escalation of frontier violence. Qualifications of the first kind came in the form of the attempt, firstly, to allow the testimony of Aborigines to be received in a court of the law and, secondly, to recognise their proprietary rights to the land. From the perspective of the more liberal-minded, the inadmissibility of Aboriginal evidence was of concern for two reasons. In the first place, to the extent that it prevented the Aborigines

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<sup>66</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 185.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>68</sup> Majoribanks, *Travels in New South Wales*, p. 97. See also Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 22 July, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 252; and Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, 4 November, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, p. 627.

<sup>69</sup> West, *The History of Tasmania*, p. 276.

from seeking legal redress, it allowed crimes to be perpetrated against them with impunity. As the Wesleyan Missionary Benjamin Hurst noted in 1843, the Aborigines 'may be destroyed by their fellows, and what is worse, may be shot wholesale by Europeans, and yet the arm of the law has no power to punish, unless the evidence of a white person can be produced'.<sup>70</sup> Even where it was assumed that the inadmissibility of their evidence did not necessarily work to the disadvantage of the Aborigines (most of them apparently being acquitted when brought into the Courts), it did have secondary effects that threatened to undermine the legal measures taken for their protection. As Sir George Gipps informed Lord John Russell, the tendency of the courts to acquit the Aborigines of criminal charges on account of them not being able to give evidence in their own defence, had operated 'very unfavourably' against them. For in consequence of 'the difficulty and uncertainty of bringing them to justice, there [was] a disposition, engendered in the minds of the less principled portion of the White population, to take the law into their own hands'.<sup>71</sup> Naturally so far as the problem was the inability of the court to understand the language of the Aborigines, it was 'irremediable by Legislation'. Yet, as the Marquess of Normanby suggested, their 'want of religious knowledge' was not sufficient grounds to render their evidence inadmissible and government should take active measures to rectify the injustice.<sup>72</sup>

At the same time, in recognition that 'Hostility from the natives must be the natural result of their being driven from their hunting grounds',<sup>73</sup> various attempts were made to formally secure them access to their traditional sources of sustenance. Conceiving it to be a great 'injustice' that the natives should suffer the destruction of their game, the Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land undertook to prohibit the settlers from attempting 'to destroy kangaroos by hunting, shooting, or other means, within the limits

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<sup>70</sup> Letter from the Superintendent of the Wesleyan Mission at Geelong, to His Honour the Superintendent of Port Phillip, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 502.

<sup>71</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 7 April, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 313.

<sup>72</sup> Marquess of Normanby to Sir George Gipps, 31 August, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, pp. 302-303. Curiously enough in the light of this prompting, an Act passed by the Legislative Council of New South Wales in 1839 allowing the Aborigines 'to be received as competent Witnesses in Criminal Cases', was disallowed by the Home Government on the grounds that it ran 'contrary to the principles of British jurisprudence'. And although the Home Government attempted to make amends several years later by encouraging a subsequent attempt to allow unsworn evidence to be received in civil and criminal proceedings, the measure was this time defeated in the Colonial Parliament by a majority of fourteen to ten. See Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 11 August, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 756; and Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 9 July, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII, p. 659.

<sup>73</sup> Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 1 September, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 787.

prescribed to the natives'. So important did this measure appear to be to the members of the Aborigines Committee of 1830, that they considered it expedient that such activity be made a 'legal offence, to be visited with severe penalties'.<sup>74</sup> A similar measure, though in a far more developed form, was suggested by the Secretary for War and Colonies, Earl Grey, in February 1848. Writing from Downing Street, he informed the then Governor of New South Wales, Sir Charles Fitz Roy, that leases granting the settlers rights of pasturage were 'not intended to deprive the natives of their former right to hunt over these Districts, or to wander over them in search of subsistence, in the manner to which they have been heretofore accustomed'. For him, as had been the case for Lieutenant-Governor Arthur some time earlier, granting the Aborigines a usufructuary right in the land was a way of reducing the acts of atrocity which had become all too common in the outlying districts. 'The evil of occasional depredations or acts of violence between Settlers and natives in these outlying districts is one which it is vain to expect can be wholly prevented', he informed Fitz Roy. 'But a distinct understanding of the extent of their mutual rights is one step at least towards the maintenance of order and mutual forbearance between the parties'.<sup>75</sup>

On a more practical level also, the overriding principle of legal equality was not applied with the same strictness with which it was defended. In recognition that the natives were ignorant of the law and of their legal means of redress (not to mention still unable to give evidence in the courts), it became something of a matter of policy to discriminate in their favour:

It is true that in administering the Law, and especially in enforcing the penalties of it, a difference is frequently made between Savages (who understand it not) and persons of European origin; but this difference is invariably in favour of the Savage; and, if it were not so, the Law would become the instrument of the most greivous injustice.<sup>76</sup>

While none of the early Governors believed that the natives should be above the law, even for offences committed among themselves, they readily acknowledged that 'the utmost degree of Mercy and forbearance' needed to be exercised when putting it into force

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<sup>74</sup> See Extract from the *Report of the Aborigines Committee* (VDL), 19 March, 1830, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>75</sup> Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 11 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, pp. 225-226.

<sup>76</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 7 April, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 313.

against them.<sup>77</sup> Naturally whenever their 'predatory disposition' posed a serious threat to the persons and property of others or, worse still, to the 'progressive improvement' of the colony itself, colonial officials did not hesitate to bring the full punitive power of the government to bear against them. Yet at least until they advanced in civilisation and became cognisant that there was a recognised authority to which they could apply for protection, it was conventional not only 'to forgive or overlook many of the Occasional Acts of Violence and Atrocity' that the natives had, for one reason or another been led to commit, but to plead extenuating circumstances for their more serious outrages as well.<sup>78</sup> To mercilessly punish 'untutored savages' for acts of violence that they either did not know or did not perceive to be wrong was apparently not only counterproductive to the interests of order but in contradiction of the very principles of natural justice upon which British positive law was putatively founded.

If certain remedial measures, either of a legal or practical nature, were taken in consideration of the ignorance of the Aborigines, they were rather designed to fix certain defects in the system of justice than to make a fundamental adjustment to the law. Whether because government imagined the extension of subjecthood to the Aborigines the best means of effecting the amalgamation of black and white or because it was unwilling to retreat from the legal situation created by its assertion of unreserved sovereignty, it continued to steer away from what one commentator referred to as 'the enervating effect of specific legal protection'.<sup>79</sup> Even as late as 1841, an Act passed by the colonial legislature 'to prohibit the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales from having Fire arms or ammunition in their possession, without the permission of a Magistrate' was disallowed by the Home Government on the grounds that it established 'a wide and unfair distinction between them and their white brethren'.<sup>80</sup> Not until the Supply of Liquors to Aborigines Prevention Act of 1867 ushered in a new era of 'special regulations' (and then for entirely different reasons), were any changes made to the civil and criminal codes that ran contrary

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<sup>77</sup> Colonial Secretary Thomson to Sir James Dowling, 4 January, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 656.

<sup>78</sup> See Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 18 March, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 54; Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 6 April, 1843, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 655; and A.G.L. Shaw, *Gipps-La Trobe Correspondence 1839-1846*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1989, p. 150.

<sup>79</sup> R. Gouger, *South Australia in 1837; In a Series of Letters: with a Postscript as to 1838*, Harvey and Darnton, London, 1838, p. 58.

<sup>80</sup> See Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 1 January, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 148; and Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 26 August, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 485.

to the notion of the moral equality of the Aborigines. In what can only be attributed to their resounding faith in processes of civilisation and Christianisation, government officials treated the breakdown of relations between Aborigines and settlers as an executive, rather than legislative, issue. From their perspective, the frequent eruptions of violence within and beyond the boundaries of location were not so much a reflection upon the limitation of the colonial social contract as a reflection upon the difficulties inherent in getting the Aborigines and, to a lesser extent, the settlers, to recognise and abide by its terms. As Gipps asserted in 1839: 'The Law, however, as it respects the Aborigines, required neither improvement nor alteration, the means only were required of putting the Law into execution'.<sup>81</sup>

#### IV

#### Civilisation and Christianisation

As far as the authorities were concerned, bringing the laws of Britain into effect in New Holland was fundamentally a matter of securing the consent of the Aborigines to the colonial social contract. If the peace and good order of the settlement was to be permanently restored, the indigenous inhabitants needed to recognise and uphold the political agreement to which, unbeknownst to them, they had already been made a party. Like the pre-political men who were the stock-in-trade of the social contract theorists, they had to be brought to that point in their moral development at which they would willingly trade their natural liberty and all the inconveniences it entailed (especially for the settlers!) for the comfort and security of civilised society. If the Colonial Government was inclined to represent the various measures adopted for the moral improvement of the natives as being exclusively for their own benefit, it was by no means unaware of the considerable advantages the success of such measures would hold both for the colonists and for itself.<sup>82</sup> Even the most optimistic of the early Governors, and Macquarie certainly

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<sup>81</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 6 April, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 91.

<sup>82</sup> As Goderich informed Bourke after the proposal of the Church Missionary Society to establish a mission to the Aborigines in the vicinity of Wellington Valley had been approved: 'It is almost needless for me to instruct you to afford your countenance and protection to the Missionaries and to give them every facility in the discharge of duties, from which the Government anticipate much advantage to the Natives themselves, as well as to the European Settlers, who at present are exposed to the mischievous consequences of the predatory lives and habits of their neighbours'. Viscount Goderich to Governor Bourke, 21 December, 1831, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XVI, p. 477.

stands out in this regard, soon recognised that the only way to end the general disorder which characterised relations between black and white at a distance from protection was to induce the natives 'to relinquish their wandering idle and predatory Habits of Life, and to become industrious and useful Members of a Community where they will find Protection and Encouragement'.<sup>83</sup> To allow anything else, as most officials acknowledged sooner or later, was to cultivate precisely what Hobbes saw as the greatest scourge of any government: disorder, anarchy, civil war.

The means of bringing about this agreement was to be found in the education and religious instruction of the natives. By bearing witness to their moral improvement, processes of Christianisation and civilisation were themselves to ensure that the natives came to recognise and understand their duties to their fellow subjects and to the Crown. According to Macquarie, for instance, it seemed,

only to require the fostering Hand of Time, gentle Means, and Conciliatory Manners, to bring these poor Un-enlightened People into an important Degree of Civilisation, and to Instil into their Minds, as they Gradually open to Reason and Reflection, A Sense of the Duties they owe their fellow Kindred and Society in general (to Which they Will then become United), and taught to reckon upon that Sense of Duty as the first and happiest Advance to a State of Comfort and Security.<sup>84</sup>

Inevitably there were some, drawing upon different traditions of thought, who argued otherwise. To the illiberal or the sacrilegious the indigenes were ever a separate order of beings, distinct from their origin, who would never comprehend civilised life and, by implication, the motives which actuated those who did.<sup>85</sup> But as far as the authorities were concerned, bringing the natives to an awareness of the benefits of a more settled existence did not appear especially arduous. Trusting that the original inhabitants were 'human beings partaking of one common nature but less enlightened than ourselves',<sup>86</sup> they imagined it would be easy to achieve what the agents of colonisation were in fact forced to labour long and hard (and with only limited 'success') to bring about: the civilisation of the Aborigines. If it was undoubtedly just to attempt to accommodate their 'ignorance' in the first instance, any measures undertaken for this purpose were thus only ever in lieu of

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<sup>83</sup> Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 June, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 144.

<sup>84</sup> Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 October, 1814, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. VIII, pp. 368-369.

<sup>85</sup> In the published literature, such views were generally known more through their refutation than their acceptance. See, for instance, Bartlett, *New Holland*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>86</sup> Enclosure A.S., to Minute No. 24 of 1838, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 348.

what the Marquess of Normandy referred to as 'the ultimate remedy': 'moral and religious instruction'.<sup>87</sup>

To these sentiments can be attributed the numerous 'experiments' either directly undertaken, funded or administered by the Colonial Government in the first decades of the nineteenth century for the purpose of bringing about the civilisation and Christianisation of the Aborigines. In 1814 Governor Macquarie established the 'Native Institution' at Parramatta under the direction of Mr. William Shelley (formerly a missionary) for the purposes of 'Educating, and bringing up to Habits of Industry and decency, the Youth of both Sexes'. At the same time, he registered his intention 'to Allot a piece of Land in Port Jackson bordering on the sea shore for a few of the Adult Natives, Who have promised to Settle there and Cultivate the Ground' in the hope of encouraging others to settle on and cultivate lands set aside for them.<sup>88</sup> Although itself scarcely extensive in operation (it began with six boys and six girls), the work of the 'Native Institution', was complemented substantially with the expansion of the evangelical missions in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1825 the Colonial Government set aside an area of land at Lake Macquarie, fifty miles to the north of Sydney, for L.E. Threlkeld of the London Missionary Society (LMS) to undertake 'the improvement of the religious and civil condition of the Aborigines thereof'.<sup>89</sup> Seven years later the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was granted an annual sum of £500 from the colonial revenue to begin its labours among the Aborigines at Wellington Valley.<sup>90</sup> In 1837, a Government Mission to the Aborigines was undertaken by the Anglican Catechist, George Langhorne, in the newly opened Port Phillip district and a further £450 was drawn from the colonial revenue to help defray the passage of three German Missionaries of the Lutheran Church who had been encouraged by the Reverend J.D. Lang to establish a Mission at Moreton Bay.<sup>91</sup> Finally, in 1838, the Wesleyan Church recommenced the work it had begun some years

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<sup>87</sup> Marquess of Normanby to Sir George Gipps, 31 August, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 303.

<sup>88</sup> Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 October, 1814, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. VIII, p. 369.

<sup>89</sup> Sir Thomas Brisbane to Earl Bathurst, 8 February, 1825, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XI, pp. 512-514.

<sup>90</sup> See Under Secretary Hay to Governor Darling, 11 February, 1827, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIII, pp. 107-109; Viscount Goderich to Governor Bourke, 21 December, 1831, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XVI, p. 477; and Governor Bourke to Viscount Goderich, 5 August, 1832, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XVI, pp. 691-692.

<sup>91</sup> For the Government Mission at Port Phillip see *HRV*, Vol. 2A, pp. 153-190; and for the Mission at Moreton Bay see Lord Glenelg to Sir Richard Bourke, 6 July, 1837, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, pp. 8-10.

earlier in New South Wales by establishing a mission to the Aborigines at 'Bunting Dale', forty miles to the west of Geelong.<sup>92</sup>

Although destined to play a critical role in the wholesale re-evaluation of government policy towards the Aborigines which properly began in the 1840s, these various 'experiments in civilisation' were at this stage still somewhat peripheral to the mainstream preoccupations of the Colonial Government with respect to the Aborigines. Despite the fact that processes of civilisation and Christianisation held the key to the security and prosperity of the settlement, the fundamental problem facing the government in the first instance was not so much how to effect the moral improvement of the Aborigines as how to prevent their extermination at the hands of the settlers.<sup>93</sup> Before any thorough-going attempt could be made to polish their manners and educate them into the virtues of Christian civilisation, they had to be conciliated and induced to abandon their lawless warfare with the settlers. Indeed, for many of the early Governors the civilisation of the Aborigines was in fact the less difficult of the two tasks — pacification and civilisation — then facing them. For if only the natives could be 'induced to forego this Vindictive Spirit', Governor Macquarie informed Earl Bathurst in 1814, 'their next Step towards Civilisation would be rapid and easy, and they Would learn to Appreciate that Degree of Importance to Which they had thus progressively Attained'.<sup>94</sup> For him, as for others, the real question was not so much how to improve the habits of the Aborigines (the various evangelical missions would quickly see to that), but how to quell the outrages which, regardless of the cause from which they proceeded, were likely to result in their destruction. In short, some measure needed to be adopted to prevent the natives coming to grief before the authorised agents of protection and civilisation were given an opportunity to produce a moral feeling among them by prising open their 'dormant intellects'.<sup>95</sup>

To secure this end, two measures were pursued with varying degrees of 'success' by the authorities: conciliation (based upon securing obedience through consent) and

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<sup>92</sup> The Reverend Mr. Walker of the Wesleyan Missionary Society had begun his mission to the Aborigines of New South Wales in 1821. For information on the Bunting Dale Mission see Rev. J.R. Orton to Sir George Gipps, 3 May, 1838, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, pp. 93-96; and Colonial Secretary to Rev J.R. Orton, 7 May, 1838, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 97.

<sup>93</sup> See for instance, Extract of a Despatch from Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Secretary Sir George Murray, 20 November, 1830, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 243.

<sup>94</sup> Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 October, 1814, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. VIII, p. 369.

<sup>95</sup> See Sir George Arthur to Lord Glenelg, 22 July, 1837, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 26.

coercion (based on securing obedience through force). Inevitably each option had its advocates in the colony. In evidence given to the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question of 1838, G.A. Robinson, the man considered to be chiefly responsible for restoring peace in the disturbed districts of Van Diemen's Land in the 1830s, warned against any attempt to subdue the natives through instruments of violence in the region of Port Phillip: 'I would think that an attempt to subjugate them by force, in so widely extended and thickly wooded a country would fail under any circumstances'. By contrast, Robert Scott, the Magistrate whose 'Commission of the Peace' was withdrawn soon after giving evidence before the Select Committee for the part he played in the defence of the perpetrators of the Myall Creek massacre, was fully persuaded that acts of violence on the part of the Aborigines only ceased when they became 'better acquainted with our power to punish'.<sup>96</sup> Yet if there was considerable debate, even among officials, as to the best means to teach the Aborigines to differentiate between right and wrong, both modes of subjection -- conciliation and coercion -- tended to be closely allied at both the institutional and policy level.<sup>97</sup> Connected through the same official discourse of order and justice, they were often deployed simultaneously in an attempt to bring the Aborigines to a sense of their duties and to make them know the necessity of obeying the law.

## V

### Conciliation

The policy of conciliation was fundamentally pedagogical rather than punitive in nature. Although manifested in a variety of guises and institutional forms, it was universally undertaken according to the same general premise: the best means of quietening the passions of the Aborigines was to conciliate their affections by cultivating a friendly intercourse with them. For the early Governors, and in this their underlying idealism and

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<sup>96</sup> See *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question* (1838), pp. 5, 15; and Extract of a Despatch from Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to the Right Honourable Sir George Murray, 15 April, 1830, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 198. For the withdrawal of Scott's Commission see Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 20 December, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, pp. 704-705.

<sup>97</sup> Thus, for instance, in the Standing Orders of the Border Police (themselves under the authority of the Commissioners of Crown Lands) item number six read as follows: 'The means by which every Border Policeman will have it most in his power to obtain the approval and favourable consideration of the Governor, will be by behaving in a kind and humane manner to the natives, and by endeavouring to gain

faith in civilisation was fully revealed, the chief obstacle to establishing good relations between black and white was not so much the savage character of the natives as the lack of trust or confidence that had arisen from the misinterpretation of motives. If the Aborigines kept their distance from the new arrivals and maintained a hostile disposition, it was only because the insults and injuries they received at the hands of certain classes of settlers had distorted the intentions of the Colonial Government towards them and predisposed them to think ill of the settlers in general. Hence Lieutenant-Governor Arthur:

These miserable beings, I make no doubt, are wearied with the harassing life they have endured for a considerable time past, and would gladly be reconciled, if they knew our real intentions towards them were those of kindness; but unfortunately, the most conciliatory measures of the Government have been already frequently rendered nugatory by the barbarity of runaway convicts, or of detached stock-keepers.<sup>98</sup>

Usually physically as well as morally on the margins of white society, and for that reason in close proximity to the Aborigines, these 'worthless Characters',<sup>99</sup> as Governor King described them, were seen to have distorted the otherwise favourable communication between black and white. On the one hand, their innumerable aggressions and outrages belied the friendly overtures of the Colonial Government towards the natives and undermined the 'trust' or 'confidence' which officials, through inducements or concessions of one kind or another, worked so hard to cultivate. While, on the other hand, they incited sanguinary acts of retaliation from the indigenes which not only added to the unsettled state of affairs, but, being exacted indiscriminately upon the white population, forced the government to adopt precisely the coercive measures it wished to avoid in order to protect the lives and property of its 'more respectable' subjects.<sup>100</sup>

Attempts to remedy this situation, from Arthur Phillip (1788-1793) to Sir George Gipps (1838-1846), were invariably built upon the same general plan. Confidence among the natives was to be restored by interposing properly authorised and accountable agents

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their confidence and esteem, as well as to civilise and improve them'. See Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 22 July, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 258.

<sup>98</sup> Extract of a Despatch from Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to the Right Hon. Sir George Murray, 15 April, 1830, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 203. See also, Governor Phillip to Secretary Stephens, 10 July, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 62; Governor King to Earl Camden, 15 March, 1806, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. V, p. 660; Governor Darling to Under Secretary Hay, 11 September, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 575; and Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 21 December, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 440.

<sup>99</sup> Governor King to Earl Camden, 15 March, 1806, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. V, p. 660.

<sup>100</sup> See Copy of a Despatch from Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to Viscount Goderich, 10 January, 1828, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 188.

at the point of intersection between black and white. Since it was assumed that the natives would readily forego their hostile disposition once they understood that the newcomers were readier to be friends than enemies, officials were keen to undertake any measure which might help cultivate a more conciliatory form of intercourse. As they saw it, the first step towards curtailing the acts of violence perpetrated beyond the limits of settlement was to 'open a communication' with the original inhabitants in which they might make known 'the kind and pacific intentions of the government and the settlers generally toward them'.<sup>101</sup> In essence, the policy of conciliation was grounded upon the hope that government could relieve itself of the necessity of pursuing more coercive measures for the benefit of the public order by persuading the natives (and to a lesser extent the settlers) to exercise a greater degree of self-restraint. As Governor Darling made clear in 1825, in undertaking 'to communicate with the Chiefs and Tribes in their neighbourhood', it was important that the Magistrates of the unsettled districts keep a double end in mind. As well as assuring the Aborigines 'of the desire of the Government to protect them from the outrages of all evil disposed persons', they were required to impress on them 'that the Government relies on their endeavours to restrain all acts of violence on the part of their Tribes'. Only in this way could the natives demonstrate their good faith in the protection of the colonial authorities and 'confirm their claim to its friendship and confidence'.<sup>102</sup>

For the most part this attempt to quieten the natives and prepare them to receive moral instruction by entrusting officials to conciliate their affections was undertaken without a great deal of coordination or system. Particularly during the first years of settlement, those who could in some measure act as intermediaries (often the Governors themselves) were induced to play the role of go-betweens on an ad hoc basis for the purpose of negotiating with the natives and conveying the benevolent intentions of the Colonial Government toward them.<sup>103</sup> Over time, however, more systematic and

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<sup>101</sup> See Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 9 July, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 49; and Extract from the *Report of the Aborigines Committee (VDL)*, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 250.

<sup>102</sup> In the same way that the 'Chiefs' were to control their 'Tribes', the proprietors of cattle were requested to control their servants. See Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 May, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 271.

<sup>103</sup> The Aborigines were also frequently deployed in this capacity, Governor Phillip even being prepared to kidnap them to facilitate communication. See Governor Phillip to Secretary Stephens, 10 July, 1788, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 62; Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 12 February, 1790, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 145; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 18 March, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, pp. 53-54; Governor

institutionalised expressions of the policy of conciliation gradually emerged. In 1816 Governor Macquarie attempted to draw more young 'scholars' into the Native Institution by establishing an annual 'Friendly Meeting' or 'Congress of friendly Natives' at which to explain the object of the Institution and to consult with the original inhabitants 'on the best Means of improving their present condition'.<sup>104</sup> In 1827 Lieutenant Sadlier was employed by the Home Government under the auspices of Archdeacon Scott on a 'tour of enquiry as to the state of the Aborigines', the object of which was to 'impress the natives with the desire of the Government to make their situation more happy, by being acquainted with the customs of the civilised world'.<sup>105</sup> And then, in 1831, in what was to become something of a model for all subsequent attempts to conciliate the natives, George Augustus Robinson was employed in an official capacity to explain the amicable intentions of the government to the Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land. His mission: to solicit their 'consent' to being removed from the island so that the government might better provide for their ongoing 'safe custody and civilisation'.<sup>106</sup>

The culmination of all these schemes to conciliate the Aborigines came with the establishment of the Protectorate System in the Port Phillip Districts under the direction of none other than Robinson himself. Established in the wake of the *Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines* (British Settlements) of 1837, the Protectorate represented the most ambitious plan yet developed in the colony of New South Wales to secure the peaceful amalgamation of Aborigines and settlers. Faced with the rapid occupation of the south east area of the colony by precisely those 'inferior agents of the colonists' who were assumed to have caused so much trouble elsewhere, government was keen to avoid 'the

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Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 October, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 618; and Extract of a Despatch from Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to Secretary Sir George Murray, 20 November, 1830, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp. 238, 245.

<sup>104</sup> See Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 October, 1814, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. VIII, pp. 367-373; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 June, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, pp. 142-143; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April, 1817, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 340; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 24 March, 1819, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. X, p. 95; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 24 February, 1820, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. X, pp. 262-272; Major-General Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 27 July, 1822, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. X, pp. 676-679; and Sir Thomas Brisbane to Earl Bathurst, 3 October, 1825, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XI, pp. 863-864.

<sup>105</sup> See Appendix to Lieutenant R. Sadlier's Evidence in *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question* (1838), p. 36; Archdeacon Scott to Governor Darling, 9 December, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 796; Viscount Goderich to Governor Darling, 6 July, 1827, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIII, pp. 433-434; and Archdeacon Scott to Governor Darling, 1 August, 1827, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIV, pp. 55-64.

<sup>106</sup> See *Report of the Aborigines Committee* (VDL) 1831, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp. 250-251, 253.

occurrence of those acts of violence which [had], in too many instances, proved fatal to the aboriginal inhabitants where British Colonies [had] been planted'.<sup>107</sup> Adopting a plan based largely on the recommendations of Sir George Arthur, Lord Glenelg proposed to appoint a Chief Protector and four Assistant Protectors to superintend relations between Aborigines and settlers in the area of Port Phillip and the newly opened Colony of South Australia. Each Protector was to maintain the security of the 'objects of his care' by attaching himself 'as closely and constantly as possible to the aboriginal tribes' and 'attending them in their movements from one place to another' until they could be induced to adopt more settled habits of life.<sup>108</sup> Like Robinson in Van Diemen's Land, they were to endeavour to placate the natives, to conciliate their respect and confidence, and to make them aware that it was the desire of the Colonial Government to protect them from injustice and improve their condition.

In essence the role entrusted to the Protectors was twofold. On the one hand, they were responsible for protecting the rights of the Aborigines during the period of their 'ignorant nonage' and, on the other hand, they were encouraged to expedite the conclusion of that period by promoting their moral and religious improvement. In recognition that the Aborigines were necessarily unaware of their rights and of their means of legal redress, the Protectors were required to act as guardians or custodians. Instructed to befriend the Aborigines (for which purpose they were to be supplied with moderate quantities of food and clothing), their primary duty consisted in protecting and guiding them as one would children until their moral improvement superseded the necessity of such close superintendence.<sup>109</sup> Essentially a vehicle for the transmission of messages back and forth across the frontier, the Protectors were to regulate any intercourse between black and white, simultaneously shielding them from the criminal elements among the settler population and representing their wants, wishes and grievances to the authorities. For this purpose, each was formally invested with the powers of a Magistrate and instructed to 'watch over the rights and interests of the Natives', protecting them 'from any encroachment on their property, and from acts of Cruelty, of oppression and injustice'. At the same time, they were to attempt to bring about the 'ultimate

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<sup>107</sup> James Stephen to A.Y. Spearman, 30 August, 1837 (extract), *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 28.

<sup>108</sup> See Sir George Arthur to Lord Glenelg, 15 December, 1837, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> In line with Locke's discussion of paternal power, the protectors were to understand for the Aborigines until such time as they could become 'equally subjects of the same law together'. See J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1990, pp. 144-145.

accomplishment' of their official engagements by instructing the 'Aboriginal Tribes' in 'the Elements of the Christian Religion' and by 'preparing them for the reception of teachers, whose peculiar province it would be to promote the knowledge and practice of Christianity among them'.<sup>110</sup> The conclusion of their efforts would come when the Aborigines had sufficiently progressed in civilisation to render their understanding fit to take the government of their will.

The key to this whole venture, as to the policy of conciliation, lay in the acquisition of the native language.<sup>111</sup> As both the primary means of communicating the intentions of the government and the critical instrument of civilisation, language was seen to play an important double role. Without it neither the benevolent intentions of the Colonial Government towards the natives nor the moral principles that underpinned their rights and responsibilities under British law could be rendered apparent.<sup>112</sup> Of the effectiveness of language (as opposed to force) as a means of subduing the Aborigines Robinson's 'conciliatory mission' in Van Diemen's Land had, it seems, been proof enough. Although some colonists were inclined to attribute his success to 'some species of animal enchantment', officials clearly recognised that it derived in large measure from him being capable of 'explaining to them in their own language the amicable intentions of the Government'.<sup>113</sup> It was hardly surprising, therefore, that in his list of points designed to 'form the ground of Instructions' for the Protectors, Lord Glenelg went so far as to suggest that, 'In reference to every object contemplated by the proposed Appointment, it is exceedingly desirable that the Protector should, as soon as possible, learn the language

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<sup>110</sup> See Lord Glenelg to Sir George Gipps, 31 January, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, pp. 252-255.

<sup>111</sup> So important was language to conciliation that officials were often willing to use the very measures they so stridently opposed in order to learn the native tongue or teach them that of the settlers. Thus Phillip: 'Not succeeding in my endeavours to persuade some of the natives to come and live with us, I ordered one to be taken by force, which was what I would gladly have avoided, as I knew it must alarm them; but not a native had come near the settlement for many months, and it was absolutely necessary that we should obtain their language, or teach them ours, that the means of redress might be pointed out to them if they are injured, and to reconcile them by showing the many advantages they would enjoy by mixing with us'. See Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, 12 February, 1790, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 145.

<sup>112</sup> Hence Reverend Coates: 'As no extensive good could be expected to result from instruction unless communicated through the medium of the Natives' own language, the Missionary has ever considered the attainment of it as one of the first most important duties, and to which he has endeavoured to devote as much of his time and attention as his circumstances would allow'. Reverend Dandeson Coates to Lord Glenelg, 31 October, 1833, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 662.

<sup>113</sup> See West, *The History of Tasmania*, p. 307; and Copy of a Despatch from Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to Secretary Sir George Murray, 4 April, 1831, in Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, p. 257.

of the Natives so as to be able to freely and familiarly to converse with them'.<sup>114</sup> Since force was, after all, but the way of beasts, language was to provide the privileged tool of conciliation and civilisation, its very use contributing to the end to which the office of Protector was intended to serve. It would hardly be exaggerating, therefore, to suggest that translators or interpreters of one kind or another became some of the most valued (and perhaps some of the more effective) agents of British colonisation in New Holland.<sup>115</sup>

## VI

### Coercion

The policy of coercion was based upon the straightforward notion of deterring acts of violence by opposing 'force with force'. Rather than attempting to build trust and confidence among the Aborigines by opening a communication with them, government sought to bring them to a sense of their duties by making them 'feel the punishment which is due to their offence'.<sup>116</sup> Naturally for officials convinced that the only means by which the British government could make amends for the injustices perpetrated upon the Aborigines was to conciliate and civilise them, subjugation at the hands of the civil and military powers was by no means the preferred method of restoring order. On almost every occasion in which they took recourse to more aggravated measures to repel the aggressions of the Aborigines, officials registered their extreme disquiet and reluctance at having to do so. At the same time, however, they readily accepted that the likelihood of the Aborigines being destroyed in a war of extermination with the settlers was sufficient to justify more coercive measures being introduced against them. Witness the reason given by the Executive Council of Van Diemen's Land in October 1828 for the need to proclaim Martial Law:

Great and well founded alarm generally prevails, and unless the measure recommended be adopted the Council apprehend that the settlers, finding themselves unprotected by the Law, and the Government, will be

<sup>114</sup> Lord Glenelg to Sir George Gipps, 31 January, 1838, *HRA*, Series I Vol. XIX, p. 255.

<sup>115</sup> See for instance, Governor Phillip to Lord Sydney, February 12, 1790, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, pp. 145, 147; Bischoff, *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp. 217, 238-240; George Mackillop to Colonial Secretary, 28 July, 1836, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 40; J. H. Wedge to Van Diemen's Land Colonial Secretary, 8 October, 1836, *HRV*, Vol. 2A, p. 53; Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 6 October, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 618; Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 21 February, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 701; Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 23 February, 1845, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIV, p. 263.

<sup>116</sup> Governor Darling to Under Secretary Hay, 11 September, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 575.

driven to take the remedy into their own hands. The case will then become one of a war of private persons, the duration of which it is impossible to conjecture, but the end of which will in all probability be the annihilation of the Aboriginal tribes.<sup>117</sup>

In short the policy of coercion was motivated by the hope that 'terror may have the effect which no proffered measures of conciliation have been capable of inducing'.<sup>118</sup>

From the outset the Colonial Government was forced to capitalise upon the limited punitive power at its disposal by simultaneously maximising the intensity of its expression and multiplying the points of its appearance. In the former, somewhat more crude, instance, government sought to compensate for its inability to preserve the peace and good order of the colony through continuous and regular means of surveillance by allowing the civil and military forces to exercise their power to punish in a thoroughly ferocious and unrestrained fashion. Since it was uncertain whether untutored savages could comprehend the system of legal punishment, government frequently had recourse to more summary forms of justice as a means of suppressing and deterring disturbances of the public peace. Although the authorities did not go so far as to suggest that 'superior strength alone commands obedience' among the natives of New Holland,<sup>119</sup> they saw decided advantages in repelling outrages on the spot. For while prosecution according to the ordinary measures of the law tended to introduce a significant gap between the commission of the crime and the administration of punishment for those not yet accustomed to drawing abstract relations of cause and effect, summary executions of justice established a clear association between the two. Brought to account through the spectacle of public violence, the Aborigines would not only feel the displeasure of the Sovereign directly, but know the punishment had been 'inflicted on them for their own bad behaviour'.<sup>120</sup>

This kind of display of public power was a feature of the colonial administration from the very outset, the development of the settlement only witnessing a progressive refinement in its system and range. After the murder of the convict M'Entire in 1790, for instance, Governor Phillip had 'ordered out a party' to search for the native who

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<sup>117</sup> Lieut. Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, 4 November, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, pp. 629-630.

<sup>118</sup> Lieut. Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, p. 626.

<sup>119</sup> See for instance Scott, *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question* (1838), p. 54.

<sup>120</sup> Governor Phillip to Lord Grenville, 7 November, 1791, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. I, p. 293.

committed the crime in the hope of making 'a severe example of that tribe'.<sup>121</sup> Called upon to lead the expedition, Captain Watkin Tench of the marines was instructed to bring away two natives as prisoners and put ten to death; Phillip having undertaken to furnish the party with hatchets and bags with which to cut off the heads of the slain and bring them into the settlement.<sup>122</sup> In similar style, Governor Macquarie dispatched a 'Strong Detachment of Troops' to the interior parts of the colony in early months of 1816 'to Inflict exemplary and Severe Punishments on the Mountain Tribes' who had lately manifested a 'strong and sanguinary Spirit of Animosity and Hostility'. For Macquarie, as for Phillip, the purpose of the punitive expedition was effectively twofold: to punish the natives 'for their late atrocious Conduct' and 'to Strike them with Terror against Committing similar Acts of Violence in the future'.<sup>123</sup> In 1824 Governor Brisbane carried these coercive measures one step further by 'placing the Country beyond the blue Mountains, or West of Mount York, under a state of Martial Law'. Finding that 'the ordinary Powers of the CIVIL MAGISTRATES (although most anxiously exerted) have failed to protect the Lives of HIS MAJESTY'S Subjects', Brisbane felt compelled to sanction the 'Use of Arms against the Natives beyond the ordinary Rule of Law in Time of Peace'.<sup>124</sup> For precisely the same reasons, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur adopted the same extreme measure in Van Diemen's Land in 1828, thereby allowing the civil and military authorities to repel the aggressions of the natives 'as if they proceeded from subjects of an accredited state'.<sup>125</sup>

While the Colonial Government was certainly prepared to make use of summary forms of retaliation as a means of setting an example to the native tribes, its preferred means of overcoming the lawless warfare which had taken hold beyond the boundaries of location was to extend the reach and effectiveness of the limited forces under its command. At the most basic level this involved placing a certain amount of civil power into the hands of the 'embattled' colonial subjects themselves. As a consequence of the unsettled state of affairs along the rivers Hawkesbury and Nepean in 1816, for instance,

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<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>122</sup> See Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, pp. 207-208.

<sup>123</sup> See Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 18 March, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 54; and Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April, 1817, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, pp. 362-366.

<sup>124</sup> See Sir Thomas Brisbane to Earl Bathurst, 3 November, 1824, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XI, pp. 409, 411.

<sup>125</sup> Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, 4 November, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, pp. 625-635. See also Earl Bathurst to Governor Darling, 14 July, 1825, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 21.

Governor Macquarie enjoined the settlers to form themselves into 'Associations' so as 'to afford each other mutual relief and Assistance on Occasions of any Attack or Incursions of the hostile Natives'.<sup>126</sup> Since, on the whole, however, it was not considered expedient to encourage private subjects to take the business of protection into their own hands any further than they had already, government preferred to entrust matters of order and justice to properly authorised agencies.<sup>127</sup> In the first instance, the policing role was played predominantly by 'Military Parties'. Although it was reluctant to deploy regiments of the line to repress what (from the point of view of the authorities) were civil outrages, government generally had no other means at its disposal by which it might either deter the Aborigines from the perpetration of atrocities or bring them to justice after they had done so. Thus in both New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, detachments of troops were regularly either sent to or stationed in the disturbed districts of the colonies for the purpose of assisting the 'District Magistrates' to check such acts of violence as the natives might be disposed to commit.<sup>128</sup>

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, however, several more specialised intermediate forces, the 'utility' of which, as George Grey put it, depended 'more on their activity and efficiency than on their numbers',<sup>129</sup> began to replace the Military Parties as the preferred means of providing for the internal security of the settlement. In 1825, members of the Executive Council of New South Wales advised Sir Thomas Brisbane of the propriety of establishing a Mounted Police, composed of volunteers from regiments of the line, for the protection of the settlers in the remote districts. Designed to 'form an effectual force against the depredations of runaway convicts, as well as the Aborigines',<sup>130</sup> the Mounted Police quickly emerged as the foremost means of repressing outrages in the remote districts. Constantly in demand from the settlers, but brought under scrutiny as a result of some 'unfortunate collisions' with the

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<sup>126</sup> Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April, 1817, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 363. See also Governor Darling to Under Secretary Hay, 11 September, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 577.

<sup>127</sup> See for instance, Sir Thomas Brisbane to Earl Bathurst, 8 November, 1825, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XI, p. 898.

<sup>128</sup> See for instance, Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 8 June, 1816, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 139; Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April, 1817, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 364; Governor Darling to Earl Bathurst, 23 May, 1826, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XII, p. 324; Lieut-Governor Arthur to Governor Darling, 24 May, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, p. 413; and Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, 12 September, 1829, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XV, p. 446.

<sup>129</sup> Captain Grey to Lord John Russell, 4 June, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 36.

<sup>130</sup> Sir Thomas Brisbane to Earl Bathurst, 8 November, 1825, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XI, pp. 897-898.

natives,<sup>131</sup> the Mounted Police were eventually subsumed within a more closely regulated perambulating force under the command of the Crown Commissioners of each district. Established in 1839 (doubtless partly with the intention of further freeing civil policing from the grip of the military forces), the so-called Border Police were consigned, as their specific field of operation, to the troubled area 'beyond the limits of location'. Although, as Gipps informed Lord Glenelg, the act by which the force was brought into existence made no mention of the protection of the Aborigines, 'it was principally introduced for the purpose of putting a stop to the atrocities which have been committed both on them and by them'.<sup>132</sup> And while the settlers were often somewhat equivocal as to its value, Gipps himself had few reservations: 'Of the means which are thus employed for the prevention of collisions between the Aborigines and the Settlers, and in the hope of civilising the former, I feel bound to say that the Border Police is the most efficient, and the only one from which the Colonists have as yet derived any advantage'.<sup>133</sup>

## VII

### Protecting the Crown

In all of this, the fundamental problem was not one of race, but one of legality. Although a significant gap frequently opened up between theory and practice when it came to the question of frontier violence, government at least made a significant display of administering justice purely on the basis of criminal innocence and guilt. While the (generally suppressed) view that the Aborigines were a nation in revolt against foreign rule clouded the matter somewhat, their barbarities and outrages were in principle no different from the civil offences perpetrated by the lawless bushrangers. In every measure undertaken by government to suppress the atrocities of the indigenous inhabitants, a clear distinction was made between the 'Hostile Natives' who had run afoul of the law and the

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<sup>131</sup> As Gipps informed Glenelg, 'Your Lordship must be, I am sure, aware that these matters are calculated to produce a considerable sensation in the Colony, and that therefore much management is required in the treatment of them. In the Executive Council, an apprehension arose of the mischief that might ensue, if any offence were given to the Officers and Men of the Mounted Police, who are (as your Lordship doubtless knows) all Volunteers from Regiments of the Line serving in New South Wales, and at liberty to resign their Police duties and return to their regiments when they please'. See Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 27 April, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 399; and Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 21 July, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, pp. 508-509.

<sup>132</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 6 April, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 90.

<sup>133</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 17 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 433.

'Friendly Natives' who continued to enjoy its protection. In offering to pardon the natives he had placed in a 'State of Outlawry' in July 1816, for example, Governor Macquarie sought to make it known that in surrendering to a Magistrate they would once again be entitled 'the Protection of the British Government in this Colony, in common with those peaceable and unoffending Natives who have for so long enjoyed and are still under its Favour and Encouragement'.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, even as Lieutenant-Governor Arthur undertook one of his more radical measures to quell hostilities in Van Diemen's Land — the proclamation of martial law in 1828 — he continued to solicit information that might demonstrate one tribe of natives to have been less guilty of committing outrages than the others. Naturally, from his perspective order needed to be restored, but if he was forced to proceed against the whole black population it was only because all the tribes were guilty of committing outrages that amounted 'to a complete declaration of hostilities against the settlers generally'.<sup>135</sup>

From the official perspective there were two sides to this problem of legality: the need to protect the rights of subjects and the need to protect the rights of the Crown. Since it was the promise of security of person and property that provided the rationale for their submission to a common power, infractions against the law on the scale experienced by the inhabitants of New Holland were capable of putting their very allegiance to the political order into question. If private individuals either could not be prevented from taking the business of defending and avenging themselves into their own hands or found it necessary for their own safety to do so, the Sovereign could no longer legitimately lay claim to their obedience. This much at least the social contract theorists had confirmed: where subjects were forced to endure precisely that state of lawlessness and insecurity which it was the function of government to prevent, they had a right to resume their natural liberty and undertake whatever measures were necessary to provide for their own protection.<sup>136</sup> In part the Colonial Government was able to stave off just such a revolt by laying responsibility for any disorder at the feet of the Aborigines (and the settlers) rather than itself. Yet it was also fully aware that the private warfare carried on between black and white beyond the boundaries of location was corrosive of the symbolic order of power

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<sup>134</sup> Governor Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April, 1817, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 365.

<sup>135</sup> Lieut.-Governor Arthur to Sir George Murray, 4 November, 1828, *HRA*, Series III, Vol. VII, pp. 634, 629.

<sup>136</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, pp. 227-228.

upon which its own right to rule was grounded. From its perspective, putting an end to the atrocities committed both by the Aborigines and upon them, was tantamount not only to restoring peace, but to re-establishing a certain respect for, and trust in, its own authority. If, therefore, the various measures adopted to put an end to the acts of violence on the frontier were generally represented as a means of protecting the rights of subjects, they were fundamentally also about protecting a centre of power.

It was to this end that the policies of conciliation and coercion were ultimately directed. Behind both measures lay the desire to restore the system of order and justice embodied in the social contract (and thereby bolster the legitimacy of the public power), by ensuring that the strong arm of government extended throughout the various colonies. Ideally the authorities would have liked to establish a permanent symbolic presence in every part of the territory. But since they did not have sufficient forces at their command to spread agents of protection evenly and uniformly across the whole country, they were forced to pursue a more modest solution. Partly by utilising the theatre of appearances and partly by increasing the mobility of their forces, they attempted to create the impression that there were no limits to the power of the Sovereign, no district left unguarded by the rigorous and impartial protection of the laws of Britain. Assuming that the key to ensuring legal restraint among black and white was to generate either an attachment to the law or a fear of its transgression, government deemed the best measures those which allowed the various agents of protection to follow the Aborigines in their 'migratory habits'. It should not be wondered, therefore, that the two foremost institutional expressions of the policies of conciliation and coercion — the Protectorate and the Border Police — should have been modelled upon an itinerating plan.<sup>137</sup> Through the mobility of these agents, the authorities attempted to ensure that the Sovereign could be seen, or at least be expected to be seen, even in the furthest and most isolated reaches of the realm.

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<sup>137</sup> Indeed one of Gipp's principal frustrations with the Protectors was due to the fact that they had 'come to Australia with the expectation of establishing Missionary Stations, rather than of itinerating with and amongst the tribes'. See Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 3 February, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 211.

## Chapter V

### Experimenting with Savagery

While the almost wholesale removal of the Tasmanian Aborigines to Flinders Island more or less put an end to the lawless warfare carried out on that island, hostilities persisted on the mainland well into the second half of nineteenth century. In the more remote squatting districts of New South Wales and the newly settled areas of Port Phillip, calls for more effective protection from those most exposed to the depredations of the Aborigines were as insistent (and usually as indignant) as ever. At least as far as the proprietors of stock were concerned, the promise of government to secure person and property from insult and injury was not yet fully realised.<sup>1</sup> This was not to discount the utility of the Police Forces — Mounted Police, Border Police, Native Police — or Protectors perambulating in the remote districts. If the Annual Reports of the Commissioners of Crown Lands can be trusted, the presence of mounted patrols of one kind or another had significantly reduced (and in some cases entirely eliminated) the incidence of violence among Aborigines and settlers.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that these forces remained unevenly distributed, however, it was difficult to prevent relations between black and white periodically lapsing back into lawlessness and disorder in various parts of the colonies. For even where the natives had been effectively checked in their 'open war' with the settlers, depredations upon the unprotected herds and flocks proved a continual source of aggravation.<sup>3</sup> Stockholders in the thinly populated areas of the colonies complained bitterly of their losses (despite paying a pittance for whatever Aboriginal labour they could avail themselves of) and generally failed to restrain their servants from exacting revenge in ways that the law could neither sanction nor deter.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the petition of the residents in the district of Maranoa in *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1856-1857, p. 427.

<sup>2</sup> See Report by Mr. G.J. Macdonald, 1 July 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 173; Report of the present state of the Aborigines in the district of Moreton Bay, 1 January, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII, pp. 485-486; Report on the Aborigines by Graham D. Hunter, Commissioner of Crown Lands, District of Bligh, for the Year 1845, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, p. 7; and J. Sherer, 'Present State of the Aborigines in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia', *Anthropology Pamphlets*, Vol XII, No. 6, 1853, pp. 270-273.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Report on the State of the Aborigines of the District of Moreton Bay for the Year 1845, 31 December, 1845, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, p. 2.

If problems of law and order had not been entirely resolved before the middle of the century, they were nevertheless sufficiently under control for other, more pressing, considerations to come to the fore. By the early 1840s it was already abundantly apparent that the various 'experiments in civilisation' undertaken by the government during the 1820s and 1830s had completely failed in their objective. Despite all the money expended, neither the missions to the Aborigines nor the Protectorate had produced a sufficiently permanent change in their minds and habits to render them of any real service to the colony. In almost every instance the 'experiment' had been tried, the Aborigines had displayed a 'fixed and rooted aversion'<sup>4</sup> to the kind of regular and settled habits upon which their successful instruction and employment so much relied. Worse still, judging from the reports filed by the Protectors and Commissioners of Crown Lands, the advance of settlement appeared to have deepened rather than alleviated their misery. Everywhere the Aborigines were in contact with the labouring classes who acted as the unworthy forerunners of civilisation, vice, the handmaiden of disease, spread quickly among them and proved most vicious in its effects. Rather than improve their condition as government anticipated, the advance of settlement had in fact been attended by ever greater immiseration and a gradual decline in numbers. In sum, from the government perspective, the instruction and example of the colonists had only succeeded in reducing the Aborigines to a borderline state between savagery and civilisation in which the advantages of both conditions were lost. As the Commissioner of Crown Lands for Macleay River put it in 1845, 'the savage is spoiled and the civilised man is not yet formed'.<sup>5</sup>

If the agents of protection and civilisation had not been successful in improving the moral and social condition of the Aborigines, their efforts were by no means without consequence. In bringing the moral (mental habits) and social (population health) condition of the Aborigines more clearly into focus, they helped redefine the very concept of Aboriginality that had underpinned colonial policy towards the Aborigines until the 1840s. Prior to that point, it was widely assumed that the space separating 'the Aborigine' from 'the European' could be filled by ordinary methods of instruction and example. While the Aborigines were certainly low in the scale of civilisation, their condition would be readily improved through general and religious education and exposure to the more

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. R. Allman, Jr. to Colonial Secretary Thomson, 10 January, 1846, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Mr. R.G. Massie to Colonial Secretary Thomson, 24 December, 1845, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, p. 5.

sophisticated customs and manners of the settlers. With the knowledge gained from the experience of the Missionaries, the Protectors and the Commissioners of Crown Lands, however, it began to be assumed that the Aborigines were not simply deficient in education, but subject to certain 'peculiarities'. Even those who clung on to the notion of the universality of man (as colonial officials for the most part did), were unable to deny that the apparently 'unregenerate habits' of the Aborigines made their civilisation a difficult experiment. Not only did they seem unable to affect the customs and habits of settled life for any more than a brief period, the advance of settlement invariably wrought the most devastating effects upon their health. If there was to be any chance either of civilising the Aborigines or arresting the work of extermination, therefore, it appeared necessary not simply to supplement their experience, but to reconstitute who they were.

Under the force of this new conception of the 'Aboriginal Race' the centre of gravity of official policy with regards to the indigenous inhabitants began to shift from a position of moral equality to one of moral discrimination. Although government was willing to assume that the mind of the Aborigines could still be reclaimed and their extinction averted, success in the experiment increasingly appeared incompatible with the extension and protection of their liberal rights. Since it was not just a polishing of their manners but a reconstitution of their subjectivity that was required to civilise and improve them, it was no longer possible to leave the Aborigines free to conduct themselves as they chose within the bounds of the law. Not until they could be removed from the destructive influences to which they were exposed on the one hand and brought under the influence of a more rigorous form of moral discipline on the other could better results be anticipated. While extending the Aborigines the full complement of their liberal rights and freedoms appeared consistent with principles of justice, therefore, it increasingly appeared ill-adapted to the exigencies at hand. Only a legal and political regime that made it possible to subject the social relations of the Aborigines to strict observation and control appeared likely to answer the twofold objective of civilisation and welfare. In this way government was induced to abandon the principle of strict justice which had underpinned official policy towards the Aborigines until the 1840s in favour of a more discriminatory and paternalistic style of administration. As the fixed Reserve displaced the itinerant Protectorate as the preferred institutional mechanism of management, the Aborigines emerged as a special legislative category whose individual rights and freedoms could be legitimately restricted for the greater good of civilising and preserving the 'race'.

## The Failure of Civilisation

In the years leading up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the various measures adopted during the 1820s and 1830s 'for the benefit of the natives' were brought under continuous and exacting scrutiny. Under the auspices of the Legislative Council of New South Wales, government initiated a whole series of inquiries designed to evaluate the costs and benefits of its existing plans for the protection and civilisation of the Aborigines and to look into the possibility of alternative (and presumably more advantageous) arrangements.<sup>6</sup> Although complete parsimony was discouraged as likely to prove dangerous in a newly formed State, reducing the amount of public money expended on behalf of the Aborigines was a central thread in evaluations of the Police, the Missions and the Protectorate alike. As government increasingly adopted both the language and the practice of utilitarianism, all the institutional variables of its still simple machinery of superintendence — structure, organisation, distribution, management — were subjected to the rigours of rational calculation. Financial returns were ordered, relevant correspondence collected, and suitable witnesses examined by the members of the Legislative Council with an eye to improving economy and efficiency wherever possible. Inevitably in some areas (notably the police) the process of evaluation did little more than encourage a rationalisation of the existing institutional arrangement. Yet where it could be shown that either the methods employed or the machinery itself did not represent the most effective means of achieving the desired ends (and this applied both to the Missions and the Protectorate), government had no hesitation in recommending the discontinuance of public support.

While the Police of the colony by no means escaped the charge of inefficiency, it did not attract the kind of wholesale condemnation reserved for the Missions and the Protectorate. In the Report of the Select Committee on Police and Gaols of 1839, the

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<sup>6</sup> See Report of the Committee on Police and Goals, *NSWLCV&P*, 1839; Return to an Address by Dr. Thomson, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, pp. 475-542; Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, pp. 937-1001; W. Westgarth, *Report on the Condition, Capabilities, and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines*, William Clarke, Melbourne, 1846; and Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1849, pp. 417-475.

desire to curtail the expense of the various policing agencies was invariably offset by the need to protect 'the peace, good order and moral state of the Community'.<sup>7</sup> For the members of the Committee, a large, and consequently expensive, Police Force was necessitated by what they considered to be the striking features of the population of the colony. Given the great disparity of sexes in the remote districts (to which was attributed the dissipation of the men on the frontier), the penal character of a part of the population, the dispersion of settlement over a vast extent of territory, and the frequent hostility of the indigenous inhabitants, it appeared difficult to introduce greater economy without sacrificing the interests of public safety.<sup>8</sup> This was not to suggest that there was no room for improvements in the organisation, management, or even the distribution of the various civil forces. In particular it was expected that the establishment of a Central Office to 'regulate the whole of the Stipendiary Establishments throughout the Colony' would considerably improve the coordination and thus the efficiency of the force.<sup>9</sup> Yet with the exception of the long settled area of Sydney, the Committee thought it impossible to contemplate a reduction in the Constabulary Force without seriously endangering the security of life and property. Paying due regard to the circumstances of the settlement, particularly the thinly populated outlying districts upon which the wealth of the colony so much depended, it was not so much a decrease as an increase in the number of Police that appeared 'absolutely necessary'.<sup>10</sup>

An altogether different determination was made with regards to the key Missions to the Aborigines — Lake Macquarie (London Missionary Society), Wellington Valley (Church Missionary Society), Moreton Bay (German Mission), Port Phillip (Wesleyan Church) — established with the assistance of government during the 1820s and 1830s. Although the inefficiency of these establishments had been apparent for some time already, it was not until 1842 that the Home Government finally recommended the complete withdrawal of public support. Having perused the rather disconsolate Annual Reports furnished by the Missionaries, Lord Stanley instructed Sir George Gipps that he considered it 'impossible any longer to deny that the efforts, which have hitherto been

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<sup>7</sup> Report of the Committee on Police and Gaols, *NSWLCV&P*, 1839, p. 1. (Since the votes and proceedings of the Legislative Council for 1839 are not paginated sequentially, the page numbers given here refer to those used in the report itself).

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 23, 51.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 35, 55.

made for the civilisation of the Aborigines, have been unavailing; that no real progress has yet been effected; and that there is no reasonable ground to expect from them greater success in the future'.<sup>11</sup> To continue to fund the Missions on the basis of such discouraging representations, he added, 'would be to delude ourselves with the mere idea of doing something, which would be injurious to the Natives as interfering with other and more advantageous arrangements, and unjust to the Colony, as continuing an unnecessary and profitless expenditure'.<sup>12</sup> Having himself already halved the public funds allocated to the different Missions in the four years previous to receiving this recommendation, Gipps did not hesitate to comply.<sup>13</sup> Returning to the subject in a despatch dated 21 March, 1844, he advised Lord Stanley that there was now 'no longer any Missions to the Aborigines receiving aid from the Government'. Although there was an 'Establishment of a Missionary character' still being undertaken by the Reverend William Watson in the neighbourhood of Wellington Valley, it was maintained without the support of either the Church Missionary Society (under whose auspices Watson had originally begun his labours) or the colonial authorities.<sup>14</sup>

If, for a time, the Port Phillip Protectorate continued to draw upon the public accounts, it too eventually came to an inglorious conclusion. While it was a moot point whether the Protectorate System had helped to prevent collisions between Aborigines and settlers (and many, including Sir George Gipps, thought it had not), there was little evidence to suggest that it had been any more successful than the Missions in inducting the Aborigines into the arts and practices of civilised life.<sup>15</sup> Despite what the funding situation suggested, according to Westgarth, it was 'not to be supposed that the eye of the

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<sup>11</sup> Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 20 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 436.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Statements respecting the Missions', claimed Stanley, 'furnished not by their opponents nor even by indifferent parties, but by the Missionaries themselves, are I am sorry to say as discouraging as it is possible to be'. See Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 20 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 437.

<sup>13</sup> See Return of the Expense defrayed from the Colonial Treasury of New South Wales of every Mission to the Aborigines with the Colony, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 475.

<sup>14</sup> See Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 21 March, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII; and Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 23 February, 1845, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIV, p. 257.

<sup>15</sup> As early as 1841 Sir George Gipps had informed Lord John Russell that his 'hopes of any advantage being derived from the employment of the Protectors [were] every day diminishing'. A year later he was led to question whether the efforts of the Protectors had 'tended rather to increase than allay the irritation, which has long existed between the two Races'. By contrast Westgarth suggested that 'The inconvenient scrutiny which the Protectors have exercised with reference to the commission of any violence upon the population placed under their care, is not to be ranked in the list of their non-efficiency.' See Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 3 February, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 210; Sir George Gipps to Lord

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Government possessed the faculty of discerning the proper path more clearly than others' when it came to matters of Christianisation and civilisation. For at least in terms of the higher objectives with which it was entrusted, the Port Phillip Protectorate had proven to be 'equally unsuccessful with other experiments on the Aborigines'.<sup>16</sup> Naturally some of the responsibility for the failure was attributed to what Gipps referred to as 'the want of sound judgement and zealous activity on the part of the assistant protectors'. Yet no amount of condemnation of the particular personnel involved was sufficient to dispel the suspicion that the Protectorate System was itself defective as a means of civilising the Aborigines.<sup>17</sup> On this point the Report of the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate of 1849 was unequivocal. Having perused the available evidence, the members of the Committee concluded 'that the present system of protection of the Aborigines has totally failed in its object'. At best the Department (discontinued in January of the following year) appeared to have been 'useless' and, at worst, 'prejudicial to the objects of its care'.<sup>18</sup>

If the agents of protection and civilisation did not succeed in their proselytising mission, their failures were nevertheless of the most productive kind. As institutions that afforded more continuous and regular opportunities for observation and experiment than had hitherto been the case, the Missions, the Protectorate and the various departments of the Civil Police (particularly the Commissioners of Crown Lands in control of the Border Police), played a critical role in the accumulation and refinement of knowledge about the Aborigines. Through them government greatly enhanced its capacity to obtain reliable information on the present state of the Aborigines, their numbers, their places of residence, their moral and social condition and their future prospects. Admittedly the quality of the material relayed through these channels was highly variable and the sheer quantity of

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Stanley, 16 May, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 55; and Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition, Capabilities, and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines*, pp. 27-29.

<sup>17</sup> See Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 29 July, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 168; Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 20 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 438; Sir Charles Fitz Roy to Earl Grey, 17 May, 1847, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, p. 558; Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 24 May, 1847, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXV, pp. 583-590; and Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 11 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 223.

<sup>18</sup> Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1849, p. 419.

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correspondence frequently presented its own problems.<sup>19</sup> Such was the mass of information transmitted by the Protectors, for instance, that Sir George Gipps was eventually led to question whether they might not better acquit themselves of their duties if they devoted less time to writing and more to active service.<sup>20</sup> Yet to the extent that this institutional machinery for the protection of order and justice was both local and general, it made it possible for the eye of power to penetrate more deeply within and more uniformly across the different districts than ever before. Through the network of superintendence constituted by the agents of protection and civilisation, aspects of the 'Aboriginal Tribes' previously either hidden beneath the level of inspection (mental habits) or beyond its scope (population health) were finally brought within the reach of observation and measurement.

To begin with, while opportunities for observation varied from place to place, the local presence of the agents of protection and civilisation put government in possession of a type of microscopic device for observing the 'mental habits' of the different tribes. Since the movements of the Protectors and the Missionaries in particular tended to be confined to certain districts, they were able to accumulate a knowledge of the 'capacities' and 'prejudices' of the Aborigines that was both more minute and more exact than anything the early explorers had generally been capable. Where incidental encounters only allowed for the endless repetition of casual observations, regular contact with the same tribe or collection of tribes over an extended period of time made it possible to undertake a more active interrogation of the 'Aboriginal mind'.<sup>21</sup> Naturally the ability of the agents of civilisation and protection to systematise and make sense of their observations owed a great deal to the new ethnological sciences — physiology, sociology, philology — filtering into the colony from Europe and America. Yet it was the institutional base formed by the Mission and the Protectorate that allowed them to undertake the kind of empirical examination and testing upon which these new sciences so much relied. Even when the

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<sup>19</sup> As C.J. La Trobe argued, 'Though the amount of correspondence between the Chief Protector and his assistants, and with the local government, is exceedingly heavy, it is impossible, after the most careful sifting, to glean from it any quantity of really valuable and trustworthy information, capable of being employed in taking those important steps for the better government of the natives, in their various relations to one another, or to the Europeans, which are so imperatively called for'. Letter from His Honour the Superintendent of Port Phillip, to the Colonial Secretary, 4 March, 1842, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 513.

<sup>20</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 3 February, 1841, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 211.

<sup>21</sup> Thus while the traveller was restricted to a brief list of words, the missionary was able to compile a regular orthography and grammar of the Aboriginal language.

different 'experiments in civilisation' proved to be a failure (as they invariably did), they were still profoundly instructive of the 'mental habits' of the Aborigines and what alternative methods might be adopted to 'improve' them in the future. As Earl Grey remarked to Sir Charles Fitz Roy in 1848,

It is of the highest importance that we should not suffer ourselves to be discouraged by the failure of experiments hitherto tried, but should pursue with unabated zeal the execution of those measures which appear to promise the best, and seek watchfully for any opportunity which may present itself of rectifying errors and devising improvements in our policy towards this helpless portion of our fellow subjects.<sup>22</sup>

In effect, the process of experimentation established a kind of feedback system in which the results of each trial provided the necessary knowledge to conduct new, and ever more sophisticated, attempts to reclaim the Aboriginal mind.

At the same time that the agents of protection and civilisation brought the 'mental habits' of the Aborigines into focus, they allowed government to adopt a more macroscopic perspective on the health of the indigenous population. Although isolated observations upon the state of the Aborigines had been a regular feature for some time already, it was only with the extension of the arms of government during the 1830s and 1840s that it became possible to build an account of the welfare of the 'race' as a whole. The statistical foundation was laid in August 1840 when Lord John Russell requested that officers of the government engaged in the protection or civilisation of the Aborigines provide an Annual Report of their activities to the Governor. In particular they were to record 'all the transactions of the past Year relating to the condition of the Natives, their numbers, their residence at any particular spot, the changes in their social condition, the Schools, and all other particulars, including the state and prospects of the Aboriginal Races'.<sup>23</sup> Inevitably the nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous inhabitants prevented the statistical returns furnished through these channels from being as accurate as they might otherwise have been. Yet as local functionaries in a census machinery that stretched all the way from Western Port to Moreton Bay, the Commissioners of Crown Lands and the Officers of the Protectorate made it possible to observe general trends in the Aboriginal population in a way that had hitherto been impossible. Through their efforts questions of

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<sup>22</sup> Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitzroy, 11 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 223.

<sup>23</sup> Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 25 August, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 776.

mortality and morbidity, longevity and fertility, began to properly emerge as objects of scientific investigation and government deliberation.<sup>24</sup>

To the emergence of these new fields of vision it is possible to attribute both the local development of the new sciences of ethnology and the shift in government policy towards the Aborigines that began during the 1840s. By simultaneously bringing the intellectual capabilities and the general health and welfare of the Aborigines with the scope of measurement and evaluation, the agents of protection and civilisation were responsible for introducing a new feature into the political landscape: the Aboriginal Race. From them derived a knowledge of the very mechanics of the 'savage mind' that filtered into government policy in the second half of the nineteenth century and became the basis for more coercive interventions into the Aboriginal way of life.

## II

### The Savage Mind

If nothing else, the various experiments in civilisation revealed a common pattern of behaviour among the Aborigines. In the annual reports of the Missionaries, Protectors and Commissioners of Crown Lands the same observation recurred with monotonous regularity. Although in many instances the 'proximity of civilisation' did exert a temporary influence upon the conduct of the Aborigines, nothing more than a partial change had ever been effected in the habits or disposition of the 'race'.<sup>25</sup> For every highly celebrated individual who had forsaken their savage customs for the comforts and security of civilised life, there was an overwhelming number of cases in which the impressions that appeared to have been made upon their minds proved 'quite transient'.<sup>26</sup> While the children could be

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<sup>24</sup> Naturally the quality of the information transmitted through these channels varied significantly from district to district. In some Annual Reports only the most general assessments of the numbers of Aborigines were furnished, while in others detailed tables outlining ratios of males to females and adults to children at different locations were supplied. See for instance, Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 3 April, 1843, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, pp. 644-654.

<sup>25</sup> See Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 20 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 437; Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 4 January, 1843, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, pp. 484-485; Papers relating to the Aborigines in *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, pp. 482-487, 500-504; W. Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p.27; and C.J. La Trobe in the Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1849, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Reverend W. Schmidt in Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, p. 962.

brought under instruction and the adults induced to labour for a limited period of time, both eventually succumbed to the inducements of the wilds and returned to their wandering and desultory mode of life. Whether on the Missions, where the want of children for instruction proved a continual frustration, or on the Stations, where the want of adults for labour was particularly felt, the Aborigines could not be persuaded to remain very long in any one place. Even the most tractable and promising among them, in the words of William Westgarth, was likely to 'suddenly throw aside the loose and cumbrous mantle of civilisation, and return with unabated zest to his native woods and his original barbarism'.<sup>27</sup> At the very moment when civilisation appeared to have taken hold, they would throw off their clothes and leave their disconsolate masters to tend their shattered dream of one day turning them into a 'serviceable people'.<sup>28</sup>

Precisely what prevented the Aborigines from permanently adopting the habits of civilised life was a matter of considerable controversy. From a physiological viewpoint, the poor results achieved by the Missionaries and Protectors was a function of the peculiar organic structure of the 'savage mind'. In line with the notion that each intellectual function was performed by a discrete portion of the brain, the partial civilisation of the Aborigines was attributed to the particular structural configuration of their intellectual organs. From craniological examinations (such as they were), phrenologists deduced that the 'moral and intellectual portions' of the Aboriginal mind were 'very deficient' compared to that of the European. In particular, they imagined the Aborigines owed their 'degraded character' and 'inferiority as a people' to 'the deficiency of the organ of Constructiveness' (otherwise known as mechanic art) whose locality on the temple was invariably marked among them by a 'contracted and hollow appearance'. That they were far surpassed in this facility by even the 'most barbarous and uncivilised people ever known', claimed Æneas, was amply demonstrated by their 'wretched substitute for a habitation' and their 'frail canoe'. Significantly the Aborigines did evince a high level of development in the perceptive organs of 'Locality' (to which was attributed their love of roaming) and 'Individuality' (to which was attributed their heightened powers of observation). But while these had been indispensable to their survival in the circumstances

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<sup>27</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, pp. 37, 22.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase comes from D. Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, A.H. & A.W. Reed in Association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, Vol. I, 1975, p. 499.

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in which they found themselves, they were ill-suited to the more regular pursuits of civilised life.<sup>29</sup>

If physiologists agreed about the limitations of the Aboriginal mind, its cause and implications remained in dispute. For those willing to raise the spectre of polygenesis, the failure of civilisation was taken as a confirmation that the Aborigines suffered from an innate deficiency of intellect. As an anonymous contributor to the *New South Wales Magazine* suggested in reference to the failure of the Aborigines to adopt the habits of civilised life:

Human physiologists of the present day, with few exceptions, will account for this remarkable fact on phrenological principles. This is tender ground, and I wish to tread it like Agog, delicately. But on what other principle can the acknowledged fact be explained than this; that the virgin page of the savage mind cannot retain our characters; in other words, that the black skull does not possess the faculties necessary for the purposes of civilised life.<sup>30</sup>

According to this view, the Aborigines were not simply sunk in a state of miserable barbarism, but entirely beyond the pale of civilisation. Although they might eventually be domesticated and subdued, it was futile to expect that they would ever be anything other than what they were. 'To advance their welfare as a race', claimed Francis McArthur in reply to the circular letter of the Legislative Council Select Committee of 1845, 'leaving them free to dispose of themselves, practically speaking, is considered to be impossible'. For man 'is born with a determinate constitution of mind and body, which is manifest in the peculiar distinction of races; and these peculiarities are not obliterated by the modification resulting from external circumstances'.<sup>31</sup> In short, although the Aborigines possessed capabilities admirably adapted to the circumstances in which it pleased God to place them, their 'illogical minds prevented their understanding or appreciating the doctrinal teachings of their religious instructors'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Aeneas, 'Phrenology: No. VIII', *Colonial Literary Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 11, 1844, pp. 172-173

<sup>30</sup> 'A few words on the Aborigines of Australia', *New South Wales Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1843, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> Francis McArthur, Esquire, J.P., for the Bench of Magistrates, Goulburn, in Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, p. 978.

<sup>32</sup> J. Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, London, 1870. Reprinted by Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York, 1967, p. 4.

If the breaking up of the Missions added a great deal of legitimacy to the formerly marginalised notion that the Aborigines were simply incapable of improvement, there was another, and from the point of view of the authorities, more palatable, way to approach the problem. For those who held firm to the notion of the unity of the species, the underlying cause of failure was not so much an innate incapacity as a variation in mental development produced by a process of adaptation to local conditions. What the persistence of old habits among the Aborigines suggested, they argued, was nothing more or less than 'the inflexible nature of a mind which has been moulded in barbarism throughout successive ages'.<sup>33</sup> 'The Australian', as Westgarth put it,

has been suited to the circumstances in which he happens to be placed. His country is limited in variety of adaptations; in geographical position he is removed from the great stream of human intercourse that flows among the more advanced population of the islands and countries to the northward; the scope of his mind is proportionately narrowed; and the according faculties, stamped throughout successive generations, cannot be immediately changed by his introduction to a new scene.<sup>34</sup>

Since for Westgarth, mental capacities were considered to be both hereditary and improvable, however, it was possible to accept a certain 'prostration of spirit' and 'quiescence of the higher departments of mind' among the Aborigines without at the same time abandoning the hope of future progress.<sup>35</sup> Much as he was inclined to doubt that the civilisation of the Aborigines would be achieved, he did not rule out the possibility that a different set of circumstances might, with the passage of several generations, remedy the intellectual defect.<sup>36</sup>

Although more than ready to affirm that the Aborigines were exceedingly brutish, Christians refused to counsel ideas either of an innate deficiency of intellect or of an arrested process of social development. Perceiving the sceptical tendencies inherent in both views, they reasserted the efficacy of the account of human origins contained in the

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<sup>33</sup> W. Westgarth, *Australia Felix; or, A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Settlement of Port Phillip, New South Wales: Including Full Particulars of the Manners and Condition of the Aboriginal Natives*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1848, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> See Westgarth, *Australia Felix*, p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, pp. 25-26, 22.

<sup>36</sup> 'From what has been observed of the two races', claimed Count Strzelecki, 'one may affirm, without fear of contradiction, that it will be easier to bring the whites down to the level of the blacks, than to raise the latter to the ideas and habits of our race'. See P.E. De Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1845. *Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 19*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1967, p. 355; and Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 35.

first chapters of Genesis — the Creation and the Fall of Man, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and the Genealogies of Nations. As they saw it, the Aborigines were a remnant of one of the ancient peoples of the Old Testament long departed from the light of God.<sup>37</sup> Destitute and benighted, their position was analogous to that formerly occupied by the sons of Albion, those 'Stupid Aborigines of Briton', who the 'Eloquent Cicero' had declared '*so stupid and utterly incapable of being taught*' as to be '*unfit to form a part of the household of Atticus!*' Like them also, the natives of New Holland only required 'the good providence of God to shew the folly of foreigners and the ridiculousness of their erroneous impressions in regard to the aborigines of whom they could know little'.<sup>38</sup> For although it was frequently asserted that the intellectual capacities of the Aborigines were inconsistent with a common origin, both secular and sacred history gave ample testimony to the fact that all men were capable of instruction and all souls provided for in the scheme of salvation. If it could not be denied that in their moral state they were 'almost upon a lower scale than the beasts, doing and performing considerably, what beasts will instinctively do', they were still endowed with 'the same gifts and talents as in Europeans', and, perhaps more importantly within the context of the Christian tradition, at least capable of that 'feeling for good or evil' which constituted 'the grand distinction between man and all other animals'.<sup>39</sup>

Inevitably for the religious philosopher the problem was no so much the diminished mental powers of the Aborigines as the corruption of their soul. 'In speaking of their capacities', claimed the Reverend William Cowper, 'I have seen enough to convince me that they are equal to learning any of the common arts and employments of civilised society'.<sup>40</sup> If there was an obstacle to their civilisation and Christianisation (and that much

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<sup>37</sup> See W. Hull, *Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales*, William Clarke, Melbourne, 1846, pp. 38-39; W. Hamilton, *Practical Discourses, Intended for Circulation in the Interior of New South Wales*, Kemp and Fairfax, Sydney, 1843, pp. 137-138; and Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E. Threlkeld: Missionary to the Aborigines 1824-1859*, Vol. I, Australian Aboriginal Studies, No.40, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1974, pp. 59-60.

<sup>38</sup> Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences*, pp. 63, 70, 149. See also, Appendix IX, 'Reverend Charles P.N. Wilton's Views on Civilizing the Aborigines (1828)', in *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 349.

<sup>39</sup> See C.G. Tiechermann, *Aborigines of South Australia. Illustrative and Explanatory Notes of the Manners, Customs, Habits, and Superstitions of the Natives of South Australia*, South Australian Facsimile Editions No. 2, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1965 [1841], pp. 5, 13; R. Mudie, *The Picture of Australia*, Whittaker, Treacher, And Co., London, 1829, p. 267; and J. Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, Hamilton, Adams, & Co., London, 1843, p. 555.

<sup>40</sup> W.M. Cowper in *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question*, J. Spilsbury, Sydney, 1838, p. 59.

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at least seemed irrefutable), it was rather of a moral than an intellectual character. As former Assistant Protectors E.S. Parker and James Dredge both agreed, it was not the mind of the Aborigines, but 'the utter sensuality of their habits and dispositions that [was] the main hindrance to overcome'.<sup>41</sup> Without any knowledge of the Supreme Being or the saviour who died for them, the Aborigines had inevitably fallen into that state of moral destitution encountered wherever man was abandoned to his own frail intelligence and carnal propensities. As the light of truth was withdrawn, dark superstitions had taken hold of their minds leaving them enslaved to their desires and predisposed to all manner of sensual excess. Regardless of the indications of superior mental capability, therefore, no improvement could be expected in the condition of the Aborigines until their minds were released from the barbarous superstitions that held them captive 'in the very depths of moral debasement'. Unfortunately, instead of providing a balm for their moral and spiritual maladies, contact with the settlers had for the most part only succeeded in throwing 'a shade of deeper night' upon their original darkness.<sup>42</sup>

### III

#### Population Health

In addition to this debate about the characteristics of the 'native mind', the agents of protection and civilisation opened up a whole new discourse about the health of the indigenous population. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century it was regularly acknowledged that contact with civilisation had not only failed to improve the condition of the Aborigines, but to encourage their moral and social degradation. From across the different districts the same desultory picture of creeping immorality and physical decay was painted again and again by the agents of civilisation and protection. 'The Aborigines', suggested the Commissioner for Crown Lands at Moreton Bay in his Annual Report for the year 1844, 'have now for years been within the reach of civilised man, but without, I fear, any real improvement in their moral or social condition'.<sup>43</sup> Although in some

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<sup>41</sup> See Letter from Mr. Assistant Protector Parker to the Chief Protector, 30 January, 1843, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 519; and E.S. Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, Hugh M'Coll, Melbourne, 1854, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> J. Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines of New South Wales*, James Harrison, Geelong, 1845, pp. 10, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Report of the State of the Aborigines for the District of Moreton Bay for the year 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIV, p. 486.

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instances they were reported as 'becoming more useful and more willing to work',<sup>44</sup> few believed that their present state or future prospects had been improved by the arrival of the settlers. On the contrary, wherever the colonists permanently established themselves, it tended to be the vices rather than the virtues of civilisation that spread most rapidly among them. Summing up the situation in 1847, Robert J. Massie, Commissioner for Crown Lands in the Macleay River District, wondered whether the overall effect of colonisation might not in fact have been a negative one:

In their intercourse with the white population they have quickly acquired a good many of the bad habits of what is commonly called civilised society without their General condition being improved so as to afford them compensation for those evils; and, in so far as the point of advancement has been made in our attempts at Civilisation, it clearly admits of a doubt whether we have not inflicted an injury rather than conferred a benefit on them.<sup>45</sup>

While anecdotal accounts of the growing misery of the Aborigines were increasingly commonplace, the most reliable and quantifiable measure of their moral and social degradation came in the form of census data collected by the agents of protection and civilisation. By examining the returns of the Protectors, Magistrates and Commissioners of Crown Lands, officials were able to make statistical assessments of the health of the indigenous population as a whole. Predictably obtaining reliable returns for the various 'Native Tribes' in the different districts proved a notoriously difficult exercise. As G.J. Macdonald, the Commissioner of Crown Lands for New England, noted in 1842, 'It is at all times a matter of much difficulty to determine the *number* of the Natives frequenting particular Districts of Country with any certainty in consequence of their wandering and unsettled habits of life'.<sup>46</sup> Yet by the middle of the 1840s sufficiently comprehensive returns were available from across the various districts to confirm what had been taken on faith in certain quarters for some time already: the impending extinction of the race. Summarising the available evidence (exhibited in tabular form for 'greater distinctness') in his *Report on the Condition, Capabilities and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines* of 1846, William Westgarth concluded that 'The uniform result of all inquiry

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<sup>44</sup> See Report of the Aboriginal Natives by Graham D. Hunter, Commissioner of Crown Lands, District Blight, for the year 1843, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII, p. 491.

<sup>45</sup> Mr. R.J. Massie to Colonial Secretary Thomson, 31 December, 1847, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 394.

<sup>46</sup> Report by G.J. Macdonald, Commissioner of Crown Lands, New England, 1 July, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 172.

on the subject of the numbers of the Australian Aborigines exhibits a decrease in the population of those districts which have been overspread by colonial enterprise'.<sup>47</sup> Under the pressure of white settlement the condition of the 'Aboriginal races' had without exception become 'most pitiable and wretched, and their future prospects most gloomy and without hope'.<sup>48</sup>

As with the failure of the experiments in civilisation, attempts to explain this phenomena gave rise to considerable controversy, with commentators once again tending to align themselves along a critical divide. Among those who were prepared to reduce phenomena to the operation of certain physical laws, the impending extinction of the indigenous population appeared less a contingency than a necessity. As they saw it, the disappearance of the Aborigines was in fact indicative of an law of nature governing relations between 'weak' and 'strong' or 'inferior' and 'superior' races. 'As the tendency of nature appears to be a progress from the inferior to the superior', suggested Mr. French in evidence before the Victorian Select Committee of 1859, 'it is more than possible, almost certain, that, notwithstanding all well meant efforts to the contrary, the aboriginal must disappear, and give place to the superior race'.<sup>49</sup> Within this proto-evolutionist mode of thinking, particularly offensive from the Christian point of view, responsibility for the decline in the indigenous population was taken out of the hands of the settlers themselves and placed firmly in those of the divine. Since the laws of nature, however mechanically they operated once set in motion, ultimately reflected the plan of the Creator, the extinction of the Aborigines could legitimately be considered to bear the imprimatur of God. Consequently, nothing undertaken in this world was likely to do anything more than temporarily defer or slacken the pace of the process of extinction. 'I believe that it is the design of Providence that the inferior races should pass away before the superior races', claimed William Hull before the same Committee, 'and that independently of all other causes, since we have occupied the country, the aborigines must cease to occupy it'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>48</sup> See Report by Mr. E. Mayne, Commissioner of Crown Lands Office, Peel's River, District of Liverpool Plains, 3 July, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 171.

<sup>49</sup> See evidence of Mr. French in the *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines* (1859), p. 43.

<sup>50</sup> W. Hull in *ibid.*, p. 9. As Westgarth also suggested in 1848, 'The law of their disappearance, if we may so speak, is doubtless a wise and merciful ordination. It cannot be desirable to prolong a race which has always sunk into circumstances of unhappiness and degradation'. See Westgarth, *Australia Felix*, p. 123.

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For those committed to the notion that the Aborigines might still be saved from extinction, it was impossible to countenance such a conclusion in any form. Although they were willing to admit that the history of modern colonisation furnished numerous examples of races passing away before the foot of the European, they were loathe to accept that it was in any way inevitable. 'Though, hitherto, the progress of civilisation has proved the destruction of savage nations', claimed Richard Sadlier, 'yet this is no proof that such is the decree of Providence'.<sup>51</sup> For Sadlier, as for Parker some years later, there was something particularly offensive in attributing what was in fact nothing more than the product of an unjust and selfish system of colonisation to the agency of God. 'Do you not see it is a miserable logic', declared Parker to an assembly at the Mechanics Hall in Melbourne in 1854, 'to conclude, that because Divine Providence has suffered the crime, that, therefore, it has given its sanction to it?' To fall in with such reasoning and follow it through to its logical consequences, he suggested, was to justify every outrage and palliate every crime — 'God has *suffered* it, therefore he *wills* it!'<sup>52</sup> If such a solution served admirably to assuage the conscience of the whites, according to these commentators, it did so at the expense of examining a whole range of other more mundane, and hopefully remedial, causes for the decline in the indigenous population. As always, the key to understanding the problem as they saw it, lay not in the inscrutable intentions of the divine, but in the all too apparent wickedness of men.

Without by any means discounting the effects of mutual wars, hostilities with the whites, practices of infanticide or the loss of customary forms of subsistence, those who were sympathetic to the Christian view tended to attribute the great destruction of the indigenous population to the combined effect of the introduction of European vices and the irregular nature of the native mode of life. With regards to the first, the origin of the problem was once again thought to lie with the more degraded class of colonists (shepherds and stockmen) living on the fringes of white settlement.<sup>53</sup> Generally no strangers to habits of illicit intercourse, drunkenness and debauchery, these 'depraved individuals' were assumed to have either directly or indirectly acted as conduits for the transmission of disease to the native population. Through their agency and example the

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<sup>51</sup> R. Sadlier in the *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question*, (1838), p. 33.

<sup>52</sup> Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, p. 30.

<sup>53</sup> See for instance, Land and Emigration Commissioners to Under Secretary Stephen, 17 July, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, pp. 740-741.

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Aborigines had not only become afflicted with a range of contagious or epidemic diseases, but been initiated into a number of immoral habits (principally drunkenness and debauchery) whose disastrous impact upon the health and longevity of the general population was everywhere apparent. Particularly around the townships and the so-called 'Bush Inns' where there was ample opportunity for the Aborigines to become drawn into the worst description of vices, disease and degradation were increasingly prevalent. As the Commissioner for Crown Lands in the District of Liverpool Plains declared in his comments upon the condition of the Aborigines in 1848, 'the more their intercourse with that class of Europeans whom they at present meet is extended, the more rapidly will their numbers decrease and the more deplorable will their prospects become'.<sup>54</sup>

Inevitably the decline in the moral and social condition of the Aborigines was not attributed to the corrupting influence of the settlers alone. If the vices of those living on the margins of European settlement had been crucial ingredients in the introduction and spread of disease, their effects were assumed to have been rendered even more severe by the sensual character of the Aborigines and the irregular nature of their mode of life. Amidst the many causes to which the decline of the native population was attributed, it was not unusual for commentators to cite such things as 'the neglect of taking care of themselves whilst sick', the 'absence of command over their appetites' (particularly with regards to eating and drinking), 'constant exposure to the weather' and the 'use of spirits and strong drinks'.<sup>55</sup> Since, on this view, the Aborigines were almost entirely bereft of the kind of moral discipline characteristic among civilised people, they tended to embrace the temptations of the flesh with even greater abandon than their degraded white counterparts. Abominable sinners in their own right, they were a fertile bed for 'every kind of vice and profligacy that can disgrace the human species'.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, their wandering mode of life, uncleanly habits and the lack of proper medical supplies made them particularly vulnerable both to the transmission and to effects of disease. As Henry Bingham, Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Murrumbidgee District, claimed in his Annual Report for the year 1847: 'The Aboriginal Natives have suffered severely during the

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<sup>54</sup> Mr. R. Mitchell to Colonial Secretary Thomson, 11 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 396.

<sup>55</sup> The Most Reverend J.B. Polding in the Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, pp. 952-953.

<sup>56</sup> Mr R.G. Massie to Colonial Secretary Thomson, 17 December, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIV, p. 263.

prevalence of the recent Epidemics in consequence of their having no protection from the vicissitudes of the weather or Medical aid under their sufferings'.<sup>57</sup>

Through the mutual interaction of these exogenous and endogenous causes, claimed Westgarth, diseases of one kind or another had begun to take hold of the native population and to 'considerably to abridge the usual term of human existence'.<sup>58</sup> Standing 'prominently forward' among the various maladies to which the decrease in their numbers was principally attributable, was that most destructive of complaints: the venereal disease. While there was some question as to whether this affliction was known by the Aborigines before the arrival of the Europeans, there was little doubt that the settlers had been 'terribly effectual' in disseminating it among the 'wandering outcasts of the soil'. Through the common practice of seizing the native women as concubines, the labouring classes had effectively become conduits for 'that great scourge of the vices of mankind' and materially advanced it in its destructive course.<sup>59</sup> To this prominent cause of misery and mortality was added a whole range of other afflictions induced either by excessive indulgence in spirituous liquors or exposure after intoxication. For in addition to the numerous physical disorders that attended the consumption of alcohol itself, drunkenness exposed the Aborigines to a number of pulmonary and rheumatic complaints which, as Westgarth put it, tended to 'carry them off' within twelve months of the original attack.<sup>60</sup> So destructive did the secondary effects of this excessive indulgence in 'ardent spirits' appear to be upon the physical constitution of the Aborigines in fact, that by 1859 the members of the Select Committee of Victorian Legislative Council went so far as to declare it 'the great cause' of their decrease.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> H. Bingham, Report on the State of the Aboriginal Natives in the Murrumbidgee District, 1 January, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 402.

<sup>58</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Westgarth also refers to the leucorrhoea as 'a very prevalent complaint'. See *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10. See also, Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>61</sup> *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendices*. Ordered by the Council to be Printed, 3 February, 1859, John Ferres, Melbourne, 1859, p. iii.

## IV

### The Aboriginal Race

For the authorities, the many questions surrounding the state of the 'Aboriginal mind' and the state of 'Aboriginal health' were not merely, perhaps not even predominantly, of scientific or spiritual concern. While it was evident that they were not entirely disinterested in the debate about monogenesis or the competing claims of revealed and natural truth, the approach they took to the issue was of a much more practical character. For them it was simply a matter of trying to discover whether the Aborigines were in fact capable of improvement and, if so, what had prevented them from deriving any permanent benefit from the plans hitherto tried. To be sure government was not unencumbered by ideological presuppositions. But given that it was necessary to determine the exact cause of the 'barbarous habits' and 'physical destitution' of the Aborigines before it could decide what measures were properly calculated to eliminate them, it tended to value experience above speculation and seek out points of convergence beneath the intellectual controversy. In this decidedly utilitarian regime, beautifully exemplified in the preface to the report compiled by Westgarth in 1846, there was little or no room for idle speculations upon the original unity of the species:

The object here proposed being to exhibit the condition and prospects of the Aborigines with reference to their civilisation, or to any degree of benefit that it may be possible to confer upon them, the various and endless Mythologies (if they may be so dignified) of the different tribes are very slightly alluded to, and all theoretical inquiries as to the primeval origin of the race entirely overlooked.<sup>62</sup>

In order to arrive at an accurate assessment of the present condition and future prospects of the Aborigines it was necessary to stand guard against any scientific or religious theory that might pervade the mind and bias the perceptions. Only by carefully examining the evidence and filtering it of any prejudice or preconception was it possible to devise an appropriate plan for the future civilisation and Christianisation of the 'Native Tribes'.

The residue of this filtration process, apparent in a whole range of official reports, was a view of the moral and social condition of the 'Aboriginal Race' as sufficiently

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<sup>62</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, preface.

impoverished to make providing for their civilisation and welfare a difficult experiment, but not so destitute as to bar any possibility of further improvement.<sup>63</sup> Despite the altogether bleak nature of its previous dealings with the Aborigines, government was keen to resist the more disheartening implications of what its agents of protection and civilisation had revealed. Chastened as officials evidently were by the failure of civilisation and the gradual (and in some instances not so gradual) decline in the indigenous population, they refused to accept that there was nothing left to be done for the Aborigines than smooth the pillow of the dying. At least for the time being, neither the idea that they were incapable of civilisation nor the belief that they were destined to die out, became the basis for public policy making. As Lord Stanley suggested in a passage, not only regularly quoted by sympathetic contemporaries, but representative of the attitude of government towards the Aborigines in the second half of the nineteenth century:

I should not, without the most extreme reluctance, admit that nothing can be done — that with respect to them alone, the doctrines of Christianity must be inoperative, and the advantages of civilisation incommunicable. I cannot acquiesce in the theory, that they are incapable of improvement, and that their extinction before the advance of the white settler is a necessity which it is impossible to controul.<sup>64</sup>

This was not to suggest, however, that it would be possible to civilise the Aborigines or arrest the work of extermination with ease. Experience had shown that the Aborigines were not simply wanting in knowledge, but fully constituted subjects characterised by their own peculiar habits and customs.

From the different experiments in civilisation, officials concluded that the defining elements of the 'Aboriginal Race' (and to that extent the principal obstacles to be overcome in reclaiming and preserving them) was their want of reflective capacities and their wandering and erratic habits. Although the idea that mental attributes were innate and unimprovable remained outside the mainstream, practical opinion tended to converge upon the idea that the Aborigines were at least for the present somewhat deficient in the higher intellectual departments. Indeed, given their own disheartening experience in proselytisation, even the Missionaries found it difficult to deny that centuries of isolation

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<sup>63</sup> As E.S. Parker suggested in evidence before the Victorian Legislative Council in 1859, 'The native mind is so constituted that it requires peculiar treatment to promote its educational progress'. See *Report from the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines*, 1859, p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> Lord Stanley to Sir George Gipps, 20 December, 1842, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXII, p. 439.

had left the minds of the Aborigines in a comparatively low and weak state. Asked by the Chairman of the Select Committee of 1845 to comment on the capabilities of those under his care, the Reverend William Schmidt, resident Missionary at Moreton Bay, had no hesitation in suggesting that the Aborigines were close to the bottom of the scale of intelligence. 'Their faculties, especially their memories, are, in some instances, very good', he suggested, 'but they appear to have no understanding of things to which they commit to memory — I mean connected with religion'. Either there was something wanting in their minds that prevented them from comprehending abstract principles, he added, or 'it is slumbering so deeply, that nothing but Divine power can awaken it'.<sup>65</sup> In either event, their lack of reflective power had left the Aborigines, not only mired in superstition and prejudice, but particularly susceptible to passing impressions and fancies.

Inevitably claims about the migratory habits of the 'Aboriginal Race' were somewhat less controversial. Even those who were wary of suggesting that the Aborigines were deficient in understanding, tended to assume that their wandering mode of life was so deeply rooted in their character as to make their general progress in the scale of civilisation a difficult proposition.<sup>66</sup> Among other things the wandering habits of the Aborigines made it virtually impossible to bring them under a regular system of instruction or induce them to labour for any length of time. Even where it seemed that the Aboriginal children were either equal or superior to their European counterparts in terms of their ability to read and write, they could not be induced to remain long enough in any one place to finish their schooling.<sup>67</sup> In much the same way, the adults resisted all attempts to permanently shackle them to the routine and discipline of regular work. In one district after another, the Commissioners of Crown Lands reported that the biggest barrier to the Aborigines joining the ranks of the labouring community was not their unfitness for work, but their general lack of discipline.<sup>68</sup> It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the members of the 1859 Victorian Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines were willing to treat whatever intellectual weaknesses the Aborigines exhibited as of only secondary

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<sup>65</sup> Reverend William Schmidt in the Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, p. 962.

<sup>66</sup> Mr. F. Allman, JR., To Colonial Secretary Thomson, 1 January, 1845, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIV, p. 265.

<sup>67</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>68</sup> J. Sherer, *Present State of the Aborigines in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia*, pp. 269, 274, 277

importance. According to the Report tabled in Parliament, it was not the 'deficiency in their reflective capacities', but the 'want of steadiness in their characters' which was 'the great obstacle to be overcome in reclaiming them, and bringing them within the pale of civilisation and Christianity'.<sup>69</sup>

If government did not abandon hope for the Aborigines, therefore, it no longer assumed that it would be possible to improve their moral and social condition without paying particular attention to the habits and disposition of the race.<sup>70</sup> As E.S. Parker noted in evidence before the Victorian Legislative Council Select Committee, 'the native mind is so constituted that it requires peculiar treatment to promote its educational progress'.<sup>71</sup> Henceforth any plan for the civilisation of the Aborigines would require a process, not simply of supplementation, but of normalisation. To succeed in the experiment was to permanently fracture the Aborigines from themselves, divorce them from their Aboriginality and reconstruct them afresh. As Chief Protector George Robinson suggested in evidence brought before the Legislative Council of New South Wales in 1843, 'Improving the condition of uncivilised tribes, is a work of great difficulty, and to ensure success, a slow and cautious process is required, for ere we can hope for lasting benefits, prejudices, and errors of centuries, have to be encountered and removed'.<sup>72</sup>

## V

### Segregation and Discipline

The means by which the Aborigines might be reconstituted was in fact widely agreed among the agents of civilisation and protection.<sup>73</sup> As they saw it, success in the experiment simultaneously required exercising far greater control over the destructive influences to which the indigenous inhabitants were exposed and implanting a completely

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>70</sup> As Eyre noted, the problem with previous plans was that they were not comprehensive enough or well enough adapted to the state the Aborigines were in, to guarantee any success. See E.J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia*, Vol. II, T. & W. Boone, London, 1845. Australian Facsimile Editions, No. 7, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964, p. 154.

<sup>71</sup> E.S. Parker in *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines*, (1859), p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> See G.A. Robinson in *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 496.

<sup>73</sup> As Westgarth noted, 'Experience of plans, and more accurate knowledge of the habits and character of the Aborigines, have combined to give a somewhat definite and mutually accordant aspect to the methods that have latterly been suggested'. Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 30.

new principle into their minds. To begin with, it was necessary to prevent the Aborigines from being corrupted by the negative example of either white or black. So long as their principal experience of civilisation continued to derive from those more interested in polluting than uplifting their minds and no barriers were established to prevent the transmission of customs and habits from generation to generation, their moral and social condition would inevitably continue to suffer. At the same time, the foundations of civilisation needed to be more firmly laid through the inculcation of settled habits. Only when the propensity of the Aborigines to wander was decidedly broken did there appear to be any chance of making the impressions of civilisation permanent. In short, if the Aborigines were not only to be civilised but preserved, a far more effective system of regulation and instruction had to be adopted than had hitherto been the norm. Reclaiming them in the fullest sense of the word required supervising all aspects of their social relations and for that a rather different institutional arrangement, based upon a system of exclusion rather than inclusion, and a different mode of instruction, based upon a system of discipline rather than pedagogy, was required.

In order to prevent the corruption of the Aboriginal mind, officials recommended a whole series of institutional exclusions. In the first instance it was considered absolutely essential that the Aborigines be separated from the general European population. Prior to the failure of the Missions and the Protectorate it was widely assumed that 'proximity to civilisation' was the best means of bringing the Aborigines into the customs and practices of settled life. But as the Missionaries and Protectors themselves repeatedly suggested, contact with Europeans generally tended to degrade the Aborigines rather than improve them. In representative fashion, the Reverend William Cowper suggested that the Aborigines simply did not have the 'firmness or energy of mind to withstand allurements' in their 'semi-barbarous' or 'partially cultivated' state. Attracted by every new scene, they were quickly 'drawn into temptation and probably immorality and wretchedness' by the example of the labouring classes.<sup>74</sup> Worse still, the white population on the margins of settlement were sufficiently degraded and pernicious to deliberately attempt to instil evil principles into the mind of the heathen. From across the different religious establishments, examples were not wanting of the settlers encouraging the Aborigines to treat the teaching

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<sup>74</sup> The Reverend William Cowper, examined before the Executive Council, 17 April, 1839, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 616.

they received from the Missionaries with laughter and derision.<sup>75</sup> In either event, contact between white and black showed a decided tendency of 'counteracting any beneficial effects that might result from the labours of the Missionary'.<sup>76</sup> Thus, as far as Benjamin Hurst from the Wesleyan Mission at Bunting Dale was concerned, no improvement could ever be expected in the habits of the Aborigines until they were protected from the noxious influence of that disreputable class of settlers residing upon the frontier.<sup>77</sup>

In addition it began to be generally accepted that the different 'Native Tribes' needed to be separated from each other rather than brought together and instructed *en masse*. Until the 1840s it was customary for the Missionaries and Protectors to locate themselves at those points where the different tribes gathered for ceremonial or other purposes. Yet as the reports of government officials made clear, collecting the Aborigines together tended rather to disrupt than assist the process of civilisation. The 'common and fatal error' to which the failure of the Missions and the Protectorate alike could be attributed, wrote one time Assistant Protector, James Dredge, was 'that of attempting to *concentrate* the natives'.<sup>78</sup> By endeavouring to maximise the return upon their efforts, the agents of civilisation and protection had injudiciously tended to 'take up such a position as would combine the largest number of tribes'. Yet not only had this 'unnatural centralisation' provided every opportunity for the natives to maintain their customary (and generally sanguinary) relations, according to Dredge, it gave rise 'to frequent collisions between whites and blacks' which invariably terminated to the disadvantage of the latter.<sup>79</sup> By contrast, the practice of isolating a single tribe, only lately tried by the Wesleyan Missionaries at Bunting Dale, had already proven a more efficient way of proceeding. Having laboured in vain for some years, wrote Westgarth, these evangelists were about to abandon the experiment as hopeless, when it occurred to the Reverend Mr. Tuckfield 'to try a new principle of management with these untractable tribes'. Rather than collect them together, an effort was made 'to separate the different tribes, and maintain them distinct

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<sup>75</sup> Report of the Wesleyan Missionary Society's Mission to the Aborigines of Port Phillip, from November, 1840, to December, 1841, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 503.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 503.

<sup>77</sup> 'It appears to us, that if the Aboriginal race is to be preserved, and the money and labour devoted to the promotion of their civil and religious improvement, are to be made permanent blessings to them, they must be cut off, by some means or other, from all intercourse with European, except with those who are placed among them for their benefit'. *ibid.*, p. 501.

<sup>78</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines*, p. 20. See also Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 4 January, 1843, *HRA*, Series I, vol. XXII, pp. 484-485.

<sup>79</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines*, p. 24.

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and isolated, alike from the white population, and from one another'.<sup>80</sup> And, although it was probably still too early to judge properly, the early indications were that the measure had been met with unprecedented success.

Finally, and most importantly, it was universally agreed that the native children needed to be removed from the influence of their parents as early as possible. Without exception the experiments in civilisation had confirmed that the influence exerted by the older natives over the younger members of their community was a 'most insuperable bar to any real and satisfactory advance in civilisation'.<sup>81</sup> As the carriers of the customs and traditions of the tribes, the elders were invariably listed among that group of 'adverse parties' who exerted a detrimental effect upon the moral development of the Aboriginal children and blocked their path towards civilisation.<sup>82</sup> Obviously isolating the children from their parents would not in and of itself elevate them beyond their natural state of intelligence. Yet, at the very least, the process of separating the one from the other allowed the Missionary to go to work on the minds of the young before they became confirmed in the habits of their parents. Given 'that these little ones would not, at so early an age, have imbibed the bad principles, and conduct of their Parents', suggested the Reverend Charles Wilton in 1828, 'the Teacher would have to contend merely with the *natural disposition*, independent of the acquired and increasing *habit*'.<sup>83</sup> In its most developed form, this process of dissociation involved not only the physical separation of the children from the elders, but the wholesale displacement of the native language. Asked by the chairman of the New South Wales Select Committee of 1849 what means he had taken to 'detach' the Aboriginal children from their own customs and tribes, for instance, the Reverend George King, master of the educational establishment at Fremantle, replied

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<sup>80</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 29.

<sup>81</sup> Mr R.G. Massie to Colonial Secretary Thomson, 17 December, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIV, p. 263. Claims of this kind were repeated endlessly during the 1840s, but for a representative sample see also, Letter from the Commissioner of Crown Lands at Wellington, to the Colonial Secretary, 9 November, 1841, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 487; S. North, Bench of Magistrates, Berrima, in Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, p. 976; Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 39; Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition*, p. 285; and Reverend G. King, in Report of the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1849, p. 443.

<sup>82</sup> See the evidence of the Reverend J. Ham in Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1849, pp. 438, 440.

<sup>83</sup> Reverend C. Wilton, in Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences*, p. 350.

that he 'discountenanced their own language so that they had no means of hearing anything of a bush life'.<sup>84</sup>

At the same time that the agents of protection and civilisation saw the need to erect certain physical barriers to prevent the corruption of the Aboriginal mind by negative influences, they recognised that a different technology of reform was necessary to penetrate to the substratum of their character. Although they offered rather different reasons for their beliefs, both secular and Christian commentators acknowledged that it was not enough to simply teach the Aborigines the so-called ordinary branches of elementary education (reading, writing and arithmetic) and the fundamental truths of the Christian religion (the existence of God and divine system of rewards and punishments). Since the favourable impressions these created generally failed to become firmly embedded in the Aboriginal mind, it was necessary to establish a foundation for civilisation through a system of physical and moral discipline. In essence this shift from 'instruction' (pedagogy) to 'training' (discipline) involved a privileging of the form of education over the content. While more traditional forms of schooling were by no means to be ignored, teachers were increasingly encouraged to concentrate their efforts upon inculcating habits of regularity, cleanliness, obedience and restraint. Particularly among the younger Aborigines, whose minds were supposedly 'more open to receive and retain the impressions made upon them',<sup>85</sup> a rigid system of self-control was expected to have a salutary effect upon both their moral character and general health. For them discipline was to be the rich soil in which the habits and practices of true civilisation would finally take root.

For more secular commentators, this foundation was to be laid by combining instruction (secular and religious) with a disciplinary regime of a military or, more frequently, industrial nature. Of the value of the former to simultaneously improve the mental powers and maintain the order and health of the Aborigines, the Native Police Corps was regularly cited as an exemplary instance. Even Sir George Gipps found the papers in his possession relating to the Native Police to 'strongly confirm' the opinion he had 'long entertained' that 'in the civilisation of savages, Military Discipline, or something nearly approaching it, may advantageously be employed'.<sup>86</sup> Through the physical drills and

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<sup>84</sup> Reverend G. King, in Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1849, p. 444.

<sup>85</sup> Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 11 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 227.

<sup>86</sup> Sir George Gipps to Lord Stanley, 21 March, 1844, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXIII, p. 498.

strict subordination that characterised the operation of the force, great opportunities were opened up both for 'improving the men morally' ('practising their memories' and 'teaching them to reflect') and of 'inculcating habits of regularity, obedience, and cleanliness'.<sup>87</sup> For much the same reasons, training in the arts of industry was increasingly seen to be an important adjunct to instruction in the elements of ordinary and religious education. 'To the omission to instruct the Natives in those Arts', suggested Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy in 1848,

I attribute, in a great degree, the general failure of the experiments in their education which have hitherto been made; although some portion of each day should be devoted to the purposes of instruction, the scholars should also be trained, as early as possible, in mechanical employments and in those of agriculture.<sup>88</sup>

In general the advantage of such occupations was seen to lie less in their practical utility than in the physical and mental discipline they demanded. Since work inculcated habits of regularity and order, it promised to destroy that desire for 'a wild and roving life' so marked among those natives whose education had not partaken of an industrial character.<sup>89</sup>

Among religious commentators the same object was to be achieved less through a military or industrial regime than through the inculcation of a form of 'practical Christianity'. Although they too acknowledged that it was necessary to penetrate to a deeper strata of being to reclaim the Aborigines from their degraded state, they tended to assume that Christianity was the only means of doing so. To advance the condition of the Aborigines, as one of the Missionaries at Wellington Valley put it, a 'new principle' needed to be 'implanted in their minds, and a thorough change effected, by the influence of christianity'.<sup>90</sup> Yet as the proposal for the moral and social improvement of the Aborigines put forward by former Assistant Protector James Dredge made clear, the kind of religious instruction to be undertaken was of a decidedly 'practical' character. When it came to the Aborigines, Christianity was to be set forth, 'not so much in accordance with the wisdom of men, as in its required personal and experimental adaptation to the moral exigencies of

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<sup>87</sup> See for instance, Copy of a Letter from the Commandant of the Native Police to the Colonial Secretary, 1 March, 1852, *NSWLCV&P*, 1852, p. 790.

<sup>88</sup> Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 11 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, p. 227.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>90</sup> See Annual Report of the Mission to the Aborigines at Wellington Valley for the year 1841, *NSWLCV&P*, 1843, p. 483.

fallen sinners'. In this mode the teachings of Christ were to be valued as much as a system of religious truth as a means of fostering the foundations of moral discipline: industry, loyalty, abstinence, constancy. What made the Gospel so essential, according to Dredge, was that the very moment it began to 'operate upon the mind of the heathen' a settled course of life and habits of industry were introduced and made permanent.<sup>91</sup> If Christianity remained at the centre of Missionary endeavour, therefore, its function was no longer purely, perhaps not even predominantly, that of bringing the Aborigines to a higher level of religious understanding. At least in the first instance, the more fundamental object was to inculcate the kind of moral discipline necessary to reconstitute their being and render them productive.

## VI

### From Subjects to Outcasts

From the point of view of the authorities, the institutional arrangement that appeared to offer the best chance of putting these principles into operation was not that of the itinerating Protectorate but that of the fixed Reserve. As the members of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria declared in 1859, 'The only practical method of accomplishing the desired object, and the ~~one~~ most likely under all the circumstances of the case to succeed, would, in the opinion of your Committee, be to form reserves for the various tribes, on their own hunting grounds'.<sup>92</sup> While the value of mobility in reducing conflict among black and white was by no means wholly discounted, even the most generous of the critics of the Protectorate System recognised that attending the Aborigines in their movements from one place to another was an inefficient means of attempting to effect their civilisation. Neither in terms of regulating the social interactions of the Aborigines nor in terms of instructing them in the arts and practices of civilised life, had the supervised migration of the tribes proved a particularly deft instrument. Not only did it prevent the Aborigines from being brought under a regular system of discipline and instruction, it tended to confirm them in precisely the 'erratic habits' that it was the purpose of civilisation to eradicate. As former Assistant Protector James Dredge wryly

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<sup>91</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines*, pp. 31-33.

<sup>92</sup> *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines*, (1859), p. v.

noted in 1845, 'that patronising their migrations by accompanying them to and fro is a likely mode of inducing fixed habits of settled life is not, by any means, very apparent'.<sup>93</sup>

By contrast, locating the Aborigines made it possible to simultaneously insulate them from the influences that had tended so much to corrupt them (whether morally or physically) and to educate and train them. In essence it was supposed the formation of fixed Reserves would serve a dual purpose. In the first place it was to act as a kind of asylum for the Aborigines. Given the constant inroads that were being made into their 'traditional haunts', the loss of their traditional forms of subsistence, and the difficulty of administering appropriate medical supplies, establishing a haven in which the indigenous inhabitants would be simultaneously safeguarded against the settlers and supplied with the necessaries of life appeared not only a matter of justice but one of necessity. Regardless of whether the threat posed by lower classes on the outskirts of European settlement was deemed to be a moral or a medical one (or both), segregation offered an effective means of preventing contamination and arresting the spread of disease and degradation. At the same time, the Reserve created the conditions in which the Aborigines could be brought under a regular system of instruction and discipline. Since it confined the Aborigines to a particular locale, permanent schools could be established for the children in which the elements of ordinary and religious education could be combined with a form of military or industrial discipline.<sup>94</sup> In addition, provided the land set apart was comparatively moderate, it would be possible to ensure that the adult Aborigines began to live, 'not as hunters, in which case', as the Land and Emigration Commissioners put it, 'no good would be done, but as cultivators of the soil'.<sup>95</sup>

From the perspective of the settlers, the benefits the Aborigines could expect to derive from this system should have been sufficient in themselves to induce them to locate and place themselves under the care of the government. Since, at the very least, the Reserve offered the Aborigines protection from the settlers and a regular supply of food and medicine, it was reasonable to expect that their love of the wandering life, so

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<sup>93</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines*, p. 24.

<sup>94</sup> This general plan for the Reserve was put forward in a number of places, but see for instance E.S. Parker in Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, p. 996; Earl Grey to Sir Charles Fitz Roy, 11 February, 1848, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXVI, pp. 226-228; and *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines* (1859), p. v.

<sup>95</sup> Land and Emigration Commissioners to Under Secretary Stephen, 17 July, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XX, p. 740.

destructive to both the interests of the colony and to themselves, might be sufficiently compensated. Every inquiry made by government as to whether the Aborigines were likely to willingly forego their wandering habits and give up their children to the Missionary, however, showed that they would resist the measure. The 'one main error' that had afflicted 'all the schemes devised at a distance for the protection and reclamation of the Aborigines', claimed La Trobe in 1848, was that they took for granted what 'a real acquaintance with the Colony, and the form assumed by its Aboriginal race [had shown] to be unfounded': that the Aborigines would willingly submit to any plan proposed for their benefit. Even when the particular object aimed at was manifestly for their physical comfort and advantage, he suggested, there was no guarantee that they would 'consent to follow as and where you lead'.<sup>96</sup> To anyone who had any experience in the matter it was abundantly evident that the Aborigines would neither settle in one place nor admit their children for instruction in the absence of any physical restraint. In order to render the Reserve System effective in the first instance, therefore, it was necessary to exercise better control, not only over the movements of the tribes, but over their civil relations.

In this way a tension began to emerge between the legal rights of the Aborigines and the measures that appeared necessary to secure their civilisation and preservation. 'The subject of ameliorating their condition' wrote Charles Sturt, is 'one of great difficulty, because it cannot be done without violating those principles of freedom and independence on which it is so objectionable to infringe'.<sup>97</sup> Where civilisation itself may not have provided a sufficient justification for coercion, however, the impending extinction of the race certainly did. Although it appeared unjust to restrain the Aborigines and deprive them of their rights, coercive measures could be readily excused by reference to an evil of far greater proportions: extinction. 'The restraints and deprivations to which, in the attempt to reclaim his mind and habits, it is sought to subject [the Aborigine]', suggested Westgarth, 'are to be excused and justified only in the view, that they are the means of avoiding still greater impending evils'.<sup>98</sup> On this basis a whole range of exclusions and prohibitions were recommended and gained legitimacy in public discourse. Although

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<sup>96</sup> Copy of a Letter from the Superintendent of Port Phillip to the Colonial Secretary, 18 November, 1848, in Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, *NSWLCV&P*, Vol. II, 1849, p. 428.

<sup>97</sup> C. Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, 1849, Vol. II, p. 283.

<sup>98</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 38. See also Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, Vol. II, p. 283.

opinions diverged on other matters, there was near universal agreement among the colonists that the interests of the indigenous inhabitants would be materially advanced by imposing a number of restrictions upon them. In particular, the proper protection of the race was increasingly declared to depend not only upon the 'compulsory restriction' of the Aborigines within the limits of the Reserve, but upon the forcible removal of the children from their parents.<sup>99</sup>

Inevitably some of these 'coercive measures' were introduced against the Aborigines at the local institutional level long before government actually moved to legislate for them. At the Poonindie Training Establishment at South Australia, described in 1856 as 'the most gratifying experiment yet made on the Australian continent', for instance, great success had already been achieved by placing the young people under a system of instruction in which they were induced to 'become estranged from their own customs'.<sup>100</sup> Eventually, however, government began to pass special legislation designed to restrict the Aborigines from engaging in certain harmful practices and to empower its agents of protection to undertake more intrusive measures for their civilisation and preservation. The first mature indication of this shift towards a policy of discrimination came in the form of the Supply of Liquors to Aborigines Prevention Act of 1867.<sup>101</sup> Under this bill any person either licensed or unlicensed was prevented from either selling or supplying the Aborigines with any fermented or spirituous liquor other than for medical purposes. While the Supply of Liquors Act was something of a watershed, however, it was not until the Victorian Parliament passed the Aborigines Protection Act in 1869 that government made a transition from isolated enactments that deprived the Aborigines of certain rights to comprehensive legislation which empowered government to exercise specific controls.<sup>102</sup> In what was to become the model for the Protection Acts brought into force in other colonies during the late nineteenth century, the Victorian legislation actually made it legal for the Governor to make regulations;

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<sup>99</sup> See *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines* (1859), pp. 40, 42, 44.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>101</sup> An Act to prohibit the supply of Intoxicating Liquors to the Aboriginal Natives of New South Wales, 23 December, 1867, 31 Vict., No. 16.

<sup>102</sup> See An Act to Provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria, 11 November, 1869, 33 Vict., No. 349; and A. Markus, 'Australian Governments and the concept of race: an historical perspective', in M. De Lepervanche and G. Bottomley, *The Cultural Construction of Race*, Meglamedia, Annandale, 1988, p. 49.

(I.) For prescribing the place where any aboriginal or any tribe of aborigines shall reside.

(II.) For prescribing the terms on which contracts for and on behalf of aboriginals may be made with Europeans, and upon which certificates may be granted to aboriginals who may be able and willing to earn a living by their own exertions.

(III.) For apportioning amongst aboriginal the earnings of aboriginals under any contract, or where aboriginal are located on a reserve, the net produce of the labor of such aboriginals.

(IV.) For the distribution and expenditure of moneys granted by Parliament for the benefit of aborigines.

(V.) For the care custody and education of the children of aborigines.

(VI.) For prescribing the mode of transacting the business of and the duties generally of the board or any local committee hereinafter mentioned and of the officers appointed hereinafter.<sup>103</sup>

Although government remained anxious to acquit itself of the moral responsibility it had incurred in dispossessing the Aborigines, therefore, the second half of the nineteenth century saw it retreat from the principle of moral equality which had been the mainstay of official policy towards the Aborigines until the 1840s. Considered against the threat of extinction, the delimitation of rights (notably those of native title) was in the eyes of many without question the lesser evil. Naturally this did not mean that officials abandoned all hope of incorporating the original inhabitants within the colonial social contract. If the schools set up within the Reserve were successful in reconstituting their subjectivity in the manner anticipated, there was nothing to prevent the Aborigines being re-admitted to the status of full subjects. In the meantime, however, it was necessary to shift towards a far more paternalistic and discriminatory style of administration in which power was permitted to move, not simply against those 'hostile natives' who threatened the peace and good order of the settlement, but against the 'Aboriginal Race' as a whole. If there was to be any hope, not only of civilising the Aborigines (which in the circumstances tended to become a secondary objective), but of saving them from extinction, it was necessary for the peculiar habits of the race to become subject to government control. In this way the key issue in the management of the Aborigines became less a matter of policing a space than of policing an identity. To 'protect' them in the wider sense that the word was

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<sup>103</sup> An Act to Provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria, 11 November, 1869, 33 Vict., No. 349.

beginning to acquire was not simply a matter of punishing them for what they had done, but of reforming who they were.

## VII

### The Realm of Surveillance

Although the measures taken during the 1830s to bolster the power of the government to protect its subjects were not wholly unsuccessful, the itinerating plan upon which both the mobile policing agencies and the Protectorate were modelled remained a comparatively inefficient one. Doubtless the extension and intensification of public power had been at least partially successful in eliminating conflict between Aborigines and settlers beyond the boundaries of location. On some accounts, even the much maligned Protectors made a significant contribution to the peaceful adjustment of race relations in the southern districts. Yet under the itinerating model the power to protect and to punish depended entirely upon the vagaries of the deterrence mechanism and its costly and clumsy demonstrations of Sovereign might. To be at all effective it was necessary for the agents of government to appear in sufficient numbers and to be sufficiently restrained in their actions for the Aborigines to know that they were watched as well as guarded by the law. And, with the exception of the older more settled areas of the colony, the cost of distributing officers evenly enough as to be an effective deterrent to crime and of supervising their operations closely enough as to ensure moderation in their actions proved beyond the means of the colonial administration. As Lord John Russell suggested to Sir George Gipps in 1840 in reference to 'the conflict carried on with little intermission between the Colonists and the Natives':

It is but too clear that the only effectual remedy for this lamentable evil is an organised force adequate to keep both parties in check, and confine each to the limits which the Government shall assign. But this remedy is so expensive, and requires so much vigilance, so much temper in every soldier or Constable, and the Territory to be traversed is so large, that it is, after all, imperfect.<sup>104</sup>

By contrast the Reserve System opened the possibility of a far more economical, and arguably far more effective, mode of power. As an institutional arrangement based

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<sup>104</sup> Lord John Russell to Sir George Gipps, 25 August, 1840, *HRA*, S.I, Vol. XX, p. 776.

upon locating the Aborigines in one place, the Reserve enabled government to institute a more continuous and more productive system of surveillance than had hitherto been possible. Ultimately it was envisaged that the Reserves would be an entirely self-sufficient operation, reducing the cost of the exertions undertaken for the benefit of the Aborigines 'to an amount comparatively trifling'.<sup>105</sup> Yet even should it fail to provide the means of its own support, the Reserve System allowed government to simultaneously reduce the number of officers in the field and to dispense with the costly and unpredictable displays of its own power. With the delimitation of space to be brought under observation, the efficiency of the machinery of supervision was proportionally enhanced. Through a minimum physical presence it became possible, not only to undertake whatever measures were necessary for the civilisation and welfare of the Aborigines, but to prevent acts of violence being committed either by or on them. At the same time, the Reserve system made it possible for government to exercise control without it being necessary for the Aborigines to recognise the signs of power. Although it was important that the agents entrusted to administer the Reserves took their direction from, and were ultimately controlled by, the authorities, power no longer needed to bear the signature of the Crown in order to be effective. Increasingly more a matter of reform than of deterrence, the management of the Aborigines could be readily performed by an anonymous network of social scientists, religious philanthropists and medical personnel.

It goes without saying that this breakthrough in economy was simultaneously a breakthrough in efficiency. From the outset the Reserve System was a more finely articulated reformatory technology than the Protectorate had ever been. By controlling as far as possible the forces that came into play in the formation of subjectivity, the Reserve (much like the scientific laboratory) made it possible, not simply to undertake the education of the Aborigines, but to reconstitute them in their very being. By carefully manipulating the conditions under which the Aborigines were subjected to experimentation, the Reserve acted as a safeguard against the detrimental influences that had proved so destructive of all previous attempts to civilise them. Indeed to the extent that it made certain strategically sensitive relationships — Aborigine and settler, tribe and tribe, adult and child — accessible to regulation and control, it significantly reduced the potential for the contamination of the subjects that government so much wished to render

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<sup>105</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines*, p. 41.

productive. At least as far as the children were concerned, the process of segregation and confinement left their masters little to contend with other than their natural disposition. In this rigidly controlled and neutralised environment, the positive work of reclamation could then proceed through the combined effect of discipline and instruction. Confined within specific limits, the Aborigines could be subjected to a continuous disciplinary regime of one description or another in the hope that that the arts and practices of civilised life might thereby take root in their minds and provide a foundation for their permanent improvement.

Doubtless the potential for the Reserve System to act as a superior technology for securing the civilisation and preservation of the Aborigines was only ever imperfectly realised. Even judging from the representations of the European agents whose interests were tied up with its success, it is evident that the Aborigines continued to subvert the structures that had been set up supposedly for their benefit. Yet to the extent that the Reserve provided a space in which it was possible to police the social relations of the Aborigines more extensively than ever before, it substantially circumscribed the possibilities for eluding the eye of the power or slipping between the points of its appearance. As James Dredge acknowledged, locating the 'native tribes' in an isolated position and exercising due control over their movements did not guarantee improvement in their habits. 'But even the most irrecclaimable' among them would thereby 'be brought under such surveillance as would naturally check their vicious dispositions, and prevent the influence of their lawless example'.<sup>106</sup> Particularly where the adults were concerned, the Reserve was as much a means for the managing and controlling of the Aborigines as it was for civilising and preserving them. Calculated to remove 'every known inducement' to the 'barbarous customs and wandering habits' of the Aborigine, it promised to maintain the Aborigine 'at least in quietness, without injury to himself or to others'.<sup>107</sup> Even where it proved ineffectual in the higher objects to which it was ostensibly directed, therefore, the move to a stationary technology of surveillance appeared likely to afford far greater security to the lives and property of the colonists than the Protectorate System had ever

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>107</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 37.

been able to accomplish. And that, at least from the perspective of the settlers, was a significant advance.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> To quote Dredge once more, 'Settlers resident in the country will promote their own interests, and secure their own property, by assisting such Missions as, in their results, will effectually relieve them and their servants from the constant and harassing dread of the depredations of the strolling Aborigines'. Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines*, p. 44.

## Section IV

### The Forum of Conscience

In considering the proper mode of dealing with the aborigines of Australia, it is desirable that all extraneous difficulty should be got rid of. Many persons when arguing on this subject turn round and say, 'Well, after all, I do not see what right we have to come and take away their country from them'. This is a mixing up of two questions, which should be kept perfectly distinct. And it is of importance that the right to colonise should be settled in the first instance; for if we have no right to occupy the country, no course of subsequent dealing can, in the forum of conscience, cure the original defect of title, and the sooner that we retrace our steps, and that every European departs from the shores of Australia, the sooner shall we have shown a sincere regret for the injury we have already caused the natives.

C. Griffith, *Present State and Prospects of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales*, 1845.

## The Forum of Conscience

The threat of the extinction of the Aborigines served as a defining moment in colonial race relations. To the extent that it shattered the illusion that there was a necessary coincidence of interests between black and white, it forced the colonists to reflect, in a most urgent and forceful way, upon the duty they owed to the peoples they had usurped. At the limits of this reflection lay a series of questions as to the right of possession itself. Since, as John West acknowledged, the original occupation of the country necessarily involved most of the consequences which followed, it was impossible to separate the question of extinction from the question of sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> In assuming a right to occupy New Holland, the British Government had inevitably set in course the processes that had led to the near destruction of its indigenous inhabitants and it was only in light of those events that the justice of the original act could to be properly assessed. Even posed in these consequentialist terms, however, the problem seemed easily resolved. In line with the utilitarian ethic of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, West, like so many of his contemporaries, was able to assert with due confidence that the dispossession of the Aborigines did not constitute a moral wrong: 'The right of wandering hordes to engross vast regions — for ever to retain exclusive property in the soil, and which would feed millions where hundreds are scattered — can never be maintained'.<sup>2</sup>

The responsibility of the settlers with regard to the Aborigines thus tended to resolve itself into what Charles Griffith referred to as the 'practical question' of how the Aborigines were to be 'dealt with'.<sup>3</sup> Once it was taken for granted that the original occupation was a just measure, the only real consideration was to establish the terms upon which the Aborigines were to be catered for by the British Empire. In the resolution of that question, the full significance of the more intimate relationship established between science and government in the second quarter of the nineteenth century became apparent. For prior to the emergence of the notion of the 'Aboriginal Race' in the 1840s, the duty of

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<sup>1</sup> J. West, *The History of Tasmania*, edited by A.G.L. Shaw, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1971, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 330-331. As Westgarth also asserted: 'We can only urge, by way of justification for our unceremonious intrusion, that a vast territory like Australia, hitherto appropriated to a handful of the rudest savages, is now being rapidly transformed into a scene of prosperous industry, the future seat of millions of our fellow-countrymen, and the dawn of a great and interesting empire'. W. Westgarth, *Australia Felix; Or a Historical and Descriptive Account of the Settlement of Port Phillip*, New South Wales, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1848, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> C. Griffith, *Present State and Prospects of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales*, William Curry, Jun. & Co., Dublin, 1845, p. 171.

the colonists with regard to the indigenous inhabitants was framed in terms of the protection of their human rights. Irrespective of the fact that they were regarded as little more than 'untutored savages' (or rather because of it), protection from oppression and injustice was assumed to form part of their natural endowment. Indeed, as human beings possessed of a common nature with the European, they were deemed to be morally entitled to the same rights as any other subject within the allegiance of the Crown. The only question that presented itself was whether the best means of bringing them to an appreciation of their rights and a sense of their duties was conciliation or coercion.

Once the 'discovery' that the Aborigines were 'peculiarly constituted' set them adrift from the relatively safe mooring of moral equality, a wholly different sense of political responsibility emerged. To the extent that the 'mental habits' of the Aborigines set their civilisation and preservation in opposition to their freedom and autonomy, a more restrictive regime of management appeared increasingly necessary and thus increasingly legitimate. Already by the middle of the nineteenth century, government was beginning to define its duty to the indigenous inhabitants it had dispossessed in consequentialist (as opposed to de-ontological) terms. Working on the assumption that they were incapable of acting in their own best interests, it abandoned its former policy of non-discrimination and began to treat them as a special case. Within this increasingly utilitarian approach, the primary responsibility of the authorities was not to protect the rights of the Aborigines but to preserve their lives. In the moral hierarchy of ends and means, saving the people was more important than saving their liberty and for that it was necessary to gain a mastery over their 'unregenerate habits'. In this way, a whole range of coercive measures, the sole purpose of which was to fracture the Aborigines completely and irrevocably from their cultural practices, began to be considered legitimate. All of a sudden, social engineering (and later eugenics) ceased to be unconscionable measures and became instead acts of sovereign mercy.

In this politics of mastery an increasingly important place was reserved for the technical knowledge supplied by the agents of protection and civilisation. To the extent that this knowledge illuminated the internal structures regulating the Aboriginal mode of life, it was a valuable commodity in undertaking the process of reclamation. To know the precise manner in which the Aborigines were constituted was also to know how

to best go about eradicating their habits. What became less important in this functional regime was the kind of approach to difference that continued to form the foundation of the pure scientific, Christian and Romantic traditions. Of those three, however, only the Romantic offered the possibility of a more constructive sense of responsibility to otherness than that provided by government itself. For scientists, the threat of extinction tended merely to become an occasion for renewing their efforts at preserving as much information about the Aborigines as possible. Christians devoted their attention to preserving both the lives of the Aborigines and their souls, but premised the success of both ventures upon the eradication of their traditional customary practices. From the Romantics, by contrast, came a certain recognition of and respect for difference that for all its tendency to collapse into a kind of aesthetics held certain positive possibilities for relating to others.

## Chapter VI

### Preserving the Aborigine

#### I

##### Science and the Preservation of Knowledge

In the field of science the relationship between the European (knower) and Aboriginal (known) was inevitably mediated through a concept of knowledge. How scientists related to the Aborigines depended in large measure upon the epistemological conditions that needed to be satisfied to invest their observations and analyses with the status of truth. In the work of colonial naturalists these rules tended to act as a wholly implicit foundation of inquiry. Much in the manner of conventions dealing with the admissibility and inadmissibility of evidence in a court of law (a metaphorical relation by no means lost on some contemporaries),<sup>1</sup> they tended to be more presupposed than articulated. Generally speaking, they only came to the surface of the colonial text during those disputes *inter se* where the margins of knowledge itself with regard to the Aborigines were in the process of being defined. Invoked on these occasions as a means of policing the boundary between truth and falsehood, they highlighted the conditions naturalists were expected to satisfy if their observations were to be authorised. In order to reconstruct the epistemological foundations of colonial scientific practice, therefore, it is necessary to take a somewhat indirect route. At least in the first instance, the concept of truth upon which it was built will be established by turning to those instances in which naturalists, motivated by a desire to eliminate misrepresentation, indicated what it was not. In this way it will be possible to establish, not only what counted as knowledge in the different phases of colonial scientific development, but the sense of responsibility to the other that each of these phases made possible.

On first impressions the epistemological foundations of natural history until the 1840s consisted in little more than the disinterested pursuit of the facts. For the most part, colonial naturalists were inclined to attribute the many 'erroneous impressions' of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Æneas, 'Phrenology. No. II', *The Colonial Literary Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 1844, p. 75.

Aborigines circulating both in the colony and abroad to two fundamental types of error. On the one hand there were those 'errors of observation' (arising either from interested motives or extravagant sentiment) that led naturalists to give a distorted account of the object under examination and, on the other hand, those 'errors of inference' (arising either from ignorance or prejudice) that led them to draw the wrong conclusions from what they had in fact seen correctly.<sup>2</sup> To these two persistent problems, naturalists were inclined to attribute almost every mistaken impression and every failure of dispassionate judgement. If the natives of New Holland had been by turns elevated and traduced it was because commentators had either remained insufficiently detached or overstepped the limits of the facts. To the extent that they can be said to have followed an epistemology, therefore, it rested upon a twofold set of distinctions between 'fact' and 'opinion' and 'inference' and 'speculation'. If naturalists were to preserve the integrity of scientific inquiry, it was necessary to guard against the drift towards opinion driven by interest and rhetoric on the one hand, and the push towards speculation driven by ignorance and preconception on the other. In the interests of attempting to gain a better understanding the conception of knowledge at work in natural history it is worthwhile considering each of these conditions in turn.

Colonial naturalists sought to stamp out misrepresentations occasioned by avarice or ambition by demanding that the work of the author gratified 'no other passion than that of laudable curiosity'.<sup>3</sup> Unlike those serving special interests (particularly their own) who would always be inclined to misrepresentation or exaggeration of one form or another, the 'man of science' prided himself on treating the pursuit of knowledge as an almost intransitive activity. Although, as Alexandro Malaspina suggested in relation to statements an enthusiastic Joseph Banks made about the colony of New South Wales, even the President of the Royal Society was not immune to ill-informed zeal, nor necessarily unswayed by a desire to see his scholarly efforts used to the advantage of his Fatherland, he was still distinguished among other less reputable commentators of the public administration for being unwilling 'to pawn with destructive aims his Humane and

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction was put forward by West. See J. West, *The History of Tasmania*, edited by A.G.L. Shaw, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1971, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> S. Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in His Majesty's Ship the Endeavour*, Charles Dilly, London, 1784. Reprinted by Caliban Books, London, 1984, p. vii.

Philosophic character'.<sup>4</sup> More than anything else perhaps, it was this disinterestedness which separated naturalists from merchants and politicians. Concerned with knowledge rather than profit, exploration and discovery rather than prestige and power, they staked their claim to authenticity (as Malaspina himself did) on an 'habitual impartiality' and a heart 'not infected with Egotism'.<sup>5</sup> If their representations were not entirely free from distortion, therefore, they were at least able to rest upon that sincere and prudential regard for truth that encouraged Collins 'to mention only such facts' about the customs and language of the natives of New South Wales 'respecting which after much attention and inquiry, he could satisfy his mind'.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to such 'external' demonstrations of their fidelity to the facts, it was also requisite that the naturalist provide, in the words of Lort Stokes, sufficient 'internal evidence' of their truth.<sup>7</sup> Since the aim of ethnological description was to establish a direct correlation between representation and its object, it was important to prevent the medium of communication itself from refracting reality through rhetorical excess. Regardless of whether it was referred to as the 'concise phraseology of the science' (Westgarth), 'the language of official documents' (Dredge) or, in a more personal turn, 'my own plain and homely language' (Dawson), the stylistic principal adopted by the naturalist was for all intents and purposes the same: simplicity and economy of expression were preferable to those more ornate and polished compositions where the artifice of the author was all too apparent.<sup>8</sup> It was not that a certain elegance of style and diction was entirely eschewed by natural historians, still less that they explicitly declared it incompatible with scientific knowledge. Yet whenever they evoked, as did Dawson, 'the simplicity of truth, and the honest testimony of an unprejudiced mind, as compensation for the absence of polished

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<sup>4</sup> A. Malaspina, 'A Political Examination of the English Colonies in the Pacific', in R.J. King, *The Secret History of the Convict Colony*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 93, 144.

<sup>6</sup> D. Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, T. Cadell Jun. & W. Davies, London, 1798. Reprinted by A.H. & A.W. Reed in Association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, 1975, p. 513..

<sup>7</sup> J. Lort Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia; With an Account of the Coasts and Rivers Explored and Surveyed During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle, in the Years 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43*, Vol. I, T. and W. Boone, London, 1846, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> See W. Westgarth, *Australia Felix; or, A Historical and Descriptive Account of the settlement of Port Phillip, New South Wales: Including Full Particulars of the Manners and Condition of the Aboriginal Natives*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1848, p. 47; J. Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines of New South Wales*, James Harrison, Geelong, 1845, p. 4; and R. Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1830, Archival Facsimiles Limited, Alburgh, 1987, p. xii.

style and methodical arrangement', it was with more than a hint of disingenuousness.<sup>9</sup> Since truth was generally perceived to be consonant with realism, faithful representations could only be achieved by way of a neutral observation language stripped of any obfuscating artifice or literary embellishment. Rather than attract attention to himself or, still worse, to the medium in which he worked, the natural historian had to generate a kind of transparency between subject and object through the eradication of any signs of linguistic performance. To claim of a particular account that its 'only ornament was truth', was thus not to disparage it, but to afford it a very high recommendation indeed.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, as much as it was important to ensure the reliability and neutrality of scientific observations, sincerity and rhetorical restraint were not of themselves sufficient to guarantee against misrepresentation. In a context where the great distance between the colony and the mother country caused 'almost everything regarding it to be viewed through a false medium',<sup>11</sup> experience (and the more extensive the better) acted as the critical ingredient of truth. Only by having 'been there', to borrow a phrase employed so felicitously by Clifford Geertz,<sup>12</sup> was it possible to distinguish the 'reality of things' in the colony from the 'descriptions that had been given of them in England' and endeavour to replace them with an account of them 'as they really were'.<sup>13</sup> Since those actually possessing the requisite information had generally failed to secure attention 'amidst all the conflicting testimony or misrepresentation by which a person at a distance is ever apt to be assailed and misled', it became commonplace to seek authorisation on the basis of more or less lengthy periods of residence in the antipodes.<sup>14</sup> Naturally as time wore on and the boundaries of location in the colony were extended, the basic requirement of 'being there' gave way to demands for more extensive forms of interaction with the native inhabitants than those offered in and around Port Jackson. As both Dawson and Grey testified,

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<sup>9</sup> Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, pp. xii-xiii. Compare this with following passage from Collins: 'to a work of this nature a style ornamental and luxuriant would have been evidently inapplicable'. Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, p. xxxvii.

<sup>10</sup> Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*, p. xxiii.

<sup>11</sup> Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, pp. xvi.

<sup>12</sup> C Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, p. xvii.

<sup>14</sup> See E.J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia, and Overland from Adelaide to King Georges Sound, in the Years 1840-1*, Vol. II, T. & W. Boone, London, 1845. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 7, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964, pp. 502-503; Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, pp. xi-xii; and J. Henderson, *Observations on the Colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1832, p. v.

representations of the Aborigines formed on the basis of a scanty or incomplete knowledge of the facts could be just as misleading as those formed out of complete ignorance.<sup>15</sup> But if the general criteria of observation and experience could permit such finer discriminations, the conditions of accurate representation remained essentially the same. Much in the spirit of Callender — who in the process of reviewing the unresolved question of the Patagonian giants asserted that 'Nothing but the actual seeing such a race of giants, can establish their existence'<sup>16</sup> — it was taken as axiomatic that the imagination was not to be given a freer reign than what the eyes could behold.

If the source of many errors regarding 'these poor Aborigines' was, as Dawson maintained, the 'ignorance which has hitherto prevailed upon the subject',<sup>17</sup> there was a still more formidable enemy to truth to be countered. Since the gradual progress of knowledge itself could generally be relied on to 'correct the errors which inadvertence or the deficiency of information may have occasioned' misrepresentations arising from ignorance were of far less import than those engendered by bias.<sup>18</sup> Invariably the gravest errors were introduced into scientific discourse, to paraphrase Bayle in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, not so much because the mind was void of knowledge, but because it was full of prejudice.<sup>19</sup> What blocked the path to the truth above all else were those rationalist propositions, spun out of the imagination like a spiders web, that never descended so far as to touch the object under investigation.<sup>20</sup> Based upon false premises and deduced logically argument from argument, these 'speculative theories' or 'revelries of the closet' were not simply innocent errors arising from a lack of information, but deceptions introduced into the very structure of scientific inquiry by the desire to anticipate the discovery before the process of exploration had even commenced.<sup>21</sup> If the integrity of scientific investigation was to be vouchsafed, therefore, emphasis needed to be given, not to abstract speculations fashioned in the closet, but to facts derived from direct

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<sup>15</sup> See Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, p. xiv; and G. Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia*, Vol. II, T. & W. Boone, London, 1841, p. 260.

<sup>16</sup> J. Callender, *Terra Australis Cognita or Voyages to the Terra Australis*, Vol. 3, N. Israel, Amsterdam, 1967, p. 727. Originally published by A. Donaldson, London, 1768.

<sup>17</sup> Dawson, *The Present State of Australia*, p. xiii.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, p. xv; and J. Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines of New South Wales*, James Harrison, Geelong, 1845, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1951, p. 162.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance, West, *The History of Tasmania*, p. 260; and Grey, *Journal of Two Expeditions*, Vol. II, p. 367.

<sup>21</sup> See Grey, *Journal of Two Expeditions*, Vol II, pp. 217, 220; and E.S. Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, Hugh M'Coll, Melbourne, 1854, p. 6.

experience. Only in this way could scientists provide a secure foundation for the construction of hypotheses and a sure means of arbitrating between conflicting knowledge claims.

While these various strictures allowed the natural history of man to be properly classed as an empirical science, however, they did not work to divest it of all normative presuppositions. Reduced to its simplest form, the epistemological foundation of the science amounted to little more than a appeal to look carefully and describe accurately. Ethnographic misrepresentation (which at this point was nothing more or less than distorted vision) could be avoided by eliminating those four idols — interest and sentiment, ignorance and prejudice — which constantly interfered to prevent dispassionate judgement. Yet it is evident that the whole process of determining the facts continued to occur within and be shaped by the metaphysical parameters of the account of human origins given in the Book of Genesis and the order of creation established by the Great Chain of Being. Although naturalists went to great lengths to demonstrate that their observations and inferences were faithful, their practice consisted in little more than the production of empirical proofs for preconceived notions. The ultimate purpose of scientific inquiry was to either confirm or deny a certain set of propositions — the original unity of the species or the continuity of creation — that were determined well in advance of the accumulation of sensory data. If recourse needed to be taken to the ordinary methods of observation and experience to resolve debates about such things as the relative advantages or disadvantages of the state of nature, therefore, that was where the utility of the facts ended. Science was essentially there to legitimate a certain view of the world and, as a consequence, the study of man remained deeply impregnated with moral presumptions.<sup>22</sup>

With the development of the new ethnological sciences during the 1840s an instrumental imperative was introduced into the study of man that fundamentally altered the metaphysical foundations of the science and divested it of normative presuppositions. In part this instrumentalisation was reflected in (and made possible by) the push towards

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<sup>22</sup> So it was, according to Lovejoy, that naturalists, concerned to fill out the space between the apes and man tended to assume that 'among the more remote peoples semi-human beings might be found as had now and then been described in traveller's narratives. Some voyagers testified to having seen with their own eyes men with tails; others had encountered tribes incapable of speech'. See A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1933, p. 233.

universal natural laws that was the defining feature of the new sciences of ethnology. Once racial differences were assumed to reside in organic structures, colonial scientists could no longer content themselves with what Tench had called 'the humble province of detailing facts'.<sup>23</sup> In order to understand the characteristic behaviour displayed by the Aborigines it was necessary to proceed from effects to causes and begin to specify, in the form of natural laws, the precise structural conditions upon which it depended.<sup>24</sup> As Grey suggested, a proper understanding of the 'social system' of the Aborigines could not be grasped simply by describing 'isolated customs'. In a move which found equivalents in the physiological analyses of Field and the philological analyses of Threlkeld, it was also necessary 'to digest them into one mass, and to exhibit them in the aggregate, so that an inference might be drawn as to how far the state in which the natives of Australia are at present found, is caused by the institutions to which they are subjected'.<sup>25</sup> Naturally it was the manifold data of sense experience that provided the point of departure and constant measure of validity for such an endeavour. No general proposition could be attested which was not derived, in the words of Mann, from a 'rigid adherence to the facts'.<sup>26</sup> Yet the end point of ethnological analysis was not the mere accumulation of data, but the formulation of physiological, sociological and philological laws which were 'as certain and definite as those which control the movements of the heavenly bodies'.<sup>27</sup>

The emergence of this nomological thrust in colonial ethnology brought with it two important implications. To begin with, it endowed scientific knowledge with a previously unavailable instrumental or functional value. In coming to understand how the laws governing the physiological, sociological and philological systems of the Aborigines worked to maintain them in a state of 'barbarism', ethnologists opened up a range of new sites for political manipulation and control. Inevitably, the discovery of the structural causes for the failure of the indigenous inhabitants to either adopt civilised habits or withstand the challenge of European settlement, went hand in hand with the emergence of more finely articulated measures to secure their civilisation and welfare. In the schemes put forward by the likes of Dredge and Westgarth, Grey and Eyre during the 1840s, it was always a knowledge of the underlying causes of their peculiar habits (their Aboriginality)

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<sup>23</sup> W. Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961, p. 300.

<sup>24</sup> See Grey, *Journal of Two Expeditions*, Vol. II, p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>26</sup> D.D. Mann, *The Present Picture of New South Wales*, John Booth, London, 1811, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Grey, *Journal of Two Expeditions*, Vol. II, pp. 207, 219-224.

that provided the foundation for making 'therapeutic' interventions. Having recognised that the Aborigines were constituted by mechanisms beyond their own immediate control, these reformers were able to determine precisely what measures needed to be undertaken to master them and reclaim them from their 'barbarous state'.<sup>28</sup> Naturally pure ethnological inquiry continued to be driven by higher philosophical concerns about the origins of the species. But it was always possible to separate these more metaphysical questions from the residue of technical knowledge developed in the process of trying to resolve them. As Westgarth's *Report on the Condition, Capabilities and Prospects of the Aborigines* illustrated, officials could jettison the more arcane features of the science while adapting its technical insights to the pursuit of certain instrumental ends.<sup>29</sup>

In the second place, the positivist turn in colonial ethnology tended to empty it of any normative content (other than perhaps utility itself) and encourage the total objectification of the people it was attempting to understand. With the turn to the hidden depths of being, ethnologists tended to restrict their inquiry to the underlying systems responsible for the peculiar habits of the 'Aboriginal race'. Rather than approach their study as an opportunity to confirm or deny a set of metaphysical presumptions (like the unity of the species), they merely sought to discover, at a highly practical level, the way in which the Aborigines were put together. Within this positivist way of thinking, the Aborigines were entirely reducible to a collection of organic structures whose operation was regulated by certain natural laws. If there was a key to their peculiar habits, to their thought and action, it was to be found, not in some metaphysical moral core, but in the peculiar configuration of parts within their animal economy, social system and linguistic structure. Unlike its predecessor, natural history, therefore, ethnology did not work within any overarching moral framework that established the rightful place of humanity in the order of things and assigned rights and responsibilities accordingly. In no sense did the Aborigines serve (as they continued to within the Christian and Romantic traditions) as a kind of normative guide — a bearer of moral lessons. Like any other specimen in the laboratory of nature they were comprised of a set of organic structures that caused them

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<sup>28</sup> Thus George Grey: 'I do not hesitate to assert my full conviction that, whilst those tribes, which are in communication with Europeans, are allowed to execute their barbarous laws and custom upon one another, so long will they remain hopelessly immersed in their present state of barbarism'. See Captain Grey to Lord John Russell, 4 June, 1840, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XXI, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> W. Westgarth, *Report on the Condition, Capabilities and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines*, William Clarke, Melbourne, 1846, preface.

to behave in precisely the way that they did. In short, by the 1840s, colonial ethnology was beginning to return the Aborigines to nature and to treat them as a set of structural operations necessary for survival.

In this way, whatever moral responsibility natural history had assumed towards its 'objects of investigation' as a consequence of its metaphysical presumptions tended to disappear. The necessary effect of the positivist epistemology was a relationship of subject to object in which the role of colonial ethnologists was to place the Aborigines under ever more intrusive forms of observation and experiment, to reduce their way of life to a regular system of knowledge, and to control the spaces (principally the ethnographic text and the natural history collection) for its exhibition and analysis. Forced to exclude from their field of inquiry (as indeed likely to corrupt it), understanding based upon personal interaction and exchange, they were only able to apprehend the other as observers looking in from the outside. Naturally ethnologists were required to communicate with the Aborigines to obtain the raw information from which they hoped to abstract towards natural laws. Even if it was only to induce them to submit to being examined (as it often was for physiologists) they still needed to engage with the other at some level in the scientific enterprise.<sup>30</sup> But since it was assumed that the Aborigines were necessarily unaware of the underlying structures in which their racial distinction resided, it was impossible to treat the representations they gave of themselves on their own merits.<sup>31</sup> True, the indigenes could play the role of the informant, but they could never make an intervention into the discourse that was being constructed about them as an interlocutor. If

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<sup>30</sup> The following anecdote from Bennett provides some sense of the relationship: 'When on one occasion the head of a native was under examination, a gentleman present asked the wondering black, "if he knew what was doing to his head?" Blackee answered in the negative. "Why you will no more be able to catch kangaroos or opossums". No sooner was this said, than the black started away in anger, seized and flourished his spear, exclaiming, "What for you do that? What for you do all the same that!" And the unfortunate manipulator of savage craniums, as also his companion, began to be apprehensive, that the practice of the science was in a high degree dangerous among uncivilised beings'. See G. Bennett, *Wanderings in New South Wales, Batavia, Pedir Coast, Singapore, and China*, Vol. I, Richard Bentley, London, 1834. *Australiana Facsimile Editions* No. 115, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1967, p. 243n.

<sup>31</sup> Thus philologists spoke of the 'natural inability' of the Aborigines to answer grammatical questions. See C.G. Teichmann and C.W. Schürmann, *Outlines of a Grammar, Vocabulary and Phraseology, of the Aboriginal Language of South Australia, Spoken by the Natives in and for some Distance around Adelaide*, Robert Thomas & Co., Adelaide, 1840. *Australiana Facsimile Editions* No. 39, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1962, p. v.

there was a conversation implicit in the ethnological enterprise it was only the one that science was carrying on with itself.<sup>32</sup>

It is scarcely surprising, then, that colonial ethnologists responded to the impending extinction of the Aborigines by doing no more than endeavouring to record as much about them as they could. With the ethnological treasure trove rapidly disappearing, the 1840s bore witness to an intensification in the attempt to accumulate and systematise knowledge about the Aborigines. With the process of extinction threatening to finally deprive ethnologists of their 'objects of investigation', they redoubled their efforts at recording every last detail of the Aboriginal way of life before it finally disappeared. As the self-appointed guardians of the font of knowledge bearing upon the origins of the species, they considered it their scientific responsibility to rescue the Aborigines from oblivion by carefully recording their secrets for posterity. Of this scientific ethic colonial science sponsored many examples, but it was probably encapsulated as succinctly in the following passage by George French Angus as anywhere else:

As British civilisation is daily spreading over the Australian continent, so the degraded natives of the soil are fast disappearing; and, in New South Wales especially, they will, ere long, have totally disappeared. During my stay there, I made constant search and inquiry into the past history and customs of the aborigines; and, combining my own observations with those of others who have been eye-witnesses to their ceremonies, I have been enabled to preserve such records of these people as may prove interesting to ethnologists at a future day.<sup>33</sup>

By mastering the rules regulating the Aboriginal way of life, colonial ethnologists hoped to prevent the earliest stage of human development from being forever consigned to the darkness of a prehistory without records. For them, the impending extinction of the Aborigines brought with it the heavy, but doubtless deeply seductive, duty of mediating between the past and the future for the benefit of all mankind.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> On this point see E.W. Said, 'Intellectuals in the post-colonial world', *Salmagundi*, No. 70-71, Spring-Summer, 1986, p. 55.

<sup>33</sup> G.F. Angus, *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. II, Smith, Elder, & Co., London, 1847. Australian Facsimile Editions No. 184, Libraries Board of 'South Australia, Adelaide, 1969, p. 210. The evidence of C.W. Carr before the Select Committee of 1859 was perhaps even more illuminating: 'I cannot suggest any plan by which the aborigines of this country might be saved from ultimate extinction, nor can I resist confessing that I can see no good likely to result morally, socially, or commercially, in the preservation of a race so utterly useless and irreclaimable, except it be the desirability of preserving a few living specimens of the lowest type of humanity for the investigation of science'. See C.W. Carr in *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria* (1859), p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> As James Bonwick wrote in 1870, 'Conscious of the imperfections of his undertaking, it has been his honest effort to bring together the most reliable information about the Lost Race of Tasmania, that men of

Obviously in the 1840s it was the very physical survival of the Aborigines that appeared to be in question. But the figure of extinction soon entrenched itself in ethnological discourse as a metaphor for the disappearance, not so much of a particular people, but of a certain pre-modern cultural world — a world which it was the self-appointed duty of the science of man to preserve.<sup>35</sup> In what has become an enduring topos, ethnology enshrined itself as a mediator between the first and last ages of man. Possessed of a technology that aboriginal peoples did not have — writing — it sought to do for them (and for us) what they were apparently unable to do for themselves: preserve their culture. Of course, in adopting such an approach, ethnology was effectively laying the first wreath upon its own grave. For in a paradoxical way, the preservation of the memory of early man provided both the ultimate legitimation and the terminal move of an ethnological enterprise that refused its objects of investigation a history and subjectivity of their own. Having restricted itself to embalming those traditional cultures that were supposedly fast disappearing, the scientific study of man simultaneously gained the supreme justification for its own existence and 'lost' the very thing upon which that existence was based. Naturally for a time there was work to do aplenty. But in the end ethnology would have nothing left before it than the melancholy pursuit of shrinking shadows and the uncertain pleasure of chasing its own tail. Even before 1870, therefore, the science of man had set itself on course for the dilemma that would pose itself in all its force in the following century: 'For ethnology to live, its object must die. But the latter revenges itself by dying for having been "discovered", and defies by its death the science that wants to take hold of it'.<sup>36</sup>

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science in future days may have some record of the tribes now gone from the earth'. J. Bowditch, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, London, 1870. Reprinted by Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York, 1967, preface.

<sup>35</sup> As Levi-Strauss himself noted: 'Inevitably, circumstances have made anthropologists the unworthy repositories of a vast amount of sociological and philosophical experience — the experience of the so-called primitive societies to whom writing was unknown, which is gradually being wiped out and which it is our function to preserve as far as possible'. See C. Charbonnier (ed.), *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1969, p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> J. Baudrillard cited in K. Bentrak, S. Muecke, and P. Roe, *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology*, with R. Keogh, Butcher Joe (Nangan), and E.M. Lohie, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, p. 183.

## II

### Government and the Preservation of Life

From the outset attempts to secure the amalgamation of Aborigines and settlers (which of course meant the subjection of the former) took shape within a discourse about the moral foundations of colonisation. Since the British right of occupation was bound up with the notion of conferring an advantage upon the indigenous inhabitants whose autonomy was being usurped, the means used to effect colonisation became a measure of the legitimacy of foreign rule. In this forum of conscience the methods employed by other European states provided a kind of negative benchmark for the treatment of indigenous peoples. 'Should we ever be fortunate enough to effectuate a discovery, and make settlements in the Southern world', wrote John Callender in 1768, 'the example of the Spaniards will prove a useful lesson, and teach us to avoid avarice and cruelty'. Since the conquistadors had blackened their faith by proceeding 'to exterminate, with the most unheard-of barbarity, millions of their fellow creatures', it was incumbent upon those imbued with a more enlightened spirit of humanity to proceed along a different course. As men, as Englishmen, and as Christians, the British deemed themselves triply bound to undertake the colonisation of the *Terra Australis* in ways that were more consistent with principles of humanity and justice than those employed by other imperial powers.<sup>37</sup> Thus in all their dealings with the Aborigines, government demonstrated an avowed solicitude about the means by which the natives of New Holland were being incorporated within the British Empire.

Prior to the 1840s government attempted to discharge the duty it had incurred to the indigenous inhabitants of New Holland in taking possession of their country by making them a party to the social contract. From the very outset this involved both an extension of legal rights to the Aborigines and an undertaking to effect their civilisation. By virtue of the unreserved sovereignty claimed by the British, the Aborigines were effectively placed on an equal legal footing with the settlers. One or two anomalies notwithstanding (such as the inadmissibility of their evidence in a court of law), they were entitled to the same

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<sup>37</sup> J. Callender, *Terra Australia Cognita: or, Voyages to the Terra Australis*, Vol. I, A. Donaldson, Edinburgh, 1799. Reprinted by N. Israel & Da Capo Press, Amsterdam & New York, 1967, pp. 11-12.

protections and subject to the same punishments as any other subject within the allegiance of the Crown. Given that the Aborigines appeared as little more than 'untutored savages', however, the authorities did not expect that they would become immediately sensible either of their rights or, perhaps more importantly, their responsibilities. Not until their manners were polished and their nature softened by 'ordinary' and 'religious' instruction, would they be able to enter fully into their new civil association and avail themselves of its many benefits. In order to fulfil its responsibility to the indigenous inhabitants it had dispossessed, therefore, government was required not simply to secure them from harm, but to undertake whatever measures were necessary for their moral development. As William Cowper reported to the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question of 1838:

It is certainly the duty of the British Government and of the colony to do all in their power to preserve this unhappy race from extirpation, and not to leave them in a worse condition than that in which they previously existed. But more than this they ought not to be satisfied with any thing less than making them Christians, and elevating them to the scale in human society, for which they may be fitted by instruction and civilisation, and to which Christianity will eventually lead them.<sup>38</sup>

It will be immediately apparent that this social contract was built upon a Christian liberal notion of moral equality. If, from the very outset, government was prepared to afford the Aborigines rights to person and property equivalent to those granted to putatively more civilised beings, it was only because such rights were assumed to inhere in human nature itself. Even where it was not explicitly articulated, the foundation of official policy towards the Aborigines during the early years of settlement was the belief that they too were moral beings, possessed, in however undeveloped a form, of the same potential for dignity and the same capacity for happiness as Europeans. At no stage was it assumed that the uncivilised state of the dispossessed exempted the British Government from honouring the obligations due to them as fellow men. Irrespective of their position in the order of civilisation, protection from oppression and injustice formed part of their natural endowment. This is not to say that there were no other foundations upon which moral obligations to the Aborigines might be incurred. As the House of Commons Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements) reported in 1837:

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from the Reverend W.M. Cowper to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Australia, 28 September, 1838, in *Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines Question, with the Minutes of Evidence*. Ordered by Council to be Printed, 12 October, 1838, J. Spilsbury, Sydney, 1838, p. 60.

beyond the obligations of common honesty, we are bound by two considerations with regard to the uncivilised: first, that of the ability which we possess to confer upon them the most important benefits; and secondly, that of their inability to resist any encroachments, however unjust, however mischievous, which we may be disposed to make. The disparity of the parties, the strength of the one and the incapacity of the other, to enforce the observance of their rights, constitutes a new and irresistible appeal to our compassionate protection.<sup>39</sup>

Yet it was as 'human beings partaking of one common nature' that the Aborigines were, above all else, assumed to have 'an equal right with the people of European origin to the protection and assistance of the law of England'.<sup>40</sup> At the most basic level, their claim upon the authorities resided in what the Aborigines Protection Society referred to as the 'rights of humanity'.<sup>41</sup>

Inevitably the persistent failure of government to either secure the Aborigines in the enjoyment of those fundamental rights or confer on them the advantages of civilisation was a source of great anxiety to itself and sweeping condemnation from others. Particularly when it came to their usufructuary rights to the soil, humanitarian and Christian groups inveighed against what they perceived to be a miserable failure of justice. The 'question of the Aborigines', as Threlkeld put it, 'resolves itself into one of a very simple nature':

We are a Christian nation, commanded to 'love thy neighbour as thyself'; and directed that 'all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them'. And until these precepts be recognised as the governing principle of our laws, and acted upon by nations, churches, families, and individuals, there will be 'envying strife, confusion, and every evil work'. As a nation *we have placed ourselves* in a position that has *compelled* the Aborigines to become our *neighbours*, and we have worked ill towards our neighbours, because we, the many, dispossess the few Blacks of their rights to birth, which convey to them a certain district, in which they seek and obtain their means of subsistence.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*. Reprinted, with comments, by the 'Aborigines Protection Society', William Ball, London, 1837, pp. 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Proclamation Concerning the Establishment of Commissioners of Crown Land in New South Wales, 21 May, 1839, in H. Reynolds, *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*, p. xi.

<sup>42</sup> N. Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E. Threlkeld: Missionary to the Aborigines 1824-1859*, Vol. I, Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 40, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1974, p. 146.

Naturally in their own defence the authorities drew attention to the difficulties involved in providing effective protection within a settlement extended over so vast an extent of territory and comprised of some of the very dregs of civilised society.<sup>43</sup> Yet it is apparent that they were frequently as concerned about the injustices inflicted upon the Aborigines as their detractors. Particularly as the humanitarian movement in England, following the abolition of slavery in 1833, redirected its energies into defending the rights of indigenous inhabitants embodied into the British Empire, government (both in the colony and in England) became ever more solicitous about protecting the Aborigines from oppression.<sup>44</sup> As the formation of the Protectorate System in 1838 and the recognition of the usufructuary interests of the Aborigines in the land a decade later clearly indicated, it by no means took its responsibilities to the indigenes lightly.

Much as government was anxious to bring theory and practice into line with respect to protecting the rights of the Aborigines, however, its Christian liberal conception of humanity prevented it from calling into question the process of settlement itself. Since it assumed that the Aborigines were at base motivated by the same desires and actuated by the same passions, it scarcely even considered colonisation, provided it was effected in accordance with the principles of justice, to be inconsistent with the interests of the indigenes themselves. In all the attempts made by the Colonial Government to conciliate the affections of the Aborigines, it assumed the introduction of civilisation would be beneficial to them. Indeed, such was the confidence of the new arrivals in the universality of man, that they imagined the Aborigines would only need to be made sensible of the many advantages they would enjoy under British rule for them to forego their hostility to the settlers and renounce their savage mode of life. The various attempts to open a communication with the Aborigines had no other purpose, therefore, than to encourage them to endorse the principles of association embodied in the social contract. Without exception the brief given to the Protectors and other official envoys used as intermediaries extended no further than informing the Aborigines of their rights and educating them into their responsibilities. At no point did government treat such communication as a means of negotiating the very terms upon which black and white were to associate.<sup>45</sup> The only

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<sup>43</sup> See for instance, Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 27 April, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 398; and Sir George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 21 July, 1838, *HRA*, Series I, Vol. XIX, p. 509.

<sup>44</sup> See Reynolds, *Dispossession*, p. 183.

<sup>45</sup> Hence the duties of the Commissioners of Crown Land in respect to the Aborigines were 'to cultivate at all times an amicable intercourse with them; to assist them in obtaining redress for any wrong to which

option the Aborigines were permitted to exercise was to give their consent to the social contract or suffer the penalty meted out to the lawless and rebellious.

During the 1840s the Christian liberal conception of human nature upon which this politics of assimilation was based began to be subject to challenge. With the failure of the missions and the decline in the indigenous population a more radical conception of racial difference began to cement itself in official discourse and fundamentally altered the moral framework of the colonial enterprise. Through the combined effect of the many fruitless experiments in civilisation and the impending extinction of the Aborigines, the concept of race entertained by the settlers came increasingly into line with the more structural approach of the new ethnological sciences. Even those who continued to assume that the Aborigines could be reclaimed for civilisation acknowledged that they were not the figure of pure lack conveyed in the notion of 'natural man'. At the very least, as Grey pointed out, they were subjected to a strict set of social regulations whose uniform operation had sustained them in a condition of barbarism since time immemorial:

to believe that man in a savage state is endowed with freedom either of thought or action is erroneous in the highest degree. He is in reality subjected to complex laws, which not only deprive him of all free agency of thought, but, at the same time by allowing no scope whatever for the development of the intellect, they necessarily bind him down in a hopeless state of barbarism, from which it is impossible for man to emerge, so long as he is enthralled by these customs; which, on the other hand, are so ingeniously devised, as to have a direct tendency to annihilate any effort that is made to overthrow them.<sup>46</sup>

With this recognition it was no longer possible to assume a continuity of civilisation. Since the laws that bound the Aborigines in their savage state had been 'transmitted from father to son, through unknown generations' and become 'fixed in the minds of the people as sacred and unalterable', their characterisation as a less polished version of the European appeared increasingly fanciful.<sup>47</sup> True, the Aboriginal mind was not beyond reclamation, but it did bear the stamp of an ancestry that could not be erased by the mere proximity of civilisation.

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they may have been exposed, and particularly to prevent any interference on the part of white men with their women. On the other hand, they will make known to them the penalties to which they become liable by any act of aggression on the persons or properties of the colonists'. See Proclamation Concerning the Establishment of the Commissioners of Crown Land in New South Wales, 21 May, 1839, in Reynolds, *Dispossession*, p. 189.

<sup>46</sup> Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, Vol. II, pp. 217-218.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 220.

Inevitably this new conception of Aboriginality worked to corrode the notion of moral equality and lead the way to a new principle of political responsibility. As the settlers began to accept that the Aborigines were peculiarly constituted, the belief that they were entitled to certain rights by virtue of their common humanity tended to fall into disrepute. Without necessarily denying that the Aborigines belonged to the same species, the colonists assumed their differences were significant enough to disqualify them from making claims on a principle of moral equivalence. As Charles Griffith maintained, the fact that the Aborigines had been dispossessed of their land did not allow them to claim any form of 'compensation as a right'. If the settlers were responsible for providing for them at all (and this much Griffith conceded), it was not as an obligation incurred to their fellow men, but as an 'indulgence' granted to 'an ignorant, and therefore weak being, from one superior to him in knowledge and power'.<sup>48</sup> The duty to be discharged, in other words, did not derive from the recognition that the Aborigines had an inherent right to something, but from the recognition that the settlers had a capacity to supply it to them. That the new arrivals were morally obliged to secure the welfare of the Aborigines (if moral obligation is in fact the right term at all in this context) rested largely on the fact that they were in a position to do so. Thus Griffith:

But although I do not admit that the native can claim compensation as a right, I fully concur in the view that the providing for his welfare, as far as possible, is a charge which the English government was bound to undertake, as it has done, and that it is also bound to afford him all the indulgence which is consistent with the welfare of its other subjects.<sup>49</sup>

As this approach gained support both within the colony and beyond it, government began to conceive its obligation to the indigenous inhabitants it had dispossessed less in terms of the protection of rights and more in terms of the fulfilment of needs. Given that the overriding consideration was to preserve the Aborigines from extinction, all the privileges previously extended to them as natural and inalienable became open to challenge. In terms of their interest in the land, for instance, it was possible for government to claim that it was better acquitting itself of its moral responsibility by providing the Aborigines with a regular supply of food than by granting them a right to hunt and gather in their customary way. Since roving across the land in search of game exposed them to the

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<sup>48</sup> C. Griffith, *Present State and Prospects of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales*, William Curry, Jun. & Co., Dublin, 1845, p. 171.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 171.

dangers of violence and disease without necessarily ensuring their subsistence, what West called an 'equitable lein on the land'<sup>50</sup> was not inherently preferable to the establishment of depots of supplies. Indeed, considered strictly in terms of their consequences, the latter was a far more efficient (and therefore better) means of achieving what, from the point of view of the colonists, was essentially the same end: providing the Aborigines with food.<sup>51</sup> Within this utilitarian style approach, no measure that held out the possibility either of rendering the Aborigines useful or preserving them from extinction could be discountenanced on the basis that it was somehow unjust. However restrictive of their freedom (like their confinement within reserves) or contrary to natural affections (like the forcible removal of their children), it was still morally preferable to their suffering from a want of the necessaries of life.

Since government considered itself responsible not so much for the preservation of rights, as for the preservation of life, it attached no moral value to protecting the recently discovered cultural integrity of the Aborigines. From the utilitarian perspective, there was nothing inherently abhorrent about those new forms of regulation, brought into practical operation during the 1840s and reinforced by the emergence of discriminatory legislation during the 1860s, whose whole intention was to estrange the Aborigines from their own customs. Indeed, to the extent that such customs were considered contributing factors in their impending extinction, their utter destruction was a compassionate measure that could be undertaken in good conscience. 'If in our relations with the Aborigines', wrote Eyre,

we care about staying the rapid and lamentable ravages which a contact with us is causing among their tribes, we must endeavour to do so, by removing, as far as possible, all sources of irritation, discontent, or suffering. We must adopt a system which may at once administer to their wants and at the same time, give us a controlling influence over them.<sup>52</sup>

In this way the question of the Aborigines increasingly resolved itself into one of administration rather than government. In the interests of saving the people, of preventing

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<sup>50</sup> West, *The History of Tasmania*, p. 331

<sup>51</sup> Thus Eyre: 'I still maintain that the native has a right to expect, and that we are in justice bound to supply him with food in any of those parts of the country that we occupy, and to do this, too, without demanding or requiring any other consideration from him than we have already received when we took from him his possessions and his hunting grounds'. E.J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia, and Overland From Adelaide to King Georges Sound, in the Years 1840-1*, Vol. II, T.W. Boone, London, 1845. Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 7, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964, p. 479.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 479.

them from doing harm either to themselves or to others, any number of restrictions upon the exercise of their free will were assumed to be morally justifiable. The only concern was to discover which of the available measures were best calculated to render the Aborigines useful and preserve them from extinction.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that it was not so much the Aborigines as those involved in their civilisation and protection with whom government began to open a communication. For although the ends to which official policy towards the Aborigines was directed were fairly well established — production and preservation — the authorities were reliant upon those who had acquired an extensive knowledge of the Aborigines through their participation in the experiments in civilisation to direct them towards the most efficient means for achieving them. In the series of legislative inquiries into the condition of the Aborigines undertaken during the 1840s and 1850s, it was the testimony of those whose experience in the field qualified them as competent or expert witnesses that was particularly sought. From these came that knowledge of a 'practical character' upon which government would build the techniques and strategies of surveillance that came into effect later in the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> This is not to say that government ceased to communicate entirely with the Aborigines themselves. Some significance could perhaps be attached to the fact that the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee of 1845 withheld its final report in the hope of finding 'intelligent Aborigines' capable of giving an account of their own condition.<sup>54</sup> Yet, since it tended to be assumed that the indigenes were unaware of the underlying causes of their own barbarism, the most important communication was with those practical ethnologists who purported to understand them better than they understood themselves.

The conception of moral responsibility that emerged after the 1840s was thus entirely consistent with the various forms of social engineering (and latter eugenics) that came into operation in the second half of the nineteenth century. As government shifted its emphasis from what Hannah Arendt has called the politics of 'freedom' to the politics of 'need',<sup>55</sup> the Aborigines ceased to be subjects even in the Christian liberal sense and

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<sup>53</sup> See Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, preface.

<sup>54</sup> Report from the New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, *NSWLCV&P*, 1845, p. 941.

<sup>55</sup> See F. Feher, 'The pariah and the citizen: on Arendt's political theory' in G.T. Kaplan and C.S. Kessler (eds), *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p. 20.

became instead objects to be mastered and controlled. As Eyre wrote in his 'Suggestions for the improvement of the Aborigines' of 1845:

It appears that the most important point, in fact almost the only essential one, in the first instance, is to gain such an influence or authority over the Aborigines as may be sufficient to enable us to induce them to adopt, or submit to any regulations that we make for their improvement, and that to effect this, the means must be suited to their circumstances and habits.<sup>56</sup>

Since civilising the Aborigines and preserving them from destruction was dependent upon the eradication of their traditional customs and institutions, government could legitimately seek to exercise complete control over their social relations. Even if such a plan did not succeed in civilising them, it would at least bring them under such restrictions as were necessary so that 'population might go on'.<sup>57</sup> The frequently unremarked consequence of such an approach was, of course, the complete exclusion of the Aborigines from the social contract. From the moment that they became objects to be managed rather than subjects to be governed, their relationship to the European, as West put it with admirable economy, could only be 'that of an alien, or a slave'.<sup>58</sup>

### III

#### Christianity and the Preservation of Souls

There can be little doubt that the various evangelical organisations played an important institutional role in the development of the mechanisms of surveillance that began to encircle Aboriginal people in the second half of the nineteenth century. As sites for the accumulation of knowledge and the dispensation of instruction, the Missions were critical in both framing and executing the practices of cultural dispossession that culminated in the formation of the Reserve System. Yet there was always an ideological dimension to the relationship between the Missionaries and the Aborigines that resisted the shift towards a strictly instrumental and utilitarian approach to their management and control. Even those Christian philosophers like Threlkeld who played a significant role in piecing together the

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<sup>56</sup> See Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery*, Vol. II, pp. 480-481.

<sup>57</sup> See evidence of W. Thomas in the *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Condition of the Aborigines; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, And Appendices*, Ordered by the Council to be Printed 3 February, 1859, John Ferres, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1859, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> West, *The History of Tasmania*, p. 333

hidden structure that imparted the peculiar character to the Aboriginal language (and hence the Aboriginal mind), refused to see them in purely mechanistic terms. Obviously there were significant differences between the approaches of the various denominations that undertook missions to the Aborigines during the nineteenth century. But their relationship with the Aborigines was always refracted through a Christian thematic of salvation and damnation that imparted to it a double moral significance. For them the degradation of the Aborigines was both a salutary lesson for those who might presume to banish the agency of God from the world and an opportunity to seek absolution for both the self and the other by extending the influence of the redeemer. Within the theological world view, in short, there was something more important even than the promotion of temporal well-being of the Aborigines: the preservation of their souls.<sup>59</sup>

Although some naturalists were inclined to exempt the Aborigines from the curse of original sin, Christians imagined the benighted state of their souls sufficiently testified in their immoral habits and ostensible religious beliefs or, more to the point, the lack thereof.<sup>60</sup> For many it was transgressions of the sacred moral statute that provided the strongest evidence that the Aborigines were in the very depths of debasement. Since, from the Christian point of view, the real division between men was not to be found in the distinction between civilisation and savagery, but in that between virtue and vice, the distinguishing feature of the Aborigines lay more in their gross sensuality and immoral habits than in their animal economy or social organisation. At the same time that they staunchly defended the common humanity of the Aborigines, therefore, Christian philosophers tended to recoil in horror from the so-called 'deeds of darkness'<sup>61</sup> which appeared to prevail among them to a terrible extent:

Whilst the undoubted proofs of mental superiority displayed among them, in the usual varieties which characterise communities of the human species, demand for them the rank which their Creator designed them to occupy amongst rational intelligences — the awful predominance amongst them of sins of the most obscene and revolting description,

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<sup>59</sup> See D. Coates, J. Beecham and W. Ellis, *Christianity the Means of Civilisation Shown in Evidence Given Before a Committee of the House of Commons, On Aborigines*, R.B. Seeley, W. Burnside, L. & G. Seeley, and T. Marson, London, 1837, p. iii.

<sup>60</sup> The idea that the Aborigines were innocent and without shame was a frequent theme in natural history and just as frequently contested by Christians. See for instance, G. Barrington, *A Voyage to New South Wales*, View Productions, Sydney, 1985, p. 65; Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, p. 464; and Gunson, *Australian Reminiscences*, Vol. I, p. 147.

<sup>61</sup> J. Orton, *Aborigines of Australia*, II, Copy of a letter from the Rev. Joseph Orton, dated Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land, August, 1836, p. 8.

alike destructive to the body and to the soul, demonstrates that they are without God in the world.<sup>62</sup>

Rather than the image of purity which some had affirmed, the Aborigines were in fact, therefore, according to Threlkeld, exactly 'as described in the Gospel': "All gone out of the way". "Their feet swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in the their ways", and their 'Places are full of the habitations of cruelty'.<sup>63</sup>

Reduced to a concentrated form, as it was in the work of Majoribanks, this moral repugnance saw the Aborigines brought into association with all the lawless and unregenerate habits attributable to heathens. Drawing extensively upon the works of religious authorities such as the Reverend David Mackenzie, Marjoribanks, built his account of the Aborigines in the form of a descent into ever darker shades of degradation and inhumanity. Beginning with improvidence: 'But however plentiful their repast may be, and however great the supply, no provision is made for the next day'; he worked his way down through indolence and gluttony: 'this [the banquet] lasts, between incessant eating and sleeping, when quite gorged, two or three days, until the whole animal is consumed; their gluttony then obliges them to change their place of encampment'; enslavement: 'The women of the Aborigines are in a state of the most deplorable slavery; they have no other idea themselves but that they are destined to subserve the passions of the men'; polygamy: 'Polygamy, which Moses never approved of, but merely connived at, is not only permitted but practised amongst them to a great extent'; and infanticide: 'Though they are, in general, very fond of their offspring, and almost inconsolable when they die, yet those amongst their children who are deformed, or of the squalling species, they are very apt to put to death'; until finally reaching the very depths of immorality in the figure of the anthropophagi: 'It is a well ascertained fact, not only that they are cannibals, but that they frequently eat the bodies of those taken in war'.<sup>64</sup> Entirely bearing out the view that the natives of New Holland were, like the men of Sodom, 'sinners exceedingly',<sup>65</sup> this narrative shop of horrors crystallised into an image of utter barbarity which fully anticipated Marjoribank's less than salutary conclusion:

Whether the physical or moral condition of the these children of the forest is considered, the picture they present is one of gross darkness

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<sup>62</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines of New South Wales*, p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> Gunson, *Australian Reminiscences*, Vol. I, p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> Marjoribanks, *Travels in New South Wales*, pp. 85-91.

<sup>65</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines of New South Wales*, pp. 11-12.

and misery. Their God is their belly; their will, or rather their passions, are their law, as long as they are able, through violence and cruelty, to maintain their point; and the testimony of the Scripture, that the 'dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty' finds in their case an awful verification.<sup>66</sup>

While this vast moral disorder was doubtless proof enough that the Aborigines were without God in the world, they invariably displayed themselves to be entirely ignorant of even the most basic features of natural religion: the existence of God and of a future state of rewards and punishments.<sup>67</sup> From the earliest days of the colony, all inquiry on the subject of religion had only borne out the conclusion that the Aborigines had 'not the most distant idea of any supreme Being'.<sup>68</sup> Given the 'entire absence' of outward indications of any ideas of a supreme intelligence such as sacred relics, idols, rites or ceremonies, there was little evidence to confute what a complete lack of moral sense had already so clearly indicated: 'their utter loss of the knowledge of God'.<sup>69</sup> Although some commentators, Threlkeld not least among them, were prepared to acknowledge that the Aborigines were 'not left without some instinctive feeling of dependence on the great "Unknown Being" on whom they call when in danger', they did not dignify the belief with the title of religion. Since 'no stretch of imagination nor diligent enquiry [could] shew any act of adoration to this supreme unknown being' it seemed more reasonable to conclude that they, like the ancient Greeks, were a nation entirely void of understanding: 'The Blacks of Australia and the men of Athens, stand on a perfect equality in regard to the knowledge of God, and of both, it may truly be said that they are without God in this world'.<sup>70</sup>

On the matter of existence after death the evidence was ultimately similarly corroborative of a lack of true religious knowledge. While it was commonly acknowledged that there was at least some proof in the funerary customs of the Aborigines that they entertained a notion of immortality, few commentators saw it as

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<sup>66</sup> Marjoribanks, *Travels in New South Wales*, p. 92. Marjoribanks lifted the final quote directly from Rev C. Eipper, *Statement of the Origin, Condition and Prospects of the German Mission to the Aborigines at Moreton Bay*, Sydney, 1841, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices of the Aborigines of New South Wales*, p. 11. For a statement on the 'fundamentals of natural religion'.

<sup>68</sup> Orton, *Aborigines of Australia*, I, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Dredge, *Brief Notices on the Aborigines of New South Wales*, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences*, pp. 62-63. A similar view was expressed by C.P. Hodgson: 'That they have some sense of a preternatural power is certain; but it is equally certain that their ideas on the subject are very limited, proceeding only from ignorance, superstition and fear'. C.P. Hodgson, *Reminiscences of Australia, with Hints on the Squatters Life*, W.N. Wright, London, 1846, p. 230.

evidence of religion. To Parker it was 'obvious from the care they displayed to inter with the dead body every article that the deceased had been accustomed to use, or that the affection of survivors could bestow', that the Aborigines had a 'distinct belief of the existence of their spirits after death'.<sup>71</sup> In much the same fashion (if with a rather more supercilious tone), Tiechermann alluded to the native ritual of allowing the corpse to determine the inquest into his own death by transmitting certain signs to living relatives, as proof that they had 'some idea of this kind', however fantastic it might appear to Europeans.<sup>72</sup> Yet if such practices constituted sufficient evidence to suggest that the Aborigines had a concept of the immortality, it was rather a notion of metempsychosis (which involved the transmutation of virtues) than transmigration (which involved the transmutation of souls).<sup>73</sup> Although both the idea that dead blacks would return as Europeans and the belief that the spirits of their ancestors dwelt in certain animal species was suggestive of an afterlife, it was not one, according to the Christian view of things, that was grounded in a doctrine of future judgement. Even those Aboriginal superstitions that suggested discriminations were made among the dead, according to Meyer, did not make reference to a different dispensation for the blessed and the damned. Hence 'no fears about the future, or concerning punishments and rewards, [were] entertained by them'.<sup>74</sup> As Collins had asserted at a much earlier stage in the history of the colony, while 'there indeed existed among them some idea of a future state', it was 'not connected in anywise with religion; for it had no influence whatever on their lives and actions'.<sup>75</sup>

In the absence of either a supreme being even remotely resembling the Christian Deity or of a notion of a future state of rewards and punishments, the Aborigines were, according to the Missionaries, bound to an illusory world of superstition and fancy. To this it was possible to attribute their exaggerated faith in the powers of their own sorcerers and their incapacity for moral action. For as even the most cursory examination of their burial rituals and methods employed to treat disease indicated, they were more enthralled

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<sup>71</sup> Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> Tiechermann, *Aborigines of South Australia*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>73</sup> See Hodgson, *Reminiscences of Australia*, p. 225.

<sup>74</sup> H.E.A. Meyer, *Manners and Customs of the Aborigines of the Encounter Bay Tribe*, George Dehane, Adelaide, 1846. South Australian Facsimile Editions, No.20, Public Library of South Australia, Adelaide, 1963, p. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. I, p. 454. See also P. Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales; Comprising Sketches of the Actual State of Society in that Colony; of its Peculiar Advantages to Emigrants; of its Topography, Natural History, &c. &c.*, 2 Vols., Henry Colburn, London, 1827, p. 200.

by the enchantments and evil machinations of men in this world, than by the power of the divine authority who would stand in judgement in the next.<sup>76</sup> Placing their faith (and locating their fear) only in those doctors and sorcerers who professed 'to be able to cure all diseases, produce sickness, blindness, &c., thunder and lightning, rain and hailstones, check the rain when long continuing, and transform themselves into any shape or substance',<sup>77</sup> they remained blind to the real Creator and preserver of all things and dangerously incognizant of the retributions that would be exacted by eternal justice. Within their system of beliefs there was nothing like a proclamation of faith to hold together this world and the next, no bridge between matter and spirit by which their present and future happiness could be secured. As with other heathens, the spheres of man and God were in them almost completely torn asunder, leaving, as Tiechermann observed, no basis whatsoever for morality:

From the visible world they derive their existence; from the visible world they expect good or evil, and the whole creation again they believe to have under their controul (sic). Therefore, we cannot expect to find morality or any idea of final and individual responsibility amongst them; and we have met in them, with nothing but superstition and human endowments abused to more than brutish desires.<sup>78</sup>

If they regularly confirmed that the Aborigines were sinful in the extreme, however, Christians still held out hope for the preservation of their souls. As they saw it, the natives of New Holland, like their more refined brethren, were capable of deterioration to barbarism or progress to civilisation and perfection depending upon their knowledge of, and obedience to, God's law.<sup>79</sup> In order for them to learn to act morally, discriminate between good and evil, and, above all (for man was by nature a fallen creature, susceptible to temptation), seek atonement for sins, it was necessary that they both recognise and fear a superior being whose judgments upon this world would be decisive of their fate in the next. Within this schema of sin and redemption, it was the profession and the work of faith (with the emphasis given to each shifting according to the creed) that comprised the basis of temporal and eternal happiness. By way of divine worship and moral restraint, Christianity linked together the worldly present and divine future, making the condition of transmigration, of salvation or damnation, obedience to the word. The purification of the

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<sup>76</sup> Tiechermann, *Aborigines of South Australia.*, p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

spirit, its emancipation from the encrustations of guilt and sin built up in the pursuit of worldly gratification, could only be secured by an acceptance of the supreme being and of the eternal truths revealed to his disciples. Provided they came to dwell in God's house and accept the truth of his word, divine grace was available to all men and all nations, regardless of how deeply burdened with sin and sorrow: 'He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned'.<sup>80</sup> Those who remained strangers to 'the covenants of promise', however, were forever bereft of hope and destined to live 'in bondage under the fear of death all their life long'.<sup>81</sup>

From the Christian perspective, therefore, the responsibility of the settlers to those whose country they were in the process of occupying was more extensive than merely advancing them in the order of civilisation. Given that the Aborigines were destined to incur the full extent of the wrath of God for their sins unless they could be brought the blessings of the gospel, Christians were morally obliged to preserve them from evil and prepare their souls for the future day of judgement. So it was that the Reverend Joseph Orton, in the process of performing divine service with the Europeans at recently established Port Phillip settlement,

presumed to point out some of the obligations under which they were placed, endeavouring to impress upon their minds that they were bound in justice and humanity, and by the Christianity they professed, to promote by all the means in their power both the temporal and spiritual welfare of their fellow-men, with whom, in the order of Providence, they had thus become connected.<sup>82</sup>

Since to abandon the Aborigines to their own carnal propensities and sensuous habits was not only to assent to their ever greater social degradation but to consign them to a future state of endless misery, it was incumbent upon all Christians to endeavour to fulfil the 'Divine mandate': 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature'.<sup>83</sup> If they were to save the Aborigines (and in the process redeem themselves), it was necessary to rid them of their sinful habits and superstitious observances. To preserve their soul, in short, it was necessary to eradicate their Aboriginality. Thus Charles Thompson in his prize poem, 'Australia':

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<sup>80</sup> See Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences*, p. 142; and Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>81</sup> Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences*, p. 47.

<sup>82</sup> Orton, *Aborigines of Australia*, II, pp. 9-10

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

O, come blest era! Happy age awake,  
When the dark native from gross night shall break,  
To docile temper mollify his mind,  
And taste acquire for habits more refined, —  
When heathen error shall no more possess  
His soul reclaimed to CHRIST AND RIGHTEOUSNESS.<sup>84</sup>

If the 'Christian philosopher', as opposed to the 'natural philosopher', showed an interest in the Aborigines, therefore, it was 'not for the gratification of mere philosophic curiosity, but to gauge and estimate the extent and urgency of the claims of his fellow-men'.<sup>85</sup> Yet if there were many, like Orton, who felt that they 'could have sacrificed every temporal comfort for their spiritual advantage', they also recognised that the 'awfully degraded condition of the people' could only be overcome through the intervention of divine as well as human agency.<sup>86</sup> Only when the master of all things allowed the light of the gospels to shine within their souls would the Aborigines be raised up from the 'darkness of [their] dungeon' to testify to the truth of the promise that 'in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert'.<sup>87</sup> Much as they devoted their energies to communicating the blessings of the word to the Aborigines, therefore, the missionaries were conscious that they were indirectly carrying out a conversation with the divine. As Threlkeld declared while contemplating the future of 'these miserable objects for whom the Messiah died', he was 'humbly depending on the powerful influence of that Holy Spirit to cause these very dry bones in the wilderness to arise and become an exceedingly great army to the Glory of Him who can excite "Kings to be nursing Fathers, and Queens nursing mothers"'.<sup>88</sup> Without this intervention the Aborigines were not only destined to become extinct in this world, but truly lost in the next.

#### IV

#### Romanticism and the Preservation of Beauty

Although the discovery of the underlying integrity of the Aboriginal mode of life sponsored a range of more finely articulated administrative systems for their regulation

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<sup>84</sup> C. Thompson, Jun., 'Australia' in *Wild Notes, from the Lyre of a Native Minstrel*, Robert Howe, Sydney, 1826. Facsimile Edition, University of Sydney Press, Sydney, 1973, Appendix, p. xix.

<sup>85</sup> Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Orton, *Aborigines of Australia*, II, pp. 9, 10.

<sup>87</sup> See Parker, *The Aborigines of Australia*, p. 6; and Orton, *Aborigines of Australia*, II, p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences*, p. 123.

and control, it also led to the emergence of a certain kind of cultural pluralism. Particularly in the work of Strzelecki and Westgarth, the Aboriginal mode of life finally appeared as something to be valued in its own right. The new development hinged on a point of perspective. It was the 'singular presumption of the whites', wrote Strzelecki in 1845, to stigmatise and denounce the indigenous inhabitants as 'savage, debased, unfortunate, miserable'. Apparently unable to shake off the 'trammels of a conventional, local, and therefore narrow mode of thinking' they had feigned to measure the great and varied family of mankind in accordance with 'one uniform standard of customs and institutions'. Yet to anyone who studied and surveyed the different nations of the earth in personal travels and by observation, it was evident that Providence had left, not just one, but 'as many roads to the threshold of contentment and happiness as there [were] races of mankind'. Even the Aborigines, possibly the most maligned of all the races of the earth, exhibited a 'striking proof of the bountiful dispensation of the Creator'. For considered 'in his allotted dwelling and destiny', the Australian could be seen 'procuring for himself all that he wants, regulating all his social affairs, and securing all the worldly happiness and enjoyment of which his condition is capable'. Indeed, at least as far as those 'uninvaded haunts' were concerned, the Aborigines remained in every sense 'in perfect harmony with the whole economy of nature'.<sup>89</sup>

With this recognition of the value and integrity of the Aboriginal mode of life, came a more profound sense of the injuries inflicted by the arrival of civilisation than even enlightenment humanists had shown themselves capable. Since, within this conception, the Aborigines were seen, not so much as the empty bearers of human rights, but as the laden carriers of valuable cultural traditions, the damage caused by settlement extended beyond the individual suffering and destitution it had brought. In coming to the antipodes, the European had not only perpetrated great injustices upon the indigenous inhabitants, but disturbed the 'happy economy' and 'mutual relations' of their cultural system.<sup>90</sup> Civilised man, in his 'irresistible progress', as Westgarth put it, had 'either driven off the Aboriginal tribes, or subdued their native spirit, and subverted their social polity'. Everywhere the country was occupied, their 'primitive manner of life' was not simply under threat but 'no

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<sup>89</sup> See P.E. De Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1845. *Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 19*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1967, pp. 338n, 342-343; and also Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 36.

<sup>90</sup> See Strzelecki, *Physical Description*, p. 343; and Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 36.

longer attainable'.<sup>91</sup> Despite all the promise that civilisation was once assumed to hold out for the Aborigines, therefore, it had, in the matter of just a few years, succeeded only in destroying their cultural world and reducing them to the point of extinction. Only in the unlocated areas was it possible to see the Aborigines as they once were: in perfect harmony with their environment.

Among those prepared to indulge this sentiment of 'mournful solemnity',<sup>92</sup> as Strzelecki aptly put it, the extinction of the Aborigines tended to become an occasion for either idealisation or aestheticisation. In the first instance, the Aboriginal way of life was put into service (in much the same way as it was earlier with Cook) as a kind of instrument for reflecting upon the progress of civilisation itself. In this figuration, the disappearance of the Aborigines provided an occasion for Europeans to think critically about what they themselves had lost in the process of advancement. Such reflection took many forms, but it was invariably shaped by a kind of lingering enthusiasm for that *homme naturel* (residing perhaps, as Rousseau imagined, within us all), who was not yet estranged from nature or shackled to the routine of settled life. In fashioning this idealised vision, the settlers often paid little heed to the discoveries of the ethnologists. If the inspiration for their Romantic posturing came from the recognition that the Aboriginal mode of life constituted a valuable cultural world in its own right, they were not particularly concerned with the actual mechanisms by which it was regulated. At least at that moment, primitive man became little more than a beautiful antidote to the effete manners and dreary discipline that seemed to be the very hallmarks of civilisation. Hence Strzelecki:

Migration, the chase, fishing, and occasional war, alternated by feasting, and lounging in the spots best adapted to repose, fill up the time of an Australian. The pangs and gnawings of ambition, avarice, discontent, or weariness of life, the distress caused by oppression or persecution, the maladies arising from the corrupt or artificial state of society, are unknown to him; as are also the cares and anxieties of arts, sciences, and industry; from all of which, the physical condition of the country, and the manifold provisions of a beneficent Providence have preserved him; whilst that share of health and content which falls to his lot, rewards him amply for his faithful adherence to the dictates of nature.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, pp. 36-37

<sup>92</sup> Strzelecki, *Physical Description*, p. 345.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p. 342. See also 'A few words on the Aborigines of Australia', *The New South Wales Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 11, 1843, p. 55.

At other times, the extinction of the Aborigines became little more than an aesthetic vehicle for a melancholy that embedded itself in the figure of the last of the tribe. Within this approach, it was not so much the natural beauty of the uncorrupted Aboriginal mode of life that provided the inspiration for reflection, but the rich pathos of its inevitable disappearance. In the image of the solitary Aborigine, accompanied only by memories and dreams of a lost age, writers discovered a rich vein of symbolism for their delicately mournful revelries. Of this Henry Kendall's 'The last of his tribe' of 1864 was certainly exemplary:

He crouches, and buries his face on his knees,  
And hides in the dark of his hair;  
For he cannot look up to the storm-smitten trees,  
Or think of the loneliness there:  
Of the loss and the loneliness there.

.....

Will he go in his sleep from these desolate lands,  
Like a chief, to the rest of his race,  
With the honey-voiced woman who beckons, and stands,  
And gleams like a Dream in his face —  
Like a marvellous Dream in his face?<sup>94</sup>

In this kind of 'pictorial sentimentality',<sup>95</sup> as J.J. Healy has called it, the Aborigine was already scarcely more than a ghostly presence. The eyes of Kendall's last man are full of 'smouldering thoughts' that reach backward to a time that is 'no more'. For him, unable even 'to look up to the storm-smitten trees', there can be no future other than the future of memory. The steady march of civilisation has taken from him everything save the dream whose fading lustre will serve to mark the darkening path of his own disappearance.

It will be evident that neither of these imaginings was a politically efficacious response to the decline in the Aboriginal population. Although in their different ways, both gave civilised man pause for reflection, they were almost wholly free of either accusation or remedy. Indeed the tragic motif of 'The last of his tribe', who to this extent served as a metaphor for the 'Aboriginal race' as a whole, would have been completely lost if the process of extinction could have been averted. Kendall could mourn for him simply because there was nothing else left to do. To the extent that such an aesthetic stylisation

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<sup>94</sup> H. Kendall, 'The last of his tribe', in T.T. Reed (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Henry Kendall*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1966, pp. 90-91.

<sup>95</sup> J.J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1989, p. 103.

was reducible to a political stance, therefore, it could only consist, as it did with Strzelecki and Westgarth, in leaving the Aborigines to their own devices. For some, of course, it was already too late. Where the indigenous inhabitants had come into contact with civilisation, there could be no escape from the 'malignant ally of the white man' that 'carries destruction wherever he advances'.<sup>96</sup> These, then, needed to be entrusted to 'the care and diligence of the missionary'. But where the Aborigines were 'peaceably conducted' and managed to 'pick up a subsistence sufficient for their wants' it appeared 'advisable to leave them to themselves'.<sup>97</sup> 'Amidst the wrecks of schemes, efforts, and attempts to christianise, civilise, utilise, and preserve the aboriginal race', wrote Strzelecki,

there remains yet to be adopted one measure, worthy of the liberality of the English Government, — viz., to listen and attend to the last wishes of the departed, and to the voice of the remaining few: — 'Leave us to our habits and customs; do not embitter the days which are in store for us, by constraining us to obey yours; nor reproach us with apathy to that civilisation which is not destined for us'.<sup>98</sup>

Civilisation could make its destructive way, it seems, but the Aborigines were not to suffer the additional ignominy of being shackled to its disciplines. At least as far as Strzelecki was concerned (and here he presumes to speak with the authority of the native voice), the best way for the colonists to demonstrate their liberality was to break off communications with the Aborigines entirely and put an end to the various plans and schemes for their amalgamation.

Inevitably such a stance was impotent in the face of a rampant and unforgiving process of colonisation. To assume no possibility of reconciliation between the two cultures was to forego any hope for the survival of the Aborigines other than as an image of beauty or a figure of melancholy. In this respect not unlike the other discourses on the Aborigines, Romanticism fully succumbed to the figure of preservation. Yet the Romantic tradition was at least based upon some germ of positive recognition and regard for difference that set it apart from the other more institutionalised discourses at work in colonial society. For all its tendency to idealisation and aestheticisation, it was still grounded upon a certain kind of compassion and empathic understanding that prevented it from collapsing into a politics of mastery of one kind or another. If the Romantics

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<sup>96</sup> Strzelecki, *Physical Description*, p. 345.

<sup>97</sup> Westgarth, *Report on the Condition*, p. 38.

<sup>98</sup> Strzelecki, *Physical Description*, pp. 355-356.

abandoned any hope of the Aborigines maintaining and developing their culture, they were at least prepared to refrain from trying to turn them into something else. In essence, the Romantic tradition was only able to make of the Aborigines what it did, because it maintained a regard both for their individual suffering and for the integrity of their cultural world. And in that, less instrumental, way of relating to others, there was certainly something worth preserving.

## Conclusion

The evidence adduced in this thesis suggests that it would be wrong to consider representations of the Aborigines as either a disinterested product of scientific inquiry or an indispensable instrument in colonial rule. The testimony of history (such as it is) does not bear out the conclusion that the study of the other was entirely free of worldly associations any more than it establishes it as the *sine qua non* of the colonisation process.<sup>1</sup> What it does suggest is that European representations of the Aborigines were simultaneously the product of a certain kind of colonial power relation and one of the means by which that power relation was consolidated and extended over time. On the one hand, the conditions of colonisation itself tended to determine the kind of knowledge of the other that it was possible to acquire. In the various measures taken by the colonial government to extend its control over both the territory of New Holland and its indigenous inhabitants, different possibilities for observation and analysis were opened up that allowed the colonial study of man to develop in precisely the way that it did. On the other hand, what was known about the Aborigines tended to determine the kind of status that government afforded them and the kind of techniques that were used to incorporate them into colonial society. While there was always a gap between the more esoteric forms of scientific knowledge and that used in institutions of management, there is little doubt that the scientific understanding of the Aborigines filtered into government policy at various levels.

The full significance of this relationship between power and knowledge only becomes evident through an examination of the changes it underwent over time. In the early stages of European settlement, the connection between knowledge and power tended to operate in a much more contingent fashion than would later be the case. If government had a hand in bringing the natives of New Holland within the compass of scientific

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<sup>1</sup> While I think Attwood is correct in his suggestion that anthropology was not indispensable to colonial rule, I think he underrates the importance of a certain kind of knowledge in enabling the colonisation of the human and physical terrain to proceed in the way that it did. See B. Attwood, 'Introduction', in B. Attwood and J. Arnold, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, La Trobe University Press in Association with the National Centre of Australian Studies, Bundoora, 1992, p. xi.

knowledge, it was only so in the limited sense of making them accessible to observation. What information was accumulated was little more than a by-product of the innumerable explorations — voyages, journeys, expeditions — by which government sought to acquaint itself with the territory over which it had claimed sovereignty. Although explorers were certainly encouraged to make observations regarding the natives during the course of their investigations, that was never their main purpose. That it was possible to prosecute ethnographic discoveries in this way at all turned largely on the fact that scientific investigation at that time did not require sustained contact with any particular tribe. Since natural history consisted in little more than the nomination of the visible, casual encounters were generally enough to record all the necessary information to make a contribution to what passed as the science of man. With little more (and frequently much less) than one or two days experience with a particular tribe, naturalists were able to provide a reasonably extensive inventory of their distinguishing characters and make some preliminary assessment as to their place in the order of civilisation.

In the same way, the natural history of man as it was undertaken until around the 1830s was only obliquely related to the process of colonisation. For all its attention to the signs of racial distinction, the knowledge of the different 'native tribes' it produced was almost entirely without functional value. Nothing in the science actually helped to extend or refine the potential applications of colonial power with regard to the indigenous inhabitants. From its processes of mapping and naming the colonists derived neither techniques for the civilisation of the Aborigines nor strategies for their effective protection. If it operated as a support for the process of colonisation at all, it was only to the extent that it helped to legitimise the British occupation that brought it into connection with its 'objects of study'. For in representing the natives as an exemplar of natural man, natural history made it virtually impossible to conceive of European settlement as being contrary to their interests. If what separated the coloniser from the colonised was nothing more or less than the progress of civilisation itself, the incorporation of the indigenous inhabitants within the social contract could not but improve their condition and advance their happiness. In the arrival of civilisation, it could be safely assumed, they would not only find a remedy to all their physical and moral sufferings, but an opportunity to advance

towards that state of perfection of which all men were capable. In short, natural history legitimated the process of dispossession by lending its support to the notion that colonisation offered the Aborigines the possibility of finally realising their full intellectual and moral potential.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century a more intimate set of connections were established between science and government that were simultaneously more productive of systems of knowledge and systems of control. With the experiments in civilisation and protection undertaken during the 1820s and 1830s, a series of institutional formations — schools, missions, protectorates — came into existence in which a more active interrogation of the 'savage mind' was able to take place than had hitherto been possible. As the Aborigines were subjected to various forms of moral instruction, the agents of civilisation and protection were able to dissect and analyse their culture and expose the very structures responsible for maintaining them in their 'barbarous state'. To a certain extent these practical scholars were reliant upon the new ethnological sciences — physiology, sociology, philology — to make the most of their enhanced opportunities for observation. Without the notion of organic structure that filtered into colonial ethnology from Europe and America, they would not have been able to systematise their knowledge in the way that many of them did. Yet even where the information collected remained under-analysed, these makeshift laboratories provided more favourable conditions for prosecuting discoveries in the science of man than earlier explorations had done. Not only were the agents of protection and civilisation able to observe on a continuous basis, they were in a position to test the capabilities of the Aborigines. For the practical ethnologist, the susceptibility of the indigenous inhabitants to instruction provided a measure both of the limits of their intellectual powers and the resilience of their habits.

In its turn, this knowledge of the way in which the Aborigines were constituted provided both a technology for the colonisation of their identity and a rationale for more coercive interventions into their mode of life. The first of these was essentially a by-product of the endless tinkering to which the Aborigines were subjected in the second

quarter of the nineteenth century. From the various experiments of the 1820s and 1830s came a more complex and technical knowledge of the mechanics of the 'savage mind' that could be continually fed back into the civilising process itself. Each failed plan for the moral regeneration of the indigenous inhabitants tended to become an opportunity for devising improvements in both the organising principle and the mode of instruction of the institutions of reform. In exposing the forces responsible for maintaining the Aborigines in their so-called barbarous condition, the agents of civilisation and protection made it possible to pinpoint the most important sites for strategic interventions. To understand (or assume to understand) how the cultural identity of the Aborigines was put together, was to be able to devise a more finely articulated set of techniques for breaking it down and pulling it apart. It would not be going too far to suggest, therefore, that the strategies of segregation and discipline which were the hallmark of the Reserve System, owed their inspiration to a process of trial and error. In them lay the practical knowledge that had been distilled from over two decades of failure in the experiments in civilisation.

At the same time, the discovery of these structural forces became both the basis for and the legitimisation of a range of coercive interventions into the Aboriginal mode of life. From the agents of protection and civilisation came the view that the peculiar nature of the Aborigines (the 'savage mind' embodied in the structure of their organs, institutions and inflections) worked against the possibility of either rendering them productive or reversing their decline. So long as they remained free to pursue their customary mode of life and maintain their social institutions no change could be expected in their barbarous habits. The only means of inducing them to undertake regular work and to improve their moral state was to completely sever them from their former selves. On this view of things, there was nothing particularly abhorrent in the profoundly restrictive set of institutional apparatuses set up in the second half of the nineteenth century for the regulation and surveillance of the 'native tribes'. If the habits of the Aborigines were as deeply entrenched as the agents of protection and civilisation suggested, it could be assumed legitimate (even necessary) for government to abandon its former policy of non-discrimination and enact a

whole series of special legislative measures for their management. Having shown that the Aborigines were necessarily unable to act in their own best interests, it had a responsibility to protect them both from others and from themselves by whatever means necessary. From its perspective, to leave them free to exercise their will was to effectively condemn them to extinction.

It is evident that the consolidation of this more intimate connection between knowledge and power had disastrous ethical implications. As an increasingly instrumental science took control of matters of truth and an increasingly utilitarian government took control of matters of conscience, even the naive humanitarian impulse characteristic of earlier relations between white and black tended to disappear. Spurred on by the belief that rendering the Aborigines productive and preserving them from extinction required the eradication of their Aboriginality, government sought to intervene in ways that were more regular, systematic, and, despite their lingering humanitarian inspiration (or because of it) increasingly destructive of traditional cultural patterns. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the most important object for government was no longer to protect the rights of the indigenous inhabitants, but to gain an undisputed mastery over their 'unregenerate habits'. From the official perspective, gaining a controlling influence of the Aborigines was a precondition to the achievement of all other goals in relation to them. Whatever moral imperatives were usually assumed to apply to human relations could be legitimately set aside or overridden for the purpose of dislocating them from their traditional way of life. If government had a responsibility to the Aborigines it was not to preserve their culture, but to preserve their lives. Indeed to the extent that these two objectives appeared to stand in opposition one to the other, it was fully justified in using the knowledge generated by previous experiments in civilisation to break the Aborigines from their habits. By the middle of the nineteenth century, social engineering (and subsequently eugenics) had come to be seen as an act of mercy.

Inevitably this instrumental and utilitarian approach to the Aborigines marginalised other (potentially less destructive) ways of relating to them. In the emergence of a politics

of mastery, Christianity tended to be relegated to a form of welfare and Romanticism to a kind of aesthetic. Yet in these two discourses a form of moral responsibility to the other was preserved that held out the possibility of two rather different kinds of relationship between black and white. From the Christian perspective, the Aborigines were always far more than an object to be investigated or a subject to be governed. As the bearers of souls, they enjoyed that particular moral significance that separated man from beast and formed the condition of entry into the divine schema of salvation and damnation. Rather than a kind of mechanical object to be dissected and analysed or regulated and mastered, they were an image of the creator incarnate whose moral degradation imposed a heavy responsibility upon those fortunate to have remained illuminated by the divine light. Unfortunately for the Aborigines this tended to place the Christian in an identical position to the government official with regard to Aboriginal culture. Since the supposedly immoral habits of the Aborigines were considered detrimental, not only to their worldly condition, but to their eternal welfare, the elimination of those habits became the only basis upon which the Christian was prepared to relate to them. In order to preserve the heathen both from extinction in this world and, more importantly, eternal misery in the next, Christians considered themselves morally bound to eradicate all customary practices. For them the preservation of the Aboriginal soul could only come through the eradication of Aboriginality.

For the Romantics the situation was altogether different. To the extent that their attitude was informed by a kind of cultural pluralism, they did not premise their relationship with the Aborigines on the need to reconstitute who they were. Apparently capable of recognising the value of the 'primitive' way of life itself, they saw more to mourn in its passing than the loss of a scientific resource, a labouring subject, or an eternal soul. For them, the impending extinction of the Aborigines was tragic simply for what it was: the disappearance of unique cultural world. Inevitably that disappearance became an opportunity for the romantically inclined to indulge their own cultural preoccupations and aesthetic predispositions. In the figure of the lost Aborigines they found a powerful symbol

for reflecting either ironically or sorrowfully on the bed that civilised man had made both for himself and for others. Yet for all their evident idealisation these reflections continued to be anchored to a certain recognition and respect for difference. Already in them it is possible to see the germ of that responsibility to otherness that has informed the postcolonial turn in Aboriginal studies. If there is something positive to be extracted from this approach (as I believe there is), it would thus consist, not so much in the aestheticisation of the other, but in its recognition of the intrinsic value of cultural difference. Even in the nineteenth century there is evidence of what Taylor, drawing upon the hermeneutic strain of Romantic criticism, has called the 'presumption of equal worth'.<sup>2</sup> And upon that presumption it may yet be possible to build a politics of recognition rather than a politics of mastery.

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<sup>2</sup> C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited and introduced by Amy Gutman, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p. 72.

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