Re-inventing the Wheel:
indigenous peoples and the master race in Philip Ruddock's "wheel" comments

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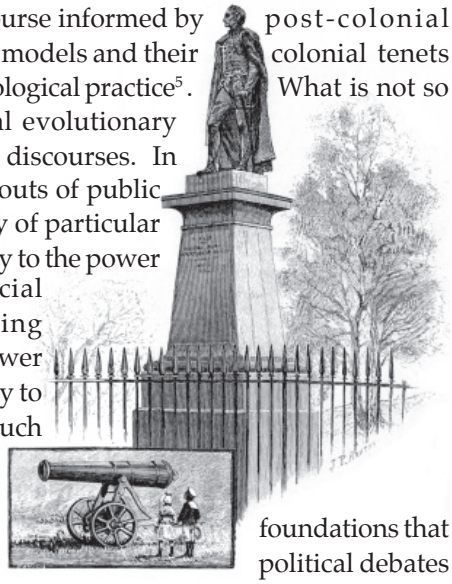
In Western intellectual historiography the placement of Indigenous peoples from the far corners of the earth into European evolutionary narratives is well known[4]. More recently, archaeological discourse informed by post-colonial theory has revealed how social evolutionary models and their colonial tenets continue to underscore contemporary archaeological practice[5]. What is not so well known is the influence of these social evolutionary perspectives on modern political and social discourses. In Australia, we are reminded of this during bouts of public debate that affirm the intellectual superiority of particular ethnic or cultural groups, narratives that testify to the power and pervasiveness of once-prevalent social evolutionary thoughts. These ongoing discourses are testimony not simply of the power of once-prominent beliefs, but more pointedly to the power of the historical trajectories that such beliefs have since engendered. Such trajectories reveal past archaeological thought not as intellectual history, but as foundations that continue to inform contemporary national political debates and policies. This paper explores one such example of contemporary political



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[4] B. David (2002), *Landscapes, Rock-art and the Dreaming: an Archaeology of Preunderstanding*, Continuum Press, London; C. Gamble (1992), "Archaeology, History and the Uttermost Ends of the Earth – Tasmania, Tierra del Fuego and the Cape"; *Antiquity* 66, pp. 712-20; L. Russell, In Press, *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Constructions of Aboriginalities*, Australian Scholarly Publications, Melbourne; G. Stocking (ed.) (1985), *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material culture,* University of Wisconsin Press, Madison and N. Thomas (1994), *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government,* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

[5] For example C. Gosden (1999), *Archaeology and Anthropology: a Changing Relationship*, Routledge, London; A.B. Kehoe (1998), *The Land of Prehistory: a Critical History of American Archaeology*, Routledge, New York; I.J. McNiven and L. Russell (in press) "Towards a decolonisation of Australian indigenous archaeology", in C. Chippindale and H. Maschner (eds), *Handbook of Archaeological Theory*, Altamira Press, New York and B.G. Trigger (1980) "Archaeology and the image of the American Indian", *American Antiquity* 45, pp. 662–76.

discourse grown from roots laid in what are now publicly long-forgotten archaeological debates.

On the 1st September 2000, as the world's media focused on Australia on the eve of the 27th Olympiads, the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, reported an interview with Philip Ruddock, then the Federal Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Reconciliation. The topic of the interview concerned Aboriginal disadvantage and what has come to be known as 'sorry business' and the 'Stolen Generation'. "Pourquoi les Aborigènes restent-ils la minorité la plus désavantagée d'Australie?" ("Why are Aboriginal people still the most disadvantaged minority group in Australia?") asked Bruno Philip[6] in 2000, *Le Monde's* correspondent. Ruddock's response was more revealing of Western preconceptions and attitudes towards race and land than it was of Aboriginal history or Aboriginal disadvantage:

> De tout les peuples indigènes de la planète, si on les compare avec les Indiens du Canada ou des Etats-Unis, les Aborigènes d'Australie ont été les peuples qui sont entrés en contact le plus tardivement avec des civilisations développées. Les Aborigènes étaient des chasseurs collecteurs. Ils ne connaissaient pas la roue. Ils ont survécu grâce à leur ingéniosité dans un environnement très difficile. Les Indiens d'Amérique, eux, vivaient au sein d'une société plus structurée. Je ne veux pas dire par là qu'ils étaient supérieurs en cela aux Aborigènes mais certainement ils vivaient au sein d'un environnement plus convivial. Exemple, ils maîtrisaient les techniques de l'agriculture, ce qui n'était pas le cas des Aborigènes d'Australie. Pour ces derniers, le processus d'ajustement à la civilisation occidentale s'est fait de manière plus lente.
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> (Of all the indigenous peoples of the world, if we compare them with Canadian or American Indians, the Australian Aborigines were the peoples who came into contact with developed civilizations the latest. The Aborigines were hunter-gatherers. They did not know the wheel. They survived because of their ingenuity in a harsh environment. The American Indians lived in a more structured society. I don't want to imply that the American Indians were more advanced than the Australian Aborigines, but certainly they lived in a less harsh environment. For example, they had agriculture, which Australian Aborigines did not have. For the latter, the process of adjustment to Western civilization was slower.)[7]

Ruddock's comments were soon reported in the Australian press, inciting widespread anger, and many community groups reported losing faith in the government's ability to move towards a process of reconciliation[8] . Ruddock

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6 B. Philip (2000), "Philip Ruddock, ministre Australien de l'immigration et de la réconciliation: 'Nous refusons d'être tenus pour responsables'", *Le Monde: édition électronique* (1st September), at http://www.lemonde.fr/article/0,2320,90746,00.html

7 This is a translation of the French newspaper statement; it is not the original English text, to which we do not have access.

8 ABC (2000) "Ruddock in hot water over wheel comments", *ABC News Online* (4th October), at http://www.abc.net.au/news/2000/10/item20001003180316_1.htm and K. Taylor (2000), "New Pressure on Ruddock", *The Age* (5th October), at http://nrstg1s.djnr.com/cgi-bin/DJInteractive?cgi=WEB_FLAT_PAGE&page=wrapper/index&NRAUTOLOG&NRLBRedirect=nrstg1s&entry_point=1

defended his statement to *Le Monde* with the view that his comments about technological developments such as the wheel, and late contacts with European civilization, were taken out of context by the broader media. His statement to this effect was reported in *The Age*[9] : When people write about some comments that you make and they take some of them and not the whole, there can be, in such an approach, matters that are taken out of context. … In no way then or now did I intend to reflect adversely on indigenous culture. … My comments need to be seen in the context of a wide-ranging discussion on the reasons for Aboriginal disadvantage". But it also came to be revealed that Ruddock had earlier made similar comments to *The Washington Post*:

> "We are putting in an enormous amount of work to improve the conditions of our indigenous people," Ruddock said. "But we are starting from a very low base. We're dealing with an indigenous population that had little contact with the rest of the world. We're dealing with people who were essentially hunter-gatherers. They didn't have chariots. I don't think they invented the wheel."[10]

How has it come to be that two of the world's most respected newspapers similarly reported 'matters that are taken out of context', as expounded in two different interviews a few months apart? Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway was subsequently reported in *The Age* to have 'renewed the Democrats' call for Mr. Ruddock to be removed from the reconciliation portfolio. "It raises questions about the suitability of the minister for the position, given his role is to advocate reconciliation," he said. It appeared Mr Ruddock was appealing to prejudices held by some people'[11] . It is the nature of these prejudices – the prejudicial content of Ruddock's statements rather than their prejudicial intent, contextualised in the colonial construction of Aboriginality as cultural *nullius* – that we explore in this paper by tracing the intellectual framework and political logic of his propositions.

Shaping Aboriginality in Western notions of race and primitivism

Philip Ruddock's comments on Aboriginal disadvantage are founded more on notions of race and social evolution than they are on notions of cultural difference. In racial formulations such as those implied in Ruddock's statements, 'Aborigines' are defined via a set of essential characteristics that are perceived to be distinctive from, and in developmental or evolutionary terms inferior to, those of the Europeans whose material culture represents the apex of cultural evolution – agriculture, chariots, the wheel. Yet the concept of 'race' as a valid marker of human physiological and social difference has been rejected by most scientists. So-called 'races' are not discrete biological categories, and indeed are biologically meaningless while having

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9 K. Taylor, *Op Cit*

10 R. Chandarasekaran (2000), "Australia's 'Stolen Generation' seeks payback: Aborigines want apology for kidnappings", *The Washington Post* (6th July), p. A01.

11 Taylor, *Op Cit.*

persistent, if irrational significance socially and culturally. Genetics has revealed the science of racial classification to be inherently circular. Europeans of the 18th and 19th centuries *believed* in the existence of racial types and attempted to prove this belief by measuring selected external, physical (phenotypic) features on selected individuals from highly selected populations. Genetic research has exposed the criteria for the division of the world's population into races – skin, head shape, hair and eye colour, and a few other physiological traits supposedly associated with social characteristics – as a miniscule range of the thousands of traits that are encoded in the gene files of humanity. The distribution of human blood types, for instance, bears no similarity to, or coincidence with, the perceived distribution of 'races'; nor do patterns of distribution of genetically inherited diseases. Human genes and human physical features vary continuously and clinally across space and through time. Different human genes ebb and flow at different rates across continents and through time to create the (ongoing) physical diversity of humanity.

Even so, concepts of race have always been fundamental to Australian polity and civic life. Yet the concept has no anthropological or genetic credibility: there is no physical reality that conforms to the notions of race that are assumed in our language, legal doctrines and texts, including our Constitution. Let us begin with a moment in Australia's history when the concept of race became a key constitutional issue in this country. In 1900, the drafters of the Australian Constitution constructed the 'race power', which, in conjunction with the provision for the national census, excluded Aborigines from the ambit of this founding document in order to prevent surviving post-frontier Aboriginal populations from affecting the parliamentary representation of the states and financial distributions by the Commonwealth to the States. According to George Williams, barrister and senior lecturer in constitutional law at the Australian National University, the purpose of the 'race power' as originally drafted was expressed by Sir Edmund Barton, Australia's first Prime Minister and later High Court judge. At the 1898 convention on federation and the then proposed Australian constitution in Melbourne, he argued that the power was needed so that the Commonwealth could "regulate the affairs of the coloured or inferior races who are in the Commonwealth"[12]. The power enables the Commonwealth to enact laws that, for example, restrict where the people of a certain race can live or what employment they can take. It is a power to pass laws such as those in force at the turn of the last century, which provided that "no Asiatic or African alien can get a miner's right or go mining on a goldfield"[13].

Before 1967, when a referendum on this issue succeeded in removing racially discriminatory clauses from the Constitution, the 'race power' contained the words "other than the Aboriginal race in any State". This left the power to deal with Aboriginal issues with the State Parliaments. The 1967 referendum changed two

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[12] G. Williams (1997), "A double edge to races power", *The Sydney Morning Herald* (29th May), Opinion, p. 17 and M. Langton, (1999), "Why 'race' is a central idea in Australia's construction of the idea of a nation", in S. Magarey (ed.), *Human Rights and Reconciliation In Australia, Australian Cultural History* 18, pp. 22-37.

[13] G. Williams, *Op Cit.*

aspects of the Constitution. First, it amended the race power to allow the Commonwealth to pass laws for the Aboriginal people. Second, it deleted section 127 of the Constitution, which had stated that in census-taking, "Aboriginal natives were not to be counted". Aborigines were excluded from the census in order that the distribution of Commonwealth monies to the States on the basis of population did not disadvantage the southeastern states as against South Australia (which until 1911 included the Northern Territory), Western Australia and Queensland, where large numbers of Aborigines remained despite vigorous attempts to eradicate them (through various means, including attempts to 'breed-out' the 'Aboriginal race')[14]. Whatever the machinations resulting in the exclusion of Aborigines from the Commonwealth, the concept of race is fundamental in the construction of our Constitution.

One of the first legislative acts of the new Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901. This Act was the basis of the 'White Australia' policy that dictated the national ethnic mix for sixty years. The history of the conventional ideas of 'race' and Aboriginal rights, particularly in relation to Aboriginal peoples' property rights, was called into question in 1992, in the judgement of the High Court in the case of *Mabo and others v The State of Queensland* that discovered native title at common law. With a 6:1 majority, the judges held that the people of the Murray Islands retained a native title to their land, that this title was not extinguished by the annexation of the islands to the colony of Queensland in 1879, nor by subsequent legislation. As Susan Burton Phillips[15] (1993: 3) noted in her summary: "In reaching this decision the Court abandons the concept of *terra nullius*, which is so offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and … establishes within common law principles a form of native title largely unrecognised before in Australia". *Terra nullius*, the notion of an 'empty continent' belonging to no-one, assumed that when the British took possession of Australia, there had been no-one to contest the act of appropriation, no-one for them to conquer. Aboriginal people were vanquished, yet not vanquished. Now that *terra nullius* has been dismissed from the paradigm of colonial relations, indigenous people expect that other relations are possible, relations that will write indigenous people fully into the modern history of the state. Aboriginal peoples will now appear as groups which might treat with the state on matters such as regional agreements on development, service delivery and, even, limited self-governance.

Philip Ruddock's recent 'wheel' statements, however, have called upon notions of Aboriginality as a cultural *nullius*, despite the obvious cultural richness of Aboriginal societies[16]. The concept of *terra nullius* was effective in rendering indigenous people invisible on the basis of assumptions about their supposed racial inferiority. In *Mabo*, with a stroke of a judicial pen, indigenous people reappeared

[14] *cf.* R. McGregor (1997) *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the doomed race theory, 1880-1939*, University Press, Melbourne.

[15] S. Burton Phillips (1993) "Reconstructing the rules for the Land Rights contest", in *Essays on the Mabo Decision*, The Law Book Company, Sydney.

[16] For one example, see D.B. Rose (1992), *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

as persons with law and proprietary – or at least possessory – rights. What Philip Ruddock's recent statements have done has been to qualify or condition a recognition of indigenous rights, not legally but in public discourse, around racially-based notions of social hierarchy and social development, with Western (material) cultural developments as the norm to which Aborigines should aspire. If it is publically accepted that the 'real' problem is not one of historical injustice but rather of the inherent nature of Aborigines as 'racially' inferior, then acts of injustice against Aboriginal people need not be judged by the standards of civil society; in this horrible logic, they cease to be amenable to moral or judicial consideration. With the government's recent 10-point plan being the latest political attempt to operate in a climate of *terra nullius* – albeit with limited success for the government – it is not land that Philip Ruddock explicitly invokes during the last years of the 20th century but an understanding of Aboriginal disadvantage revolving around a notion of Aboriginality defined as a series of other pre-existing absences: agriculture, chariots, the wheel and a hierarchical, evolutionary or developmental order. Such absences are treated by him as a measure of the (in)ability of Aboriginal people to position themselves socially above the 'very low base' from which they came before the advent of European civilization, the very society to which Ruddock traces his own roots. In this formulation, the presence of the wheel, chariots and agriculture signal the apex of cultural evolution, a pinnacle from which the cultural achievements of other peoples – including indigenous Australians – can be measured. Where the material achievements of other peoples are similar to those of the West, similar levels of biological and social evolution are assumed to have been reached. Where they are not, as in Aboriginal cultures, cultural achievements are ultimately reduced in evolutionary or developmental status to a 'very low base', a foundation that can be taken as equivalent to the West's own ancestral past, prior to the wheel, signalling a notion of otherness founded on primitivist thinking. This, then, is the position that Aboriginal people today find themselves in relation to Australia's Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Reconciliation, and to a Prime Minister who fails to find fault in such political propositions.

Ruddock's views can be traced directly to 19th century thinking and beyond. Much has been written on how the West has perceived other cultures through the ages[17]. The dominant mid-19th century views are perhaps best exemplified by the works of the influential public commentators Thomas Huxley, Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward B. Tylor and Herbert Spencer, each of whom saw the world from social evolutionary perspectives. Each, in his own way, was concerned with identifying progressive stages in human development, positioning representatives of the West at the top of an evolutionary or developmental ladder that echoed the power relations of Western colonialism. Patrick Wolfe[18] and Lynette Russell[19] (2001) have written of

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17 For a classic text, see E. Said (1978), *Orientalism*, Pantheon, New York.

18 P. Wolfe (1999), *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: the Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, Cassell, London.

19 L. Russell (2001), *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Constructions of Aboriginalities*. Australian Scholarly Publications, Melbourne.

how the social evolutionism of the mid-19th century legitimated the colonial enterprise, pointing out that considering living Aboriginal peoples as relics of Europe's own ancestral past served to sever indigenous peoples not only from their past, but from their worldly presence also. Lynette Russell and Ian McNiven[20] concluded that the claiming of the Aboriginal present as a European past (e.g. associating Aboriginal cultures of the early European contact period with the pre-wheel, 'very low base' of European development) enabled the invaders to not only position themselves higher in evolutionary or developmental terms, but also to claim the Aboriginal present as akin to Europe's own past, legitimating the appropriation of indigenous souls and indigenous lands.

The colonial process in Australia as elsewhere operated through ideologies that implicated an invader evolved from, and therefore superseding, the invaded (and their lands). The living cultures encountered by explorers and 'ethnographers' were appropriated as living testimony of the West's own evolutionary history: across the seas, geographical distance from Europe signalled temporal distance from the civilized modern, until, on the other side of the world, 'in the pure state of nature' (to use Lieutenant James Cook's words)[21] Australian Aborigines became living remnants of the West's own infancy. Australian Aboriginal people were unfailingly placed at the bottom of the evolutionary or developmental rung, a preconception that willingly saw a kinship between the biology, psychology, stone artefact types and technologies of living Australian Aboriginal peoples and those of the dawn or childhood of humanity as evidenced by the European Stone Ages (especially the Old and Middle Stone Ages). Let us consider a few examples of such associations from the 1860s to the middle of the 20th century to illustrate the prevalence of such notions in Western thought. Many more examples could be cited, but these will suffice to make the point.

'The common ancestor for all modern races'

In 1863, two books laid the foundation for associating modern Aboriginal Australians with ancient Europeans. First, geologist Charles Lyell published *The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man*[22]. This book brought together all of the available evidence on the association of human bones (including the first detailed description of a Neanderthal fossil, provided by Thomas Huxley) and artefacts with extinct animals and is considered by many to be the foundational text for prehistoric

[20] I.J. McNiven, (1998) "Shipwreck saga as archaeological text: reconstructing Fraser Island's Aboriginal past", in I. McNiven, L. Russell and K. Schaffer (eds), *Constructions of Colonialism: Perspectives on Eliza Fraser's Shipwreck*, Leicester University Press, London pp. 37-50; I.J. McNiven & L. Russell (1997), '"Strange paintings' and 'mystery races': Kimberley rock-art, diffusionism and colonialist constructions of Australia's Aboriginal past", *Antiquity* 71, pp. 801-9 and L. Russell & I. McNiven (1998), "Monumental colonialism: megaliths and the appropriation of Australia's Aboriginal past", *Journal of Material Culture* 3, (3) pp. 283-301 and Russell (2002), *Op Cit*.

[21] J. Cook (1968), *Captain Cook's Journal*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide.

[22] C. Lyell (1863), *The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man: with Remarks on Theories of the Origin of the Species by Variation*, Murray, London.

archaeology and palaeoanthropology.

The second book – *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* – was by Thomas Huxley himself and also included a detailed description of the first reported skull fragment of a Neanderthal. Such was the excitement over Huxley's work that his book sold out its first run of 1000 copies in a matter of weeks. In both books, Huxley was trying to make sense of the new Neanderthal fossil find in relation to other human fossils and modern humans and apes. In Lyell's book, Huxley compared the Neanderthal skull with those of a chimpanzee, European (modern and ancient) and, most significantly, a number of modern Aboriginal Australians. As John Mulvaney[23] has aptly noted, this comparison was a "crucial stage in Aboriginal studies". For Huxley[24] the Neanderthal skull was seen as "the most brutal of all known human skulls", while the Aboriginal skulls were seen to be representative of "one of the purest and most homogeneous of existing races of men" and indeed as pure "as any race of savages in existence". The Neanderthal and Aboriginal skulls were thought to have major similarities, to the extent that Huxley commented that it would take but little modification to "convert the Australian brain case into a form identical" to that of the Neanderthal[25]. Despite the obvious ancientness of the Neanderthal skull, Huxley used a modern Aboriginal skull to illustrate the developmental sequence of humans from apes and monkeys. This was a telling move by Huxley, for it showed that irrespective of the geological antiquity of fossil skulls such as Neanderthals, modern Aboriginal skulls were presumed to be more ancient and primordial in design.

Faced with the proposition that his skull data did not conform entirely with existing views on the primitive state of Aboriginal Australians, Huxley felt it necessary to remind readers of the so-called primitiveness of Aboriginal culture. He indicated that similarities between (ancient) Neanderthal and (modern) Aboriginal skulls have more 'profound' meaning "when it is recollected that the stone axe is as much the weapon and implement of the modern as the ancient savage; that the former turns the bones of the kangaroo and of the emu to the same account as the latter did the bones of the deer and the urus"[26]. Despite the results of his own anatomical measurements, Huxley drew on long-established hierarchical views of humanity to situate Aboriginal people near the bottom (with Neanderthals) of an evolutionary scheme with modern Europeans at the top. The arbitrariness of this scheme was not lost on Lyell who made the perceptive, almost cynical observation at the end of Huxley's analysis that "nevertheless we must remember that as yet we have no distinct geological evidence that the appearance of what are called the inferior races of mankind has always preceded in chronological order that of the higher races"[27].

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[23] D.J. Mulvaney (1966), "Fact, fantasy and Aboriginal Australian ethnic origins", *Mankind* 6, pp. 299-305.

[24] T.H Huxley (1863), *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, Williams and Norgate, London. pp. 84, 87-88.

[25] *Ibid*.

[26] C. Lyell, *Op Cit* pp. 89.

[27] C. Lyell, *Op Cit* pp. 90.

Despite the ambiguous nature of Huxley's skull evidence, the concept of Aboriginal Australians as ancient-in-design actually became more entrenched with the publication in 1865 of what many believe to be the most important archaeology book published in the 19th century – John Lubbock's *Pre-Historic Times: as Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*[28]. The volume became the seminal text that formalized the notion of Aboriginal Australians as living fossils and representatives of the Palaeolithic or Stone Age peoples of Europe. On this topic, Lubbock was clear. He noted that observations of the life of these "miserable savages" will "throw light on the ancient remains found in Europe, and on the condition of the early races which inhabited our continent"[29] Following on Huxley's work, Lubbock made direct comparisons between ancient European Palaeolithic stone tools and modern Aboriginal stone tools. Such was the significance of Aboriginal Australians in his theories of human origins that the frontispiece to his 1870 book *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man* actually depicted a group of contemporary Aboriginal people.

In his book *Ancient Society*, Lewis Henry Morgan elaborated three major "ethnical periods" of human development – Savagery, Barbarism and Civilization – each subdivided into lower, middle and upper phases. Aboriginal Australians made it into the "Middle Status of Savagery" because they used fire and cooked fish. As for the "Lower Status of Savagery" (the "infancy of the human race") where people subsisted merely upon "fruits and nuts", Morgan noted "No exemplification of tribes of mankind in this condition remained in the historic period"[30]. In other words, Aboriginal Australians were the lowest form of humanity on earth.

In his foundational textbook *Anthropology*, the first Professor of Anthropology at Oxford University, Sir Edward B. Tylor, outlined a three-stage history of humanity that was in many ways similar to that of Lewis Henry Morgan, with modern representatives that acted as a living 'guide' to each developmental stage[31]. According to Tylor, archaeological research demonstrated the validity of this theoretical framework for in "every region of the inhabited world ancient stone implements are thus found in the ground, showing that at some time the inhabitants were in this respect like the modern savages"[32]. To illustrate his point, Tylor again compared modern and ancient stone tools – two archaeological specimens from ancient Europe and a modern, ethnographic specimen from mainland Australia. Tylor clearly believed that despite the recent age of the Aboriginal stone tool, it remained ancient-in-design. A few years later, Tylor elaborated his views of Australian Aborigines to the point where they were seen as more than just a 'guide' to the past. In March 1893, he read a paper before members of the Anthropological

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28 J. Lubbock (1865,) *Pre-Historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, Appleton and Co, New York.

29 J. Lubbock (1870), *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man: Mental and Social Condition of Savages*, D. Appleton and Co. New York, pp. 336-337, 354.

30 L.H Morgan (1877), *Ancient Society*, Holt, New York, pp. 10.

31 E.B. Tylor (1881), *Anthropology*, Macmillan, London, pp. 24-5.

32 *Ibid*. pp. 26.

Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in London with the blunt title: "On the Tasmanians as Representatives of Palaeolithic Man"[33].

In 1899, Tylor wrote with similar sentiment of the Tasmanian Aborigines in his Preface to the second edition of H. Ling Roth's (1899) *The Aborigines of Tasmania*: "That these rude savages remained within the present century representatives of the immensely ancient Palaeolithic period, has become an admitted fact. … Man of the Lower Stone Age ceases to be a creature of philosophic inference, but becomes a known reality"[34]. Sir Arthur Keith, the great anatomist and palaeontologist and president of the Anthropological Institute, similarly wrote: "The aboriginal race of Australia is the only race which, in my opinion, could serve as the common ancestor for all modern races"[35] (cited in Simpson, 1956, frontispiece). In 1901, (later Sir) Baldwin Spencer[36], the foundation Professor of Biology at The University of Melbourne, wrote a *Guide* for the stone artefacts then displayed in the National Museum of Victoria, noting that "the objects are such as are at once typical of what are frequently spoken of as both Palaeolithic and Neolithic men", and concluded that "Australian aborigines may be regarded as a relic of the early childhood of mankind left stranded in a part of the world where he has, without the impetus derived from competition, remained in a low condition of savagery". [37]

It is in such a culture of understanding that William J. Sollas[38], the then Professor of Geology at Oxford University, wrote that "the Australians of all races make the nearest approach to the Mousterians [i.e. Neanderthals]. … The Australians are a lower race than the Neandertal; at the same time, they are more closely allied to it than any other; and we may regard the Australian as a survival from Mousterian times". Living Tasmanians represented an even earlier stage of human evolution: "the Tasmanians … though recent, were at the same time a Palaeolithic or even, it has been asserted, an "eolithic" race; and they thus afford us an opportunity of interpreting the past by the present – a saving procedure in a subject where fantasy is only too likely to play a leading part"[39] .

The tendency to discuss living Aboriginal peoples by reference to ancient hominids was commonplace towards the end of the 19th century and beginnings of the 20th, and says more about contemporaneous preconceptions than it does about

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33 E.B. Tylor (1893), "On the Tasmanians as representatives of Palaeolithic Man", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, pp. 141-52.

34 E.B. Tylor (1899), "Preface", in H.L. Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons Halifax, pp. vii-ix.

35 A. Keith in C. Simpson (1956), *Adam in Ochre: inside Aboriginal Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

36 B. Spencer (1901), *Guide to the Australian Ethnological Collection in the National Museum of Victoria*, Government Printer Melbourne, p. 78.

37 See I.J. McNiven (2001), "Collectors and diggers: the early years of Aboriginal archaeology", in C. Rasmussen (ed.), *A Museum for the People: A History of Museum Victoria and its Predecessors*, Melbourne, Scribe Publications, pp. 214-17. For further discussions of the history of displays in the National Museum of Victoria.

38 W.J. Sollas (1911), *Ancient Hunters and Their Modern Representatives*, The Macmillan Company New York, pp. 161 – 162.

39 *Ibid*, p. 70.

evolutionary relationships[40]. Such approaches towards the relative social and evolutionary positioning of Aboriginal people were still alive and well into the 1930s. In 1936, R.R. Schmidt's *Der Geist der Vorzeit*[41] was translated into English for the first time as *The Dawn of the Human Mind*, two years after it first appeared in German. Australian Aboriginal people are discussed only once in the book, and the tone is unmistakable:

> Its considerable capacity gives to the *Pithecanthropus* [*Homo erectus*] skull a decidedly human character. The cranial capacity, even of the largest anthropoids (which may weigh up to seven hundred-weight), is rarely more than 600 cubic centimeters. *Pithecanthropus*, however, had already brought this up to between 850 and 900 cubic centimeters. Among the lowest human races – the Veddas and the Australians – the lowest capacity descends to 930 c.cm.; while the large-skulled Neandertaler possessed a capacity of a least 1,230 c.cm.[42].

These examples of a repeated tendency to compare Australian Aboriginal biology and culture with those of monkeys, apes and ancient (pre-*Homo sapiens sapiens*) hominids could easily be dismissed as trivial ramblings, except that they much (and explicitly) represent the dominant sentiments of the mid-19th to early-20th centuries. Living Australian Aboriginal people were openly discussed as a link in the developmental chain that joined modern Europeans with their past. Australian Aborigines were not simply perceived as an unchanging people in an unchanging environment, but could be seen as an evolutionary relic of Europe's own past, and in this capacity they were imbued with both great antiquity and timeless stasis.

It is but a short space of time from the early-mid 20th century AD to our own era, a temporal space that continues to be possessed with vestiges of a Western construction of Aboriginality imbued with such sentiment. While notions that equate living peoples with stages of an evolutionary tree began to lose popular and scientific credence after the 1890s – not coincidently during a period of time when field and armchair (theoretical) anthropology were rapidly uniting and professionalising – these assumptions were by no means thereafter discarded by even the most highly esteemed of university professors. As the examples quoted above demonstrate, the deep-seated assumption that living or recently living Aboriginal peoples are essentially of great antiquity and ahistoricity remained popular well into the 20th century. Such assumptions remain with us today as the legacy of Western preconceptions of Aboriginal people as an unchanging 'race' in an ancient land.

Such evolutionary notions explicitly reverberated in much of the scientific literature even into the middle of the 20th century. By 1962, Australian Aboriginal peoples were still considered simple, egalitarian and culturally undeveloped by many writers. Manning Clark's first volume of his encyclopaedic *A History of Australia*, widely acknowledged as one of the classic works of Australian history

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40 For example, see G.F.S Elliott (1920), *Prehistoric Man and His Story*. Seeley, Service and Co. Ltd., London, pp. 70-72.

41 R.R Schmidt (1936), *The Dawn of the Human Mind*, Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd. , London.

42 *Ibid.* p.41.

and still widely used today, introduced Australian history in the following way[43].

> Civilization did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. … The early inhabitants of the continent created cultures but not civilizations. … A distinction is made here between 'civilization' in the sense described in the Oxford English Dictionary, of a people brought out of a state of barbarism, and 'culture' in the sense defined in the Grosse Brockhaus as the sum of the efforts made by a community to satisfy and reconcile the basic human requirements of food, clothing, shelter, security, care of the weak and social cohesion by controlling its natural environment.

Clark's views were popular in Australia through much of the 1960s and 1970s, views perhaps best summarised by his words: "of the way of life of [Aboriginal people] before the coming of European civilization, little need, or indeed can be, said"[44]. These views imply not just a lack of knowledge of Aboriginal history, but rather a failure to acknowledge that Aboriginal pasts had their own histories rich in cultural enterprise ("little *need* … be said": our italics), yet different from those of the West. These views revolved around an implicit understanding that Aboriginal history could be measured in relation to a series of absences; the absence of those things – such as agriculture, chariots or the wheel – that gave presence to a *Western* history. A similar understanding was articulated by Professor J.B. Cleland[45], who prefaced *Aboriginal Man in South and Central Australia*[46] with the words: "At the coming of the white man the Australian aboriginal was in equilibrium with other members of the fauna to which he belonged and fitted naturally and, on the whole, very successfully into his environment". This was not simply a treatment of *Homo sapiens* as fauna, but specifically and distinctively of Aboriginal people as fauna, in marked contrast to the cultural beings of Europe.

Notions such as these were based on an assumption that change in Aboriginal Australia was slow, if present at all, and driven largely, if not entirely, by external forces. Charles Rowley[47] noted that "for lack of historical background, the Aboriginal community is treated as a more or less static society" based on notions of intrinsic stability. Generally speaking, neither short-term processes of change nor long-term historical trends were even imagined to apply to Aboriginal Australia. But there were two exceptions. Firstly, changes were generally acknowledged to have taken place when one people or culture replaced another (migration)[48]. Secondly, change

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43 C.M.H. Clark (1962), *A History of Australia, From Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie*. Volume 1: Melbourne University Press, Parkville, p. 3.

44 *Ibid*. p. 4.

45 J.B. Cleland (1966), "Preface", in B.C. Cotton (ed.), *Aboriginal Man in South and Central Australia*, Government Printer, Adelaide, pp. 7-8.

46 Quite appropriately given the thinking of the day, this book was published as a *Handbook of the Flora and Fauna of South Australia*.

47 C.D. Rowley (1986), *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Penguin, Ringwood, p. 4.

48 For example, J.B. Birdsell (1967), "Preliminary data on the trihybrid origin of the Australian Aborigines", *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania* 2, pp.100-55; H. Hale & N.B. Tindale (1930), "Notes on some human remains in the Lower Murray Valley, South Australia", *Records of the South Australian Museum* 4, 145-218 and P.S. Hossfeld (1966), "Antiquity of man in Australia", in B.C. Cotton (ed.), *Aboriginal Man in South and Central Australia*, pp. 59-96, Government Printer, Adelaide.

was also acknowledged where external contacts, such as the arrival of Macassans during the last few hundred years, produced cultural innovations (diffusion)[49]. There was little acknowledgment that Aboriginal society had, or even could have, changed by the weight of internal social or political forces. Aboriginal people were seen to be, to a large extent, an ahistorical, essentially static race.

For many 19th century Europeans, the collapse of Aboriginal society in the wake of European colonial settlement was seen to reflect the static nature and natural inferiority of the Aboriginal 'race'. The Rev. J.B. Wood in his monumental 1870 text *Natural History of Man* viewed the decimation of Aboriginal Australians as "following the order of the world, the lower race preparing a home for the higher". So "the cause of extinction lies within the savage himself, and ought not be attributed to the white man, who comes to take the place which the savage has practically vacated"[50]. Such views are a clear attempt to naturalise the colonisation and invasion process. They remove the onus of blame away from Europeans and redirect it back onto Aboriginal people. In short, such attitudes are founded on an underlying notion that Aboriginal society collapsed because of their inferior culture, because of their lack of evolutionary development and their lack of advanced cultural traits, such as the wheel.

Conclusion: a people of the 'antipodes'

Philip Ruddock's 'wheel' statements can be treated as symptomatic of an antipodean view of Aboriginality. The 'antipodes' are more than the opposite side of the world, for as opposite, they imply an Other judged in relation to a Western centre, a Western norm. As the centre, the West is the datum about which all else is judged or ranked. The other is always marginalised in its difference.

In their capacity as the antipodean other dwelling in an inaccessible, isolated land, Australian Aboriginal people have long been considered as historically arrested. They have been positioned in Western understanding as a tragedy of geographical and spiritual isolation. Lynette Russell[51] has thus discussed how Aboriginal Australians have long been portrayed as "ancient, primitive and childlike" in both the written literature and in the visual arts. She relates Western notions of Aboriginality to Edward Said's[52] "unimaginable antiquity" of the other. In *Orientalism*, Said argued that the Western other is constructed through stereotypes that not only highlight difference but that differentiate via a set of tropes (such as notions of timelessness and material absences) that serve to marginalise. Views of Aboriginality that start "from a very low base" and that deal "with an indigenous population that had little contact with the rest of the world", "who were essentially

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[49] F. McCarthy (1943), "An analysis of the knapped implements from eight *elouera* industry stations on the south coast of New South Wales", *Records of the Australian Museum* 21 (3), pp.127-53.

[50] J.B. Wood (1870), *Natural History of Man*, George Routledge, London, p. 105.

[51] L. Russell *Op Cit*.

[52] E. Said *Op.Cit* p. 167.

hunter-gatherers", who "didn't have chariots" nor the wheel are expressions of cultural politics.

It is in this implicit positioning of Aboriginal peoples at a "very low base" when compared to the apex that Philip Ruddock's comments can be found. This is a legacy of long-standing Western notions of an antipodean world that is at once geographically distant from the developmental centre in the West and temporally ancient. In such a view it is presumed that Aboriginal being is relatively undeveloped (or without time) and that it in many ways represents the West's own deep ancestral past. There is a myopia in a hierarchical ladder of long standing, signalling a failure to see an Aboriginal existence that even *could* be of parallel standing, towards an Aboriginality that is as modern as the Western observer is modern while yet acknowledging cultural difference. In this sense, it is not a post-modern world that we face, but a hegemonically constructed pre-modern Aboriginal other. In attitudes of developmental superiority that pit Aboriginal peoples at a "very low base" and Western culture as the norm around which Aboriginality need aspire we continue to reproduce a colonial order, intruding, appropriating and suffusing equality and being, and implying a normative attitude towards appropriation of land.

The reason for Aboriginality's primitivist standing in Ruddock's imagination lies not in evolutionary fact but in the West's own ideological history. There is a rather transparent association in Ruddock's statements between, on the one hand, Europe, the rational, the industrial, culture, *Homo economicus* and the social contract and, on the other, the indigenous, nature, *Homo nullius* and the primitive. Aboriginal people's primitive standing relative to the West, as characterised by Ruddock's reference to a series of material absences – the wheel, chariots, agriculture – has remained an ontological blindspot in much Australian political life, continuing to hold root in our deeper social psyche and to give implicit voice to a more overarching view of things Aboriginal: land as *terra nullius* and indigenous rights as moral, social and cultural *nullius*. Indeed, Ruddock's willingness to attribute disadvantage to the disadvantaged's own cultural predispositions, rather than to political will, smacks of cultural superiority and a refusal to acknowledge the right to cultural difference. It is ironic that he calls as defence to his own reported statements the view that "When people write about some comments that you make and they take some of them and not the whole, there can be, in such an approach, matters that are taken out of context", while at the same time he is so willing to take some aspects of Aboriginal material culture out of their broader cultural context to evoke notions of self-responsibility for disadvantage. This is no less than washing one's hands of cultural crucifixion.

The racialisation of Aboriginal people by white Australians and the associated set of assumptions about their intellectual and social capacities, contrary to all reliable scientific evidence, clearly serves some deep psychological purpose in Australian society. Since the popularisation of Darwinian ideas in the nineteenth century, Aboriginal people have been depicted as "doomed to extinction" in accordance with various racist ideologies. Aboriginal people were stereotyped in a wide range of epithets, such as "drunks" and "parasites", by the dominant white society because

there were some acute psychological advantages in doing so. In these metaphors and the icons onto which the stereotypical information is projected, fear and contempt are expressed simultaneously in order to tame the native and turn him or her into a mendicant. Whites are made innocent of the destruction of Aboriginal society because the Aborigines "did not invent the wheel", "did not have the chariot", or are "drinking themselves to death". The virility of these myths lies in their appeal to racist and eugenicist theory, elements of which still remain in popular discourse. These myths underlie popular explanation for persecution in law and exclusion from services of Aboriginal people: "they bring it upon themselves". As colonial constructs, they gloss over historical and scientific accuracy in favour of racist falsehoods and ideology. The centrality of the arguments in Australian public life about the future of Aboriginal people, its tone increasingly mean and hateful, reflects not so much on the electoral political or economic issues which might be involved, but on the continuing narrative of the master race.