

ABORIGINAL RESISTANCE IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

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The history of frontier contact between white settlers and Aborigines in Australia used to be glossed over by historians until quite recently. Even today, when the violent and destructive nature of that contact is much more generally acknowledged, there is a tendency to treat it as an episode in the early history of Australia, regrettable perhaps, but of little relevance to the present. In reality attitudes deriving from European perception of frontier contact are widely pervasive in Australia today, and are of great significance for present and future race relations.

Frontier history's contribution to white Australian historical experience and to each white Australian's knowledge (or false-knowledge) component of his attitudes will obviously vary greatly, both from individual to individual and from one period to another. Some of the factors causing such variation in our attitudes resulting from frontier contact may be:

- . personality factors of the individual processing the information
- . the region in which the individual lives
- . the region in which the individual and his family grew up
- . formal and informal communication processes including schooling, degree of education, the media, churches, other organizations
- . contact with Aboriginal people
- . awareness of international race relations
- . remoteness in time of a region from frontier experience

These are only a tentative listing of possible factors. The transmission of ideas from one generation to another is a subject that should occupy the ethno-historian much more, especially in Australia.

Some components of this frontier historical experience that contribute to the intellectual aspect of whiteman culture seem to be:

- . the expendability of Aborigines and Aboriginal culture in the face of 'progress'
- . the submissiveness of Aboriginal people as demonstrated by their presumed lack of effective resistance to white invasion
- . Aboriginal resistance as a demonstration of Aboriginal viciousness, cowardice, and treachery - because it was guerilla resistance, rather than the model of warfare found acceptable by Europeans (i.e. more akin to the Viet Cong resistance than to the North Vietnamese).
- . the frontier as proof of Aboriginal inferiority
- . the frontier as a demonstration of lack of Aboriginal adaptability and initiative
- . the frontier as irrelevant to whites and unimportant to blacks unless made to seem so by white activists
- . the frontier to be ignored or glossed over in the teaching of history
- . Aborigines as a problem confronting the pastoralist like dingoes, droughts, and kangaroos
- . white colonization and conquest as inevitable and white actions understandable, if regrettable; therefore Aborigines to-day are unreasonable, unsophisticated, or worse still, militant to be aggrieved about it. (Stories about grandfathers being shot and grandmothers raped etc. are bad form or disturbing to harmonious community relations).

Of course, I do not suggest that this list is complete or that each white Australian would concur with all items listed, or with each one with the same degree of intensity. However, they have been important garments in the intellectual wardrobe of all or most Australians in the past and are still very commonly worn to-day. Perhaps we should all try them on for size.

The contribution of the frontier to black culture is just as varied and of great importance. The oral history record of older Aborigines reveals an almost universal awareness of dispossession by

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violence. Sometimes it is seemingly accepted with surprising equanimity: 'That's just history'. Or with bitter hostility: 'They shot them down like dogs'. However, the overall impression is of a chamber of horrors waiting for black and white historians to open. How much of this has been communicated to the young is difficult to estimate and still needs thorough exploration. Increasingly, however, Aborigines are developing more formal communication processes. Aboriginal publications and education programs are exploring the reality of their history. ('B.C.' now means 'Before Cook'; and, although I have heard several explanations of the colours in the National Aboriginal flag, one common one contains the line: 'Red is for the blood that was shed'.)

When we move from the consideration of each race separately to the area of race relations, the frontier assumes an encompassing and probably even more enduring significance. It created a multi-racial society in which Europeans and Aborigines were related as coloniser and colonised, conqueror and conquered. It created therefore a multi-racial society with a superior white caste and an inferior black caste. Regrettably, this caste system is still with us.

The few ethno-historians who have researched in the area have understandably concentrated on the destruction of the pre-existing or traditional Aboriginal society. They have high-lighted the violence of dispossession and linked the large loss of life suffered by the Aborigines in their resistance with the depopulation following frontier contact. The 'doomed race' theory has thus had its effect on historians who marched the survivors from the battlefields and the disease-ridden 'blacks' camps' to the concentration camps of the reserves, out of Australian society and its history. In reality this was a period of frustrated acculturation and a deliberate attempt to prevent the development of a multi-cultural society.

Several generations of social change in which the Aboriginal people made positive, determined, often desperate, and frequently successful attempts to respond to the new social environment were thus largely ignored or glossed over.

Such responses began with first contact and were persisted with where possible during that often extensive period of frontier conflict. Armed Aboriginal resistance to the invader lasted for periods varying from a few months to more than twenty years. During this time they not only modified their tool kits by adopting aspects of the material culture of the invaders, they also had to modify aspects of their economic, social, religious, and political life. These changes need further exploration.

I would now like to look at some of those that occurred in North Queensland. Navigation through the Great Barrier Reef resulted in a number of shipwrecks. Aborigines salvaged the vast quantities of material wealth these provided and modified them for usage.¹

Repeated and often prolonged peaceful visits in the 1840's by Royal Navy ships to Evans Bay at the northern tip of Cape York Peninsula posed a more sophisticated challenge and led to the Aborigines successfully adapting to the visits of friendly aliens who encroached little on their land resources. They seem to have accepted the Europeans into a gift-exchange system where Aboriginal labour was exchanged for such European articles as pipes, tobacco, biscuits, steel axes, and knives. Some of the Europeans were drawn into the kinship system.² The Aborigines here had started to turn outwards to sea-borne contacts and this had modified their economic and social life.

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On the pastoral frontier in North Queensland, Aborigines were 'kept out' until their resistance was broken; a process that commonly took over six years. As one supporter of the process narrated, this meant that the settlers were:

never to allow them [the Aborigines] near a camp, out-station, head-station, or township; consequently they were hunted by anyone if seen in open country, and driven away or shot down when caught out of the scrub and broken ground. This course adopted by the early settlers and pioneers was unavoidable and quite necessary under the existing circumstances.³

This policy was supported by the Queensland government until 1896. A very effective para-military force, the Native Police Force, was used to support the frontier pastoralists.⁴

Needless to say the Aborigines tried desperately to meet this new challenge. They intelligently attacked the settlers, their animals, and their property wherever possible but as first contacts were bloody, or first attempts at resistance ruthlessly punished, a general pattern of conflict developed that indicated a social and political response to the invaders.

After initial clashes with the whites who had superior firepower and offensive organizational capability, or after news of this military superiority was communicated to them from previously contacted areas, the Aborigines avoided contact with the small number of pastoralists and their employees - for up to two years in some places. As the permanency of European colonization became more apparent and sheep and cattle numbers increased, thus making unbearable inroads on Aboriginal economic, social, and religious life, Aboriginal resistance became overt and determined. Animals were killed or driven off, settlers and their dwellings attacked and robbed, not only for their material resources but also to intimidate the settlers and to try to force them from Aboriginal land. Clashes

occurred with increasing intensity until Aboriginal resistance was broken by a combination of squatter and Native Police action.

Aboriginal resistance was often not negligible. In 1868, the Police Commissioner reported:

The coast country all along from Townsville to Mackay is inhabited by blacks of the most hostile character. On some of the stations north of Bowen, such as Woodstock, Salisbury Plains, and some others, it is almost impossible to keep any cattle on the runs; and south of Bowen some stations are or were about to be abandoned, in consequence of the destruction of property by the blacks.⁵

Such effective resistance only served to focus intensified Native Police and settler retaliation. But guerilla resistance did continue for up to 20 years in areas where terrain was suitable.

During this time Aborigines had to change their social and economic life to avoid the pastoralists and the Native Police. They had to modify their political life to accommodate the need for guerilla resistance. They also, of course, had to adapt psychologically to a completely new stress situation.

James Morrill gives a glimpse of the impact of this completely inexplicable and seemingly malevolent violence that was unleashed amongst them. Morrill, a shipwrecked sailor, lived with the Aborigines for seventeen years before he made contact with the settlers at Inkerman Station in 1863. He lived for most of this time with the Mt. Elliott local group.⁶

In 1860, a group of Aborigines approached the crew of a government ship anchored at Cape Cleveland to tell them of Morrill's presence. The Europeans grew alarmed and fired upon the apparently menacing 'savages', killing one of Morrill's friends and wounding another.

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The next encounter Morrill heard of occurred about three years later. Some Aborigines were lamenting the death of an old man when an unnoticed settler fired upon them, killing the old man's son. Presumably this was the opening gambit of 'keeping the blacks out'. They later retaliated, killing the man and trying to kill his horse which they assumed was also rational and malevolent.

Reports of the encroaching whites increased, each one bringing fresh evidence of their ruthlessness. A party of Native Police with squatter volunteers, shot down the Aboriginal group Morrill had lived with at Port Denison. Next fifteen members of the group Morrill was then living with were shot dead while on a fishing expedition. Thus, by 1863, 'keeping them out' meant that Aborigines could not safely live, socially or economically, in their own country.

It was not until 1868 that the first Aborigines were 'let in' in North Queensland, a policy that was cautiously extended in the settled areas into the early 1870's.⁷

It was then that the gold discoveries in Cape York Peninsular brought vast numbers of European and Chinese miners to areas previously thought useless for cattle. Until 1881, by which time the major rushes were over, no Aborigines had been 'let in' into a mining field.⁸ It was for the residents of the more permanent towns created by the mineral discoveries, like Cairns, Cooktown, and Herberton, and the pastoralists who had followed the miners, to make the peace with the Aborigines they had dispossessed.

This process continued through the 1880s but there was still frontier conflict on the remote mining fields of Cape York Peninsula in the late 1890's.

In 1896, the Police Commissioner officially terminated Queensland's frontier assault on its Aborigines, a policy which had

been accepted unquestioningly at separation in 1859.⁹ I have described the type of frontier conflict experienced by most Aborigines in North Queensland. There were two other areas of frontier conflict in North Queensland which I shall allude to briefly: the rainforest frontier and the sea frontier. In many ways they are the most interesting because the superior technology and political organization of the Europeans was minimised by the nature of the European industry or the nature of the terrain.

The area from just north of Townsville to just south of Cooktown and west to the Great Dividing Range was covered with dense tropical rainforest which was as forbidding to the European colonists as it was helpful to the resisting rainforest Aborigines.¹⁰ In several parts of North Queensland, Aboriginal resistance was prolonged by the availability of refuge in rainforest or thick scrub. In some areas between Bowen and Mackay, for example, Aborigines had continued to raid squatters' herds for twenty years. However, it is to the rainforest of the Atherton and Evelyn Plateaus that I will now turn.

The first Europeans to encroach upon the rainforest north of Townsville were timbergetters attracted from about 1874 to the Tully, Johnstone, Daintree, and Bloomfield Rivers. Clearing the heaviest scrub revealed the land's fertility and small settlers followed in the late 1870s and through the 1880s. In the 1880s much of the best cedar on the Johnstone and Daintree Rivers became exhausted and, by 1881, the timbermen turned to the tablelands behind Cairns when the farming potential of this area was revealed and selectors began to carve out small farms. During the same period, miners and newly-established cattle stations were encroaching from the west on the Aborigines' hunting grounds and river resources. More and more restricted and more and more hungry, the rainforest Aborigines found their homeland producing maize, potatoes, and bananas in abundance and untended settlers huts and timbergetters' camps full of good things.

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These the Aborigines successfully harvested. Aboriginal attacks from ambush increased and the roads became unsafe.

Wherever and whenever possible the Europeans extracted savage revenge. But it was often impossible.

In 1882, the Herberton Advertiser remarked:

Verily we live in troublesome times and can hardly bring ourselves to consider the black police as the most effective instrument possible for the supression of myalls.¹¹

They were the best aggressive force; but not effective enough for the settlers. From 1884 to 1888, conflict became intense and the settlers' losses of animals and crops were unbearable. Aboriginal resistance in the rainforest found Queensland's frontier policy wanting. In desperation, the selectors near Atherton urged the government to conciliate the rainforest Aborigines.

In early 1889, a police constable with Aboriginal interpreters, after two months' efforts, made contact with the resisting rainforest Aborigines. He got them to agree to a truce: the Europeans would stop attacking the Aborigines and would supply them with supplementary food if the Aborigines ceased their attacks on the settlers and their property. The scheme was an immediate and dramatic success from the Europeans' point of view and spread to other areas where the terrain made Aboriginal resistance difficult to control.

After forty years, the Queensland government was forced by Aboriginal resistance to adopt an alternative policy to 'keeping the blacks out'. However, the process of asserting European control and allowing colonization to continue went on more rapidly. Substituting beef for bullets was simply a more effective means of dispossessing rainforest Aborigines.

The sea frontier, in many ways, was the most interesting of all. By the 1840's, European capitalists were exploiting the waters of North Queensland for beche-de-mer, tortise shell, guano, and after 1868, pearlshell and pearls. The most important products were beche-de-mer and pearlshells. The beche-de-mer industry and swimming-diving for pearlshell required a large supply of cheap, unskilled labour so, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century, a large number of Aborigines made contact with a European based culture through these fishing industries. The pearlshell industry was based on Thursday Island and the beche-de-mer industry on Thursday Island and Cooktown, and, to a much lesser extent, on Cairns, Townsville and Mackay.

Southern Aborigines from such areas as Fraser Island and Townsville were employed in the boats. However, much use was made of local labour as there was a plentiful supply and Aborigines could be picked up and disembarked cheaply and paid for with a minimal supply of food, tobacco, clothing and blankets. In the 1880s and 1890s there were between 300 and 500 local Aborigines employed in the northern fisheries at any time.

Progressively one area after another on Cape York Peninsula was opened up by the recruiters. Labourers were recruited initially either by deceit or outright kidnapping. Subsequently a regular labour trade developed.

Many of the young men and women were willing to work in the fisheries, probably over 50% of them. They were less held by traditional ties and recruiting opened up a way of avoiding the dominance of the elders and of experiencing a novel way of life that offered previously unimagined excitement and interest. As the male population of the fisheries became sexually dependent on Aboriginal women, a relationship developed on the sea frontier between the

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fishermen and the Aborigines, based on the need for Aboriginal labour and sex.

Thus, a multi-racial society was developing in the fisheries not based on the physical dispossession of the Aborigines. However, the taking of the young and able and the prostitution of the women had a disastrous effect on traditional life. Worse still, the introduction of diseases and the loss of human resources to the fisheries led to the depopulation of one area after another. The fishermen had to progressively move their recruiting grounds as the older ones became 'worked out'. By 1897, the Batavia River area, at Mapoon Mission, was most resorted to and the Weipa area was just being opened up. The passing of the Aboriginal Protection Act of 1897 eventually saved the Aborigines south of Mapoon from the worst ravages of the fisheries.

If Aborigines actively participated in the industry, they also actively resisted the strictures it placed on their lives. Many did not wish to stay away from their homeland as long as the fishermen wished. Many wanted the material wealth offered by the fishermen but not the service on the boats. Thus, the Aborigines frequently ran off with boats to return to their homeland or to obtain the wealth of the fishermen. Attacks on the fishermen to avenge ill-treatment or to enable Aborigines to escape with property were frequent and the loss of life of fishermen quite high.

The sea frontier thus led to a multi-racial society not based on complete physical dispossession. The relationship between the fishermen and Aborigines was still one of colonizer and colonist, superior and inferior racial castes. This relationship also contained within it the seeds of exploitation by the dominant caste of the inferior caste and resistance by the inferior caste to the dominant caste.

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From both the rainforest and sea frontiers the lesson for to-day is that less violent frontier conflict led no less to the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society than did the frontal assault on the pastoral and mining frontiers. To-day in North Australia the frontier is in Weipa and Aurukun, as well as in the Kimberleys and Central Australia. In all of these areas the mining industry or the tourist industry is systematically continuing the nineteenth century assault on lands reserved solely for the use of Aborigines. In other areas, like Yarrabah and Palm Island, the tourist industry threatens to consolidate the expansion of European colonization.

If the Aboriginal people are thought worthy of consideration, the lesson of history ought to be obvious: that culture change should proceed at a pace acceptable to both cultures. This means that Aboriginal communities should have the right to control or veto the further expansion of industry into their land.

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