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Beyond the frontier: European influence, aborigines and the concept of 'traditional' culture

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Beyond the Frontier: European Influence, Aborigines and the Concept of 'Traditional' Culture*

In spite of the variety of subjects dealt with in this article, there is a common theme: the full impact of European settlement on Aboriginal culture cannot be measured by positing a model of 'traditional' Aboriginal culture, because very little can be known about the nature of that culture before European contact. More importantly the very concept of 'traditional' culture is challenged as being meaningless in discussions of other cultures.

In recent years there has been renewed interest in the history of white/Aboriginal relations. Many historical accounts have concentrated on the destruction of Aboriginal society by direct violence, misguided government policy and general public neglect. The theme of violence has led to a proliferation of 'blunderbuss' histories which, concentrating on white/Aboriginal frontier conflict, unfortunately have overlooked the more insidious effects of the later systematic exploitation of Aborigines and official and semi-official attempts to break down their established ways of life.

This article does not concentrate on Aboriginal history which occurred **behind** the frontier, but on the effects of white settlement **beyond** the frontier. While accounts of frontier violence may be more spectacular, the influences beyond the frontier may have been just as pervasive and certainly as destructive as anything produced by white violence.

The Aboriginal Past and History of the Aborigines

Recent research has established that man has been in Australia for at least 40,000 years if not longer. But while the Aborigines have a long past they have only a very brief history. There are a number of reasons why this distinction between the Aboriginal past and Aboriginal history is important. While many changes certainly occurred in Aboriginal culture during those 40,000 years, there are no records of specific events or particular people and only a scant knowledge of Aboriginal prehistory can be deduced from meagre remains. It is also obvious that for many Aborigines, even today, the past has little meaning and the idea of history is alien to their thought. The 'Dreamtime' has no time, it belongs to a sense of 'everywhen'.¹

The idea of history is a particularly western concept, developed over time in European culture; a history of Aborigines can therefore only begin with the establishment of white settlement in Australia. This is so not only because the whole venture of writing history is

* This is a revised version of a paper delivered to the History Section of the 48th A.N.Z.A.A.S. Conference (Melbourne), 1976. I would like to thank Shirley Andrew, Diane Barwick, David Horton and Basil Sansom for their comments on an earlier draft.

1. W. E. H. Stanner, 'The Dreaming', in T. A. G. Hungerford (ed.), *Australian Signpost*, Melbourne, 1956, p. 52.

western in conception, but also because the documents upon which such a history must be based are couched in European languages and based upon western concepts. There exists no separate history of the Aborigines but a history of white settlement in which Aborigines appear. The whole perspective of Australian history is slanted in this manner.² This is not to deny that a history of the Aborigines after European settlement is possible. With the use of oral history and a thorough knowledge of Aboriginal culture and languages, a non-Aborigine might be able to produce such an account; increasing literacy among Aborigines themselves will probably produce even better narratives. Such accounts undoubtedly will be different from those produced today by many Australian historians.³

The distinction between an Aboriginal past and a history of the Aborigines is important because if it is to be argued that the influences of white settlement went ahead of the frontier, it might be asked how these influences can be known. The truth is that many of the changes must be inferred or gathered up from European accounts recorded soon after contact. There was an overlap between Aboriginal past and the recording of their history, but very little has been recorded.⁴ The problem centres upon the concepts of 'contact' and 'frontier'. The initial settlement of Europeans in Australia marked but the start of a major transformation not only of the lives of the Aborigines but also of the nature of the country itself. Within roughly one hundred years Europeans, as explorer and settlers, had penetrated most parts of the country and their influence spread before them. Movement in some areas was sporadic and difficult to document, therefore the concepts of 'contact' and of 'frontier' must remain vague. Statements on which side of the frontier changes occurred and the exact nature of 'contact' cannot be made with precision. Many of the changes occurring beyond the frontier were merely continued and reinforced once the frontier had advanced and moved beyond a particular area. The pattern of events behind the frontier form part of Aboriginal history; the discussion which follows must always remain vague and open to conjecture.

Iron and Glass

The Aborigines before white contact did not possess the technology to produce items of iron, glass or pottery yet such objects were often found in use among Aboriginal groups when first contacted by Europeans. A number of these items may have accidentally entered Australia, by being washed ashore from Asia or from wrecks, especially in Western Australia. A number of items such as iron, pottery and bottle glass were brought to Australia by the 'Macassans', though when their voyages to northern Australia first began

2. On this distinction see: P. Munz, 'The purity of historical method: some sceptical reflections on the current enthusiasm for the history of non-European societies', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 5, no. 5, 1971, pp. 1-17.

3. See the accounts of Ben Murray in L. Hercus, *Tales of Ngadu-Dagali (Rib-bone Billy)*, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1977, pp. 52-76, and the texts in F. Merlan, "'Making people quiet'" in the pastoral north: reminiscences of Elsey Station', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1978, pp. 70-106.

4. But see the vivid account by Strehlow of the killing of men who committed sacrilege at an Aranda ritual in the 1850s or 60s: T. G. H. Strehlow, 'Geography and the totemic landscape in central Australia: a functional study', in R. M. Berndt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, Nedlands, 1970, pp. 112-13.

is still uncertain.⁵ European settlement of Australia brought masses of new material into the country and many items were obtained by Aborigines. Not all the new goods appealed to the Aborigines but certain items were greatly prized and soon found their way beyond the frontier. What an Aborigine in contact with the early white settlements may have found functionally useful became an object of some value further away from the frontier.

Iron was particularly popular. Iron knives and axes were quickly recognised as being superior to stone, especially where good local stone was unavailable. The Aborigines soon learnt that when actual axes and knives could not be obtained other material could be utilized. Iron wheel hoops and horseshoes were particularly favoured and sometimes horses were killed merely to procure their valuable horseshoes. Carnegie reported that a horseshoe had been made into a 'tomahawk' by some desert Aborigines he met in Western Australia in 1896 and in one abandoned camp he found an old iron tent peg, the lid of a tin matchbox and the metal parts of horse harness. It is unlikely that the groups to whom these items belonged had experienced any contact with white men.⁶ Similar cases could be cited from the early literature of exploration while archaeological investigation has discovered items of European manufacture in archaeological contexts of the early period of settlement.⁷

Another substance for which the Aborigines found a ready use was glass. Glass, particularly from the thick base of a bottle, could be flaked in the same way as certain types of stone and provided an excellent cutting edge. In the Kimberleys, Aborigines produced particularly fine glass spearheads.⁸ Early European settlement brought large quantities of glass into eastern Australia; the 'Macassans' had already introduced glass into northern Australia and the abortive settlement at Port Essington provided an additional source in this region.⁹

As European settlement moved inland the quantities of glass available to the Aborigines increased; the present day litter of empty beer cans which covers many parts of Australia merely overlays a greater deposit of earlier glass bottles! The porcelain insulators of the overland telegraph were also made into tools¹⁰ and to prevent those in use being taken the linesman often left spare insulators or bottle glass at the base of the poles for the Aborigines.

There were a number of ways material, brought into Australia by Europeans and 'Macassans', could be transferred some distance beyond the frontier. The extensive trade and exchange routes which

5. C. C. Macknight, *The Voyage to Maree: Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia*, Melbourne, 1976, p. 84 etc.; see also the possibility of earlier contacts in J. Urry and M. Walsh, 'The lost "Macassar" language of Northern Australia'. (Paper presented to the I.C.I.O.S. Conference, Perth, 1979.)

6. D. W. Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand: A Narrative of Five Years' Pioneering and Expedition in Western Australia*, London, 1898, pp. 224, 258.

7. Laila Haglund, 'Dating Aboriginal relics from the contact period', *Archaeology & Physical Anthropology in Oceania*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1976, pp. 163-74.

8. H. Balfour, 'On the method employed by the natives of N.W. Australia in the manufacture of glass spearheads', *Man*, vol. 3, 1903, p. 65.

9. J. Allen, 'The archaeology of nineteenth-century British imperialism: an Australian case study', *World Archaeology*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1973, pp. 54-5.

10. W. B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People*, London, 1927, v. 2, p. 537; in fact the telegraph lines proved an excellent supply for raw material; the wire was stolen for fishing spear prongs in the Gulf Country, and in southern Arnhem Land the poles and insulators were incorporated into song, dance and decoration (Alice Moyle pers. comm.).

existed across Australia, the use of messengers, the gathering of various groups for ceremonial reasons and the transhumant nature of subsistence patterns all contributed to the distribution of foreign goods.¹¹ These routes of transmission also spread other things beyond the frontier: knowledge of the Europeans and their ways,¹² disease and perhaps some exotic animals.

Aborigines were highly selective in their choice of European goods, and at first they used items as substitutes for existing materials.¹³ The impact of these introduced goods and materials therefore can be said to have been relatively insignificant. However, the introduction of steel axes into areas of northern Australia increased the ability of the Aborigines to produce dug-out canoes based on Asian models which led in turn to a greater mobility of population and probably alterations in subsistence patterns.¹⁴ The potential significance of new forms of material culture in other parts of Australia can never be known as the frontier advanced too quickly for us to measure their long term effects. In spite of certain claims,¹⁵ anthropologists have never seen an Aboriginal culture which relied solely on stone tools in its patterns of exploitation and material technology.

It is a pity that most studies of technology and the use and importance of material culture have concentrated on 'traditional' forms. Aborigines in certain areas have been using western goods for nearly two hundred years and their choice of certain items and the value they place upon them are of great importance in understanding many aspects of their lives. The Aborigines have exhibited a special concern with western dress from parading in cast-off military uniforms in the early days of settlement to their 'cowboy' dress often seen today. The use of the gun, particularly in hunting, has a long history but no proper study exists of its importance in their lives. More recently the introduction of large quantities of money into communities has increased the use of other things, especially radios and cassette recorders, and the motor car which has had a very important impact.¹⁶ None of these subjects have received the attention they deserve.

Disease and Death

Knowledge of disease in Aboriginal communities in the past is too contradictory to come to any firm conclusions concerning its nature or its effects. There has been some discussion recently on whether or not certain diseases were indigenous or introduced (for instance yaws) but analysis of prehistoric human remains should

11. D. J. Mulvaney, "'The Chain of Connection': the Material Evidence", in N. Peterson (ed.), *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia*, Canberra, 1976; Mulvaney specifically mentions the exchange of iron beyond the frontier, *ibid.*, p. 90.
12. See H. Reynolds, "'Before the Instant of Contact": Some Evidence from Nineteenth Century Queensland', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 63-9.
13. W. W. Thorne, 'Aboriginal Adaptability', *Australian Museum Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 10, 1929, pp. 337-39.
14. W. L. Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe*, New York, [1937] 1958, pp. 458-61; F. G. Rose, 'The Indonesians and the Genesis of the Groote Eylandt Society, Northern Australia', in *Beitrag zur Volkerforschung Hans Damm zum 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin, 1961, pp. 526-7.
15. Especially by those who have carried out so-called ethnoarchaeology in various parts of Australia in recent years.
16. But c.f. F. G. Rose, *The Wind of Change in Central Australia: the Aborigines at Angas Downs*, 1962, Berlin, 1965, pp. 25-30, on Aboriginal mobility and motor vehicles left behind after the Second World War; Aborigines today own, and use, vehicles extensively.

help settle some of these arguments. Those diseases which leave no traces on bone will always remain a matter for conjecture.

It may be safely assumed, however, that since Australians were isolated from other populations for a considerable time,¹⁷ they were also relatively isolated from many diseases found in other parts of the world. Those diseases developed in areas with large population concentrations and with different modes of subsistence and diet from the Aborigines were certainly absent from the continent. The settlement of large concentrations of Europeans in Australia and the constant contact through trade and fresh emigration with pools of infection overseas, not only brought new diseases into the country, but also helped sustain a high level of infection within the population.

The situation in Australia is analogous with that of the impact of Europeans of the Indian populations of the Americas.¹⁸ In spite of the fact that the initial European settlement of Australia was more recent and the documentary evidence concerning colonization and expansion is much better than that for the Americas, we know far less than American scholars about the effects of disease on the Aboriginal population of Australia. Contemporary accounts of settlement are full of details of the disastrous effects of disease upon the Aborigines and many modern accounts contain brief references to the role of disease in the alteration of Aboriginal society. However, very little effort has been made to calculate the decline of population due to disease¹⁹ or to examine the possible influences of particular diseases.

Within the first year of European settlement near Sydney an epidemic broke out among the local Aborigines which caused many deaths. This epidemic has usually been attributed to smallpox, though its origins have always remained a mystery: no cases were recorded in the convict fleets or on visiting ships and the epidemic did not affect the white settlement. It has also been suggested that the epidemic raged out of control across Australia killing many Aborigines.²⁰ However, only two other smallpox epidemics have been reported among Aborigines: an outbreak on the Murray River in the 1830s and one in the Northern Territory in the 1860s. Stirling, who surveyed the evidence for smallpox epidemics in Australia and on the Murray in particular surmised that 'Macassans' in northern Australia introduced the disease (perhaps more than once) and that it spread at varying rates across Australia.²¹

17. Many of the papers in a recent volume on the origin of the Australians comment on this isolation; R. L. Kirk and A. G. Thorne (eds.), *The Origin of the Australians*, Canberra, 1978; see also J. Urry, 'Old Questions: New Answers? Some Thoughts on the Origin and Antiquity of Man in Australia', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1978, pp. 149-66.
18. For such an analogy see: T. D. Stewart, 'Perspective on some problems of early man common to America and Australia', in A. P. Elkin and N. W. G. MacIntosh (eds.), *Grafton Elliot Smith: The Man and His Work*, Sydney, 1974, pp. 129-32; 'isolation' is obviously a relative term, contacts with New Guinea and Indonesia existed in the past. Some of the Aborigines may have built up an immunity to certain diseases and the manner in which disease helped destroy the Tasmanians may reflect their greater isolation.
19. Diane E. Barwick, 'Changes in the Aboriginal Population of Victoria, 1863-1966', in D. J. Mulvaney and J. Golson (eds.), *Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia*, Canberra, 1971, is a notable exception.
20. E. H. Curr, *The Australian Race: Its Origin, Languages, Customs, Place of Landing in Australia . . .*, Melbourne, 1886, pp. 213-14; the claim has been repeated by many later writers, for instance: G. Blainey, *Triumph of the Nomads: A History of Ancient Australia*, Melbourne, 1975, pp. 102-3; I. M. White, 'Pitfalls to Avoid: The Australian Experience', in *Health and Disease in Tribal Societies*, Amsterdam, 1977, p. 269.
21. E. C. Stirling, 'Preliminary report on the discovery of native remains at Swanport, River Murray; with an inquiry into the alleged occurrence of a pandemic among the Australian Aborigines', *Transactions and Report of the Royal Society of South Australia*, vol. 35, 1911, pp. 4-44.

There is need for caution in identifying diseases from historical sources. In a population which has had little or no experience of western diseases, the diseases sometimes take a different form from that in populations possessing a measure of immunity.²² A number of viral infections produce skin eruptions which can scar in ways that might be mistaken for a severer diseases. Measles outbreaks among Aborigines in recent times have caused a high level of mortality and severe lesions which are not always associated with this disease among Europeans.²³

The epidemic nature of such diseases as smallpox and measles must also be considered. These viral infections have developed in large populations and Fenner has recently noted that to remain endemic such diseases require minimal populations of some considerable size.²⁴ Considering the possible size of Aboriginal groups in the past it is highly unlikely that either smallpox or measles remained endemic within the population or spread throughout the country. Chickenpox, however, is quite another matter. Whereas smallpox and measles need populations of between 300,000 and 500,000 to remain endemic, chickenpox needs only 1000. In certain forms chickenpox is associated with skin complaints and can be carried thus for many years as a strain of the disease. In certain situations this can be transformed into a virus which can develop into an epidemic.²⁵ This may have been a significant factor in the initial infection of Aborigines and account for the spread of the disease; many Aborigines suffered from skin complaints, some of which are believed to be indigenous.²⁶ Unfortunately I can find no reports of chickenpox in accounts of disease among early European settlers or in articles concerned with diseases among Aborigines.²⁷

It is not simply these more spectacular viral infections which can cause devastating effects on the Aboriginal population.²⁸ Perhaps the greatest killers, particularly in the temperate regions of Australia, were the common cold and influenza.²⁹ Barwick reports that respiratory diseases caused the greatest mortality among Aboriginal populations in Victoria for the period she examined.³⁰

22. D. A. J. Tyrell, 'Aspects of Infection in Isolated Communities', in *Health and Disease in Tribal Societies*, Amsterdam, 1977, pp. 137-53.

23. F. W. Clements, discussion of: F. Fenner, 'The Effect of Changing Social Organization on the Infectious Diseases of Man' in S. V. Boyden (ed.), *The Impact of Civilisation on the Biology of Man*, Canberra, 1970, p. 73.

24. Fenner, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-8.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

26. H. Basedow, 'Diseases of the Australian Aborigines', *Journal of Tropical Hygiene and Medicine*, vol. 35, no. 12, 1932, pp. 177-85; no. 13, pp. 193-8; no. 14, pp. 209-13; no. 15, pp. 229-33; no. 16, pp. 247-50; no. 18, pp. 273-8, reports a number of skin diseases as well as other reasons for scarring which might resemble pox marks.

27. Basedow, *op. cit.*; J. H. L. Cumpston, 'Public Health in Australia (Parts 1 and 2)', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 1931, pp. 491-500, pp. 591-7; A. D. Packer, 'The Health of the Australian Native', *Oceania*, vol. 32, 1961, pp. 60-70; A. A. Abbie, 'Physical Changes in Australian Aborigines consequent upon European Contact', *Oceania*, vol. 31, 1960, p. 141, does mention chickenpox but gives no reference; chickenpox was recognized as a separate infection from smallpox in the early sixteenth century. The fact that it is usually thought of as childhood infection may account for why it is not discussed in the general literature. Dr Diane Barwick reports that chickenpox is not mentioned as a disease among Victorian Aborigines in nineteenth century government reports.

28. One of the greatest causes of mortality associated with viral infections are, however, secondary invaders, see F. L. Black et al., 'Epidemiology of Infectious Disease: The Example of Measles', in *Health and Disease in Tribal Societies*, Amsterdam, 1977, p. 120.

29. On the influence of climate on disease among hunter-gatherers see: F. L. Dunn, 'Epidemiological factors: health and disease in hunter-gatherers', in R. B. Lee and I. De Vore (eds.), *Man the Hunter*, Chicago, 1968, pp. 225-7.

30. Barwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 303-9; see also B. Gandevia, 'The prevalence of signs of chronic respiratory disease in Pintubi and Walbiri Aborigines at Papunya, Central Australia, and Warburton, Western Australia', *Medical Journal of Australia*, no. 6, 1967, pp. 237-42.

Cumpston cites influenza epidemics as illustrative of how Australia became involved in wider world pandemics; the epidemics of 1836/7, 1847/8, and 1850/1 which killed many white Australians are associated with similar epidemics in Europe from whence they came.³¹ These epidemics undoubtedly took many Aboriginal lives. In more recent times the epidemic of Spanish influenza after the Great War took a heavy toll of Aboriginal lives in central and northern Australia.³²

There are many other introduced diseases which contributed to the deaths of Aborigines including tuberculosis and venereal disease.

Rather than massive epidemics sweeping across the country, a pattern of recurring localized infection breaking out just ahead of the advancing frontier is probably closer to the real situation. Certain diseases spread more rapidly than others and particular infections went some distance from source. It would be safe to surmise, however, that disease played a considerable part in the alteration of Aboriginal life beyond the frontier. It may have been carried via the means already associated with the transmission of material culture, or by groups fleeing outbreaks in their own territory.

Again there are analogies with the situation in America. In areas with large populations and which were contacted in the early period by Europeans, disease rapidly reduced the population, but in remote areas (for instance the Amazon) the people remained free from many of the diseases. Even if disease had reached these regions the size of the social units prevented it from spreading or remaining endemic. In recent years, as the jungle areas have been penetrated by explorers, miners and settlers, the Indians have died in large numbers from such common western infections as influenza and colds.³³

What were the effects of introduced disease on the Aboriginal societies of Australia? Many of the diseases would have provided a challenge to established modes of diagnosis and methods of healing. Treatments may have as easily furthered the spread of infection as hindered it.³⁴ The most important effect, however, must have been on the size of the population and its ability to survive as a viable unit. Certainly the demographic structure of the society was upset, not just in terms of the total size of the population being reduced but in regard to the age and sex ratios of the population. Subsistence patterns may have been altered, especially if the major food producers in the groups were killed or incapacitated. Patterns of autho-

31. Cumpston, *op. cit.*, p. 595.

32. Though in Victoria and areas of New South Wales it claimed few lives, Dr D. Barwick (*pers. comm.*).

33. On the mortality rates and diseases, see H. F. Dobyns, 'Estimating Aboriginal American population: I, an appraisal of techniques with a new hemispheric estimate', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 7, 1966, pp. 409-10; in North America fur trappers spread infections, in Amazonia rubber trappers—many white explorers and prospectors moved ahead of white settlement in Australia; on the fur trappers and disease in Canada, see A. J. Ray, 'Diffusion of diseases in the western interior of Canada, 1830-1850', *Geographical Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, 1976, pp. 139-57. On recent studies in South America see J. V. Neel, 'Health and Disease in Unacculturated Amerindian Populations', in *Health and Disease in Tribal Societies*, Amsterdam, 1977, pp. 155-67, and R. G. Baruzzi, *et. al.*, 'The Kren-Akorore: a recently contacted indigenous tribe', in *Health and Disease in Tribal Societies*, Amsterdam, 1977, pp. 179-200.

34. For instance, if chickenpox scabs were picked off they would not only have increased the risk of infection to others, but also caused additional scarring.

urity, kinship and marriage as well as the continuation of exchange links and ceremonial activity would have been upset or curtailed.³⁵

With the establishment of European settlements and missions Aborigines were congregated into larger units which became established for long periods. The size of the communities, the changes in diet, the lack of hygiene and the constant contact with Europeans all helped to increase the incidence of disease. Thus a process which began beyond the frontier was reinforced behind the frontier, causing a decline in the population and a high mortality rate, particularly among children, which continues today.

Considering the sudden and devastating decline in populations which have occurred in many of these communities, it is surprising that many anthropologists use demographic data collected from these settlements to analyse 'traditional' patterns of kinship, marriage and the structure of society.

Flora and Fauna

Before the settlement of Europeans in Australia the flora and fauna had been relatively isolated from the rest of the world. Most of the Australasian flora and fauna had been unique to the region for millions of years. The Australasian region long had been separated from Asia by a sea barrier which relatively few species could cross. Birds and reptiles crossed the barrier fairly easily, but only a few small mammals reached Australia and their effect on the ecology was minimal. Only the dingo, which came in association with man, was to alter the environment to any extent. European settlement was to change all this. New plant and animal species, particularly large mammals, were brought to Australia and while some remained extremely localized, others spread widely across the continent. Through such introductions and by his methods of economy the white man was to transform the ecology of Australia and consequently the lives of the Aborigines.

The people in the first convict settlements were not expected to live off the native resources but to till the land and raise domestic stock. Within a short period the cattle brought with the First Fleet had escaped beyond the frontier only to be discovered years later having bred and increased in numbers.³⁶ No doubt within the first decades of settlement a number of other plants, insects and animals escaped beyond the frontier.³⁷ So began a massive introduction of exotic species into the country; some were accidental escapes, but the majority were intentional releases. The exact origin of many of these new species will probably always remain a mystery. Sailors and sealers for example released pigs, goats and rabbits on remote islands and regions of the mainland in the hope that they would provide food for any future castaways.

35. In ceremonial matters the loss of mature men meant that many of the esoteric meanings were lost as the acquisition of such knowledge was only achieved in old age after a lifetime of involvement, see T. G. H. Strehlow, *Aboriginal Religion, Prospect (S.A.)*, pp. 1-2 (Strehlow Research Foundation Pamphlet no. 4).

36. On the relation between these cattle and Aborigines, see K. Lyon and J. Urry, 'Bull Shelter: a Cow Pastures' Conundrum', *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Newsletter*, n.s. 11, 1979, pp. 39-45.

37. Grenfell Price, 'The moving frontiers and changing landscapes of flora and fauna in Australia', in J. Andrews (ed.), *Frontiers and Men: A Volume in Memory of Griffith Taylor (1880-1963)*, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 155-73; on feral livestock see T. McKnight, *Friendly Vermin: A Survey of Feral Livestock in Australia*, Los Angeles, 1976 (University of California Publications in Geography, vol. 21).

Many of the exotic animals rapidly adjusted to the new conditions, herbivores fed on the indigenous flora while carnivores preyed on the native animals. Beside the cattle already mentioned, other early exotic animals included the pig which spread rapidly through the eastern regions,³⁸ the buffalo, which was introduced into northern regions during the settlement of Port Essington, and the cat. These were followed later by the rabbit, the hare, goat, fox, camel, donkey and many other creatures. All were to have, and indeed still are having, a profound effect upon the countryside.³⁹

Not all the animals were released together in the same place and at the same time, some of them are of quite recent origin. Nor did they all spread at the same rate or in the same areas; many of the exotic species have quite a localized distribution. But there are few areas of Australia today which have not experienced the effects of introduced animals, sometimes in a drastic manner. It is obvious that the arid areas of Australia, where the ecological balance between species and their environment is most critical, have experienced the effects of the introduced flora and fauna in the most extreme manner. This is the area least 'settled' by the white man and the region where large numbers of Aborigines until quite recent times have attempted to continue past practices. This section will therefore concentrate upon arid region Australia.⁴⁰

It is probable that before the coming of the white man the response of the Aborigines living in the arid regions to their environment was extremely flexible. After good wet seasons the region could be plentiful in plants and in game but at times of drought it could be desolate and life became hard. Possibly the first exotic animal to intrude into this region was the feral cat.⁴¹ The feral cat can have a drastic effect on the native fauna, catching small marsupials, birds and large numbers of reptiles.⁴² Many native species which have been greatly reduced in numbers or which have become extinct in the last 200 years may have fallen victim to the cat.⁴³ The cat soon adapted to the arid conditions of central Australia and Carnegie reported the existence of the cat in the spinifex country of Western Australia as early as 1896.⁴⁴

38. On pigs, see E. M. Fuller, 'The Wild (feral) pigs of Australia: their origin, distribution and economic importance', *Memoirs of the National Museum of Victoria*, no. 18, 1953, pp. 7-23; McKnight, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-55.

39. J. H. Calaby, 'Changing the face of a continent', *Australian Natural History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1977, p. 64 reports that twenty-four mammals, twenty-four birds, twelve fishes, a toad and perhaps two reptiles are known to be introduced; the most detailed accounts of the exotic fauna are: Eric C. Rolls, *They All Ran Wild: The Story of Pests on the Land in Australia*, Melbourne, 1969, and H. J. Firth, *Wildlife Conservation*, Sydney, 1973, chap. 3.

40. This is not to deny that other areas would be worthy of study; any study of Arnhem Land would have to consider the influence of the feral cat, the damage caused by buffalo and feral pig, etc.; the pig can be a great killer and the decline in native ground breeding birds and some marsupials have been attributed to its depredations, McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

41. The cat may have been introduced into the northern areas of Australia by the 'Macassans' as the Aborigines claim that the cat has long been established in the area, H. H. Finlayson, *The Red Centre: Man and Beast in the Heart of Australia*, Sydney, 1935, p. 68.

42. On the modern effects of the cat see: B. J. Coman and H. Brunner, 'Food habits of the feral house cat in Victoria', *Journal of Wildlife Management*, vol. 36, 1972, pp. 848-53; C. P. Bayly, 'Observations on the food of the feral cat (*Felis catus*) in an arid environment', *The South Australian Naturalist*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 22-4.

43. A number of native marsupial species were apparently in decline before white settlement, the introduced predators merely hastened their extinction; many species thought to be extinct have recently been re-discovered though their numbers are very small, Calaby, *op. cit.*, p. 63; Frith, *op. cit.*, chap. 6.

44. Carnegie, *op. cit.*, p. 214 ft.

The number of cats in this region probably increased with the coming of the rabbit about the turn of the century. Cats were often released into the wild in the hope that they would reduce the numbers of rabbits. The introduction of the rabbit into Australia and its devastating effects has been well recorded.⁴⁵ Rabbits soon destroyed much of the local vegetation, not only consuming grasses but also the roots of trees, the bark and at times stripping leaves off the branches. Plant communities were devastated and where re-growth occurred the pattern of vegetation often did not duplicate that which previously existed. Large numbers of rabbits coming to drink at waterholes often destroyed the banks, polluted the water and by removing the surface vegetation increased erosion in the vicinity.⁴⁶ Rabbits also affected the local fauna; they invaded the burrows inhabited by native species, interrupted breeding, or consumed the cover in which they lived and bred, forcing them out into the open where they fell prey to native predators or introduced species such as the cat and the fox.⁴⁷ The rabbit spread into central Australia by a number of routes. Often it was introduced by settlers onto their properties before they realised the damage the animal could cause. Aborigines may also have helped, either indirectly by driving it out of its territory by exploitation, or directly by carrying the young as captives into a new area where some escaped.⁴⁸

While these exotic species were extremely deleterious to the ecology of the arid regions it would perhaps be wrong to concentrate solely upon their destructive effects. The exotic species were to cause changes to the existing ecology. While certain sections of the flora and fauna may have declined others may well have increased as a result of these intrusions. Some plant species recovered more quickly than others after being exploited, while species which were not favoured by introduced animals (including ruminant stock), became more prominent. The destruction of the surface cover in many areas increased erosion and as the nature of the soil conditions altered new plant species colonized the areas. The new plant species often attracted different kinds of fauna. It has been established that two species of kangaroo (*Osphranter robustus* and *Megaleia rufa*) have increased in central Australia since the introduction of ruminant domestic stock, while many species of wallabies and bandicoots have declined.⁴⁹ The kangaroos find more food in the fresh short grass shoots which grow after domestic animals have grazed. No doubt further research could illustrate other changes in the fauna.

It is obvious therefore that these changes to the ecology of central Australia altered the modes of Aboriginal exploitation. Changes

45. Rolls, *op. cit.*, part I; F. N. Ratcliffe and J. H. Calaby, 'Rabbit', *Australian Encyclopedia*, v. 7, pp. 340-2; F. N. Ratcliffe, 'The Rabbit in Australia', in A. Keast, et al. (eds.), *Biogeography and Ecology in Australia*, The Hague, 1959, pp. 545-9.

46. Though they did not cause the massive damage to such areas as did the buffalo and the feral pig in certain areas of Australia.

47. H. H. Finlayson blamed the fox for the disappearance of many of the species of native fauna once common in the arid regions of South Australia; 'On central Australian mammals. Part IV—the distribution and status of central Australian species', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1961, p. 151.

48. On the capture and movement of native species, see N. B. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*, Canberra, 1974, p. 109; on the spread of introduced dogs among the Tasmanians see: Rhys Jones, 'Tasmanian Aborigines and Dogs', *Mankind*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1970, pp. 262-4.

49. A. E. Newsome, 'An ecological comparison of the two arid-zone kangaroos of Australia, and their anomalous prosperity since the introduction of ruminant stock to their environment', *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. 5, 1975, pp. 389-424.

in the plant species altered the availability of plant foods, especially seed grasses which may not have reached maturity because of grazing, thereby not only reducing the crop but also failing to seed for future growth. Certain native species of animals, once commonly exploited, declined.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the increase in the large native animals meant more meat for the Aborigines which was further supplemented by the exploitation of exotic animals. Before the turn of the century rabbits had reached the central arid regions where the Aborigines at first confused them with the ratakangaroo.⁵¹ The Aborigines quickly learnt that rabbits provided excellent food and they were eagerly sought after.⁵² Even in the most desolate areas rabbit, feral cats, foxes and introduced mice soon came to play an important part in the Aboriginal diet.⁵³ New hunting methods, the use of the gun, motor vehicles and hunting dogs (no longer dingoes but mongrels of introduced stock) have also altered hunting patterns.⁵⁴

In the long run, however, the ecological changes in the arid zone were far from beneficial for the Aborigines. Perhaps the dire straits in which many of the central Australian people found themselves during the severe drought of 1926 to 1933 were accentuated by the depredations of introduced wild animals and stock.⁵⁵ Even the areas which had supported quite large populations of Aborigines were severely affected. Strehlow recorded the opinion of his Aranda informants thus:

'Our country has been turned into a desert by the senseless whites', many of the older Aranda used to tell me thirty years ago [i.e. in the 1930s], as they pointed to a land sadly reduced from its former state of fertility by years of unprecedented drought and overstocking, and by millions of introduced rabbits. They commented bitterly on the swift destruction of the natural food plants and the almost complete extinction of many of the formerly abundant species of marsupials, and said sadly—'The old men who knew how to summon the rain clouds, how to create the animals, and how to keep the country green, are dead now; and our land is dying too'.⁵⁶

It is highly unlikely that the exact patterns of Aboriginal subsistence in the arid central areas of Australia before the coming of the white man will ever be reconstructed totally. Apart from the scanty reports of a few early explorers the composition of the pre-contact flora

50. Finlayson reported that his Aboriginal informants could tell him of marsupial species once common in their area which had declined or disappeared in their own lifetime, Finlayson, 'Central Australian mammals . . .' *op. cit.*, pp. 160-1.

51. Finlayson, *The Red Centre . . .*, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

52. H. Basedow, 'Anthropological notes made on the South Australian government north-west prospecting expedition, 1903', *Transactions and Proceedings and Report of the Royal Society of South Australia*, vol. 28, 1904, p. 15.

53. On the 'Pintubi' see D. F. Thomson, *Bindibu Country*, Melbourne, 1975, pp. 25, 30, 43, 102-3, 114; on the 'Nyatunyatjara' see R. A. Gould, *Yiwara: Foragers of the Australian Desert*, London, 1969, pp. 16, 42, 64, 65; on the 'Mardudjara' see R. Tonkinson, *The Mardudjara Aborigines: Living the Dream in Australia's Desert*, New York, 1978, p. 24.

54. On the influence of dogs see Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-8; I. M. White, 'Hunting Dogs at Yalata', *Mankind*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1972, pp. 201-5.

55. On the important influences of the drought see Tindale, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70; C. D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Ringwood, Vic., 1970, pp. 242-3. The drought and its effects on the Aborigines may, however, have been over emphasized; see the Warlpiri text in P. Read and Engineer Jack Japaljarri, 'The price of tobacco: the journey of the Warlmalala to Wave Hill', 1928, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 140-8.

56. T. G. H. Strehlow, 'A personal monotonism in a polytomic community', in E. Haberland, et al. (eds.), *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jensen*, Munich, 1964, p. 747.

and fauna of this region will never be known; all that can be said is that it was certainly different from that of today. All ecological studies in the region have been made post-myxomatosis in the case of rabbits, and after years of grazing by ruminant stock.⁵⁷ Though in recent years due to better stock management and a period of good rains the central area has recovered, it would be wrong to see in the present landscape the earlier 'primeval' state.⁵⁸

Tradition and Traditionalism

What has all this to do with the problems of the concept of 'traditional' Aboriginal culture? Aboriginal life was changed in many ways before the frontier reached it and was transformed soon after contact. There are few reliable accounts of initial contact, most early ethnographies relate to groups which had experienced substantial alteration and nearly all recent anthropological research has been carried out among people who have been in contact with Australian white communities for some considerable time. How is it then that anthropologists have been able to write detailed accounts of what they term 'traditional' Aboriginal culture while relegating most comments on foreign influences to footnotes or to concluding chapters?⁵⁹

In many ways the interest in 'traditional' Aboriginal society has been carried over from earlier forms of anthropological investigation. Anthropology was founded in Britain in the nineteenth century in the hope for preserving records of 'dying' cultures 'before it was too late'. People searched for cultures which had experienced minimal outside contacts to collect 'facts', often from old men, so that the information might be preserved for future generations. Though later anthropologists realized that what people said their culture was like and how life was lived when observed by the anthropologists were different things, many Australian anthropologists continue the quest for 'traditional' features of Aboriginal cultures, long after most of the groups have experienced massive alteration.⁶⁰ An examination of accounts of Aboriginal culture written by anthropologists indicates that when they use the term 'traditional' it can refer to a number of different things:

1. 'Traditional groups' are those which have experienced little or no contact (or association) with western culture (western culture is often referred to as the 'white man' or 'European'; the exact meaning of contact and association is unfortunately left unclear).
2. 'Traditional' can refer to those ideas, values and practices which are claimed by contemporary Aboriginal people to be a continuation of past ways and these factors are still meaningful and important in their lives today.
3. 'Traditional' can refer to those ideas, values and practices

57. Pollen analysis and archaeological evidence may provide some suggestions, but the paucity of such remains in this region makes the possibility very slight.

58. Newsome, *op. cit.*, pp. 389-90.

59. Not only have they been able to write books on 'traditional' cultures, but even to up-date them recently on the basis of 'new evidence', see: R. M. and C. H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, Sydney (first published 1964; new edition 1977).

60. See the criticisms of many Australian anthropologists and the nature of their reporting by J. B. Birdsall, 'Local group composition among the Australian Aborigines: a critique of the evidence from fieldwork conducted since 1930', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1970, p. 116.

which elderly informants believe from their memories to have been once meaningful and important to them or to their ancestors, but which may or may not be significant for Aboriginal culture today (what Berndt has referred to as 'the memory culture').⁶¹

4. 'Traditional' can refer to those ideas, values and practices which the anthropologist has gathered from his informants and reconstructed into a total picture of that society, often with the assistance of some pre-conceived model of how that culture ought to have operated sometime in an unspecified past.

Considering the papers in which the word 'traditional' is used it is clear that in the majority of anthropological discussions definition four has been the most widely used. This has resulted in the perpetuation of certain models of Aboriginal society which have distorted ethnographic accounts.

Firstly the models of traditional society have led people to assume that certain cultural forms are common to most Aboriginal cultures, so that an effort is made to fit all explanations into these pre-conceived forms. Radcliffe-Brown's sweeping summary of Aboriginal social organization must bear a large responsibility for this.⁶²

Secondly the models are not based upon a general admixture of all Aboriginal societies but upon those which are best known. A certain vision of Aboriginal society and culture, dominated in part by central Australian examples, has tended to pre-dominate. Recent work, mainly by historians and prehistorians in the archival sources relating to earlier contacted Aboriginal groups, has illustrated the diversity of Aboriginal culture.⁶³

Thirdly the anthropological model of 'traditional' Aboriginal culture has acted as a yardstick upon which historians, prehistorians and others have measured the impact of European contact and evaluated archaeological evidence from pre-contact periods.

Fourthly this anthropological definition of 'traditional' has entered the political arena, often with the assistance of anthropologists. It has been used in court cases and even entered the legislation of this country in matters relating to the Aborigines.

The term 'traditional' when applied to human groups is highly anomalous. It pre-supposes that culture and society can be defined as a whole, as a functioning well ordered system which remains constant over time. Such a view of society should have little appeal to historians, interested in the discontinuities between ideas and actions and in the importance of individuals and the consequences of events. But the vision should also be meaningless for anthropologists with any experience of the nature of human society. It is not just that the

61. R. M. Berndt, 'Groups with minimal European associations', in H. Shells (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 397-9; this paper and the same author's comments on an earlier paper by M. L. Meggitt in the same volume (pp. 218-24) clearly reflect the confusion by one influential Australian anthropologist of these different meanings of the word 'traditional'.

62. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Social Organization of Australian Tribes*, Sydney, 1931 (Oceania Monographs no. 1).

63. This is particularly so in eastern Australia where prehistorians have reconstructed accounts of Aboriginal culture from early accounts and nineteenth century ethnographies; for example, see I. McBryde (ed.), *Records of Times Past: Ethnohistorical Essays on the Culture and Ecology of the New England Tribes*, Canberra, 1978.

established idea of writing an account of 'traditional' society is impossible, but more importantly it involves a view of society which is totally untenable. It is suggested, therefore, that except in one particular case, the term should be abandoned.

The only time when the term might be applicable is in the case of two. The claim by certain groups of Aborigines to the continuance of past ways is highly significant in many current Aboriginal communities. It is impossible to know whether what is claimed is really a continuation of past ways; what is significant is that the people themselves believe it to be so and act upon it. Such claims relate to the semantic domains of the people concerned.⁶⁴

The term 'traditional' however, may also be inappropriate in this case. What is claimed as a continuity cannot be traced over a defined period of time; it is a continuity born of consistency. Aboriginal claims to continuity themselves vary over time but are never recognized as such; as long as features of their culture appear to remain consistent and cohesive the appeal to continuance is never challenged.⁶⁵ Anthropologists have confused the claims and actions of the people they have studied with their own models of an unchanging world; it is a Dreamtime of their own invention. Since contact Aborigines have lived in two worlds, that of the European and of their own, even where they have denied the influence of the alien world.⁶⁶ The Aborigines have certainly accommodated themselves to new situations, but we have few accounts of how this has been achieved.

The Aboriginal claim to continuity is upheld and sustained by the continuation of indigenous concepts through the preservation of native languages. It is also enriched by association with groups having other languages in the mixed 'tribal' settlements in which most Aborigines live today. 'Traditionally-orientated' is a term which has been mostly used for groups who have expressed the continuation of native concepts through their use of Aboriginal languages. Most Aboriginal communities where such languages are still extant stand at a critical phase, for their claims to continuity revolve around the continuation of their languages. How long the young remain competent, or wish to remain competent, in their language will be important for an understanding of how ideas and values which they claim as past ways will remain significant in their lives. Whether or not such claims can survive in a world which places a greater value on change than on continuity, only time and careful study will tell.

All this is not to deny that many anthropologists have made statements on 'social change' among Aboriginal groups, or to suggest that they have been tardy in their support for Aborigines during a long period of oppression. They have, however, created a strange dichotomy between 'tradition' and 'change'; the concept of 'tradition' continues to dominate even discussions of 'change'. Present day conditions and ideas have been judged against a model 'traditional' society and emphasis has been placed upon investigating those

64. Berndt's definition of 'traditionally-orientated' in no way resembles that put forward here. Berndt states: 'Those people whose life is still meaningful in traditional Aboriginal terms we call traditionally-orientated', Berndt, *op. cit.*, pp. 386-7. This 'definition' is at best a tautology, at worst, groundless.

65. See especially the work of Stanner, e.g. 'The Dreaming', *op. cit.*, pp. 62-3.

66. No study of Aboriginal life today can be achieved without a proper investigation of the surrounding white culture, especially in rural areas.

features assumed to be of importance in traditional life to measure how far they have altered in the current situation.⁶⁷ A society in 'change' appears in the accounts to be in as steady a state as 'traditional' societies were assumed to be. Change involves a process and the anthropologist in the field situation is merely witnessing a very brief period of time. The Aboriginal past has been reconstructed from the present while the present gains meaning from this past; history has become superfluous!⁶⁸ This attitude has allowed many anthropologists to deny the relevance of history and of historical sources, an attitude which is still widespread today.

* * *

Part of this article is concerned with establishing the impact of European culture on Aboriginal society beyond the frontier. Questions concerning disease and ecological change need further examination and problems associated with material culture change are of interest to prehistorians, though most future research will have to rely on conjecture.

Anthropologists need to convey in their accounts a sense of time and place. Their accounts are historical sources, of great value to later generations of Australians. Many older anthropological fieldworkers have in their notebooks details which would be of importance to historians. In recent years there has been a considerable increase in the number of anthropologists carrying out fieldwork in Aboriginal communities and during this period there have been major changes taking place in these communities with important implications for the future of the Aboriginal people. It would be a pity if these changes are not recorded and analysed by the anthropologists in their search for elusive 'traditional' cultures.

Most of my strictures in this paper have been directed against my anthropological colleagues. This does not mean that I wish to vindicate all the recent work concerned with Aboriginal/white contact by Australian historians. They have tended to concentrate on areas of peripheral interest, in particular the concepts of 'frontier', 'violence' and 'race relations', and in doing so have avoided some of the most interesting subjects and periods of Aboriginal history. A better understanding of the Aborigines would be achieved by a closer examination of anthropological sources. At the same time a close study of present day white rural society in Australia would undoubtedly enrich the accounts of historians.

It is obvious that there can be no anthropology of Aborigines without some appreciation of their history, and no history of the Aborigines without some anthropological knowledge of their culture. In spite of this, certain aspects of Aboriginal life in the past must always remain a mystery.

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67. The best example of this is D. H. Turner, *Tradition and Transformation: A Study of Aborigines in the Groote Eylandt Area, Northern Australia*, Canberra, 1974. Turner posits an ideal model of Aboriginal kinship for Groote, assumes that the model approximates to traditional patterns and uses his model as the basis on which to judge changes which have occurred in the society; things which do not match his model are assumed to be manifestations of change!

68. R. M. Berndt, 'Research demanding urgent attention', in H. Sheils (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, Melbourne, 1963, p. 447, states: 'To explain the present we need to know about what has gone before—which does not, of course, mean that such explanations should be couched in "historical" terms'.