UTOPIA:
A REFLECTION ON TIME SPENT IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

A modern Utopia

Raphael the wanderer, eternal student, the proxy in Thomas More's little book of 1516 tells the story of a fabulous island whose inhabitants learned how to cure the ills of human society. After a time the name of this place, Utopia, became a token for the concept of a completed political ideal, and that is how we think of it today. Thomas invented the word, half ironically, from two bits of Greek – it means "*not-place*", anonymity – so there is a double irony in its appearance on maps of central Australia. The namesake is real enough; it lies a few hours northeast of Alice Springs, and as I discovered when I was there, like its original, it is a social experiment as well as a habitation and a home. If the first Utopia was a fascinating and instructive story, the other is too – partly for reasons that belong to it alone, and partly because like dozens of small remote communities in northern and central Australia the last difficult, unfinished chapters of the tale of European settlement are still being written upon the tablet of their present lives. This claim should surprise many of our countrymen, because we imagine that indigenous dispossession was finished long ago. But the Territory is exceptional and perhaps this is the foremost of the many surprises awaiting the visitor there.

Was Utopia named by accident? Maybe we'll never know, but before the white men came there, a stretch of sandy country belonging to the Alyawarra people was called *Uturupa* – it means "big sand hill" – and possibly that is how it happened. The people at Utopia use other names too. *Urapuntja* – for the River that runs through it, also called the Sandover; *Arlparra* – the tiny settlement with the community store and administration; *Ingutanka* – the place where, for a time, there stood above the river bank a station homestead and everything the cattleman built there. All that is gone now, but if you look around, you can see why they chose the place. The sandy riverbed is shaded by beautiful river gums, each leaning over the channel as if to cover it, and the wind makes a lovely soft sound, passing through their loose foliage. And there are other names too – one for each of the score of outstations that comprise the community, and others still for the revered and secret places. Beautiful, soft names that somehow remind you of purring.

The people who speak this way are still there, for this is a homeland – a place where the aboriginal people returned to their own country a generation or two after it had been taken. There are other places where this happened, all of them in the remote parts of

the centre and the north. It is one of the things that makes Utopia interesting. Another is that it is one of the few modern indigenous communities that did not begin as a mission or a government settlement, but instead grew straight out of the movement for land rights in the 1960's & 70's – an autonomous homeland. Yet another is that it has never possessed a township or any municipal centre.

To us, the idea of 'community' implies that communal property and services are together in one place, but the Utopia people explicitly rejected this arrangement, and have gone to some trouble to keep it that way, even against considerable bureaucratic pressure. Instead, they live in 'outstations' – although that is not a good word for them; it suggests that they are appendages of something larger – which they are not. Each one is regarded as the home of an extended family group with some traditional claim to that part of the country. It must be said though, that however "traditional" this sounds, it is derived from the old ways by adaptation, and it is not very clear to an outsider just how the clans make their territorial claims.

To get to Utopia, you drive north out of Alice Springs for about an hour, then northeast on a road which roughly follows the course of the Sandover River. Nearly all the time, the River is a wide sandy bed, quite dry, its banks lined by those beautiful leaning red gums. If heavy rain falls in the ranges north and east of the Alice, water runs in this bed about half way to the Queensland border to a wide flood plain which becomes, for a

time, a pattern of lagoons and marshes. About the middle of this Sandover country is where the Alyawarra people lived until the cattle came early last century – what became Elkedra, Amaroo, and MacDonald Downs stations. Utopia existed as two grazing leases from 1925 until 1947 when it was amalgamated, and it lies on the boundary of the Alyawarra with their western kin, the Anmatjera. That is why both languages are spoken there today.

Most of the Sandover country is old, low vegetated sand hills and clay- pans, the colour of which, depending on the time of day, the season and your point of view, may be deep rusty red, or salmon brown, or anything between. When the air is very clear, the sky a fathomless deep blue, and the light sharp and glowing, as it is in winter, this earth, and the occasional rocky outcrops, appear as a living canvas on which the gorgeous plants and creatures paint themselves. On these days, you fancy yourself walking inside a picture – an artefact of the pervasive light. Sometimes it is as if this light has entered into things and they seem to be illuminated from within. Sometimes, shadows are so sharp they seem to have been carved.

This illusion of sculpture recurs often – as when you see a ghost gum, its forms and surfaces, textures and contrasts so palpable and so like the ideals our imaginations design for us that you must remind yourself that this thing grew where it stands and belongs to the kingdom of the plants, not to us. It is odd how this illusion never seems to loose its power.

If you go way up beyond the River's end, just before the road leaves the Territory, you'll find another group of Alyawarra living at Lake Nash. How they came to be there, in another people's country is a story which I'll tell in its place, because without it you can hardly understand what Utopia means. And that was what I most wanted to do after I had been there a while.

I had better say here why I am recording these memories and reflections. It is not because I'm specially well qualified. Many people know far more about these things than I do, and claim a far longer acquaintance with the place and the people. Neither is it because I have answers to the difficult questions that occur there. On the contrary, I've come to think it's the questions that most need examination; of answers, there have been perhaps too many. Nor am I much interested in the administrative or the ideological politics of indigenous affairs, except to remark what everybody knows – that there are, and always have been serious flaws in these systems which in their own way retard our aim of accommodation every bit as much as neglect and parsimony has done in the past.

Though the matter is difficult, my motives are simple. Here are two. It takes either ignorance or malice to create prejudice, and although the second may be intractable, the first is more prevalent. I found much insight as well as much error in the Territory, and I became convinced that the wisdom of those who have lived and worked and considered there should be better known. The horrors and injustices of the past are not suitable for founding a path to integration. Instead a road built on this must lead the powerful into permanent blindness, and the oppressed into apathy. Reconciliation is not so much about redress as a about creating an Australian consciousness which aboriginal people want to share.

My second motive is not original either - it has occurred to many students of indigenous 'affairs', but especially to pioneers such as Charles Rowley and Bill Stanner. The results we wanted have never arrived. Because the subjects have seemed unpromising, temporary, or perverse, and perhaps for many other reasons, the efforts of colonial and post-colonial governments to manage our indigenous peoples have always worn an air of futility. Not that they have been uniformly and always ineffectual, but that, seen as a

whole enterprise, our administration has been at different times, destructive, misguided, duplicitous, and overbearing, but almost never responsive, conciliatory, generous or consistently well-informed. The familiar results are all around us.

It seemed to me that this could be no accident and I wanted to understand why our inter-racial administration had given us this mess, and why it is felt everywhere to be so difficult. Rowley's answer was that these things cannot be understood without their history, and that a peculiarity of the Australian experience is that the history is missing. He was writing in the mid-60's, and of course a lot has been done by historians since then – but this is not really the point. Recovering a more truthful version of the past is necessary, but it is just as important to know what distortions were put into the record and why – because this is the true unguarded story of our race relations, and choosing not to know about them is a mistake because they are made of resilient stuff, and can outlast and upset our best efforts to put them behind us.

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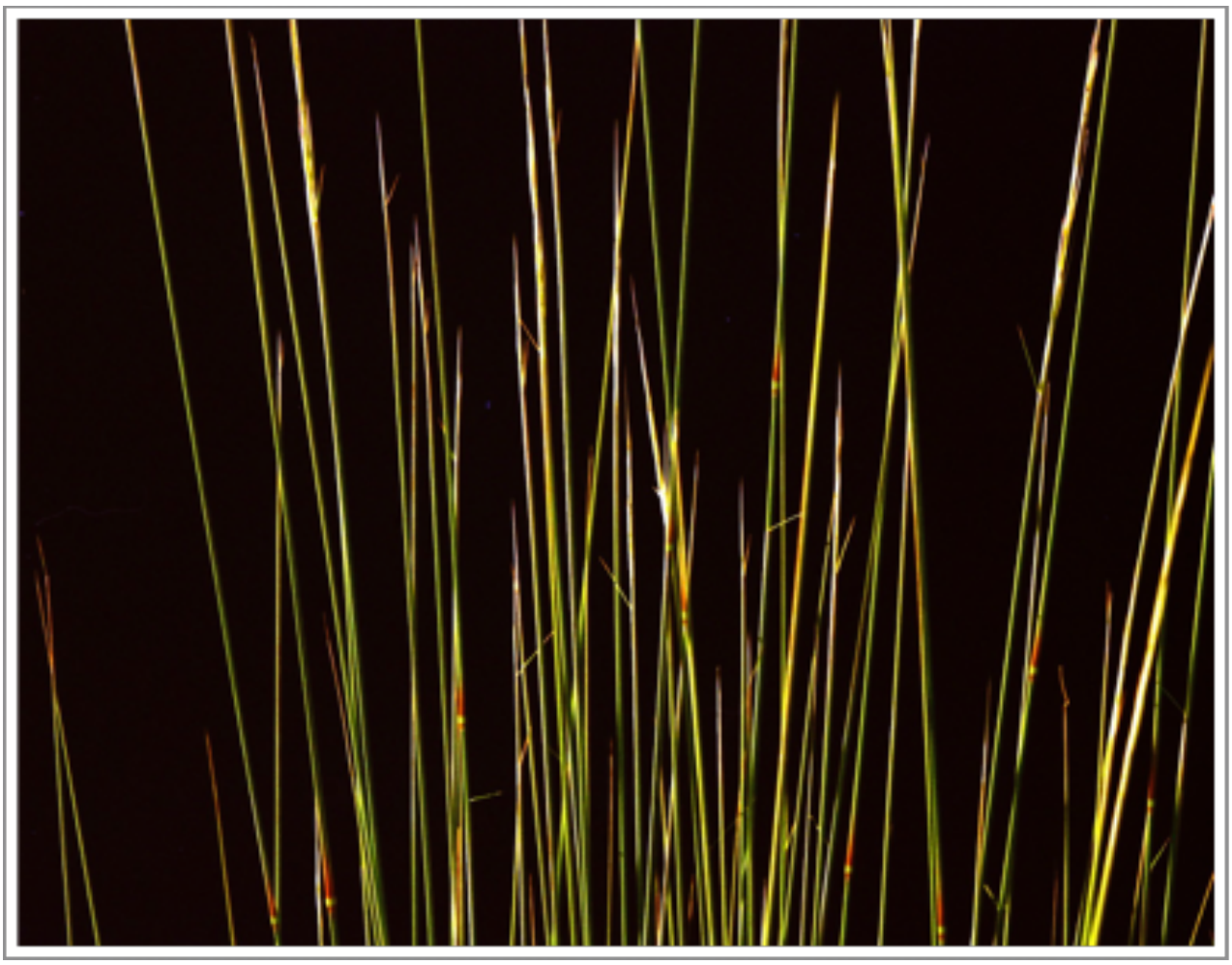
Everybody knows the Northern Territory today is the setting of very singular problems. What you must go there to appreciate though, is that they are not just hard to analyse and solve, but quite hard to even see. Not the consequences – these of course, are only too visible – but understanding exactly what is behind these disturbing appearances presents us with an order of difficulty which is quite unusual. Public policy has applied in turn a number of orthodoxies which, over time have conspicuously failed. There is a large investment of professional talent and administrative clout keeping thousands of mostly well-intentioned and dedicated people busy in the Territory and elsewhere, but it is not clear that this large effort is built upon carefully evaluated principles or that it can correct itself by examining its results. This is my attempt to record the thoughts of someone who went in order to help and learn, and came away a bit better informed, but still puzzled and helpless as before.

I went to Utopia because there is a clinic there. It is normally run by a doctor and about four nurses working as a team – and in this case, the word does actually mean an egalitarian and cooperative arrangement, rather than the usual hierarchical one. But the clinical staff are themselves a piece of a larger team that uses 'health workers' – Utopia people with more or less experience in assessment and management of the kind of bread & butter problems you encounter there. They also do an essential job that might be called "cultural intermediary", without which health care would be much clumsier and

ineffectual than it is. Part of this role is translating – for most Utopia people don't speak English well enough for a clinical interview – and partly it is interpreting in a wider sense. You soon discover that people don't tell their stories of sickness in the way we're used to; but what is more, they have distinctive ways of being sick, and their own ways of understanding what is happening to them.

These are cultural distinctions of a primary kind, and only long familiarity can make them unsurprising and cure one's confusion. As well as this, the spectrum of clinical disorders you confront is quite different, and the behaviour of bodies and organ systems under the same insults can be very different from what one expects. All this is well known to Territory old hands, but tends to disorient a newcomer. I noticed an interesting thing about the process of getting over this dizzy feeling. You tend to adopt whichever interpretations of strangeness happen to be around, and so acquire a body of orthodoxy which has a way of sticking even if it is contradicted by subsequent experiences. This of course, is precisely the way prejudices are born and bred, and it might help to explain why the Territory seems to have more than its fair share of them.



Since Utopia has no centre, the clinic is not in the main street, but is its own 'outstation'. Originally there had been a clinic based at the old homestead site. When it moved to upgraded quarters, the people wanted it to belong to no outstation, and so it was given a site of its own, on a flat place of Spinifex and red sand with a lovely stand of ghost gums all round. Inevitably, although by long-standing agreement it has been accessible to all Utopia people, the place 'belonged' to one of the clans, and this fact has had implications for the way the outstations conduct their affairs *vis a vie* the clinic, and for the governance of Utopia generally.

The clinic was always meant to be a base rather than a centre, and so it takes itself on a weekly round of outstation visits, which is most of its work. For the staff, this means a fair bit of dusty driving, but also a chance to see the country under varying conditions in the company of the health workers, meet everyone where they live, and appreciate something about how outstation life works. You can also learn a bit about traditional ways – foraging for edible and medicinal plants for instance.

Utopia has been fortunate that its clinic staff have usually been good practitioners with unusually long tenures. (In the Territory professional people come and go very regularly) I met several former clinic associates who were richly rewarded by their experience, and left behind lasting loyalties. It is a place which until quite recently managed to exclude the most damaging effects of cultural transition pretty well.

In 1986, 1994 and again in 2004, surveys were carried out on virtually the whole population to measure the prevalence of the important diseases and some other indicators of the community's health. The findings were of some interest for they showed that the tide of 'life-style diseases' rising over indigenous groups had not flowed as far at Utopia as elsewhere. This suggestion that Utopia was doing something right was generally attributed to the 'outstation way'. The necessity of travelling to the store makes bush tucker more attractive; foraging means walking; lean foods and exercise are the proper preventives for diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. The practice of eating traditional foods retains strong approval, and the techniques for gathering them are widely known.

However, the surveys also showed a disturbing trend – younger people (under 30) had more of the signs of impending metabolic disease than older ones, and the trend had strengthened in the intervals between them. Younger people also ate fewer bush foods and were less interested in foraging. So it looked as if the beneficial effect of Utopia life was going to delay, not prevent the catastrophe of the 'new' diseases. This impression

seemed to be confirmed by what I saw there. Nevertheless, these studies pose a most interesting question. Something, so far undefined, about the trajectory of the Utopia people from traditional to transitional ways of life is adaptive. Because the 'diseases' of transition are so damaging, this discovery may turn out to be of great benefit to indigenous people. But what is it? Diet and exercise are unlikely to be the whole answer, and even if they were, we'd need to understand exactly why these are effective at Utopia.

Besides a clinic the community has three other pieces of infrastructure – a council office and workshop, a community store, and a school. Actually five little schools, each at a different outstation. Kids and teachers ride a bus each day if they don't happen to live in a place with one. There's an airstrip which gets a weekly visit from the mailman, various occasional visitors, and the RFDS air ambulance when it's needed.

A few hundred people living in a remote place with these few services is a formula repeated many times all over the bush. What makes Utopia different of course is that there is no kind of economic reason for its being there. Unlike all other towns and cities which owe their existence to people coming together to make a living, the remote indigenous communities are detached from any economic necessity. Some are former missions – places chosen by churches for various reasons; some are government settlements – established at various times to fulfil different aims of indigenous policy; and some, like Utopia are reclaimed traditional lands. A few have large independent incomes from mining royalties or other assets, and a few have viable business enterprises integrated into the community's economic life. But most have no economic base at all. The artists of Utopia are widely admired, and the potential for a significant contribution to community wealth from this source is considerable. But as it is, this income is dissipated in ways that have a fairly small impact on well-being.

So why are these people and the handful of white folks gathered in that place? And will they still be there in another 30 years? We have become so used to the idea of indigenous communities, that we've forgotten how anomalous they are. Think of it this way: the nearest equivalent in non- indigenous terms is a ghost-town - a community which has used up its economic *raison d'être*. Only pensioners can live there. But Utopia is not this – a kind of *de facto* retirement village. What was the founding reason for its existence? To answer these questions we need to look into the story of the Territory as a settler's and then as a State enterprise, as well as the local history of the Alyawarra country.

What happened in the Territory?

I knew an old man there, and perhaps the best way I can convey a sense of Utopia's historical setting is to relate a little of his story. He is a generous, kindly man, his countenance is good-humoured, his bearing comfortable, his air thoughtful, rather than grave, and his conversation is considered, polite and genial. He lives not far from where he was born, on his father's country, surrounded by his family, as far as I could tell, in great contentment. But this state of fulfilment at the end of life was not reached by a smoothly paved road. He was active in the various campaigns to win title to the traditional lands, and he still serves the community in responsible roles.

In February 1933, the same year he was born, the roving journalist Ernestine Hill wrote a piece for the Sydney Sunday Sun, reporting an interview with Constable William Murray of the Northern Territory Police. Four and a half years before, Murray had led what turned out to be the last major quasi-judicial punitive expedition, in Walbiri country west of the Stuart highway, about 200km north of Alice Springs, and not too far from Ben's home. In her article, Hill enthusiastically endorsed Murray's achievement – the

murder of at least 30 aborigines – claiming that, without such actions, white settlers would not be safe. The Coniston killings, as they are known, closed the story of frontier violence (to the extent that they did) only because they occasioned an outrage which made a repetition politically impossible. But all the same, Ernestine Hill knew quite well that her views would find an appreciative audience in town and country alike. So it was, and so it has remained.

Ben (that is not his real name) grew up in a world where the memory of Coniston was fresh; the perpetrators had been officially exonerated without trial; the policeman responsible commended rather than disciplined. Pastoral leases in Anmatjera country were first taken up in the 1880's. It is a tough place to graze, and at that time only useful where there were surface waters. A big drought in the next decade and other factors, led to the abandonment of most of these holdings by 1898, and they were not occupied again until the decade 1915-1925. Among the men who took up leases then, several are still remembered for their cruelty and abusiveness – men like Harry Henty of Frew River. Ben's father would have been a youth when these rough men turned up with their cattle, and some time in the 1920's would have been compelled to adapt his way of life to theirs. Usually this meant a hybrid existence, combining the lives of station-hand and hunter-gatherer in patterns that white and black people worked out together. It was compulsory because the presence of armed white men left them with no alternatives but exile or starvation; and it was adaptive because it allowed access to traditional country and family, and preservation of some of the customary ways, and for the cattleman it provided labour without which his enterprise must have failed.

Ben began working for these men at about the age of 14, having never seen a school or a town, or any whitefellas but those few who came and went on the stations. He worked for the next 20 years or so, mostly for various stations, and for two years underground in the wolfram mine at Hatches Creek, a short way to the north of his natal country. He was never paid, but received rations instead – a practice which had been illegal since the year he was born, but was tolerated right up until 1966, when the ordinances regulating aboriginal employment were overruled by the Arbitration Commission's decision on equal pay. I was struck by the fact that, in telling these things to me he spoke without rancour or regret – something I've noticed in others. It suggests a generous spirit which perhaps we can never fully appreciate.

A few years ago, when he was in his 60's, he was taken to Melbourne with his wife for an exhibition of her paintings. It was not only his first visit there, but his first to any place

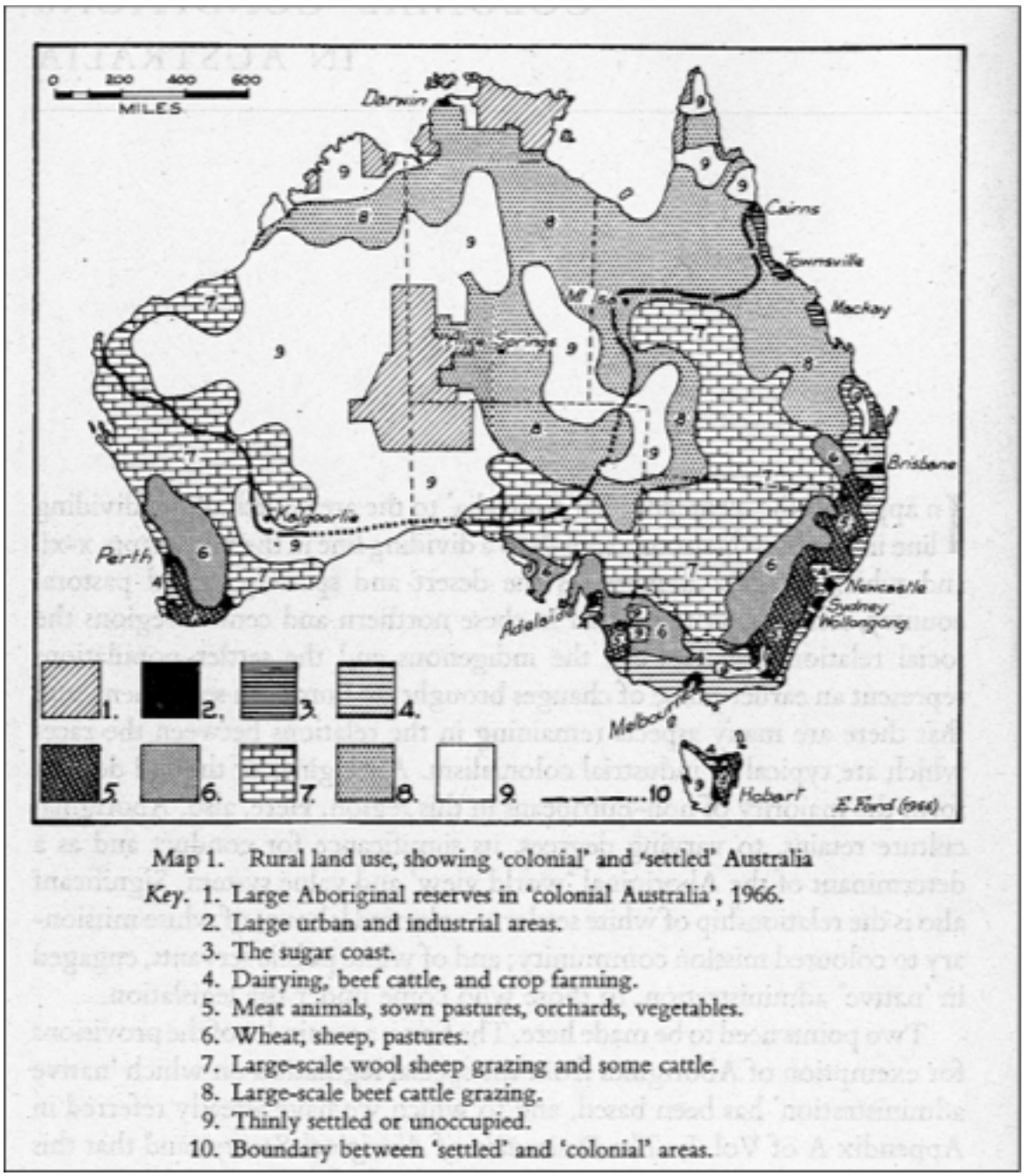
bigger or further than Alice Springs. At his suggestion, he was accompanied to the football one afternoon. As he looked around at the crowd of thousands, shouting and jeering, he grew silent, then dejected for a while, when suddenly, becoming animated, he looked up and cried out "They know! They know!" and then "Where are all the aboriginal people?"

Where indeed? On his first occasion in a totally dispossessed place he had understood something we have long ago forgotten – that the scene surrounding him was only possible because of a crime. His experience gave him no way of anticipating it, but once overwhelmed, he saw its moral stuffing with clarity and indignation. Victoria, as it happened, underwent the most rapid pastoral expansion of the whole colonial era, between 1836 and 1850, and after that, a decade of explosive growth fuelled by the gold mines. It does not appear to have been an unduly violent frontier, but the sheer speed and totality of the dispossession became a greater disaster for Victorian aborigines than for any others. The white population of 45,000 before the gold rushes began, by 1860 had become 330,000, distributed over pretty much every bit of the colony. But by then, the original (estimated) 11,500 aborigines were reduced to about 2,300. By the 1901 census, there were only 521.

I'm told that after returning to Utopia, Ben's reflection on this experience had the effect of reinforcing his commitment to the future he and his friends had conceived for their community. Exactly what that is I cannot say. It is a vision that can only grow from what they have shared since those days when the end of the ancient way of life finally arrived – about the time Europeans were ending another way of life on the bloody fields of France and Flanders. When I think of Ben's story I fancy I can see something like a web, into which are woven many of the things that puzzled me – as if this life makes palpable and thinkable what is otherwise abstract and unfocussed. I must try and explain what I mean.

The anomaly of the remote aboriginal communities is a particular historical accident. It is the one C D Rowley had in mind when he decided to call the large region in which they all occur 'colonial Australia'. [see Fig 1 below]

He explained his idea this way: *"...in these northern and central regions the social relationships between the indigenous and settler populations represent an earlier phase of changes brought about by European settlement, and ... there are many aspects remaining in the relations between the races which are typical of industrial colonialism."* [1]



Map 1. Rural land use, showing 'colonial' and 'settled' Australia

Key. 1. Large Aboriginal reserves in 'colonial Australia', 1966.
2. Large urban and industrial areas.
3. The sugar coast.
4. Dairying, beef cattle, and crop farming.
5. Meat animals, sown pastures, orchards, vegetables.
6. Wheat, sheep, pastures.
7. Large-scale wool sheep grazing and some cattle.
8. Large-scale beef cattle grazing.
9. Thinly settled or unoccupied.
10. Boundary between 'settled' and 'colonial' areas.

Figure 1 Land use map, 1966, after CD Rowley, The Destruction of Aboriginal Society, p377.
Note the position of Rowley's boundary of 'colonial Australia'. North of it, the only European land uses are cattle grazing on large ranches, and mining.

He is suggesting that, from a certain perspective, one can find two Australias, roughly divided by the line on the map. He's not the only one to have thought so. Anne McGrath, in her study of aboriginal experience in the cattle industry, concluded that

generally in the Territory, the process of 'colonising', that is to say, of establishing a power monopoly for the settlers, was never completed. *"The frontier,"* she says, *"was not a relatively short-lived society in the vanguard of progress", but a persisting condition. "If the colonial struggle is analysed as one between cultures, Aboriginal society was not truly colonised, for Aboriginal*

people had a firm footing on either side of the frontier."[2] People like Ben got a rough deal alright, but they are still around. They know what it is to be aboriginal, in a way people outside 'colonial Australia' cannot, and they have regained some lost ground. Something like this, perhaps, struck him, sitting in the stands that afternoon in Melbourne.

The continued existence of 'colonial Australia' seems to have two kinds of explanation. One is historical – under some alternative history the continent might have been settled by a different colonial power, at a different time, first in the north, instead of the south-east, and that would certainly have produced a different story for the Northern Territory. But an ecological perspective makes this much more interesting *viz*: The north and centre of the continent is either resource-poor or disadvantaged (by distance, climate, pathology *etc*) and so it discouraged capital and enterprise until all other opportunities were taken. When stock came to the Territory after the telegraph line was finished in 1872, they came in dribs and drabs, usually in small-scale outfits, onto holdings which stayed fairly undeveloped for years. The pastoralists could not afford to hire labour which was, in any case scarce, so the local people were in a position to make a better deal than they could if they had no economic value. In this way, they were able stay in touch with the old life – in fact some of them were no more dispossessed than the Torres Strait Islanders were.

Another way to put this is to say that some of the character of the frontier still exists in the Territory. This is hardly news – it is just what kept people like Ernestine Hill fascinated with it, and it is one of the things that strikes visitors most forcefully. It is profoundly significant for the way life is conducted there. You can also imagine the 'colonial' regions as if they were still enclosed in the remnants of that "capsule" of isolation which ruptured for good in January 1788 at Sydney Cove. The various acts of occupation over the next century pushed it steadily to the north until at the time of the centenary it might have had a position quite close to the line on Rowley's map.

In Fig 2 it is drawn onto a map showing the settled areas in 1850 on the eve of the gold rushes, and 1890 respectively. What was left of the envelope of aboriginal seclusion by then had many punctures, and contained, besides the original occupants who had never contacted white people, many who were in regular or passing contact with the couple of thousand settlers, drovers, telegraph employees, officials, pearlers & fishermen, miners and others who lived or travelled there.

It is as if the wave of indigenous dispossession, spreading out from settlements in the east, south and eventually the west, had slowed by 1890 upon reaching the less

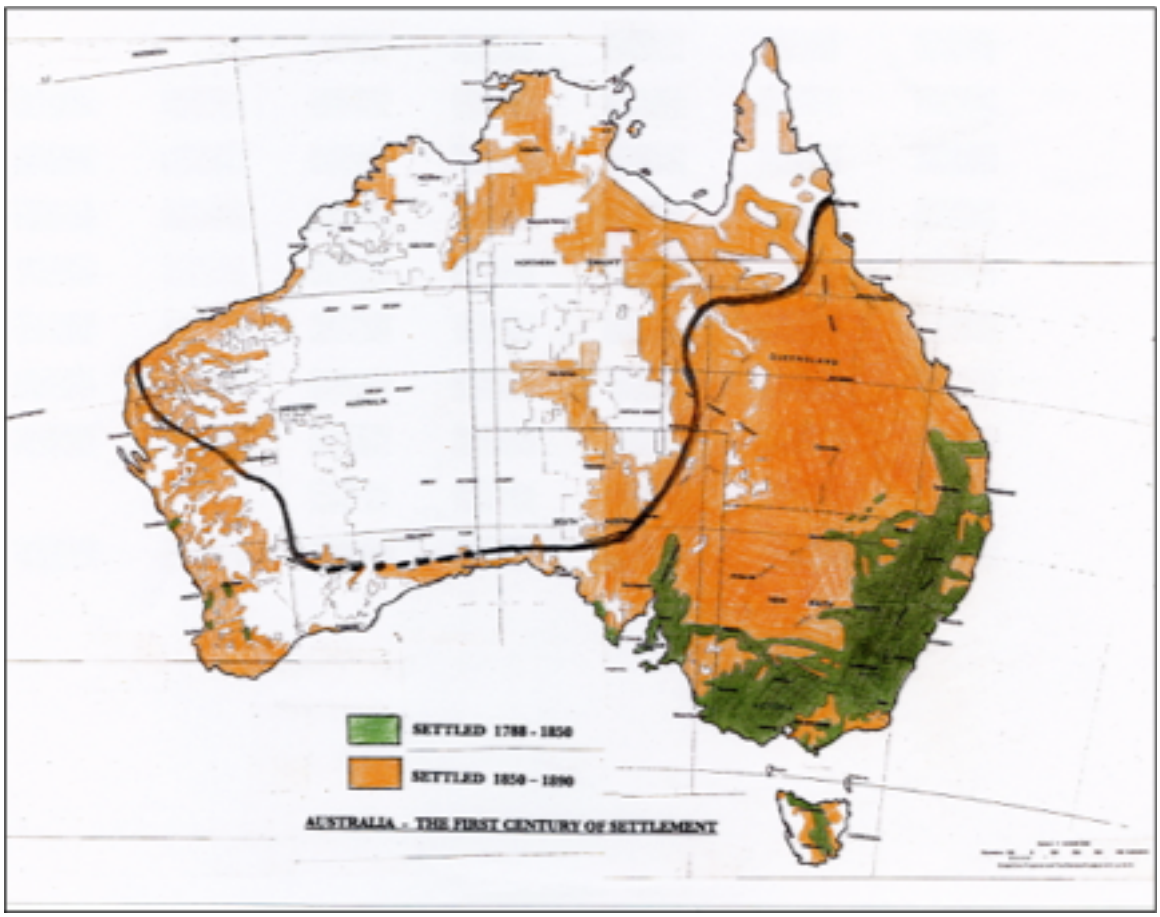


Figure 2 A settlement map, with Rowley's boundary overdrawn. After *Australians: A Historical Atlas*, 1987
Note that at 1890, much of the leased area in 'colonial Australia' was unoccupied or temporarily occupied. For the relationship of Rowley's boundary to population, see Fig 3 below.

productive areas, and stopped for good about 1920, leaving a kind of permanent pseudo-frontier in place and an 'unconquered' region beyond. Because of fundamentally different histories, conditions of life on the two sides of this divide were to remain distinct; and among those distinctions is the one we are trying to understand – the existence of hundreds of tiny communities in places so remote that there is almost no employment, and services and incomes have to be specially provided. Let us call this an historian's view. To Ben, though, it doesn't look like this at all. For him, Utopia is simply the best accommodation with the Europeans his people have been able to get. Call this the survivor's view. I believe now that quite a lot of what makes this hard to think about is the difficulty of keeping both of these in focus at once.

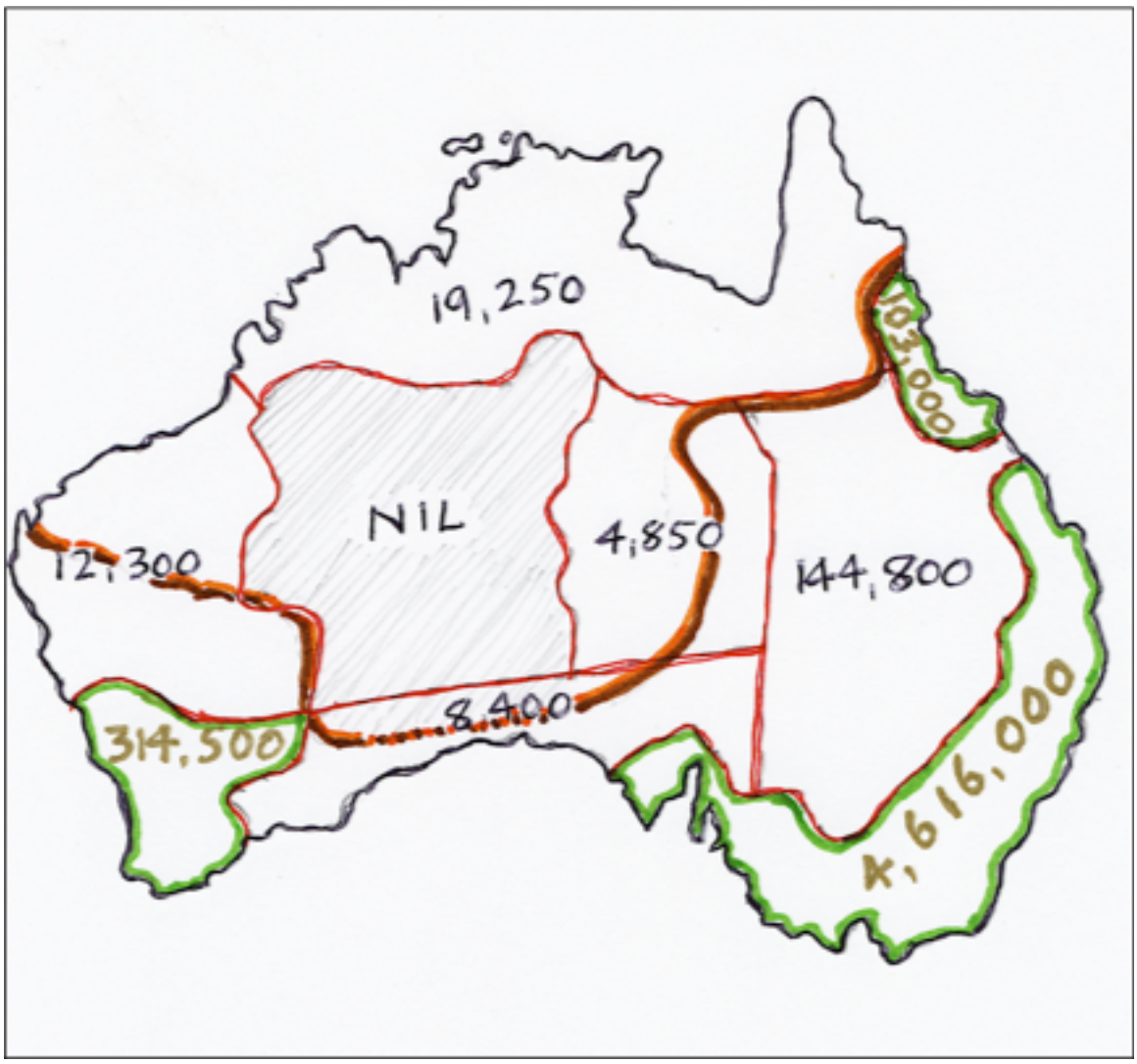


Figure 3 Map and data by John Flynn, 1915, to show the distribution of (white) population in the 'outback', with Rowley's line overdrawn. The maps together show the coincidence of geography, ecology and history that lies behind the concept of 'colonial Australia'.

"And read their history in a nation's eyes"

The present is contained in the past; we can hardly understand things without knowing where they came from. And if ignorance condemns us to repeat our errors, then false history ensures that we make them. In his second Boyer lecture in 1968 the anthropologist WEH Stanner called our historical treatment of aborigines "the great Australian silence". He didn't mean that historians had told or repeated lies about aboriginal history (although that has happened too), but that scholars had failed to record or notice a whole episode of the past, just as if it had been invisible.[3] Since then research has confirmed that there was always plenty of material – this story only waited to be told. The great silence was created quite consciously by our society in collusion with its historians, just so that when we looked into the mirror of the past, we would see

what we wanted. He was right to think the omission wasn't accidental; he was right too in thinking that our good intentions toward the aborigines would be unavailing until we fixed it.

With this in mind, and thinking about the question of Utopia's existence, I came to see that there was a standard Utopia story – and that it must be partly false. The story goes like this: the pastoral industry first evicted the aborigines, then adopted them by giving them work. In time, they claimed their land back and chose to live there indefinitely because of the strength of their attachment and a deep wish to preserve their customs and cultural identity. They are now in a position to choose a mode of accommodation with us, according to their true desires.

What is wrong with this way of looking at things? Well, first, this is not quite how the aborigines themselves see it. They were the ones who lost their way of life – so for them these events have the character of upheaval, loss and injustice, like all defeated people. And it wasn't very long ago. Old people can tell you about the first time they saw a white man. If they were children, they'll tell you how their mothers hid them in fear. People not so old will tell you how their parents and grandparents endured the killing time when the white men first asserted their claim to the place. Those rough times are a part of the immediate collective memory – always present or not far away in their consciousness of themselves. Stanner said of this awareness "It has a directness and a candour which cut like a knife through most of what we say and write".

Second, repatriation of the Utopia pastoral lease was *ad hoc* in the sense that it was the only part of the former Alyawerre lands available when a claim became feasible in 1976. Most of their country is still alienated in neighbouring leases, and likely to remain so. Third, nothing traditional warrants sedentary living in outstations, so the way of life which follows a successful land claim is something that must be invented by the group. Crucial choices must be made about how the old way of life is to be maintained and transmitted; how it is to co-exist with the new & what accommodations can be made, and how. This is to put the problem rather abstractly. In practice, it is much harder, because members of the group will have different needs depending on their age and experience; and in any case, the isolation implied by this view is not there. As time passes, interaction with the wider world evolves and grows ever more problematic.

There is another objection to the standard story which needs a bit more explanation. To suppose the aborigines free to choose their future path is to assume that they have the capacity to assess and act on a set of options which are both genuinely open to them,

and discoverable. But this can only be true for people who command most of the cultural equipment we take for granted. To choose freely they would need to be able to navigate the world of public administration, to have knowledge of their rights under our system of government, and how to assert them; they would need to understand what the fruits of full participation in the Australian community are, and how to access those they wished for. Most of all, perhaps, they would have the responsibility of finding a satisfying path through the strange borderland between two cultures so different that Stanner believed no greater gulf could have been devised. This would be hard enough if good will were all around – but instead the layers of misunderstanding and prejudice accumulated in the nineteenth century are still very much with us.

Indigenous policy and its clients

Utopia came into the possession of the Alyawerre just as official policy was undergoing one of its occasional re-births. 'Assimilation', the thinking asserted since the 1930s, was giving way to 'self-determination'. The mid- century ideal of assimilation is a bit hard to state now without making it sound half-baked, platitudinous, and rather insensitive. But

at the time it was felt to entail a major advance on the older policy of paternal protection and control. This is how it was expressed by a conference of State and Federal Ministers in 1961: "...all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians."[4] In hindsight, it is not too hard to see how the merits of the policy commended themselves to a well- meaning community during the 30 years of its orthodoxy - and also how its implications were never rigorously understood. The impression ones gets reading what its proposers and detractors had to say is that it never had a solid conceptual foundation, never came to grips with much detail, and for a long time, never acknowledged its failures in practice. But now it is a bit disturbing to find that much the same might be said of the one that has replaced it, notwithstanding an immeasurably greater interest and commitment by politicians, academics, professions and administrators. This is a puzzle I certainly wanted to understand better.

To Rowley, the concept of assimilation was too ambiguous to be useful; to Stanner, it was not just useless as a guide to action, but unreal as an idea. It means, he said, "that the Aborigines must lose their identity, cease to be themselves, become as we are. Let us leave aside the question that they may not want to," he went on, but "suppose they do not know *how* to cease to be themselves?" To see what he was getting at requires a moment's reflection on the notion of 'culture'. As long as we don't think the aborigines disqualified by any biological inferiority (this belief was extremely prevalent, almost an orthodoxy until quite recently, and is still potent and intrusive) what separates them from us is readily attributed to 'cultural difference'. But what does this mean? Anthropologists have separated two uses of the term: the first, conveniently called 'material culture', is what concerns the observable stuff characteristic of a way of living – the forms, practices, artefacts, ceremonials – the "pattern of life within a community – the regularly recurring activities and material and social arrangements", as Goodenough put it. This is the side of culture which can make a people seem exotic, but interesting; what provides audiences for aboriginal art, dancing and so on.

The second, sometimes called the 'anthropological' concept of culture is what we need to begin to understand why our policies don't work. Even though I knew better, now and again I became exasperated by the indifference of Utopia people to things like timetables, appointments and schedules. This is a homely example of a cultural contrast of the second type. The cross-cultural instructor had told us about aboriginal time being

circular, but I don't think anyone in that class was much wiser. All one could do was to imagine that the aborigines would be casual about deadlines a bit like the Irish – but this is quite wrong. The inexplicable aboriginal behaviour expresses something like a 'furniture of the mind', or to use a different metaphor, it is like a foundation or framework for their reality. Just as their art shows a distinctive mode of imagining the visual universe, so all their actions as individual and social beings tell us of a structure of ideas and ideational forms that is all their own. A moment's thought suggests why this is so hard to locate: we collect our commitments to these structures mostly too early in life to know what is happening. They are necessarily unconscious and unexamined, and so our normal disposition is to act as though they were not there. Everywhere, people feel themselves to be 'normal', and others exotic, forgetting that the judgements are always reciprocal.

What sorts of things go into this package of mental cultural possessions? The following short list is provided by Roger Keesing's textbook of cultural anthropology.[5] Other people might formulate it differently, but it will do to suggest how much we are all creatures of our cultural milieu.

- Principles for assigning patterns in the perceptual world – things, people, events, processes and contexts – to *categories*. Philosophers call this our *ontology*.

- Basic premises about interrelatedness of things and events: ideas of causality, rules of logic and inference, concepts of time and space, and so on; and basic cosmological and ontological premises about what orders of existence or categories of being there are, and what kind of universe this is, and so on. Roughly speaking, this is our *metaphysics*.

- Knowledge about the interrelations of particular things and events, based on these premises: propositions that parallel our sciences- botany, physics, astronomy and so on. You might call this *empirical* understanding, or how we think about the workings of the natural world.

- Conceptions of desirable goals or states of affairs; and hence standards for choosing among alternatives, and ideal general standards. This is the field of our *ethics*.

- Techniques and strategies for dealing with the environment, physical and social, in such a way as to maximize these goal states. This is how we regulate our economic and social activity. It is part of the content of both *custom* and *law*.

- A very broad category of norms that tell us how to act appropriately in particular situations: who should do what when and how. This is both social custom (*lore*) and the formal stipulations we call *law*.

- Rules for encoding and decoding linguistic and non-linguistic messages. This, of course, is *language*, which enables all culture, but is also one of its productions.

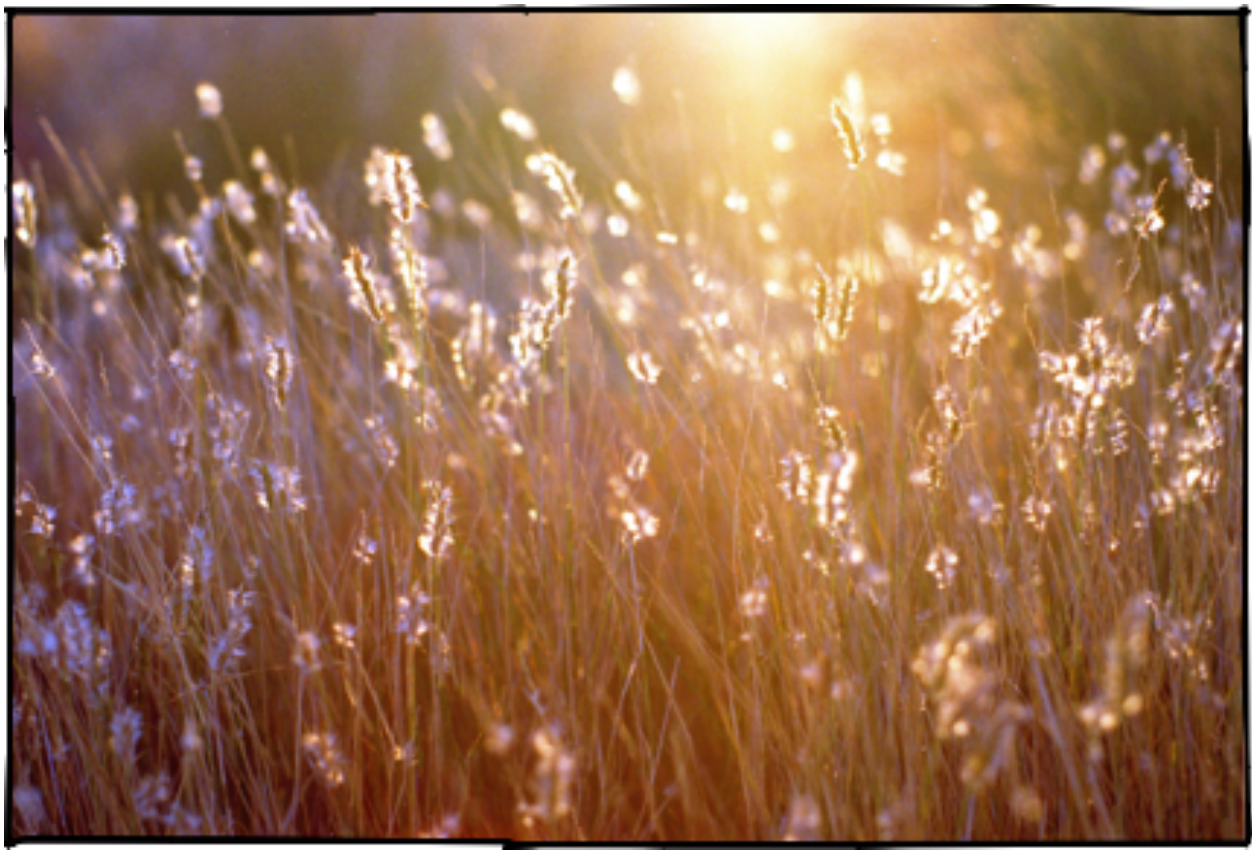
Our capacity to live in the mind in any way whatsoever is given by an axiomatic foundation of this stuff. As a package it is as variable between human social groups as the biological characters of distinct populations, and as soon as they interact, the distinctions become visible. With this in mind, you can see why the experience of making solid contact with another culture is both so unnerving, and so revealing. It is simply the only way to make visible our own. In the history of race relations everywhere, some people have been exhilarated by this discovery and others have been threatened. Very often, power relations between the confronted peoples have closely determined the pattern of response, and this is certainly detectable in the Australian story. As to the specific nodes of contrast between the aborigines and the colonising British, I shall just provide a few that impressed Stanner.

"We (the Europeans) are deeply interested in futurity. We try to foresee, forestall and control it by every means ... the aborigines are scarcely concerned with it at all; it is not a problem for them. Their 'future' differentiates itself only as a kind of extended present, whose principle is to be continuously at one with the past. This is the essence of the set of doctrines he called *The Dreaming*.

Our society is organized by specialised functions (such as occupation & social class) which cut across groups; theirs on a basis of segmentary (kinship) groups ... each having comparable sets of functions. Theirs is a self-regulating society, knowing nothing of our vast apparatus of state instrumentalities for authority, leadership or justice.

Ours is a market civilization, theirs is not. Indeed there is a sense in which *The Dreaming* and *The Market* are mutually exclusive. What is The Market? In its most general sense, it is a variable locus in space and time at which values – the values of anything – are re-determined as human needs make themselves felt from time to time. The Dreaming is a set of doctrines about values – the values of everything – which were determined once-for-all in the past. The things of the market – money, prices, exchange values, saving, the maintenance and building of capital – which so sharply characterise our civilization, are precisely those which the aborigines are least able to grasp and handle."

A toehold on the notion of 'internalised' culture, makes it easier to think about cultural difference, adaptation, and survival. And it seems to me Stanner was right – assimilating the aborigines using the official formula, is to ask them to do the impossible. That is implied in the practice which grew during the assimilation years of removing kids. But when places like Utopia became feasible about 1970, for a number of reasons including this one, the policy was abandoned. No new principle of integration was put forward in its place; instead policy makers turned their gaze in another direction, focussing on the transparent claim that whatever indigenous people did about the future, they should do it themselves. This policy is actually two things – an overdue acknowledgement that aborigines must be actors in designing their fate, not clients; and an abdication from paternalism. It was clear at the time that this re-orientation was backed by some notable success in North America; but it ought to have been obvious that granting control to Australian people and groups without experience or skills required an extended program of capacity building and carefully managed assistance and collaboration. Instead, 'self determination' became politically muscular, and over-rode many better judgments.



Politically, self-determination is an issue about 'control'. This is the way it expresses indigenous aspirations here and in other settler lands – New Zealand, Canada & the USA, and in these other jurisdictions it has contributed to some major advances. In

Australia, though, where the policy becomes vague is exactly where it needs to be most original – in describing how the aborigines are to acquire the *capacity* to exercise control over their affairs and destiny with the required insight and responsibility. This brings me to one of the enduring impressions I took away from Utopia. I saw many community-level decisions taken, but nearly all of them were responses to some proposal originating in the administration in Alice Springs or far-off Canberra. Participation in a *de facto* public service agenda is not at all what the advocates of self- determination had in mind. And yet, given the way things are there, it is hard to see how it could be much different. Nobody at Utopia can really understand official communications or the processes of policy, or meaningfully join a bureaucratic discussion. Almost nobody could read a letter; no one at all can write one. Numbers, and the management of money is a mystery to most people. You can see a paradox here: self- determination is as obvious as motherhood, but getting to it from paternalism is as tricky as a trip to purgatory.

When I was trying to understand how this state of affairs constrains their choices I began to think about how our own capacity as citizens is supplied by long socialization, and how we too would be social cripples without it. From this stance, it looks as if a significant part of aboriginal disadvantage is a symptom of their exclusion from the experiences which the rest of us use to become fully participating citizens. They are of two kinds – the formal, which we call education, and the others, which include growing up in a functional family, learning how economic participation works, and seeing the civil society at work all around us. There's no doubt that the remote aborigines miss out very badly – but we should ask why. In fact it isn't al all obvious that things should be the way they are: Utopia has been a community with a school for nearly 30 years; some remote communities are more than twice as old. Why are not youngsters generally well prepared to function in the wider community – the one that covers the whole country? At the core of this question are two different but related axes of tension which have been felt everywhere mature settler societies tried to find the right policy toward their indigenous survivors.

The first might be called the 'isolation *vs.* integration' problem. It can be expressed in a pair of opposing views which hold, on one hand, that the best thing we can do for indigenes is to give them plenty of room and leave them to either live as they have always done, or to adapt as they see fit; and on the other hand, that isolation cannot be effective, and integration on whatever terms must be managed and assisted. This debate was crucial in the formulation of assimilation policy on the eve of the second world war, and oddly, it is still alive at Utopia. The other problem is inherent in the predicament of

all people required to make the journey of integration. As individuals, if they make a minimal adaptation to the dominant society, they become adults who are pretty much unqualified to live anywhere but Utopia. If they learn quite a bit, they are likely to pass into a hazardous place where, all alone, they must re-invent their identity and discover how to travel in the strange country between two cultures. Call this the 'adjustment paradox'. Education is a passport in two senses: first, it provides admission to full participation in the society; second, it is a doorway into an expanded universe of possibility. It builds such things in the imagination and the mind that one can see beyond the horizon and speculate about living and exploring in a new space. This too was detectable at Utopia.

These key contentions are almost as old as the colonial phenomenon itself. After a wave of popular indignation about poverty on the reservations, in 1887, just about the time the first settlers were bringing cattle to Anmatjera country, the US Congress repudiated the reservation system as a comprehensive future strategy, and legislated a program of agrarian assimilation known as the Dawes Act. Indian families were given the chance to turn themselves into farmers – and many did. The integration of these families and

groups into the farming communities of the great plains can be thought of as an endorsement of this particular assimilation exercise; but anyone wishing to criticise it can use the same arguments we used here to abandon assimilation 80 years later. Dee Brown relates that when Sitting Bull was before the commission of inquiry which preceded the Act, a senator scolded the chief for presuming that his people would be partners rather than subjects in the enterprise they were contemplating. "If it were not for the government", said the senator, "you would be freezing and starving today in the mountains ... The government feeds and clothes and educates your children now, and desires to teach you to become farmers, and to civilize you, and *make you as white men*."[6]

This is the fusion of assimilation, condescension and coercion which discredited the ideal; yet it is possible, especially in the current disaffection with self-determination in practice, to argue that a re-invented assimilation is necessary. Historian Paul Johnson, for example, puts it like this: *"In material and moral terms, assimilation was always the best option for indigenous peoples confronted with the fact of white dominance. That is the conclusion reached by historians who study the fate not only of the American Indians, but of the Aborigines in Australia and the Maoris in new Zealand. To be preserved in amber as tribal societies with special 'rights' and 'claims' is merely a formula for continuing friction, extravagant expectations and new forms of exploitation by white radical intellectuals."* [7] Views such as these are as repugnant to activists, as the catechism of self determination is to conservatives.

What has always faced the people of Utopia then are the two questions that drop out if you shake these problems a bit: *How can we remain ourselves and still inhabit the Whiteman's world?* And *How do we manage the slow collision of the little world of Utopia with the big one all around it?* Understanding the dialogue within the community that responds to these conundrums isn't easy, and a lot of what one sees appears confused, but perhaps there is more intention than we think. To get some idea of the range of these responses, consider two families. Ben's wife, though unschooled, is the local custodian of the clinic at her outstation, and has acquired a useful amount of clinical knowledge. Her daughter, with sub- secondary education, has been a dedicated and effective assistant teacher at the outstation school for many years. Ben's granddaughters are spending their secondary school years at Yirrara College just outside Alice Springs, and he tells me they will study at university in order to, in his words, "help our people". In two generations this family has built its own assimilation bridge to the future.

The second family I have in mind, is from a different outstation, whose school uses less of its potentiality. They were required to deal with the white world in a most unwelcome

way when their son had kidney failure at the age of 18. This is a grave problem at any time, but for people in the bush it is especially hard, and a renal transplant was arranged for him. A transplant recipient must follow certain routines, but they are nothing like as onerous as a life on dialysis, and this young man knew the difference. Nevertheless, after a while, he began to neglect his kidney, and in less than two years it failed. When I last knew him, he was resisting the demands of the dialysis unit so much that his life was threatened several times. Basically, this was a collision between adolescent energy and a tough reality, but the things we normally depend on to get through it – good clinical communications and shared knowledge of the body, a family informed as well as concerned, a trusting relationship with therapists, and a sort of common understanding of the benefits of compliance were not there.

Interaction with the world beyond Utopia is obligatory. Ben's girls will create their own path through this and discover as they do their unique answers to the two questions. This surely is a model of self-determination succeeding. But for the many Utopia people less adept there will be no path, just intermittent and unbalanced contacts. For them a state-provided income and a refuge will be needed indefinitely.

The meaning of remoteness

Returning now to the earlier question: *why is Utopia there, and looking as if it will be there for ever?* A short but relevant answer is: *because people need it to be there.* Like the other remote communities, it is a *preferred* residence. I saw plenty of people move around between various small places, visiting family and so on; I saw people go to and from Alice Springs (often with chaotic results) and occasionally further afield; but very few had ever managed to leave Utopia for good and set up home in the world beyond the Centre. To say that they didn't want to do this is true, but the possibility was precluded, not by wanting but by capacity. One of the people who had moved was a very successful and famous painter who lives in Adelaide. This lady is a generous and well-used support for her relatives in Utopia, and one day I heard a story which seemed to bring into focus this ambiguity – that the place is both refuge and confinement.

It was told to me by a young woman about 30 who is an unusually capable manager of her little outstation clinic. As a teenager she had been bright, vivacious and good-looking, and had been pursued by an older man who already had two wives. To escape, she had given herself to a fellow her own age who turned out to be abusive and neglectful. She had small children and a life full of trouble. I often thought of where her talents might have taken her in a society with different opportunities. To get a break, she had arranged to fly to Adelaide to stay with the painter there, but on arriving at the air-line desk, something had arisen that required an adjustment to her pre-paid fare. Either she couldn't understand the problem, or couldn't fix it, but the result was that she abandoned her ticket and holiday and came home. As she told me this, I had the feeling that her disappointment was pretty much what yours or mine would have been, but her resignation was something different. For I sensed that she saw the futility and its cause quite clearly, and still knew it to be unavoidable.

Another time, a lady with a terminal cancer was staying in a bit of a hut behind the clinic. All day and night she was attended by members of her family. She never complained, and it was hardly necessary for the clinic to do anything, so competent, patient and caring were they. One day she took the long ride to Alice Springs in the ambulance to see the specialist. Next morning I asked how it went, and learned that they'd not seen him. It appeared they'd waited a long time on a hard seat before a nurse asked "have you seen the doctor?" They gave an affirmative answer. Perhaps they saw one walk by; maybe they always say yes to people in uniform asking questions. Maybe

the nurse misunderstood, but on hearing this reply she said they could leave, and they rode all the way back.

There were plenty of more or less futile eight hour round trips on that dusty road, but this one struck me as peculiarly poignant, since neither the dying woman nor those who faithfully accompanied her complained or gave me any sign that they thought this treatment demeaning, unjust, or even inconvenient. What they really thought was something I couldn't have discovered – it could not have been encoded in English, and they'd have been unlikely to reveal it in any case. The occasion was one of many maladroit meetings between the aborigines' need of us and our good intentions. Stanner had his own name for contacts with this quality – he called it 'the dusty encounter', and he understood that it was not just innocent cross-cultural confusion, but a pattern of relations which, if unravelled, led back to the beginnings of European-Aboriginal experience.

These two vignettes announce clearly that the remote aborigines are stranded, geographically, culturally and economically; but for me they also suggest something else – something Stanner thought was at the heart of the great Australian silence, wrapped and muffled by indifference. It is discernible in the record, and it is glaringly obvious to all aborigines. It is the fact that we have very rarely in 200 years offered our indigenous people the kind of bargain they were looking for. We haven't been much interested in their wishes at all, but have proposed instead a sequence of deals on the terms we thought best, the failure of each adding nothing to our estimation of the subjects, but something to our confusion.

Today, racism is a pejorative word, so much so that even avowed racists try not to use it. But this delicacy is fairly new – not so long ago things were very different. Race relations in Australia is an aspect of our history that has been much studied since Stanner spoke, and there can be no question about the picture that is revealed by this work (Keith Windschuttle notwithstanding). It is best understood by placing the Australian story in a wider context – that of the great European colonizing enterprise, beginning at the start of the 16th century. Whether it has ever ended is contestable, but certainly it has created permanent consequences which, for many societies comprise the most salient facts of their social and political reality.

What is a colony? The obvious answer is that it is a geo-political entity in which citizens, enterprises and institutions are transplanted from a donor state to another place. But this, though true, is not the interesting thing. Necessarily, unless the colonizers arrive in

an uninhabited place, they trigger a new, irreducible fact for the host people – from being proprietors, they become the colonized. That is to say, a colony is also a special kind of relationship, which, once established, evolves a dynamic which has been remarkably constant over the four centuries of colonial experience. In detail, its shape is determined by various properties of the colliding societies, but in essentials, certain themes of thought and behaviour appear to be entailed in the nature of colonizing itself and they are recognizable from Alaska to Martinique; from Swaziland to Moreton Bay.

According to Albert Memmi, the invariable characteristic of a colony is profit. Even if the colonial state makes no fiscal or strategic gain, the colonial people are always advantaged. This is the logic, the motive power of colonizing – the acquisition of land, resources and labour by a cohort willing to emigrate to wherever these are to be found.[8]

The condition of colonized people is just as invariant – for the advantage of one implies the subjection of the other. Our new histories show the astonishing variety of ways indigenous people were exploited, and one of the most striking of my discoveries at Utopia was that this inventiveness is still present. It is a rather persuasive reason for accepting Rowley's idea of residual colonialism in the never-never. Think of the story of Ben's working life. Is it possible to hear this without a shudder? Yet naked exploitation like that and much worse, has been absolutely normal for two thirds of the Territory's 130-year European history. It was not ended by any reformation of popular sentiment, but by metropolitan decisions; the attitudes which underpinned colonial practices are still there. Xavier Herbert's 70 year old portrait of Territory racism in *Capricornia* is remarkably easy to recognize.

About the time Ben was old enough to start work on his own, toward the end of the war, the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt surveyed conditions on Vestey's cattle stations in the top end.[9] We know their findings were not exceptional because they've been broadly corroborated by several other reports from the 20's to the 60's. The company, though profitable, had never paid its aboriginal work force, fiercely resisted any suggestion that they should do so, and took inordinate trouble, using falsified records, to by-pass bureaucratic scrutiny on this subject. No accommodation was provided – aborigines lived in makeshift camps with no sanitary facilities of any kind, no piped water, no school, and a minimum of medical care. During two months they were at Wave Hill, the Berndts were aware of the births of 3 babies; just after they left, a fourth took place. Of these four confinements, one infant lived, one was still-born, and

in two instances, both mother and baby died. None but the last received any medical aid, and this was *in extremis* and unavailing.

The ordinance regulating aboriginal employment stipulated that an employer might deduct from the statutory 5 shillings a week wage the cost of provisioning the employee's non-working dependents. This caveat was used both as a legal loop-hole and a moral justification for rewarding labour with tucker only. The anthropologists were impressed by how meanly this was done. The quality of rations, tobacco and working gear supplied was a discretion of the station manager, but in no case was the food adequate for a working diet, and in the worst not even for subsistence. They saw lots of malnutrition, and some actual starvation. Nor was the loop-hole honestly exploited. They found that only excepting infants and the very old and infirm, all of the 250 people camped at Wave Hill were expected to perform at least intermittent work when summoned.

Discovering these facts some time after leaving Utopia, I wondered about the source of this coercive power. Why did people acquiesce? The answer is both simple and subtle. It is difficult for Australians to believe that this is part of our story, so much disinfectant has been added to the past. So when I was trying to think of a society with which to compare the Territory pastoral scene, it was a bit unnerving to be reminded of the slave narratives recording life in the southern United States before 1860. The two situations have a skeletal equivalence, no matter how different institutionally - a near-absolute monopoly of power, an economic motive to exploit it, and an integrated system of social relations and mental attributes which serve to uphold and justify the imbalance.

The simple answer to the question 'why did the aborigines allow themselves to be enslaved in their own land?' must be that once the power relation had been demonstrated and enforced, they faced harsh and limited choices – death, expulsion, or submission. The Berndts saw it pragmatically this way: "The coming of Europeans in this area, as in others, made a formidable impact", primarily economic, "but also in regard to the whole patterning of socio-economic relationships. To begin with, a few people were induced to undertake various jobs, either through force or threat of force, or through bribery and persuasion by offering various attractive novelties. As time went by their numbers grew. In this way, more or less permanent camps grew up in the vicinity of ... cattle stations ... and their inhabitants were looked upon by settlers, drovers, and others as a legitimate source of labour." Old Toby Pitjara, an Alyawarra man born on what is now Elkedra station, told it like this: *"First time I see white man that longa Frew*

station ... and we reckon him might be debil debil; we been hear about him shoot all our people; shoot 'em out ... then burn 'em bodies in fire. But pretty soon we bin learn him job; work for white fella cartin' wood, Frew station that first place my people work."[10]

One of the most suggestive things about the prolonged 'frontier' era in the Territory is an anomaly which impressed several observers – that the aborigines were both indispensable and neglected. This odd state of affairs puzzled John Bleakley, for instance, a career public servant who undertook a thorough survey of conditions in the Territory pastoral industry for the Commonwealth in 1928. After describing the woeful state of housing, health, and general care of the indigenous workforce, he wrote: *"It is remarkable that, although recognizing their absolute dependence upon the natives, there has been no attempt made by the people on these holdings to elevate or educate them, though this should enhance their value as machinery. It seems to be the conveniently accepted notion that they are beyond redemption, that education spoils them, so there is no encouragement for ambition and the blackfellow, naturally lacking initiative and given no opportunity, has a hopeless outlook. Is it any wonder that he sometimes has little heart in his work and is branded as lazy and unreliable?"* Reflecting on the same phenomenon, the Berndts wrote: *"Aboriginal people were regarded as one of the natural resources of the country", rather than economic collaborators. "Their private lives were considered to be negligible and rather amusing, and taken into account only when they did not conflict with the interests and requirements of the local Europeans."* [11]

What was remarkable to Bleakley would not have surprised anyone in Georgia or Jamaica a century before. Until slaves became very valuable in the 1840's and 50's, this apparent ambiguity was a normal feature of slave societies, who's first imperative was the assertion of power. The opinions Bleakley recorded are found in all colonies, but particularly where the economic relations entail both dominance and dependence. Many clues from all over colonial Australia confirm that relations between the colonizers and the indigenous included a standard mixture of fear, pride, ignorance and prejudice. These have survived as corrosive components of modern race relations, but on the establishing cattle stations they were the stuff of daily life, the social cement.

And yet, despite some very coercive proprietors, and many forms of obnoxious exploitation, the aborigines were not slaves, and many of them, including Ben and old Toby, exercised their freedom by moving. Sometimes moving could be dangerous. The man old Toby referred to at Frew station was probably Harry Henty, who came to the region after serving in the first war, worked at Barrow Creek as a telegraph linesman, before becoming the lessee of Frew River. After dealing violently with the local people

for years, he met his own violent death late in 1928 when, pursuing a couple of 'boys' who'd absconded, he was himself fatally shot by an aboriginal. Just the same, moving was a survival strategy, and it appears to have been used a lot. Toby tells how he returned to his father's country Elkedra, where he worked for Kennedy and Riley. "Funny bugger managers them fellas; no money, no swag, not much beef, only bone... just living on the bone; give me no money, nothing ... later I was sitting down everywhere, Tennant Creek, Borroloola, all fresh country for me." He worked for Mac Chalmers at MacDonald Downs. Finally, he followed many of his people to Lake Nash, and then Camooweal, where he became custodian for the secret traditions of the *Bulangu*, a group which did not survive.

There is something Odyssean about this lone wandering in a disrupted and broken world. Tommy Turner, another Alyawarra man from Ammaroo also travelled to lake Nash as a boy, and as he grew, inherited the sacred knowledge of the local people, the Warluwarra, from the last of their old men. We are given a glimpse of the chaos of those times in memories like the following, recorded by Arthur Groom. He was working at Lake Nash in the summer of 1923-4. *"My wood-cutting camp was beside a small muddy pool, seventy miles west of the homestead. I rose one hot morning to find that nearly one hundred and fifty natives had 'come in' during the night, stealthily and unseen, and were camped about in small groups. They were dirty and diseased, hungry and miserable, the obvious remnants of a dying race. There was little I could do for them. ... It appeared they were not wanted somewhere, and had been warned off. They had come through an area new and strange to them, tired, dispirited and lethargic."* [12] These people were probably from the southern end of Alyawarra country and would have been walking to Soudan Station, known all over the region as a refuge. What form of dispossession drove them to such a desperate expedient, we cannot know.

Ruby Tracker, a child refugee to Lake Nash in the 1920's, told Jenny Green her grandmother's story about reprisals for cattle spearing 20 years before. "My granny told me that the whitefellas were killing people. They tied all her family up and hung them by the neck from a tree. Before that they killed all the aboriginal people on the other side of the river. My mother and aunties, they all ran away. Others were tied up and killed close to the river. Others ran away to the hills and into the bush. Just because somebody was caught eating a bullock."[13] As random violence receded in the 1930's, the communities accumulated at Soudan and Lake Nash became economically and culturally integrated with their adopted homelands. Today, the former refugees and their descendants occupy a substantial township a few miles from the Lake Nash homestead, and identify with that place, *Ilperrelhelame*, as well as with their ancestral kin and country.

The idea of the 'primitive', and its consequences

By an odd coincidence, six months before his meeting with the migrating band, Arthur Groom had encountered a man who was to have a profound effect on the destiny of the Alyawarra – Charles Chalmers. Charles was a school teacher and farmer from Mungindi who came to believe he should seek a future for his family in the still vacant parts of central Australia. He used his small capital to acquire a flock of sheep and some other livestock; put his belongings into a wagon, and with his wife and four children began walking in 1921. Reaching Boulia at the end of the year, they were halted by drought, and waited there nearly two years for rain. When Groom met them, they were about to cross a notorious dry stretch beyond Arghadaghada waterhole. This they did, and established an enterprise at MacDonald Downs which flourishes today. He was an unusual man, and although he had no previous experience living with aborigines, immediately worked out an amicable coexistence with the local people. This too has endured three generations, and people at Utopia still speak fondly of his family many of whom live in the district still. Charles' son Mac sold the Utopia lease to the Aboriginal Land Fund in 1976.

Chalmers appears to have understood that his business at MacDonald Downs was a collaborative one – that building a flock there would be possible only if the new and original proprietors found ways of making a living together. He was, in any case a sympathetic man, and seems to have given and received the deepest respect from the aborigines. This nexus of loyalty, mutual respect and an accommodating approach to pastoral enterprise has been recorded elsewhere – for example, by Constance Petrie and Alice Duncan-Kemp. If not in these, then in the case of the Chalmers, its effects have been enduring, and it seems to me that the stewardship of this family and its consequences is telling us something important. I must try to explain what I mean.

Throughout the colonial period such debate as took place in public forums, official communications and colonial legislatures almost uniformly represented the moral problem of the aborigines as if it were a question of bestowing or withholding the succour of Christian charity. Most of the energy and conscience applied on behalf of the Australian indigenes from the government in Britain, from active individuals in the colonies, and later in the nineteenth century from various aboriginal protection bodies, was provided by the churches or affiliated persons. It was assumed by nearly all that their primitive state condemned them to extinction; hard-headed progressives thought it better to get this over with, while humanitarians thought benevolence to the dying race incumbent on civilized people. In retrospect one can see that this is where our paternalism had its roots, and further that all the trouble we now attribute to 'dependency' is likewise the fruit of this thinking. Placing the actions of Charles Chalmers on this background, one can see how what appeared radical to his neighbours and critics was actually clear-sighted and elementary.

One might say that this was a contention about the visibility of 'the primitive' and of the meaningful content of this category in our discourse. This is a very old question, and too large to explore here. But I need to say something about the history of this idea in European imagination, because of its relevance to events at Utopia. In 1562 Michel de Montaigne met and conversed with a cannibal brought to France by one of the navigators, and 15 years later set down his reflections in an essay. His opinions, which became very famous, are best given in his own words:

Here he is stating a view which today we usually call 'cultural relativism"

"each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. ... Those people are wild, just as we call wild the fruits that Nature has produced by herself and in her

normal course; where really it is those that we have changed artificially and led astray from the common order, that we should rather call wild. The former retain alive and vigorous their genuine, their most useful and natural properties, which we have debased in the latter in adapting them to our corrupted taste."

Of primitive society and mode of life, he says:

This is a nation ... in which there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat. The very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, belittling, pardon – unheard of. ... Men fresh sprung from the gods.

He goes on to enumerate the natives' pleasures, comforts and lack of care, in order to contrast them with our own.

Thus was set in train an intellectual heritage which is still with us – the unresolved contest between this, what we have come to call the Rousseauean, or enlightenment, or 'romantic' view of human origins, and the 'progressive', or Hobbesean view. According to the first, *primitive* means 'original, natural, uncorrupted'; to the second, it signifies 'simple, coarse, undeveloped'. The record of European encounters with "indigenous" * peoples is a fascinating revelation of how these polarities have been reconstructed again and again in the minds and imaginations of the explorers, settlers, missionaries and administrators who ventured into exotic or colonised lands.

Just to see how long-lasting this dichotomy has been, it is worth making a couple of contrasts. First, Walter Baldwin Spenser, who, with Frank Gillen, between 1899 and 1914, wrote three of the best anthropology books the world had seen, and put the discipline on a new and very fruitful path. He was an indefatigable field researcher, and probably saw more of remote aboriginal life than any other scholar of his time, and he was a sensitive and generous man. This is how he began his article on the Aborigines in the first edition of the Australian Encyclopaedia of 1925, just when the Chalmers were getting started at MacDonald Downs:

"It is probable that, with the exception of one or two isolated groups in other parts of the world, the Australian aborigines represent the most archaic people extant, and in many respects, reveal the conditions under which the early ancestors of the human race existed." He then reminds his readers that their environment was disadvantaged, adding *"Even supposing there had been domesticable*

animals, it is quite possible that the aboriginal would have done nothing with them. He grinds many sorts of grass-seed to make into crude cakes; but it never occurs to him to sow the seed and so insure a certain amount of food supply. In many tribes this is to be associated with the fact that he knows nothing of the relation between the seed and the plant, and thinks that the latter grows because he makes it do so by means of magic." He then gives what he considers to be the main reason they failed to develop: *"the Australian aboriginal, since his ancestors first inhabited the continent, has never had to contend with any higher race."*

Spencer served the Territory under its new Commonwealth mandate as administrator, chief protector and adviser; the 1918 ordinance, the blueprint for aboriginal governance for almost 50 years, was drafted largely from his reports. One can see that his thinking about them is indelibly moulded by prevailing ideas of race and cultural 'development'. Now consider this specimen of a decidedly 'romantic' view of the aborigines' fate – that of Archibald Meston, author, explorer and administrator, writing in 1889:

"The Australian Blacks are moving rapidly on into eternal darkness in which all savage and inferior races are surely destined to disappear. All effort to preserve them, though creditable to our humanity, is a poor compliment to our knowledge of those inexorable laws whose operations are as apparent as our own existence. Their epoch of time is near its termination, the shadows deepening towards everlasting night. It is a mournful picture, that of the old inhabitants who for unknown ages have roamed the primeval forests of this mighty continent, now moving off silent and swift-footed into oblivion before the presence of the white strangers." [14]

Meston was an able, if irascible man of uneven accomplishments, who by his 1896 report to the Queensland colonial secretary and the subsequent legislation, as well as his term as chief protector, had a huge influence on policy in that State and to some extent in the Territory. Like Spencer, he believed contact was generally destructive, and advocated inviolable reserves (the 'isolationist' conviction), and like most thinking men of the time, was persuaded by the 'social Darwinist' view of racial superiority. As an administrator he was flawed, not least by a penchant for severe discipline.

Thirdly, these are the words of Geoffrey Bardon, describing Papunya as he found it in 1971.[15] It is a useful reminder that prejudice – attitudes and imagined realities generated by false evidence – are powerful and long- lasting, and their endurance and effects are like those of a residual poison, toxic and insidious.

"Papunya in 1971 was like a hidden city, unknown on maps because of the shame felt by its

Aboriginal inhabitants. ... I found a community of people in appalling distress, oppressed by a sense of exile from their homelands and committed to remain where they were by direction of the Commonwealth Government. Papunya was filled with twilight people, whether they were black or white, and it was a place of emotional loss and waste, with an air of casual cruelty. ... Many whites felt great hatred towards the Aborigines. Whites refused to shake hands with them for fear of catching diseases. Blacks were seldom allowed in government cars or any white car at all. All about the settlement were filth and dissolution."

As everyone knows, Bardon went there to teach the kids, and triggered a great art movement. Here he describes the creation of the first, famous mural, painted on the schoolhouse wall.

"It was quite a moment, as we all watched – Old Bert, Old Mick, Bill Stockman and long Jack and the others – the first hieroglyph being put on the wall lovingly and beautifully, with a marvellous painting technique. Some of the men went across and touched the wall even before the paint had dried. Then the little children came across and stood beside the old painting men and Kaapa, and we all stood back and watched the start of the honey ant mural as it was finally to appear. This was the beginning of the

Western Desert painting movement, when, led by Kaapa, the Aboriginal men saw themselves in their own image before their very eyes, on a European building. Something strange and marvellous was set in motion."

Now it seems to me that the first two men in this sample can represent two kinds of commitment by white Australia toward the indigenous people, and a bit of reflection might show pretty clearly that both can be well- intentioned and badly astray at the same time. This, with a bit of a stretch, might stand for our history of aboriginal policy from late colonial times until the present. At least this analogy captures the ambiguity, the almost schizophrenic character of this area of our national experience. From the debate on the Franchise Act in 1902, in which the parliament excluded aborigines from the electoral roll, to the latest alarm over dysfunctional remote communities, one hears echoes of the same old errors. So how did it happen that Geoffrey Bardon, Charles Chalmers, and others abstained, and what was it they saw that others did not? I had better let one of those others suggest an answer.

Bill Stanner was one of a small group who steered the transition of aboriginal policy in the early 70's, and so understood the potentiality and the hazards of 'self-determination' as well as anyone. He also managed to convey irresistibly the sense that aboriginal life (and that means not just the vanished wholeness, but all those distinctive elements that have survived and are valued by them) was a fully developed scheme, a finished human invention as complete and contemporary in its own way as ours, and in some ways richer. In other words, he believed the educative task ahead of us was a mutual one. Here he is writing in 1972 about this richness:

"In the olden days all the dynamic things – that is, the changing, active, moving things – of the world, even things with only a potential for change, activity and movement, seem to have fascinated the Aborigines: the motions of the planets, comets and shooting stars; the tides and the winds; thunder and lightning; the whirlwinds and bushfires; the silent growth of plants, the change of the seasons – and of course the growth of human beings. All were caught up and given recognition and place in an interesting philosophy of life." [16]

Here, he is introducing a short essay on aboriginal humour:

"The Aborigine's culture was materially simple, but was adequate to his needs; his social organization was exceedingly complex, but it allowed him a life of great satisfaction when not too much interrupted by Europeans; we are discovering that he had a rich aesthetic capacity and an interesting metaphysical conception of life and the world; and I can testify from much acquaintance that he added to these a very

marked sense of humour. He had, in short, fundamentally all that we have. At least he once had. He was fully equipped to meet life on even terms and, with humour, to get a little the better of it in passing." [17]

Stanner believed that even the *possibility* of well-founded policy had been so corrupted by that intellectual baggage visible in the words of Spencer and Meston that it was hard to see how we would ever get it right. One of the implications of 'self determination' for him was that "*we ourselves in some sense have contracted to un-be what* **we** *have been and are. It is the one condition that would make the new policy just, as well as sensible. We live by a plan of life"* he says, meaning our cultural and traditional apparatus, and "*If the new policy is not to remain on the plane of formal statement, without effect, I doubt if any of the main elements of that plan of life can stay wholly unchanged. That will, as Alice said, be 'mortal hard'. We will certainly have to liberalise our ethos, be less concerned with institutional consistency, and forego some of our cultural bigotries."* [18]

Policy failure and the present

That was thirty years ago. Supposing he had lived, would he still want those three things changed? My guess is he would – as he said, it was always going to be hard. Would his report card be pessimistic still? I don't know, but it doesn't seem that we ever caught his sense of urgency, or understood his vision of reconciliation as something permissive, adaptive, and mutually enriching. And it seems he was right about the consequences of delay; the aborigines will adapt whatever we do, but if we place most of the better choices out of reach, we should expect poor outcomes. I guess we've moved some way since 1970, but with too little institutional leadership. The manifest good will in the Australian community is real enough, but under-informed, like its political equivalent. The following thoughts are an attempt to sketch a background for understanding how Stanner's project was hard for most of us, yet came readily to a few.

1. It seems to me that being educated, as was Spencer, or self-taught, as Meston; being well-informed, as both men were, or ignorant, as the folks at Papunya; scientist, reformer, bureaucrat, politician – all shared with the frontiersman a very basic bundle of beliefs and attitudes revolving on the perception of aboriginal backwardness. This is easier to understand when we remember that the era of continental dispossession, from about 1830 to 1920, exactly coincided with the career of that body of ideas we call doctrinal racism, and the period of intense frontier expansion in northern Australia, 1860-90, occurred just when racist dogma seized on the 'scientific' backing of Darwinism.

2. For anyone with responsibility for aboriginal welfare, the axiom of primitiveness acted like a blindfold, no matter how good their intentions. Both Spencer and Meston, though perhaps from somewhat different motives, advocated inviolable reserves to avoid the inevitable post-contact damage in northern and central Australia. Donald Thompson took the same position in the 1930's and 40's. At the bottom of this thinking is the idea that the primitive is unfit for adaptation, or perhaps that he ought to be preserved, in much the same way and for the same reasons we preserve the panda. But this is refuted again and again by Stanner for the good reason that it denies history – there never has been a successful 'isolationist' alternative to colonial conflict – and it denies to the aborigines a fundamental condition of their humanity – that they are a people entitled to manage the fact of European presence in their own way.

3. Spencer served the Commonwealth in the Northern Territory for some years after 1911, and his recommendations took legal effect in the 1918 ordinance, which pretty

much governed aboriginal administration for the next 50 years. If it could be characterised in a word, that word would be "paternalism" – the practice by which one social group treats another as if they were children. Meston had performed a similar service for Queensland by his 1896 report and its legislative sequel. Paternalism is not just a misguided sort of benevolence; indeed it appears just as readily in people of ill-will. It is a consistent feature of a certain pattern of race relations, especially in pre-industrial (pastoral and agricultural) colonial societies, in particular where the power relations of the colony coexist with economic interdependence. As we are now in a position to know only too well, when it is institutionalised in statutes it breeds a host of inventive forms of 'control', each with its own justification. That is what we should understand from Bardon's picture of Papunya – it is the 50 year old fruit of Spencer's well-intentioned ordinance. To appreciate the effect of this over the whole country we should remember that the first such legal instrument was enacted in Victoria in 1869 and that every State and colony has had its own way of making dependents of the aborigines.

4. Spencer bequeathed a large anthropological collection to the Museum of Victoria. I well remember the day I saw some of these objects lying in a couple of well-lighted glass cases. They had come from Oenpelli – little personal ornaments to be worn by women, made of hair, fibre, seeds, wax, teeth and so on, beautifully fashioned with great delicacy and immaculate taste. It was on seeing them that I understood for the first time something important – that there are no essential differences between us in respect of our capacity for delight in well-fashioned artefacts, or in our innate need to produce and enjoy them. We know beauty, and its elevating effects, as one. We are fully and totally human together, and the works of imagination, though distinct in form and meaning, reflect in their difference no more than the distinctiveness of our different modes of life. In impulse they are alike. We pass the same gate to enter the same realm of human invention, and take the very same reward there – no more, no less – the "something strange and wonderful" that Geoffrey Bardon saw. Thinking about why I hadn't seen this before, I saw that the idea of the primitive is everywhere; like spilt milk, it seeps into corners; and like an old habit, you can't give it up until you discover both the problem and its remedy.

It sometimes seemed that everyone at Utopia painted. I don't mean what is obvious – that untalented people would churn out plain stuff for tourists – but that you never knew where an accomplished work might next appear. Over and over I walked into a camp to find one or more people whom I'd never before seen painting, at work on a

gorgeous design. That was just one side of a surprising thing. The core of it was what happened in the invention of those designs. Being a commercial activity of course, it would be strange if these artists were not influenced by the advice of their selling agents, or other exigencies of the market. But assuming a distinction between the imagination at work and dexterity at play, then what I found in these creations was both the singularity of their makers, and the most stirring and fascinating aesthetic productions.

More than that. They can be like an inviting gateway into what you can only think of as another and unsuspected imaginative world – yet at the same time weirdly familiar. It is a bit like hearing speech in an unknown tongue, but still finding a message. I never learned to speak more than a handful of names, and always regretted the crippled state of our communications – but the paintings were another matter. It was as if they made plain what a gaping cultural divide obscured – that this people, so inept in the life-way we offer them, so spare in their wants, and so uncommunicative in the only medium I could share with them, nevertheless commanded a full and satisfying symbolic expression, and accessed the ineffable interior world with enviable ease. They could put forth in their

ravishing designs such a surfeit of invention, feeling, discipline, insight and sheer creative energy – a riches of eye, heart and mind – as must convince anyone who could see, and any who doubted, of their deep, mysterious and generous humanity.

5. Stanner contends that we could make room for the aborigines at our table any time at all – but only by doing some adapting ourselves – and there's the rub. We can only be persuaded to do that if we believe their contribution to a synthetic Australian culture is not just valuable, but mandatory. There are some signs that this might be happening, but slowly, and all the while aboriginal consciousness is itself evolving. Our big stumbling block is the legacy of the colony – that century of dispossession and all the ways we licensed it – both the hard frontier values and the benign errors that entered our foundations. To be reminded that they have not leached away, think of Louis Johnson/ Warren Braedon, the aboriginal boy who was deliberately run over and left to die in Perth in 1992.[19] The youths who did this were from unremarkable, affluent, respectable families, and after their impulsive deed could not account for their motive. But the court record shows that they were capable of virulent racist thoughts. Where did these come from? Like the poisonous apparition at Papunya, these are not mysterious, wayward eruptions, but responses by individuals to something in our cultural heritage.

In his 1958 novel *Naked Under Capricorn* Olaf Ruhe, writing of a Territory he knew, tells the story of a settler who, though a friend to the aborigines, witnesses the most dreadful abuses. He is anguished but acquiescent; inactive even at personal loss, and strangely reconciled to the indigenous disaster unfolding all about him, as if it were no more preventable than a hurricane. The revilers won the frontier, and pioneers ran the state – that is how the 'great silence' began.

6. Stanner used to worry that it would take too long – not like a curator watching his precious exhibits degrade, but because he saw all round the consequences of culture loss, and past and present incomprehension, and knew that if they accumulated long enough, so would bitterness and distrust. In a sense, his fear is a parallel of Thompson's, and both are coming true. Aboriginal identity is continually reinvented. Inevitably it comes to reflect, and is then reflected in, contemporary Australian culture. This produces tension between old and young people, and it is a stimulus to myth making which does not seem to be a good substitute for understanding.

It sometimes seems as if the version of aboriginal identity that will eventually be woven into the fabric of Australian life will be a hybrid belonging to both the political and the commercial wings of aboriginal activism – the 'myth of the noble victim'. According to

the myth, the aborigines lived in and cared for the continent before white men, their ancient ecological wisdom matched by spiritual refinement, contentedness and material plenty. David Horton has gone so far as to say that they established one of the world's great civilizations. Aside from the nonsense, we might be suspicious of this kind of claim because the myth allows us to embrace the aborigines without changing or giving up a thing. Not at Utopia, but at plenty of visitor/cultural centres, commercial enterprises, entertainments, and in the offices of countless bureaucrats and functionaries, this tale has been acquiring political force. As a device for urban aborigines it is perfectly understandable – everyone romanticises the past – but it is surely unhelpful for remote people who's past and present are close and who've barely begun the voyage, and who cannot, without forcing, cease to be who they are.

Stanner put his finger on this when he said (in 1968) that we set out in a new policy direction "with a heavy burden of unsolved older problems". He was thinking of both the heritage of policy failures and the baggage of past prejudice. It is not hard to agree. It should amaze us now that it took over 60 years for the national conscience to acknowledge our indigenous Australians as citizens with us; that they exercised their franchise first in the year men walked on the moon; that less than 40 years before, there took place not far from Alice Springs a major quasi-judicial punitive massacre, virtually unpunished; and that for many years a coercive system, very much like slavery had existed on pastoral leases throughout the Territory. A close look at the administration of aboriginal policy from the end of the great war to the 1960's shows that official indifference was not just the agent of neglect, but was structurally integrated into the system of race relations in the Territory, and an important means of upholding it.[20] Like all systems of persecution, this one will tend to endure, nourished by its own negative genius, and no policy that is not designed for the purpose, will be likely to affect it much. On the other hand, any number of well- intentioned initiatives may find the ground barren and fail to take root in its presence.

It has been argued before that all the "unsolved older problems" have a common ancestor; or, putting it another way, the intractable character of our aboriginal problem is due to an original, fecund, enduring error or mischief. It might be called "*In the beginning was the lie*" Because the right of European occupation was established on a falsehood, and because it was asserted while we knew it to be false, our relations with the aborigines have always, and must always be fraught and burdened by the deceit until we assert the contrary, willingly and with good heart. It is not the sort of thesis capable of historians' proof, but a dramatist's truth – and oddly, I found myself thinking about it a lot as I

wondered about the future of Utopia. Xavier Herbert, an experienced and passionate observer of the Territory put it this way:

"Until we give back to the Blackman just a bit of the land that was his and give it back without provisos, without strings to snatch it back, without anything but complete generosity of spirit in concession for the evil we have done him – until we do that, we shall remain what we have always been so far, a people without integrity; not a nation but a community of thieves." [21]

This is not to say that granting land rights is therapeutic - merely that it is just, in the same way that withholding them was corruptive. The evolution of legal and moral confusion into State policy, first for the removal, then protection, and finally the 'assimilation' of aborigines has been the subject of very fine historical work which leaves no doubt that our motives, the interests we brought to policy-making, and the understanding we allowed ourselves were all corrupted. A bitter fruit grew from that tree; and it lies all about us now – on the sands of Utopia, in the camps and streets of Alice Springs, and even the cities and suburbs and backyards where now most aborigines live.

Now that the legal fiction has at last been contradicted, it remains to be seen what will be necessary to make the victory more than an institutional one. If it is to open the way

to genuinely new possibilities, the whole shabby legacy of colonial racial conflict and denial must be changed in some telling ways. We will need to forget those old lessons about 'primitive' and 'savage' – in short the whole family of ideas about racial qualities - and learn to see the aborigines as a people, fantastically exotic when first encountered, but gifted with potentialities and powers indistinguishable from our own, expressed in ways all their own, and some of them to us unimaginable. We will need to see, as Stanner tells us, that they have all along been seeking to deal with us, and getting short shrift in return. We will have to stop insisting that, to join us they must be like us, and instead concede that they might want to be with us on their own terms. This is very close to discovering that we might be enriched by them just as much as the reverse – and should have nothing to do with romanticising them or profiting from their wonderful artistic genius.

Some politicians have become worried that if we concede the awful blunders of the past, either the aborigines will require compensation, or our collective self-image will be tainted by crime and burdened with guilt. They have wanted to repudiate the work of a generation of gifted historians and reinstate the mythical past. But this would be a mistake. If we have learned anything between the Land Rights Act and Mabo, surely it is that nothing good can be built on a sham.

Exceptions

Let me return to the question: how did some people, on their own, come to discover and practice satisfying and productive forms of accommodation with the aborigines when all the persuasions of conformity and the institutional weight of their society sought to prevent them? The answer, I think, may be found by reframing the question in inverse form: assuming non-conformity, from what did they dissent? And the correct reply is, in the language of the sociologists, a system of invidious discrimination. That means a state of affairs in which it is normal for one social group to dominate another. So the system included prescriptive behavioural rules for both groups, and a bundle of ideas and beliefs which explained, justified and upheld the practices it entailed. To appreciate how this worked in 'colonial Australia' we can use the abundant historical evidence to list its salient features.

- The groups were distinguished by obvious physical characteristics, especially skin colour and facial and cranial shape.

- Cultural and physical characters were conflated and deemed to share a common cause – so it followed that no amount of cultural adaptation warranted the movement of individuals from one group to the other.

- Inferior cultural attainments were understood to be evidence of an undeveloped state, and this assumption in turn was used to interpret cross-cultural observations. Thus David Collins in the first years of contact, claimed the aborigines were the only people on earth without religion, and Spencer thought they had never figured out that plants grew from seeds.

- From the middle of the nineteenth century the Australian colonies participated in the liberalising democratic movements occurring in Britain, and by 1910 had become one of the most democratic societies in the world. In order to reconcile these ideals with racial oppression, the system upheld beliefs about the compromised human status of the inferior group – *eg* that they don't feel pain, or need much food; that they think like children and eat their babies; that they are inherently treacherous and lazy, and go walkabout, *etc*.

- Relations between the groups entailed close association and intimacy, through shared working and domestic lives. Status was enforced by quite rigid codes of address,

habiliment, deference and privilege, and infringements on either side met severe punishment. Whipping, beating, even shooting were routine corrections for aborigines, whereas Europeans received ostracism and exclusion, sometimes for life.

- Miscegenation was very common, frequently accompanied by violence and sometimes by great cruelty, covertly condoned, but officially proscribed.

- Inferior status *ipso facto* justified prejudicial treatment – minimal reward for labour, primitive living conditions, withholding legal, civil and human rights, coercion and arbitrary punishment, *etc.*

This list is easily recognizable by students of race relations – variations can be found everywhere indigenous peoples have survived contact with Europeans. It broadly matches what Pierre van den Berghe[22] called a 'paternalistic' or master-servant system of race relations – the features peculiar to Australia are traceable to the ideological background of the settlers and other cultural imports, their ecological/economic predicament, the legal basis of dispossession, on-the-spot perceptions and experiences, and the pattern of response of the oppressed populations. Typically in such social systems, Europeans newly arrived in the colony readily and rapidly acquire the full set of attitudes – social conformity tends to override other responses to the novel situation, and so there is a high level of coherence, and dissent is vehemently discouraged. And in fact detailed records of dissenters' experience are scarce and Charles Chalmers himself does not appear to have left any. We do, however, have the memoirs of Alice Duncan-Kemp, who grew up in the channel country of south-west Queensland, and who's family, like the Chalmers, ran their pastoral enterprise at Mooraberrie collaboratively with the original occupants.[23]

In her series of reminiscences she manages to convey a picture of aboriginal people and society as full, rich, satisfying, interesting and accomplished, neither exotic nor deficient; one feels that any question of justifying their obsolescence, oppression or extermination could never arise. In other words she finds in their persons and in their collectives everything human – *noble in reason, infinite in faculty*. In her account the differences that so impressed and alienated others are accidents, the visible results of their cultural trajectory in a very singular environment.

There is a kind of paradox here. Alice Duncan-Kemp's judgements were drawn from her experience of an almost intact culture, in about 1910-20. Nearly a century later we

inevitably underestimate this vitality because the culture nowhere any longer sustains life or interprets the cosmic or social universe. On the other hand, when her evidence was there for all the pioneer settlers to assess, it was almost always rejected. We can learn from this that the system of race relations repudiated experience – that it was a *prima facie* instance of prejudice, its justification after the fact.

The benign regime at Mooraberrie lasted almost 50 years. In 1910 there were almost 300 aborigines camped there, some from country to the west fleeing expulsion or starvation, but all in a sense refugees. But in the end, they disappeared from their homelands as surely as those who had nowhere to go. Thinking about the different fate of the Alyawarra, it seems clear that congenial relationships with at least some settlers was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their survival. Crucially perhaps, the era of contact began for them 3 or 4 decades after the channel country, and was continued by the settler's family for three generations. In the event, they drew from Charles Chalmers' legacy of collaboration the presence of mind to use political processes to regain a homeland and the foresight to design their community in a way that has turned out to be very advantageous.

A prickly enigma

At the federation census in 1901 about 2000 people were counted in the Northern Territory. This excluded aborigines, of course, who's numbers could only be guessed. Today, about 200,000 people live there – the population of Cairns and Townsville combined - about a quarter are aborigines. They are the most governed people in the country; they have for their regulation an elected legislature, an entire State administration as well as a large presence of Commonwealth service personnel and programmes. About 300 pastoral properties are gazetted (compared with 16,000 in Queensland). The days when most of these survived by compelling an unpaid or miserably under-paid aboriginal workforce are gone, but not very distant. Most of the men who activated Utopia's land claim, for instance, and who comprise the older group there today had been station workers.

The Territory became self-governing in 1978; between 1911 and then it was run from Canberra *via* the Administrator in Darwin and a small staff. The record of this period – certainly until the late 60's – is a sad tale of indifference and neglect which was ended, not by indignation, nor by a desire for reparation, but by embarrassment. At that time, Australia began to receive increasing scrutiny from the UN and other bodies concerned about the treatment of indigenous peoples, and this, rather than soul-searching is what

moved policy-makers. The aborigines became more interesting to students too; anthropologists multiplied as new roles for them appeared, and public interest grew. Historians found a new field of study – the history of colonial and post-colonial conflict and accommodation. And indigenous people themselves found new forms of expression and new audiences. Re-drawing Rowley's map today would require just one change, but that is a big one – about one third of the Territory is now owned by its original occupants. That happened, when the political climate was right, because they were always in a position to make straightforward, indubitable claims based on continuous occupation and use.

Today, visitors to the Territory very often report feeling as if they have arrived in a different country and a different time. In a sense they have. In no other place do the dispossessed and their erstwhile conquerors find themselves always in each other's company. Nowhere else are both required to make an accommodation for which there are no precedents. History has given the Territorians a task, but guaranteed their naivety – for there is no body of collective experience to guide them, nor any well- founded principles of morality or law for them to assent to. Instead, one finds old attitudes and old lies, fears, hopes and habits up on the surface of the social discourse, never far from people's minds – and that strange heritage of earnest failure that is the story of public policy there.

Looking around Alice Springs, I had thought the main economic activity would have been tourism. But people who know how the town works say it is not tourists, but aborigines who keep things prosperous. However this may be, one cannot fail to be impressed by the size of the 'industry' that has grown around this 'problem' population and their benefactors. Over time I became aware of something some aboriginal spokesmen have been worried about for years – the way a bureaucratic enterprise strives to be indispensable and so requires the dependency of its clients. Nothing could be less likely to promote self-determination.

I've thought a lot about this since I was there – the question that began this essay - why is this particular bit of public thought and action so hard to get right? Incredibly resistant injustices have been mended before. Think of how slavery became obsolete. That long struggle began with a new political possibility, and then turned itself into a permanent part of the landscape of moral and political concepts. The difficulty of our indigenous 'problem' is surely of the same kind. Being human, we possess very old habits and dispositions, as well as an evolving moral consciousness. Turning our

awareness into social action has always been fraught, and always imperfect, but if slaves can be freed, we can certainly find our way through this. And yet – you wonder about the uncomfortable blend of public good will, persisting ignorance, and institutional clumsiness that is so visible in Rowley's 'other country'.

One day, the kids brought in a thorny devil. Lots of people find these little lizards irresistible, and right away I felt the same. A fully-grown one is small enough to hold on the palm of your hand, with a bit of lizard left over. They are covered from nose to tail with little spikes, so you have to handle them softly. But even if they were as smooth as glass, you'd still want to because of the colours. I was reminded of those fractal patterns where, the more detail you see, the more is there. They sometimes wear shades of the earth – a lovely palette of desert hues arranged in a lacy net – so it is faintly surprising when it moves. But the creature can change these to resemble the tones you might see in the shade of a green Spinifex clump. It takes a little while for this to happen, as if the animal needed to think it through carefully.

They are specialists, living on nothing else but the little black ants that scurry across the sand in busy, sinuous tracks. A devil only has to position itself by one of these and it can pick off the fattest ants for as long as it pleases, with a flick of the long mobile tongue. They can run quite quickly – not fast enough to astonish you, but about what you'd expect from stick- like legs and angled knees. But if they are not in a hurry, their motion is definitely a surprise, because it is oddly mechanical, strongly reminding you of a clockwork gadget, pausing and swaying a tiny bit between steps.

You are a little surprised too that the devil has a face and even, perhaps, an expression. Maybe this is because its animal form seems to have been so completely over-ridden by disguise and defence. Nonetheless, the longer you watch them the more clear it is that this improbable prickly shape, with its lovely skin, gangly walk and attractive little eyes is a beautifully made animal, at home in the animal realm and just as interested in making a living as we all are. But if we need to remind ourselves of something so obvious, what can be pulling our intuitions out of shape? I think it has to do with the idea of design – the notion that, behind a form there is a purpose. The thorny devil gives us an odd kind of conviction that it is more like a human artefact. Its formal and visual attributes are somehow more like a riot of the imagination than of nature. And it is confusing to receive the impressions of delicacy and robustness together; its unrelatedness to any familiar creature refutes classification; its movement is like a counterfeit; and its way of life absurdly single-minded.

The beauties of nature are mostly revealed in exuberance, in grace, and in hints of the infinite; occasionally in majesty and abundance. In the desert, these are reduced. They are all there, but given out one at a time, as if there were none to spare, and slightly concealed, so that the hard dry sun might not evaporate them. This is what the little devil is like. If his share of beauty had been given to a butterfly, we would gasp. As it is, the lovely colour has been cast among thorns and made to be like the scorching sand; its wearer a bit too fanciful in costume and manners – and we wonder why we are moved the way we are. I've wondered a lot about these creatures and the bewildered feeling they provoke. And how strange it is that this is so much like the one we have when we try to understand what to do about Utopia.

Notes

[1] Charles Rowley. *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*; Penguin, 1972

[2] Anne McGrath. *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country*; Allen & Unwin, 1987

[3] I have used Stanner's work here without citing in detail. Most of what I refer to can be found in the volume of essays, articles and lectures: *Whiteman Got No Dreaming*; ANU Press, 1979, which includes the Boyer lectures.

[4] Cited in *National Report Vol 2; 20.3.4*, an adjunct to the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

[5] Roger Keesing. *Cultural Anthropology, a Contemporary Perspective*; Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976

[6] Dee Brown. *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee*; Picador, 1975, p337

[7] Paul Johnson. *A History of the American People*; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997, p433

[8] Albert Memmi. *The Coloniser and the Colonised*; Beacon Press, 1967

[9] *End of an Era: Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory*; AIAS, Canberra, 1987. Corroboration of the Berndt's findings can be found in the reports of Bleakley, Duguid, Stevens and others.

[10] Stephen Davis. *Above Capricorn: Aboriginal Biographies from Northern Australia*; Angus & Robertson, 1994

[11] JW Bleakley. *The Aboriginal and Half-castes of Central Australia and Northern Australia;* Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers Vol 2, part 2, 1929

[12] Arthur Groom. *I saw a Strange Land*; Angus & Robertson, 1950 15.P. Lyons & M Parsons. We Are Staying; AID Press, 1989, p7

[13] P. Lyons & M Parsons. *We Are Staying*; AID Press, 1989, p7

[14] A. Meston. *Report to the Queensland Government on an Expedition in the Bellenden-Kerr Range*, 1889

[15] Geoffrey Bardon. *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*; JB Books, 1999, p10

[16] *Whiteman Got No Dreaming, p351*

[17] *Aboriginal Humour*; Aboriginal History, Vol 6;1, 1982, p39

[18] These ideas can be found tellingly explored in *Continuity and Change Among the Aborigines*, an essay in the above - cited volume.

[19] This story is told at the beginning of Anna Haebich: *Broken Circles*; Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000.

[20] Andrew Markus' study *Governing Savages*; Allen & Unwin, 1990, explores this theme in admirable detail.

[21] Bullletin, November 1, 1983

[22] Pierre van den Berghe. *Race and Racism, a Comparative Perspective;* John Wiley, 1978

[23] Alice's account occurs in a series of memoirs beginning with *Our Sandhill Country, 1934*. There is a fascinating comparative study of pioneer narratives in P. Lukin Watson: *Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends,* Allen & Unwin, 1998.