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ABORIGINAL–EUROPEAN RELATIONS

IN

NORTH QUEENSLAND, 1861–1897

by

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The pattern of race relations in North Queensland conforms in the main to the model Hartwig derived from his study of the Alice Springs District, but some significant variations are evident. Hartwig suggested that Aboriginal communities in the Alice Springs District reacted first with 'fear and avoidance', then by making 'tentative approaches', then by offering 'resistance', and finally by becoming 'intelligent exploiters'. He further postulated that 'curiosity' and 'acquisitiveness' were important motives of those who made tentative approaches; and added the qualification that where geographical and other factors delayed the process of 'pacification' Aborigines sometimes adopted a policy of 'intelligent resistance', but neither resistance nor intelligent resistance occurred where Europeans implemented a careful policy of conciliation from the outset and made no inroads into indigenous supplies of food and water. 1

In the three hundred years of Aboriginal-European contact in North Queensland, the attitudes, intentions, and subsequent actions of the intruders were as vital in determining the nature of race relations as they were elsewhere in Australia; for when the first navigators, explorers, and settlers encroached upon North Queensland, the Aborigines received them with great caution but also with enough curiosity to initiate contact. The Royal Navy expeditions after 1770 and the missionaries after 1885 encountered Aborigines who had experienced varying degrees of contact. Generally, with care, they were able to establish and maintain amicable relations. These Europeans adopted a policy of conciliation and did not threaten the subsistence economy of the Aborigines; indeed food and other goods were often

1. Hartwig, The Progress of White Settlement in the Alice Springs District and Its Effects upon the Aboriginal Inhabitants, 1860-1894, p. VIII.
used to placate them. Occasionally, even a settler like Christison of Lemanmore was able to occupy the land without bloodshed by establishing communications with the Aborigines and deliberately replacing the economic resources lost through his use of the land. Throughout the period covered by this research, Aborigines showed enough curiosity towards the settlers and their artifacts and enough desire to acquire useful aspects of their material wealth for these responses to be used to establish peaceful relations. Most settlers in the nineteenth century, however, provoked Aboriginal reactions similar to those experienced by the Dutch in the seventeenth century; for both intrusions occurred within the ethos of violent imperialist expansion, actual or potential.

The first wave of settlers in the 1860's were pastoralists whose attitudes were profoundly influenced by experience in the south: their uniform policy of 'keeping the blacks out', and the use of the Native Police as an indiscriminate aggressive force, ensured that the period of fear and avoidance was followed by desperate and determined resistance which was broken by ruthless and unrestricted use of force. The Aborigines were then assigned and forced to accept the status of an inferior racial caste.

It is interesting to note that even when first contacts led to Aboriginal resistance it was possible to re-establish peaceful relations if the intruders were determined to conciliate the Aborigines. This was illustrated by Cook's relatively brief contact at the Endeavour River. More importantly in the history of Aboriginal-European relations in North Queensland, it was demonstrated by Chatfield's experience at Metal Downs, by the settlers' initiative at Atherton, and by conciliatory efforts of the Native Police in Cape York Peninsula in 1897 when the Police Commissioner reversed the force's frontier role and ushered in the age of protection. In these three cases, a period of bloody
conflict extending over a number of years had not broken Aboriginal resistance although it no doubt contributed to the desire, in both races, to seek a peaceful accord. It was also possible to provoke Aboriginal resistance after amicable relations had apparently been established. This was illustrated by the numerous acts of 'treachery' and renewed aboriginal assertiveness the settlers so often complained of, but probably most clearly in the development of conflict in the Bourke District. Here, the usual period of fear and avoidance was probably extended by reports the Aborigines had received from the Kennedy District and from some early violent clashes. However, such Aboriginal caution apparently led, in at least some parts of the Bourke District, to the establishment of friendly relations which were destroyed, probably by provocative actions of the settlers and by Aboriginal resentment of increasing pastoral occupation.

In North Queensland, although terrain largely determined the effectiveness of Aboriginal resistance, the nature of the intruders' industries played an important part. Thus the use of the Native Police to support settlers' actions against the Aborigines on the pastoral frontier was successful enough in North Queensland, as it had been in the south, to remain the principal instrument of Queensland's frontier policy until 1897. On the rugged and remote mining frontier of Cape York Peninsula, the centres of population were scattered and constantly shifting, and Aboriginal resistance was not broken to the stage where accommodation could be reached until after 1880 when the major frontier rushes had passed. The need for miners to work singly or in small groups, 'gaily raking', and for prospectors to push out in small parties into unknown country provided the Aborigines with ample opportunities to make successful attacks. Scattered and remote from the centres of supply, the fields had a communication and transport system very vulnerable
to Aboriginal attack. Moreover, unlike the pastoral industry, frontier mining did not replace depleted Aboriginal supplies of food with large numbers of easily hunted cattle and sheep. There was thus greater incentive for the Aborigines to attack the miners' horses and the horses and bullocks of the packers and teamsters which were often grazed at well-established camp sites in this inhospitable and arid frontier. Another consequence of the scattered and mobile mining population was the inability of the Native Police to provide as effective protection for the colonists as they did on the pastoral frontier. While all of these factors resulted in greater opportunities for successful Aboriginal resistance than on the pastoral frontier, they did not result in increased Aboriginal immunity from settler retaliation; for, though the Native Police could not provide an effective protective cover for the whole mining frontier, their detachments constantly struck at Aboriginal groups encountered and the large population of miners soon became frontier fighters. Indeed the large loss of life on the mining frontier attributed to Aboriginal resistance is but an inadequate index of the immeasurably greater loss of Aboriginal life.

The rainforests of North Queensland provided terrain especially favourable for Aboriginal resistance: the dense growth prevented the use of mounted men against the Aborigines and made firearms little, if any, more effective than Aboriginal weapons. Clearing rainforest for agriculture was a slow laborious and costly process during which farmers were vulnerable to attack; and paradoxically their labour placed rich new sources of food within easy reach of Aborigines in the remaining forest fastnesses. However, the gradual clearing of the rainforest and the intrusion of settlers from both east and west meant that the Aborigines were denied their normal foraging area and were constantly in need of the food so temptingly arrayed before them. Indeed, Aborigines from the coast and other areas where the fringes of the rain-
forest were being occupied were apparently forced to find refuge alongside of the already besieged resident populations. Thus, driven on by necessity, they raided the scattered farms with such success during the 1830's that the spread of agriculture was greatly retarded. The frontal assault of the settlers and Native Police was so unsuccessful that the Atherton farmers had to initiate an alternative policy: the establishment of communications with the Aborigines to offer terms of peace which included the distribution of rations in exchange for Aboriginal co-operation.

On the pastoral, mining, and rainforest frontiers, the desperate Aboriginal resistance indicated clearly the basic factor in Aboriginal-European relations throughout Australia: the struggle for land. In North Queensland, the reality of colonial expansion is starkly clear. The effective agents, the men with blood unashamedly on their hands, were free settlers, seeking, on the new frontiers, wealth unavailable to them in the settled districts to the south or in Europe, and government officials: white police as well as black, explorers, and sometimes even police magistrates like Jardine and Dalrymple. Frontier violence was sanctioned and supported actively or tacitly by the society developing on the wealth the frontier made available.

The sea frontier of far North Queensland illustrated a different pattern of contact and a different type of economic exploitation from that occurring elsewhere in the region being studied. The fishermen needed the labour of uncontacted or virtually uncontacted Aborigines. They did

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2. In New South Wales, violence on the frontier has been associated with the widespread use as shepherds of convicts and ex-convicts: brutal men or men brutalised by the convict system. In North Queensland, however, there is no indication of ex-convicts being used in this way, yet violence was at least as marked as in New South Wales. This suggests that the significance traditionally attached to ex-convicts in the southern state may be exaggerated.
not have enough time or concern for Aborigines to allow them to make tentative approaches after a period of fear and avoidance. The fishermen initiated contact and then by strategem or force obtained the labour they needed. The Aborigines were thus made to meet the needs of the fishermen before conquest and dispossession took place. Aboriginal resistance to the fishermen was no less real as was evidenced by the lives lost and boats stolen. Yet towards the end of the nineteenth century there was evolving on the sea frontier a society which, though brutal and destructive of traditional Aboriginal society, finally rested upon compliance: a large number of Aboriginal men and women forsook much or all of their old way of life for a life in the fisheries. For once the Aborigines came to understand the nature of their employment a large number of them recruited willingly.

Indeed, the Aborigines on the sea frontier exhibited the desire and capacity to exploit the intruders that was such a feature of Aboriginal-European relations in the pacified areas. In most of North Queensland, however, such Aboriginal initiative was masked to some extent by factors compelling change; for the settlers were determined to maintain the control over the Aborigines that had resulted from conquest and dispossession. Aborigines were 'let in' as long as they accepted the conditions imposed by the settlers. Their economic and social activities were prescribed so that they did not offend settler interests: their economic resources were limited by the presence of the settlers with their huge herds of cattle, their farms, their settlements, and towns. Yet finally Aborigines came to treat the society growing up on their land as another resource to exploit, an addition to their subsistence economy which had many attractive items.

Indeed, it has become clear that European intrusion produced revolutionary changes throughout Aboriginal Australia as it has throughout the rest of the world.
It is tempting for the historian to concentrate on white violence and the calamitous or unpleasant effects of European colonization upon traditional Aboriginal culture, and to ignore the changed Aboriginal 'societies' which emerged in the nineteenth century and which are still emerging today. In fact the fragmentation of traditional Aboriginal society into a number of life styles, some traditionally oriented and some, superficially at least, hardly different from that of white Australians, further complicates this subject of social change while attesting to its reality. The Aborigines who were granted a privileged but clearly subservient status as servants in the towns and settlements, on stations, farms, fishing boats, and missions are clearly as much products of social change as the remaining cohesive communities. The persistence of frontier violence and the hardships, brutality, degradation, and disease in the pacified areas which destroyed so much of traditional Aboriginal society were major factors in the development of this group of Aborigines privileged by white society and working within and for it, separate and often aloof from traditionally oriented members of their race. They were introduced to a life that must have seemed at that time luxurious, exciting, privileged, and safe. They might grow up with settlers' sons and daughters,

3. Typically most whites saw such Aborigines as exceptions that proved the general intractability of the majority. There have been numerous references in this thesis to Aborigines attaching themselves in this way to the dominant white settlers but the twentieth century significance of this only became apparent to me through interviews with old men and women who were able to tell how they or their parents were taken from 'blacks' camps' as children to live as part of a European menage, sometimes actively discouraged from having contacts with their kin. Tapes or notes of interviews are held in the History Department at James Cook University. Some now realize how they were cut off from the Aboriginal majority and have identified with the Aboriginal Advancement movement.
get a smattering of European education, and even have their own horse, saddle, and rifle.

As indicated throughout this thesis, the social change most Aborigines experienced was very different. In most areas the breakdown of traditional Aboriginal values and group cohesiveness was accompanied by a squalor previously unknown, by disease, unhygienic living conditions, and inescapable exploitation of Aboriginal women and children. In these circumstances the use of such cheap readily available tension releasing drugs as adulterated liquor and opium dross was understandable, a symptom of demoralization, and loss of hope and purpose. The picture then emerges of Aborigines seeking to survive the onslaught of frontier violence with their way of life intact, seeking accommodation when resistance was no longer possible, and, in the shadow of the physical havoc of disease and malnutrition and the inevitability of white dominance, seeking simply to survive.

The process of rapid social change continues of course into the twentieth century. Aboriginal 'society' is now a very complex phenomenon whose future developments are difficult to predict. Its reality to Aboriginal people, especially those not living traditionally oriented lives, is probably best illustrated by their concern for 'identity'. Its reality for a wide spectrum of Aborigines, ranging from those urbanized to those still living traditionally oriented lives, is demonstrated by the struggle for land rights. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore this subject, it seems reasonable to suggest that the nature of black demands in the twentieth century has been shaped partly by traditions of violence experienced in the nineteenth century and partly by the suffering resulting from the imposed status of an inferior racial caste in a multi-racial society. For while it has been necessary to stress exploitation as an aspect of Aboriginal adaptation to
European colonization the desire and ability of the colonists to exploit the Aborigines hardly needs emphasis. Indeed the dependence of the settlers in many parts of North Queensland on Aboriginal labour and Aboriginal women indicated clearly the symbiotic nature of the relationship.

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The government actions which evolved into policies to accommodate this complex situation can be clearly observed in North Queensland. It was here that a reserve system run by missionary societies developed to deal with the surviving cohesive groups of Cape York Peninsula. Here developed an alternative to conquest by means of dispersal: the rationing scheme of the 1890's associated with the Atherton initiative. Here the Native Police and ordinary police with trackers were first used as a conciliatory force. All this took place against the background norm of disease, degradation, and depopulation.

By 1897, only a few pastoralists and miners in outlying areas and a few fishermen in the far north were affected by the remaining Aboriginal resistance. There was scope to be generous as European colonial expansion had largely run its course and was consolidating. The few vocal humanitarians in Queensland like Archibald Meston were able to exert pressure on the legislators to take positive action: the resulting act of 1897 ushered in the long age of protection.

Yet it would be mistaken to see this act as only concerned with Aboriginal welfare. It aimed as well at removing Aborigines offensive to white society, at protecting the health of whites, and certainly at not interfering with the settlers' use of Aboriginal labour. There was so little opposition to it because, while it seemed to aim at promoting Aboriginal welfare, in reality it met the needs of the settlers: Aboriginal nuisances
or burdens on white society were removed; those who were useful to white society were allowed to remain. In certain areas of North Queensland thought unsuitable for European colonization the Aborigines were to be left alone unless missionary societies found enough resources and enthusiasm to Europeanize them.

The European attempt to exercise control over Aborigines has been seen as one of the central themes of this thesis. It is not surprising, therefore, to notice that the 1897 Aborigines Protection Act was the culmination of European efforts on the frontier, in the pacified areas, and on the mission field. It was the ultimate instrument of control and persisted as such for more than two generations.