



# **The Black Resistance**

An introduction to the history of  
the Aborigines' struggle  
against British Colonialism

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Widescope



- 25 Quoted in Peter Cortis, *Aborigines and Europeans in Western Victoria*, p. 88
- 26 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, p. 274
- 27 Curt, *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*
- 28 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, p. 61
- 29 *Emigrant Mechanic*, p. 206
- 30 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, p. 74
- 31 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, pp. 327-328
- 32 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, pp. 290-293
- 33 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, pp. 177-178
- 34 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, p. 309
- 35 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, p. 39
- 36 *Emigrant Mechanic*, p. 212

## 5 Queensland

... no tribes will allow of the peaceable occupation of their country but ... will endeavour to check the progress of the white men by spearing their sheep and murdering their shepherds ... History tells of no people or tribe, however small or weak, submitting tamely to the insolent intrusion of strangers, nor is the Savage of Australia, however despicable some may deem him, so utterly devoid of courage as to yield without a struggle that country which he claims as his own, or which he is used to obtain his food and to which he is undoubtedly attached.

W. H. Wiseman, 28 August 1855.

In 1609, a Dutch vessel in search of gold and slaves landed on the northern side of Cape York. The purpose of this visit was to commit aggression, to plunder the region's wealth and to use the people as slaves. These aggressors were immediately repulsed by the Australian Aborigines in an awesome show of strength. It has been said that this was the first recorded place at which the Aborigine struck a blow in defence of his country.<sup>1</sup>

While it may have been the first recorded instance of resistance it was definitely not the first or the last. It is known that aggressors came from Spain, Malaya, Holland, China, and Portugal, some, if not all, after gold. Without exception the aboriginal people had repulsed them all. These were the responses of genuine patriots, the defenders of the people and their country. After the invasion of 1788 the Aboriginal people began a bitter, protracted, and (considering the vastly disproportionate balance of forces) a highly effective struggle for the defence of their country.

By 1799 the first tentative colonialist feelers were extended to Queensland. On 16 July 1799 Flinders came to Moreton Bay. He was attacked and driven off at a place called Skirmish Point. In 1824 the first settlement was established at Moreton Bay and within three months it was abandoned because of the hostility of the Aborigines. A month before its abandonment the aggressors wrote that the Aborigines 'showed open hostility and attacked soldiers and convicts at every opportunity'.<sup>2</sup>

One of the earliest recorded clashes occurred in 1824 when prisoners wood-chopping at Humpybong (now Redcliffe) had an



axe stolen by an Aborigine. The prisoner killed one black for this crime. In return the Aborigines speared two convicts.<sup>3</sup>

The first attempts at settlement were fiercely resisted by the Aborigines, a pattern which was to continue throughout colonial expansion in Queensland even into the twentieth century. By the 1840s and 1850s the word had spread throughout most of the Aboriginal population that the white man was an aggressor and that his actions were to be watched with suspicion. For the explorers, the vanguard of colonial expansion, exploration became increasingly risky. In 1843, Leichardt said:

As a rule they're treacherous and you have to be cautious even if they express friendship. Just before I reached Wide Bay they had murdered five shepherds there.<sup>4</sup>

And four months later, reporting on his latest journey:

Between the Naomi and the Guydir on the headwaters of Rocky Creek ... There is a system of tracks in the mountains which I visited and studied as closely as my means and the wild blacks would allow.<sup>5</sup>

The killing by Aborigines of nine members of the Fraser family at Hornet Bank near Taroom on 27 October provided the colonialists with the excuse to introduce intensive punitive expeditions. Very few of the concerned tribe (the Jimans) survived and, in 1850, after an invader named Blaxland was killed, hundreds of Aboriginal people were slaughtered on the Burnett River.

This, along with a similar massacre a year earlier, broke the back of the resistance in the area, although the Aborigines still refused to give up and continued to attack the settlers for several years. In the Moreton Bay area, for instance, the Aborigines at Lockyes Creek were said to have been 'particularly troublesome', systematically destroying and scattering stock<sup>6</sup> while in 1844, all settlers along the lead of the main branch of the Brisbane River suffered repeated attacks. By 1846 to 1847 the situation had noticeably worsened for the settlers. From the *Historical Records* we find that:

The Police Force at the disposal of the Benches of Magistrates is not only insufficient but useless as a protective force, where the blacks are concerned and beyond my own personal influence I have no means of checking their aggressive habits.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1840s it was noticed by settlers that after the triennial Bunya Pine festival (where Aborigines from tribes of many hundreds of miles around would gather) 'attacks on stations were more frequent'.<sup>8</sup> The settlers reasoned that the many tribes, since they talked of matters of importance at the festival, were obviously using the festivals to coordinate a united campaign against the invading settlers. During one of McKinley's explorations, in the 1860s, he was told that a great weima corroboree

was taking place when natives 'from all quarters will be gathering'. McKinley wrote:

I have generally seen at the breakup of these meetings that, if they can manage it, they in some way or other do mischief ...<sup>9</sup>

Implicit in his observations is the fact that the tribes plan and coordinate action against the invaders.

In Queensland the Aborigines waged a struggle similar to guerilla warfare, hitting more consistently at the isolated shepherd huts and killing the sheep and the stock.<sup>10</sup> In many areas the squatters were driven off the land by the Aborigines' relentless raids while many others experienced a torrid and frightening battle for survival, suffering massive stock losses and shepherd losses through either death or desertion.

In 1842, a new road was opened between Brisbane and Westbrook. Recognising the threat, the Aboriginal people sprung into action, and, according to the settler Campbell:

A blackfellow came to see me in Brisbane and warned me not to go to the Darling Downs ... that it was to be war now in earnest ... that their intention was first to spear all the commandants [soldiers], then to fence up the roads and stop the drays from travelling, and to starve the jackeroos (men on horses or squatters).<sup>11</sup>

About the same time (1842) a runaway convict who had lived with the Kabi tribe north of Brisbane for thirteen years warned that following the triennial Bunya mountain festivals due in 1843, tribes from hundreds of miles around would plan action against the aggressors. The following year the aboriginal people launched a coordinated campaign against the settlers. There was a flood of reports of shepherd and stock killings; men refused to mind stock and isolated runs were abandoned. When Campbell arrived he was told of the situation — men killed everywhere and 'squattening at a discount. Within a week he too was attacked'.<sup>12</sup>

Farther north the situation was the same. At Maryborough in the late 1840s, settlers noted that attacks launched by the Aborigines were becoming systematically organised, and the invaders seriously considered that the Aborigines had decided to launch a campaign of extermination to defend their land. The areas around Gympie and Gladstone were actually 'won' by the invading forces only after bitter and bloody struggle. In 1856 Sir Maurice O'Connell wrote that the Gladstone district:

... is two hundred miles in extent along the coast; it is thickly inhabited by the blacks and in all parts except the town of Gladstone there have been serious outrages by the aboriginals and much loss of life.<sup>13</sup>

In Gympie, warfare was bitter and extensive with the Aborigines defending. An observer wrote that:

No white man was safe without his rifle or Colt revolver at hand. The jungle on the banks of the Mary enabled them to move throughout the country without being seen.<sup>14</sup>



With each passing decade the battle raged at a higher intensity. By the 1860s the Governor of Queensland implored the British Government to send army detachments to defend the colony from threats. He made it quite clear that the biggest threat to the colonial occupation was the bitter resistance being waged by the Aborigines.<sup>15</sup>

Everywhere the Aborigines were rising in rebellion and unifying their forces. The Aborigines of the Condamine, Fitzroy Downs, and Dawson areas began to join forces to fight the settlers while in the great coastal scrub between the Tully and Herbert there were Aboriginal attacks on sugar plantations, maize farms and homesteads. These attacks were so frequent that by 1872 the Resident Magistrate of Cardwell thought that an attack on the port itself was not unlikely.<sup>16</sup>

On the north-east coast, where the people had been repelling invaders for centuries, the Aborigines had evolved a most elaborate and ingenious method of tracking the aggressors. This following account, given by Lands Commissioner and so-called 'explorer' Dalrymple shortly after the *Maria* was wrecked is instructive:

at 11 a.m. some blacks showed on Coquette Point; they were painted white all over, excepting from the waist to below the knees to represent shipwrecked seamen with their trousers rolled up and shouted to us, to go ashore, but no notice was taken of them whatsoever ... [the following day] the same blacks similarly disguised, came out on Coquette Point, and after putting a tent-pole, left from our old camp to represent a mast, imitating hauling on ropes to get a sail up, they then pretended to kill one of their number on the beach in evident allusion to the way in which the poor unfortunates of the *Maria* raft were disposed of, and shouting 'white-fellow'. (Mr Johnston was sent ashore but found no traces of white man.) He found, however, that they had disinterred the remains of a poor murdered *Maria*'s man close by, and to that they probably wished to draw our attention by bravado. We were the more confirmed in this opinion from the facts, not only that before Mr Johnston landed — mistaking our inaction for fear — they began shouting and yelling, dancing their war corroboree, and making use of the most insulting gestures towards us, but that he found an armed mob of them lying (in ambush) ready to attack he was deceived into going ashore by their signals. This treacherous system of decoying or inviting people by signals to land, is probably as old as the earliest discoverers of Australia, the first on whose credibility they could have practised it. Captain Cook alludes to it in his voyages in Volume Three, page 449, in Botany Bay, and commends the 'great prudence' of his officers for declining the invitation. I have seen on many different parts of the North East coast, and known many places where a rash disregard of that prudence ... has cost many a poor fellow his life ...<sup>17</sup>

The extent of the Aboriginal resistance can be estimated by the protective measures taken by the settlers against it. Travelling from Sydney towards Moreton Bay in 1842, James Demurr wrote of the stations that he passed:

... a carbine could not be dispensed with.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time James Campbell described how, at his Westbrook station on the Darling Downs,

nothing is more dangerous in the presence of wild blacks than to fire a gun unless you are sure of killing ...

A. Halloran, reporting from Wide Bay in the 1850s, claimed that:

it is considered unsafe to go about even in the vicinity of the Township without firearms and no one ventures to travel from Maryborough to this station ... a distance of four miles without being armed ... my own Troopers will not venture to go to the garden or to the creek for a bucket of water neither of which are more than three or four hundred yards from my house or even to the paddock without their firearms ...<sup>19</sup>

At Kin Kin Creek, near Ipswich, the timbergetters who had ill-treated the Aborigines 'went in fear of their lives. They were obliged to carry firearms at all times'.<sup>20</sup> Many homesteads along the frontier of south-east Queensland contained 'loopholes' pierced in the thick walls for rifles.<sup>21</sup> In 1865, W. Hill, an overseer at Reedy Lake Station on the Upper Burdekin, observed that his shepherds 'had to be armed with a Terry rifle and Colt's revolver as the blacks were always on the aggressive'.<sup>22</sup> The Queensland *Figaro* commented as late as 1885 that:

Out on the very borders of civilization, where absolutely new country is being opened up, and where blacks are brought into contact with whites for the first time, the use of the rifle is undoubtedly necessary ... every white man has to fight for every inch of country he occupies ... there is a constant border warfare on the verge line of settlement ...<sup>23</sup>

The Aboriginal resistance which prompted the settlers to take such protective measures was caused by the Aborigines' attachment to the land. The Aborigines resisted when they found their territories, hunting grounds, burial and sacred sites, taken away from them and replaced with townships or stations. The dispossession of the Aborigines was carried out at the behest of British colonialism which required the land for a pastoral industry which would serve the capitalists of England. In 1883, according to the Queensland *Figaro*, four Europeans controlled 20 140 square kilometres of Aboriginal land in the Warrego Country and three others held 21 395 square kilometres in North Gregory.<sup>24</sup>

The Aborigines waged a just struggle which, in some instances, took on the character of purely retaliatory responses. Carington gave the following report on his observations north of Capricorn:

The first outrages committed by ... [the Aborigines] ... are almost exclusively in retaliation: some party of men propose for amusement to go out after the blacks ... they find a camp; the blackfellows fly at their approach leaving all their possessions ... the white men take away as many of these things as they can carry and wantonly destroy the rest ... These heroes return to the station or township, and the blacks meditate revenge. They find some poor shepherd or traveller ... They creep upon him through the long grass and kill him ... As



soon as the murder is discovered there is a great 'hullabaloo' in the district and the party turns out to disperse (i.e. to shoot) the blacks ... the object being to destroy as many as possible. The remnant of the tribe then go on to a neighbouring run, and kill another shepherd, or perhaps two, and they are 'dispersed' again ...<sup>25</sup>

It would appear that some settlers possessed a realistic comprehension of the causes of the Aboriginal resistance. W. Wiseman, reporting on settlers in the Dawson River area in the early 1860s, explained:

Such state of hostility is undoubtedly the natural consequence of the occupation of the soil by the white race ...<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, writing in her *Adventures In Australia* in 1851 Sarah Lee observed:

We cannot blame them, when, after we have usurped their lands, and driven kangaroo away ... they strive to turn us out by the only means in their power, physical force, administered in the only style of warfare with which they are acquainted.<sup>27</sup>

The Aboriginal resistance held back settlement for some years. In December 1855, A. Halloran reported that the advancement was 'very considerably retarded' due to the Aborigines. The white settlement met with resistance the father north and west it moved. For example, from 1857 to 1870 the Aborigines waged a heroic resistance (a 'sporadic war' as it has been termed) in the Dawson River area,<sup>28</sup> and during the 1860s they successfully forced the settlers to struggle for control of the Mackay<sup>29</sup> and Bowen Districts. Governor Bowen estimated that, by 1866, 600 whites had been killed by Aborigines. During the 1870s and early 1880s Aborigines waged a staunch resistance in the Cardwell district, the Palmer River Gold-Fields and the Atherton Tableland.<sup>30</sup>

On all frontiers in Queensland one finds evidence of labourers deserting their employment, of stations being abandoned, of sheep and cattle speared or driven off in their thousands.<sup>31</sup> In the Warrego County settlement along the Condamine, Maranoa, and Lower Macintyre was thwarted for three years by Aboriginal attacks and began to retreat. Settlement of the Burnett district, begun in 1842, had to be abandoned the following year due to Aboriginal raids.<sup>32</sup>

In October 1861, settlement of Port Denison was resisted by Aborigines who killed a European seaman and a squatter. Land Commissioner Dalrymple led a reprisal raid against the Aborigines, ordering his six Native Police to fire a volley of bullets into a group of vocally defiant Aborigines on the cliffs of Shaw Island. In the opinion of Dalrymple, Aborigines were 'savages', 'bloodthirsty', 'treacherous', and 'enemies of all men until fear enforces submission'.<sup>33</sup>

In a letter dated 10 October 1861, Dalrymple provides a glimpse of the extent of the Aboriginal resistance along the Port Denison region of the coast. Dalrymple, who had survived seven Aboriginal attacks from 1859 to 1860, mentioned:

The slaughter of eighteen men of the Sapphire boats when bartering for turtle at one blow ... [the attacks] upon Lieutenant Powell and party in the boats of the Reinder, of Captain Sinclair and party in the Santa Barbara. On the party of HMS *Fly* and others — to the murders of Gilbert, Kennedy, etc. ...<sup>34</sup>

Adding further testimony to Dalrymple's words, one week after his letter was written nineteen members of the Wills expedition were killed by Aborigines at Cullin-la-Ringo.

Aborigines resisted colonial settlement on the Darling Downs at Grantham in the early 1840s when a settler named Rogers had appropriated 400 sheets of iron-bark, used for shelter by Aboriginal families at Humpty Flat. The theft sparked off 'a system of reprisals and aggressions which culminated in the death of seventeen colonists'.<sup>35</sup> In the far north at Somerset in 1864 there was a 'serious loss of life' when Aborigines stepped up their struggle following the caning of an Aboriginal boy by the Government Resident.<sup>36</sup>

The Aboriginal resistance was most effective in the Maryborough district. In November 1853 the Lands Commissioner for the Wide Bay and Burnett districts noted of the residents of Maryborough:

It is almost impossible for me to describe the constant state of alarm in which the Townspeople are kept from a dread of the aggressions of the blacks whose treachery and audacity are almost incredible.<sup>37</sup>

One month later the citizens of Maryborough warned in a petition that 'The Blacks have openly threatened to kill the white people... they will drive us out'.<sup>38</sup>

The Aborigines attacked travellers along the roads. In 1873 the entire road from Cooktown to the Palmer River was, according to the Cooktown *Courier* 'almost milestoned by the corpses of white men'. It was like a 'warpath on which every white man risks his life'.<sup>39</sup> Truly heroic resistance struggles were waged in the Burke district<sup>40</sup> and in the Mt Isa/Cloncurry region from the late 1870s. Early in 1873 Dalrymple reported from the high and wild tablelands and ranges around Gilberton that after a series of executions:

nearly the whole Chinese population which formed the valuable alluvial diggers of the field had left the district, leaving the valley of the Gilbert in the undisputed possession of the Aborigines.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the superior armory of the settlers the Aborigines continued their struggle. The Aborigines of Cape York were 'still unsubdued in some corners of the Peninsula at the turn of the century'.<sup>42</sup> In 1874 the entire township of Gilberton was cap-



tured by Aborigines.<sup>43</sup> In the gulf area, a Burketon settler recalled that 'a continual guerilla warfare was waged with the blacks'.<sup>44</sup> In late 1874 the Police Magistrate and the Lands Commissioner at Normanton predicted that 'this place would share the fate of the Gilbert Township' because the Aborigines' harassment tactics were so successful.<sup>45</sup>

The superior technology and the rising numbers of the colonial invaders meant that the Aborigines would inevitably be dispossessed. The overall tally of Aboriginal deaths from overt violence by the gun, poison and even the employment of dogs is impossible to gauge.

In 1876 John Macrossan told the Queensland Legislative Assembly that 'the system of continual war ... was being carried on at the present time to utter extermination'.<sup>46</sup>

A major weapon used against the Aborigines was the Native Police Force. This force was established by Governor Fitzroy who told the Legislative Assembly in 1848 that:

circumstances having been recently brought under the Governor's notice, in respect to certain collisions which have taken place, in parts beyond the settled Districts, between white inhabitants and the Aborigines, which appear to him to require that immediate steps should be taken for their repression, he transmits to Council an estimate for the formation of a small corps of Native Police ...<sup>47</sup>

Nine years later, as the resistance intensified and as the settlement expanded, a Select Committee was set up to inquire into the Native Police because of:

the serious importance of providing protection for life and property, from the outrages and depredations of the Aborigines, so urgently claimed by the settlers residing in the unsettled parts of the Colony, and more particularly those inhabiting the outskirts or frontiers of those districts which have been most recently opened to occupation.<sup>48</sup>

The following year, 1858, another Select Committee was appointed to inquire into the 'Murders By The Aborigines On The Dawson River'. The Inquiry sought to 'look into the state of outrage between the white population and the aborigines in the northern districts, with a view to providing for the better protection of life and property'.<sup>49</sup>

Curiously, the above statement is an amended version of the original motion calling for a Select Committee. The original motion was moved in the Legislative Assembly on 15 June 1858, and it sought the Inquiry 'with a view to render the working of the Native Police Force more efficient ...'.<sup>50</sup>

Despite this official obscuring of the real aim of the Select Committee, the Inquiry proved to be a detailed investigation into

the weaknesses of the Native Police in fulfilling their task of repressing their compatriots' resistance struggle. The Report of the Committee attributes, in no uncertain terms, the successes of the resistance struggle to 'the inefficiency of the Native Police Force'.<sup>51</sup>

The previous disbandment of a large portion of the Native Police as a consequence of the dismissal of Commandant Walker, is bemoaned by the Inquiry as 'a most untoward event' and worried acknowledgement is made of the fact that some of the disbanded Troopers had returned to their tribes and had 'been leaders in most of the murderous attacks upon the whites'.<sup>52</sup>

The Native Police Force was well suited to combating the Aboriginal resistance because its members possessed an intimate knowledge of tracking, and with their mobility, could capture Aboriginal patriots in scrub lands which had proved inaccessible to Europeans. The Force had become demoralised and lacked proper organisation and leadership. The Select Committee reflected the needs of colonial settlement for the total dispossession of the Aborigines in any way. Ten mounted troopers were ordered by the Committee to be delivered by steamer from Sydney to the Commandant at Brisbane or Maryborough to be amalgamated with the Native Police. Further, a Militia of Border Settlers was recommended as a supplement to the Native Police.

A primary concern of the Inquiry was the fact that members of the Native Police had been deserting in large numbers and gone back to their tribes to join the resistance struggle. The best way to thwart this activity, the Committee deduced, was to recruit Aborigines into the Native Police from districts 'not less than 500 or 600 miles away from the district in which they are to act' and to place the members of the force under a form of military law whereby desertion would be punishable by death. The testimony of A. Brown, a resident of five years standing in the Wide Bay District, reflected the sentiment of the Select Committee Report:

... they have selected men where they ought not; they have taken them from the neighbourhoods where they are to act. I have stated that the force, in its present state, is worse than useless, and that is one reason. These men, being near their own tribes, are constantly running away, and are now amongst the blacks, who, through them, are acquainted with many of our tactics.<sup>53</sup>

The overall evidence presented to the Select Committee reveals the vast magnitude of the Aboriginal resistance and gives us a glimpse at some of the clever tactics employed by the Aborigines.

The Lands Commissioner of Port Curtis, Captain M. O'Connell, who had been ten years in frontier parts of the occupation, estimated that 'The country to be protected would be about 400 miles in length, but about 150 or 200 in breadth'.<sup>54</sup> The unhealthy military situation in which the settlers found themselves



was revealed when, on 17 June, the Inquiry asked O'Connell: 'Is it not the fact that these outbreaks are chiefly confined to one district at any one time. For instance, it now appears that the Upper Dawson is the district in which the blacks are most threatening — would it not therefore be better to concentrate in that particular district a powerful force, rather than to have a number of stations scattered over a wide extent of country?' O'Connell: 'The object of a depot would be that you might at once mass a large force on any given point'.<sup>55</sup>

An obvious problem could have emerged for the settler if the tribes of various regions were to have launched simultaneous attacks upon their respective regions. One may deduce from O'Connell's reply that the settlers were not, in 1858, capable of establishing a number of adequate forces in the various scattered points of resistance. To use the term 'desperation' would not be overstating the impression one receives from some of the evidence produced by the Lands Commissioner. Asked his estimation of the morale and strength of the Aborigines, O'Connell replied: 'Judging by the frequency of outrages and murders on the Dawson, I should be inclined to believe they are less afraid of whites than they were, and less under awe of punishment than they used to be'.<sup>56</sup>

Such was the success of the resistance that some white settlers seriously sought to placate the Aborigines rather than wage war against them. W. Archer, a resident of the Northern Districts who had personally set up four stations on the frontier, allowed the Aborigines on his station because, he believed, '... if every person did the same and they [the Aborigines] were allowed to live on the face of the country, they would not be so much disposed to commit aggression'.<sup>57</sup> Archer's sentiments were echoed in the evidence of D. Connor, a resident of eight months in the Northern Districts, Connor exclaimed before the Inquiry:

No time should be lost, as the Aborigines are becoming more bold every day, and the occupation of the country more difficult to retain.<sup>58</sup>

And, similarly, a letter to the Inquiry from J. Miller, a resident for many years on the outer stations of the Darling Downs, stated that, 'The fact is, that the present force are not able to cope with the blacks on the Dawson'.<sup>59</sup>

W. Archer expressed the common concern of all Inquiry witnesses without exception:

... the whole country is disturbed. There was an attack made upon the Barnard station — our neighbouring station — the other day. I look upon the whole country as disturbed country, although the actual murders have taken place lately at the Dawson, a distance of 150 miles from us.

Further evidence of the extent of the resistance and its effect

in retarding the expansion of settlement is revealed in the words of W. Tooth, the original occupant of a station at Wide Bay District and a Member of the Legislative Assembly:

I bought a large cattle station from Mr Larnach just before the troopers came up. The blacks before that had been so very troublesome that he could not get a purchaser for it, and he had to sell it at a sacrifice in fact. You could scarcely get a man to go into that district for double the wages paid anywhere else, and no woman would go near it at all. The hut-keepers would not venture to go down to the water-hole without being armed with gun or pistol.

The Aborigines displayed an ability to adopt varying tactics and an ability to adapt their methods of struggle to the constantly changing environment around them. For example, all witnesses before the Inquiry made reference to the shrewd deployment of Aboriginal women who allowed themselves to be seduced by Native Police in order to gain information from them. Under questioning by the Inquiry, A. Brown, a resident of Wide Bay District for five years, explained that he was aware of large numbers of tribal women attending to Native Police wherever they camped. The Inquiry asked Brown: 'Where it does occur does it not inevitably lead to the dissemination of the intended movements of the force among the blacks?' Brown replied affirmatively, advocating that 'The Troopers themselves should not know what was going to occur'. Mr E. Royds, a Magistrate and resident for three years on the Upper Dawson, concurred with Mr Forster that the relationship between the Native Police and the women from the tribes 'has a bad effect in keeping up intelligence between the tribes and the Native Police'.<sup>60</sup>

Another method of gaining intelligence information was through Aborigines employed on the stations. E. Royds decided to ban Aborigines from his station because 'It was thought better to keep them out, because they distribute intelligence among the neighbouring tribes'.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Aborigines relinquished some of their traditional fighting habits in the course of their resistance. Captain O'Connell informed the Inquiry that the instances of Aboriginal attacks at night was a new and dangerous feature. Mr J. Reid, a squatter on the Burnett for some ten years and a man who claimed to have suffered much harassment from the Aborigines, told the Inquiry that he was aware that Aborigines on the Dawson had been attacking settlers at night and that that was a very unusual situation. He also pointed out that the Aborigines on the Burnett had become active at night and that they had also taken many sheep from stations at night. Reid agreed with the chairman of the Inquiry that 'their continued success in their attacks — these murders being so frequently committed, and no punishment following — has tended to do away



with that superstition ...'<sup>62</sup>

There is also overwhelming proof that Aborigines of various tribes united in a common front against British encroachment on their land. Mr Donaldson, a member of the Select Committee, pointed out that:

Public attention has been lately drawn to some very remarkable circumstances, namely, that the blacks in the Northern Districts, especially those about the Dawson, not only travel by night, and fight by night, but ... that tribes supposed to be hostile combine their fighting men for the purposes of aggression ...<sup>63</sup>

E. Royds warned the Inquiry that the tribes on the Dawson River 'seem to mix up together more than others do' and that 'Our own blacks (on the Upper Dawson) have travelled right down into the middle of the Downs ... upwards of 200 miles'. And, furthermore, he pointed out: 'I have reason to believe the interior blacks come in to us'.<sup>64</sup>

The unity of tribes would necessarily involve co-ordination between tribes. The Aboriginal ceremony, the corroboree, was the probable 'war-room' of the various tribes. A. Brown informed the Inquiry of the function of some corrobories:

One of the objections I have is that some of the officers permit what are called corrobories — the gathering together of blacks from all directions, north, south, east and west, to one spot. That has a very baneful effect. The blacks whom we employ as shepherds and stockmen, and who are very useful to us and very beneficial to the country, are obliged to attend these meetings, on pain of excommunication, or something of the kind. I have known many blacks who did not wish to go, but they have told me they were obliged to do so. These corrobories I have frequently wished the officer of Native Police to disperse; but he would merely ride among them and send them away a few miles, without seeing that every tribe went to its own neighbourhood. I attribute many murders and outrages to these corrobories.<sup>65</sup>

W. Archer also urged the Inquiry to outlaw such corrobories:

Two or three tribes, for certain religious purposes of their own, meet at particular places; and then is the time at which the great mischief is done.<sup>66</sup>

That the unity of the tribes was a conscious strategy employed by the Aborigines is strongly suggested in the observations of W. Forster, a resident of the Northern Districts for thirteen years:

I believe a dialect that is common to a great number of tribes extends all the way along the coast from the Clarence River to Wide Bay ... Wherever these common words occur, common intercourse and alliances take place ... I know this to be a fact, that young men from the tribes will go from one tribe to another, until they reach tribes whose language they scarcely know; and they get wives from these tribes, and go back afterwards. I think it ought to be a rule never to employ any natives who may be enlisted in the force [the Native Police] within reach of their own tribes, or those with whom they may be in alliance.<sup>67</sup>

The unity of the tribes was bound by common allegiance to a common cause. It would appear from the evidence of H. Pearse,

the manager of a station in the Dawson District, that inter-tribal unity and action was carefully planned and executed. According to Pearse,

... before a murder is committed, the blacks for hundreds of miles around know that such a thing is going to take place, as far as I can find out from having spoken to the blacks after the event. But such is the combination that you cannot get them to speak out.<sup>68</sup>

The unity of different Aboriginal tribes was observed as late as the 1890s when Home Secretary Tozer reported that:

The advent of the whites, and the too prevalent discord between the two races has in many places effected mutual friendship between tribes originally hostile and broken down old exclusive tribal barriers.<sup>69</sup>

The Aborigines waged many protracted resistance struggles. Two of the greatest were the Aboriginal resistance to settlement at the Palmer River and the heroic resistance of the Kalkadood tribe at the Cloncurrie district.

In 1873 gold was found by Europeans in the Palmer River. Over the next few years thousands upon thousands of gold seekers invaded the fields. The various tribes on and around the Palmer united and bitterly resisted the invaders, inflicting upon them thousands of casualties. Two days after the first miners arrived one wrote: 'At present the blacks are very bad. It is a war to the knife between the whites and them'.<sup>70</sup> All along the 320 kilometre long road that connected the fields with the closest town, livestock were continuously speared and many miners and stockmen were killed. A miner named Milligan wrote that the Aborigines 'are determined to keep possession of the black grounds'.<sup>71</sup>

Employing the tactics of guerilla-warfare, the Aborigines conducted a sturdy resistance for seven years before the overwhelming odds against them — tens of thousands of invaders with their superior weaponry — broke the back of their struggle. It is impossible to estimate how many casualties the invaders suffered, but they certainly lost tens of thousands of horses and cattle, and possibly human casualties in the thousands (the poorly-armed Chinese suffered particularly heavy losses). Aborigines constantly harassed the gold-miners with ambushes, sneak attacks, picking off loners or stragglers and killing or stealing cattle. They also never failed to make use of anything they could get from the enemy and always got away with as much metal as they could get. From this metal, and from the kilometres and kilometres of telegraph wire, the Aborigines were able to produce some ingenious weapons.

The heaviest and most protracted fighting however was carried out in the mountainous approach to the fields, especially at the



aply-named Hell's Gate. In order to arrive at the gold-fields, miners had to make their way through some very rugged and mountainous country. Hell's Gate was so narrow that only pack horses with owners could pass through it. It was ideal for ambush and countless numbers of invaders were killed there.

The swarm of invaders increased but the Aborigines would not give in. After luckily surviving an attack, Mulligan wrote: 'I never saw blacks so determined'.<sup>72</sup> By the end of 1875 the Aborigines increased their efforts to repel the invaders. So much of their land was already ruined and, thus, they stepped up their attacks on the men who were taking their livelihood away from them.<sup>73</sup> They speared outlying parties at every opportunity and killed horses and bullocks which had become their staple food since their own game had disappeared. 'If you went for a billy of water', wrote Mulligan, 'you had to take a gun with you'.<sup>74</sup> Many brilliant tactics were employed by the Aborigines, especially through the mountainous approaches to the fields. They would stampede teams, pack horses, horse-and-bullock drays into creeks or on steep sections of the mountains.

The attacks that the Aborigines carried out were planned with care and there is substantial evidence to suggest that they even began to store arsenals of weapons in various places ready for use. Evidence was found at one of these arsenals that a number of different tribes 'had sworn an alliance to fight a common enemy'.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the magnificent and heroic resistance of the Aborigines of the Palmer River region, the weight of the invasion eventually led to their successful dispossession. A numerical advantage on the invaders' side was one factor which led to the Aborigines' dispossession. P. Tresize, who recently rediscovered Hell's Gate, has remarked that the Aborigines must have been few in number: 'My own investigation into the natural food resources of the area had indicated that it would support only a very small population of hunters, and foragers'.<sup>76</sup>

The first settlers came into Kalkadoon country in 1874. They were largely ignored by the Aborigines who looked upon them with amusement. Upon seeing that the settlers intended to occupy the best part of their country the Kalkadoons decided that the Europeans had to go. For the next ten years the Kalkadoons pursued a campaign of harassment against the colonial invaders. The Kalkadoons inflicted serious economic damage on to the settlers. They ruled the countryside to such an extent that the settlers' cattle became wild from harassment and could not be handled. The notorious Native Police were treated with contempt

and by the early 1880s the whole European district had become utterly demoralised by the successes of the Kalkadoons.

Unlike other tribes the Kalkadoons had a chief whose authority was recognised by all the tribe. Furthermore, each tribal group (usually about twenty or so) seemed to know where the chief was situated and they were, somehow, in constant contact with him. They were perfectly organised for guerilla-warfare!

When the occasion called for it the Kalkadoons could muster about one thousand fully-trained warriors at short notice.<sup>77</sup>

The terrain was also well suited for guerilla tactics:

Some of the retreats in the hills were regular fortresses, well stocked with weapons ... The ranges abounded with narrow gorges, with entrances that could be easily defended ... from the ridges, boulders could be rolled down upon the heads of the attackers.<sup>78</sup>

In 1878, in a well-executed attack, the Kalkadoons killed the settler Malvo and his three employees. For the next five years the Kalkadoons did as they pleased in the district and any invader greedy enough to get in the way paid with his life. The residents of the settler township of Cloncurry were so panicked that many feared an attack on the settlement. So effective were the Kalkadoons that in this period expansion of settlement was all but halted, and the Native Police were powerless to stop repeated and carefully-planned attacks on the settlers.

A common tactic was for one group to attack a settler, thus drawing a punitive expedition out to search for them, and thereby leaving the way clear for another party to attack, in another place, a now-undefended area.

In 1883 a settler called Butcher was killed. Beresford and five Native Police troopers went in pursuit and surprised the Kalkadoon party who gave up quietly. Not sure what to do with them Beresford camped in a gorge overnight. The gorge, like most others in the area, contained caches of arms. By morning Beresford and four of the troopers were dead.

For over a year after this incident the Kalkadoons ruled unchallenged. Settlers only moved about in large armed groups, and the Native Police were powerless because the Kalkadoons took or killed their horses.

In 1884 Urquart took over the Native Police and imposed morale and discipline into them. The guerilla tactics of the Kalkadoons continually outwitted the troopers who remained, basically, powerless against them. Later that year, in response to the killing of a man called Powell, a large party of troopers and vigilantes went in search of the Kalkadoons. They found them in a gorge and opened fire:

To the white it was like fighting shadows. Every boulder and tree trunk seemed



to hide a warrior. Spears were coming from everywhere. First this way and then that, the pursuers turned in search of the enemy but they never had more than a glance of him. The timing of the Kalkadoons was perfect. As the whites turned to face a hail of spears from one quarter the blacks on the opposite side retreated to better cover, and then hurled their weapons to cover the retreat of those who were under attack.<sup>79</sup>

The next months saw the area besieged in a state of organised war, the settlers now being organised as never before. The tactics of the Kalkadoons withstood this challenge. It was only in late 1884 when, unaccountably, the Kalkadoons changed tactics and, during a similar episode, formed ranks and charged the settlers. It was a brave but unsuccessful act as it gave the settlers the first chance they had had in ten years to get a decent shot at the Kalkadoons. In guerilla warfare the Kalkadoons could laugh at the settlers with impunity, but in a face to face battle, spears, boomerangs and nulla-nullas were no match for bullets.

Referring to the dispossession of the Aborigines, Carrington wrote in 1871 that:

We shall never possess a detailed history of this singular and gradual work of extermination — such a tale would be too horrible to read — but we have an opportunity of seeing a similar process in full work in the Colony of Queensland, and when we have seen that, we shall understand the mystery of Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria, and Western Australia.<sup>80</sup>

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