

# **The Black Resistance**

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

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Widescope



## 9 Native Police and the Missionaries

It may seem odd to consider the work of the Christian missionaries with the brutal functions of the Native Police. But for the authorities which sponsored them, and for the Aboriginal people who experienced them, the missionaries and the police constituted only different aspects of the same repressive colonialist armory. In the language of television's interrogation scenes, the missionaries were the soft approach while the Native Police were the hard line. Both comprised the dual tactics of repression — deception and violence — both had as their objective the dispossession of the Australian Aborigines from their lands. Predictably enough, the Aborigines responded to the aggressive violence of the Native Police with their own defensive violence; what was probably not anticipated was how quickly they gained a realistic understanding of missionary activity. This understanding is evident in their readiness to wipe out these ideological agents of colonialism.

The fact that some individual missionaries today in Northern Australia have taken up the cause of the Aboriginal people does not deny the fact that the intended aim of the missions, considered historically, was and is, to undermine the resistance of the first Australians.

The tactic of peddling, or more correctly imposing Christianity, had long been recognised by colonizers as a 'civilizing'/subjugating influence. It was used in Australia (as elsewhere) to subvert Aboriginal culture, and to disarm the people by the introduction of an alien religion and system of beliefs. Whether or not the missionaries were sincere or whether some of the technological or medicinal advances were desirable, are secondary aspects of this question. The essential point to emphasise is the missionaries' vanguard role in weakening the cultural unity and identity of the Aboriginal people. In fact, medicines and so forth were components of this process; in addition, the medicines were to combat European diseases and to protect the Europeans themselves.



The vanguard role to which British colonialism had assigned the missionaries is well exemplified in the following communication from a Reverend Lang to Sir George Gray (colonial secretary).

While the natives are comparatively numerous in the vicinity of Moreton Bay, the frequency of shipwrecks along the reefs to the northwest of that settlement is ever and anon exposing the hapless Europeans who survive these disasters to the savage brutality of the tribes on the coast and it is only by extending missionary operations from Moreton Bay into the Northward that these tribes can be subjected to the humanizing influences of Christian civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Had this gentleman taken his religion and Christian ethics seriously he might have stopped wasting his time sending letters overseas and instead prayed to his God for more provident weather along the coast and more able navigators to man the ships.

Further in 1838 as a response to the resistance of the Aborigines in the Moreton Bay area the first Queensland mission was established on Nondah Hill by the Lutheran missionaries. By 1841 the missionaries had been driven off the Aboriginal land with a Pastor Haussman suffering a grave wound. Of this rather obvious rebuttal a Mr Gunther wrote that it was the Aborigine's 'thoughtlessness', 'ingratitude' and 'a spirit of independence' that led to the mission's failure. And again, in 1846 more missionaries, this time at Noonga Creek were quickly ejected by coastal tribesmen who nearly killed one of the aggressors.

In addition to their vanguard function, missionaries were employed as an adjunct to more usual agencies of extirpation and suppression. The complementary relationship existing between the native police and the missionaries did not reside solely in their objective similarities, in practice they worked together. Amongst the recommendations of the 1857 Select Committee into Native Police one finds:

as a valuable auxiliary to the work of the police I strongly advocate the forming of additional missionary stations to be subsidised by the government ... The sites to be carefully selected and approved by the government.<sup>2</sup>

Here in a nutshell was the interdependence of force and deceit. No other force played a more decisive and vicious role in the dispossession of the Aborigines than did the Native Police.

The formation of the Native Police in 1848 was the colonialists' response to the heightened and widespread struggle of the Aboriginal people, which during the 1840s had attained immense proportions. A definite slowing down in colonial expansion was to be seen with many runs being abandoned due to massive stock losses and high casualty rates among the colonists. Thus the Native Police came to being because the normal police (border police) could not perform their duty, to wit, the protection of the property and person of the invader.

The advantage of the Native Police was laid out in the 1857 Select Committee Report. It said, in part:

It is a well known fact that the only control possible to be obtained at the outset and maintained over wild or uncivilized blacks is by the exercise and exhibition of superior force by people whom they recognise as capable of competing with them in their own tactics, tracking, bush cunning, lore of living, and by whom, in the bastion of their native mountains, scrubs or mangrove swamps, they know they can be followed and found when wanted.<sup>3</sup>

To a certain degree, the institution of a police force recruited largely from the Aborigines themselves (led by white officers) was a measure of the fact that the Aboriginal struggle in many areas of Eastern Australia was changing from that of a war of defending territorial integrity to one of restricting further colonial encroachment.

With the partial assimilation of Aborigines in semi-frontier districts, other Aborigines tended to limit the objective of their resistance to their 'right' to hold limited tracts of land. Of course, when the squatters aggrivated further upon the remaining portions of Aboriginal land the Aborigines would launch a counter offensive to regain the territory originally lost. In this kind of scenario, there could be patriotic Aborigines and traitorous ones, those who militantly defended their lands and those who sold out to the colonial authorities and became members of the Native Police.

Very few Aborigines who joined the Native Police were conscious traitors to their people. They were simply attracted by the pay, the horse and uniform. For the authorities, having Aboriginal policemen was a double edged sword. Certainly, by virtue of their bush skills, they aided the colonialists in their suppression of the indigenes. But simultaneously it trained Aborigines in certain military skills and potentially provided the tribes with more experienced leaders. When the force was reduced to nearly half in 1855 much of the increase in Aboriginal assaults on squatters' establishments was attributed to the leadership of demobilised police members who had returned to their native districts, or alternatively adopted a new tribe. On this particular question, the 1857 Committee asked a settler:

What was the effect on their tribes in that part of the country?

The effect was that they were perfectly well acquainted with the strength and the distribution they were better enabled to assist the tribes in their deprivations than if they had not been in the force, by giving them information.<sup>4</sup>

Thus to a limited degree, the formation of the Native Police rebounded back on the authorities. It is odd to think that the fires of Aboriginal rebellion could be fanned by the very forces that were designed to quell them.

Such 'accidental' positive consequences accruing to the Aboriginal people from the formation of the Native Police should



not be overestimated. With the advantage of horses and guns — especially after the introduction of the repeating rifle — this force wiped out whole tribes and decimated many others on the excuse that 'dispersals' were necessary against Aborigines who had committed aggressions (in their own country). The worst type of European character was recruited to conduct those murderous punitive expeditions. No amount of colonial officialdom could disguise the fact that it was a brutal job requiring brutal men. The authorities from their civilized offices cynically exploited the mercenary, the adventurer, to undertake their dirty task.

One such character was Commandant Frederick Walker. A bushman of wide experience with a loud mentality, he took charge of the corps. From the colonialists' viewpoint he was an able officer; he efficiently slaughtered blacks and pacified districts while simultaneously pandering to his superiors who sought to reassure their own consciences. Typically he wrote in a letter to the Colonial Secretary, December 1849:

From 18th May to the 14th June the Native Troopers were entirely employed checking the aggressions of the Aboriginal Natives; and I have reported, that owing to the resistance made by them to me, when I was attempting the apprehension of six blacks charged on oath with a most atrocious murder, there had been some lives lost and that two of my party were wounded.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, however, Walker's bubble burst. The job finally got to him. Having to undertake the sanguinary tasks demanded of him coupled with the sickening hypocrisy of pretending that the relations between Aborigines and the settlers were no different from those among any of His Majesty's subjects, developed a deep resentment in Walker — which no doubt eventually impaired his 'efficiency'.

Walker was hauled before a Board of Inquiry (3 July 1855) on the charges of being in a constant state of intoxication; failure to properly manage the accounts of the corps and being totally unfit for any responsible post. Arriving at the Inquiry drunk and threatening two officials with a sword, Walker was summarily dismissed.

Despite the subsequent reorganization of the force its effectiveness was considerably reduced. The psychological effects of constant killing and brutality paid its toll on Walker, who was necessarily a strong man — a weaker man might survive — but not at Walker's pace.

Despite the campaigns of suppression from which the Aborigines paid dearly, in retrospect, the Native Police failed to halt the resistance of the Aboriginal people. Indeed the most valuable instances of resistance occurred long after the Forces' birth.

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- 1 *Historical Records of Australia*, Vol. 19, p. 10
- 2 *Ibid.*, Vol. 25, p. 2
- 3 N.S.W. Parliamentary Paper; Votes and Proceedings 1857 Select Committee Report on the Native Police.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 22
- 5 *Ibid.*



## 10 Conclusion

I lost no time in sending reinforcements of Troops to the different Stations and of placing Detachments so as to furnish Guards over the Iron Gangs and Road Parties, as should these people rise who are 1 500 in number the consequence might prove of the most serious nature. Our deficiency at this moment, is in a Mounted Force as the Infantry have no chance of coming up with the *Bushrangers*, who sieze on fresh horses, whenever they require them. I have therefore made arrangement for immediately augmenting the Mounted Police which at present consists of about 68 Troopers, to 100 in the first instance, so as to increase their numbers at the three principal Stations, the North, West, and South, to such an extent as will enable them to act with effect at once in checking any disposition to revolt which may appear on the part of the *Convicts*.

I am sorry to observe that the *Natives* have also manifested a disposition of late to be troublesome. They have killed cattle at several stations which has hitherto been unusual and have menaced the Settlers on the borders of Argyle and St Vincent ... [our emphasis].

Clearly in this communication from Governor Darling to Sir George Murray of the 5 October 1830, the three major threats to the British colonial dictatorship in Australia issued from the *Convicts*, *Bushrangers*, and the *Aborigines*.

Objectively speaking the colonial authorities had placed these three groups in the enemy camp of the oppressed. The bush-rangers predominantly were convicts or ticket-of-leave men who had chosen to escape their bondage and survive as free men in the only way their illegal existence would permit. Transportation to Australia, for the convicts who in many cases had only narrowly escaped the gallows, meant a slave's existence serving the interests of the squatters and their capitalist pay masters in Britain. Nominally British subjects the *Aborigines* were last on the social rung and arraigned against them was the full force of the colonial apparatus.

For the Aboriginal people the physical presence of British colonial settlement in Australia, in the immediate sense, tended to place all Anglo-European arrivals on Australian shores in the broad category of the enemy. Little could it matter to the Aboriginal tribes facing dispossession whether the muskets firing



at them were held by the hands of regular soldiers or conscripted convicts; the effects were always the same. However, the class distinction that separated the convicts from the wealthy land holders and officer corps did have considerable bearing on the actual character of Aboriginal resistance and the historical interpretation we place upon it today.

That the convicts did not of their own choosing seek to displace another people; that convicts suffered miserably under the foot of colonial oppression and that they as oppressed men and women could sympathise with the plight of the Aborigines (who consistently aimed their blows at the colonial machinery), all lead to the conclusion that both convict and Aborigine could find common cause against the forces of tyranny.

Evidence certainly exists to prove this contention and to belie the assumptions that the interests of European and Aborigine were inimical and that the sufferings of the Aboriginal people were the inevitable product of a cultural clash.

In 1802 it was officially reported that William Knight and Thomas Thrush (both European) had united forces with the Parramatta tribespeople under the leadership of Pemulwoy and were committing 'depredations' upon the settlement in the Georges/Parramatta region. These two men were outlawed and a reward for their apprehension dead or alive was issued.

It was that notorious explorer Major Thomas Mitchell who brought to attention the story of runaway convict, George Clarke alias 'The Barber'. Rejecting his hapless life as a convict, Clarke had joined up with the Aborigines of the Liverpool Plains district. He scarified and painted his body, thus precluding any normal return to colonial society. Together with the Aborigines, Clarke conducted raids on squatters' cattle which they slaughtered in specially erected yards deep in the bush. Finally Clarke was caught by the authorities and subsequently hung in Tasmania.

Imagine the horror of the British, who in the course of their infamous Black Line broke into Three Thumbs Mountain (an almost impenetrable forest) and came upon an Aboriginal encampment where they found an impression of shoe nails — indicating that some convicts were incorporated with the Aborigines. Furthermore in 1828 the *Hobart Town Courier* reported that a white man, with his face blackened, had been spotted with the Tasmanian Aborigines in one of their attacks. The *Courier* wrote:

For the credit of humanity, we hope this report is not correct but we confess that we have long suspected such a circumstance.<sup>1</sup>

The Western District of Victoria had its 'white patriots'

also. Edwards, a former convict, fought with Aborigines in at least two battles against squatters in August of 1841.

An Indian convict named Snake Brown transported from Mauritius to Moreton Bay, escaped and lived with the Aborigines. He led a large party of Aborigines who wiped out squatters' sheep. However, during an affray with squatters he was taken prisoner. Some years earlier at Brisbane in 1827 escaped convicts leading an Aboriginal party raided the Moreton Bay settlement. The maize crop was ravaged and a guard wounded.

Compiling the instances of Aborigine/Convict unity and their historical context could well prove a very productive area of specialised research. Notwithstanding the detailed verification of our assertion that new and old Australians united in patriotic struggle, the socio-economic background to Aboriginal dispossession clearly demonstrates that a particular European intruder — the squatter — could be singled out as their distinct enemy. This enemy, intertwined with the metropolitan British capitalists, had peculiar interests over and above (if not exclusive to) those of the ordinary settler which brought him into a direct and uncompromising conflict with the Aboriginal people.

For it to be true that European settlement as such was antithetical to the Aborigines, it would presuppose millions of small settlers and farms extending the length and breadth of the fertile part of the Continent and thus generating bitter hostility from the Aborigines. This was not the case. The demands of British capitalism dictated large scale rural holdings for a local wealthy squatter class. While there is some truth in the 'pioneering' stories of freed convicts and settlers forging a livelihood in the outback, the vanguard of rural aggression were the sons of Scottish lairds and English gentlemen whose social influence in the new Colony guaranteed them a healthy slice of Aboriginal property. In his capacity as Commissioner for the Division and Appropriation of the territory of New South Wales, Thomas Mitchell recognised who in fact was to benefit from the dispossession of the Aboriginal people:

Part of the reserved land of a township has been given to small farmers — a class very essential to the increase of population but by no means numerous in New South Wales — and least of all at Bathurst, where land is laid out chiefly in large sheep farms.<sup>2</sup>

Note here how even in terms of physical proximity to areas of Aboriginal hostility, the small farmer was not in the picture. In order to own a large sheep run one had to be a man of social background.

The impression might be given that it was the 'brave' squatter



(courageous in spite of his greed) — who alone in the outback faced the hostile Aboriginal tribes. More often than not this was far from the case. When Governor Darling in 1826 replied to the petition from that fine blending of Scottish and English gentry (Messrs Bowmen, McIntyre, Spark, Duguid, Gaggin, Cobb, Winder, Mazziere, Ogilvie, Malcolm, and Brown) he noted that these men who were so concerned about Aboriginal raids on their stations conveniently resided in Sydney. Typically the squatter placed a manager to look after his property who in turn hired labour or, were assigned convicts. Under these circumstances, the convict shepherds, the fencers and stockmen were the unfortunate meat in the sandwich who bore the brunt of Aborigine attacks, while their masters carried off the profits.

That the interests of the labourers and convicts were not the same as those of their squatter masters and lent themselves to objective unity with Aboriginal patriots finds curious expression in the words of G. Hunter, Commissioner of Crown Lands, district of Bligh, (NSW) 1847:

I cannot but feel satisfied that the Station of the Mounted Police being placed there is the principal cause of the tranquillity of this and the adjoining District, keeping both the White and Black population in subjection which is as much required in the Servants of the Squatters as the Aborigines.<sup>3</sup>

Here is a very strong suggestion that alongside the Aboriginal struggle, class struggle was developing within the camp of the aggressor bringing the poor rural worker and the Aboriginal militant closer together.

While the emphasis in the above has been placed on the aggressor status of the squatter, it cannot be denied (as our previous Chapters, in fact, illustrate) that the Aborigines early in the piece hated and despised the very presence of colonial settlement.

Once their initial curiosity was satisfied, the Aborigines were determined to remove this aggressive colonial fixture. The resistance along the Swan River in Western Australia and in Moreton Bay, Queensland indicate the very determination of the Aborigines to expel the invader lock, stock and barrel. This justifiable militant intransigence could not last for ever. As the relative population figures tipped in favour of the Europeans, the Aborigines were compelled to recognize and accommodate to some form of foreign settlement on their soil.

No arbitrary date can be formulated but nonetheless it is clear that at some stage in their struggle, the character of their fight became essentially one of holding on to their remaining land. Given that the European was there to stay, the task at hand, the Aborigine reasoned, was to limit his expansion to certain localities

and to ensure his activities did not wantonly despoil their livelihood or restrict their access to waterholes. Of course humanity or reasonableness was anathema to colonialism, which unremittently seized all in its path regardless of the aspirations of the Aboriginal people. Thus bitter conflict ensued. But the point remains that the Aborigines persevered in their efforts to make the colonialists understand that a compromise situation was the most satisfactory arrangement for all concerned.

When interviewed, in 1804, on the Hunter River, about the cause of so-called tension with the settlers, Aborigines replied that 'they did not like to be driven from the few places that were left on the banks of the river where alone they could procure food ... if they went across white man's ground the settlers fired upon them ... they wanted to retain some places on the lower part of the river'.<sup>4</sup>

In an even more striking manner, Aborigines from the Bandjalang Tribe of the Clarence River district, some thirty-six years later militantly laid down their position to squatter E. D. Ogilvie who translated thus:

Begone! And take your horses; Why do you come hither among the mountains to disturb us? Return to your houses in the valley, you have the river and the open country, and you ought to be content; leave the mountains to the black people.<sup>5</sup>

What could be more reasonable than this entreaty? The fact that the Clarence River area was in conflict for at least another fifteen years shows that the proposition of these Aboriginal tribespeople fell upon the deaf ears of the invading squatters.

Of course there was no moral obligation for the Aborigines to be reasonable; they had every reason to unequivocally demand the total expulsion of the foreign intruder. However, to reiterate, historical circumstances dictated a compromise on the part of the Aboriginal people which they intelligently realised. But there was absolutely no reciprocity by British colonialism and the squatter class. As previously argued it was inherent in the very nature of colonialism to seize the Australian continent and its resources entirely in the interests of British capitalism. It must be stressed however, that this greed for land and its genocidal effects on the Aboriginal people was endemic to the system of colonialism not to the colour of the skin of the invaders.

While the notion of organised resistance by poor settler and Aborigines against British colonialism in the nineteenth century remains in the realm of hypothesis the concept of unity today against neo-colonialism is definitely on the agenda.

Manifestations of this unity are seen in Land Rights demon-



rations in the major capital cities where Aborigines and other Australians link arm in arm in common struggle. Leaving aside the feelings of 'solidarity with the oppressed' that emanate from the growing social awareness of patriotic youth, there is a sound *objective* basis for the concurrence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal political aims.

Once the 'land grabbing operations' that had characterised the old colonialism finally ceased — the Northern Territory concluded in the early 1940s — the real implications of Aboriginal dispossession to all patriotic Australians was comprehended. The cattle stations and pastoral enterprises which replaced Aboriginal land were owned by foreign pastoral enterprises. In recent years this land has passed to U.S. Imperialist Companies. Thus almost in sad parody, the Moola Bulla Station (W.A.) established as an Aboriginal-run Station by the colonial authorities in an attempt to contain and buy off Aboriginal resistance, later was to become part of the U.S. Kaiser corporation. Over one-fifth of the top end of Australia, the most choice part, is now the property of investors, based in the U.S.A.

The post-war government policy of 'Aboriginal assimilation' that had its origin in the founders of the Chair of Anthropology of Sydney University (sponsored by an American corporate Foundation) served the expedient function of justifying the assimilation (i.e. dispossession) of Aborigines from their land. In denying the Aborigine a special claim to land rights, assimilation in the first instance justified foreign pastoral expansion and in the second enabled the exploitation of the mineral resources belonging to the Australian people in general and the Aborigines in particular.

While it is true that much of this land had been officially owned or leased by agents of British capitalism as far back as late nineteenth century, this control was challenged by the Aboriginal people. When U.S. imperialism was in the process of displacing British capital in land, its aim was to create an ideological climate (i.e. assimilation) whereby the now largely conquered people would be thwarted from demanding back their rightful heritage.

In the light of the quarrying of Australia by foreign (U.S., Japanese, and British) monopolies the demand for Aboriginal land rights effectively calls for the expulsion of the multi-national mining conglomerates from our shores. Dramatically it poses the question who should rule our Continent, the Australian people or foreign imperialism? Will Australia be dominated by United States imperialism, or possibly by its increasingly stronger rival Soviet social-imperialism (already establishing a foothold in our country)? Or will Australia become a truly independent nation?

Those militant Aborigines today who heroically defend their land from imperialist encroachment are performing the highest patriotic duty to the whole Australian people.

The Aurukun Aborigines are some such patriots. At the time of writing they were locked in a bitter conflict with a consortium of foreign companies intent on exploiting bauxite reserves on land reserved for the Aurukun people. Three companies: Billiton (Shell Oil Empire), Pechiney (European) and Tipperary (U.S.); have commenced their aggression by building the largest air strip in the Southern Hemisphere.

The Aurukun Aborigines have responded in the tradition of their forefathers, armed with rifles and spears they have taken over the air field and defied the aggressor to remove them. This time the Aboriginal people will be successful. Their aspirations are now shared by all Australians who are imbued with 'a spirit of independence'.

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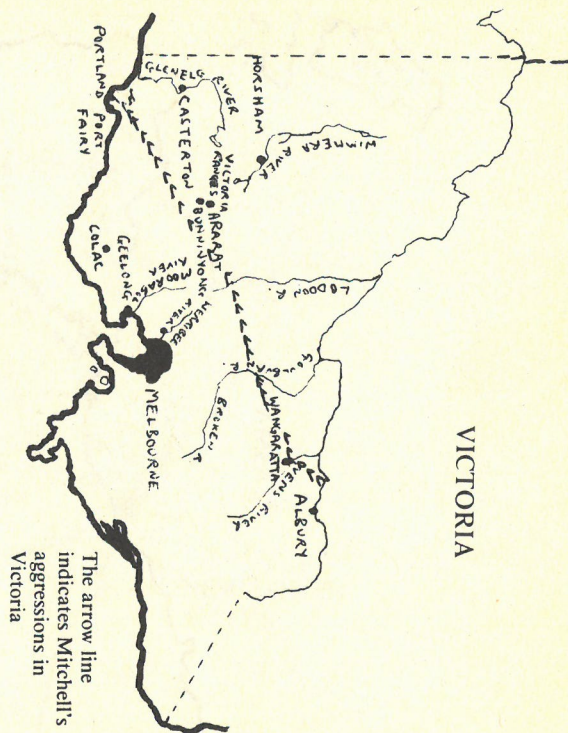
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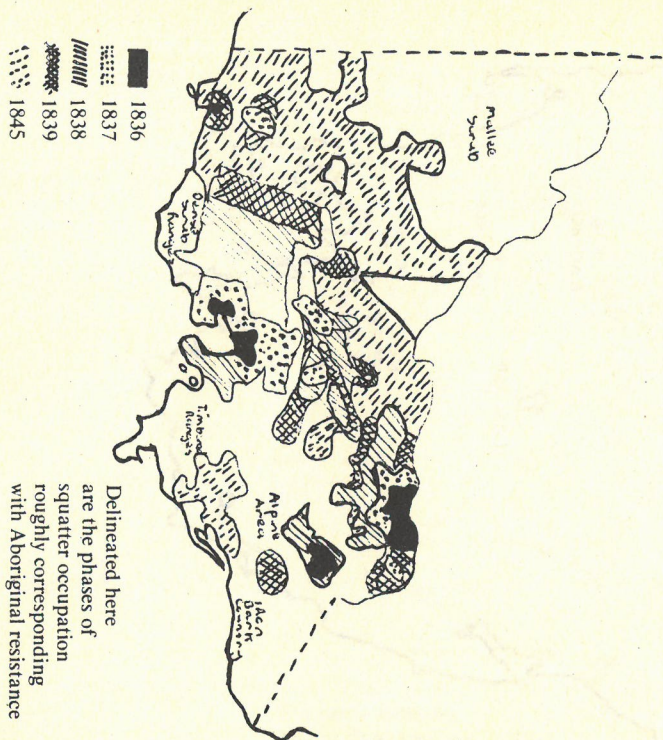
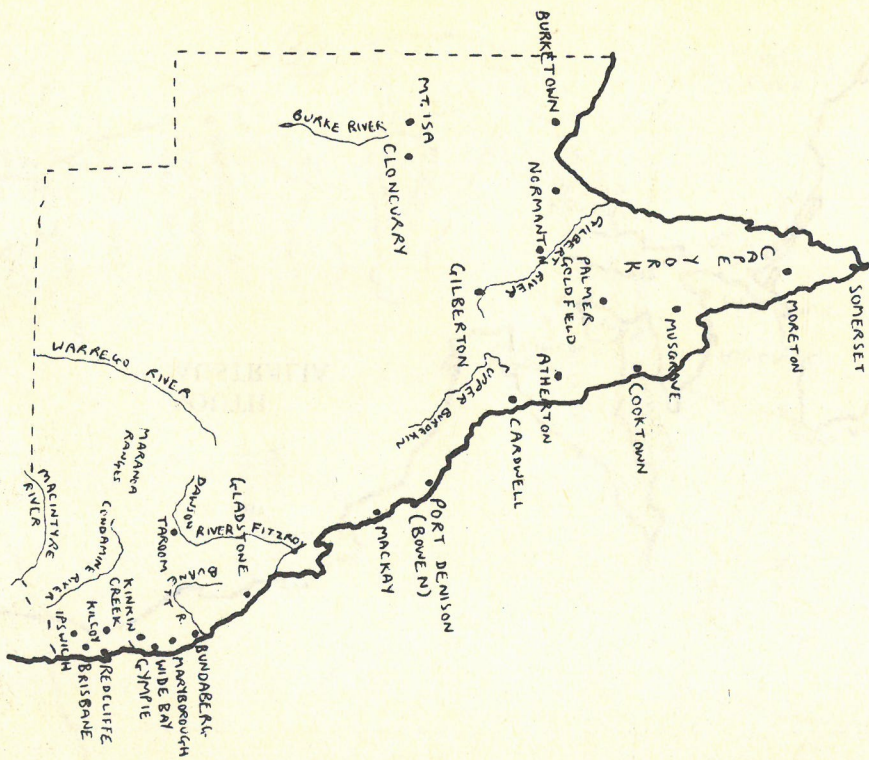




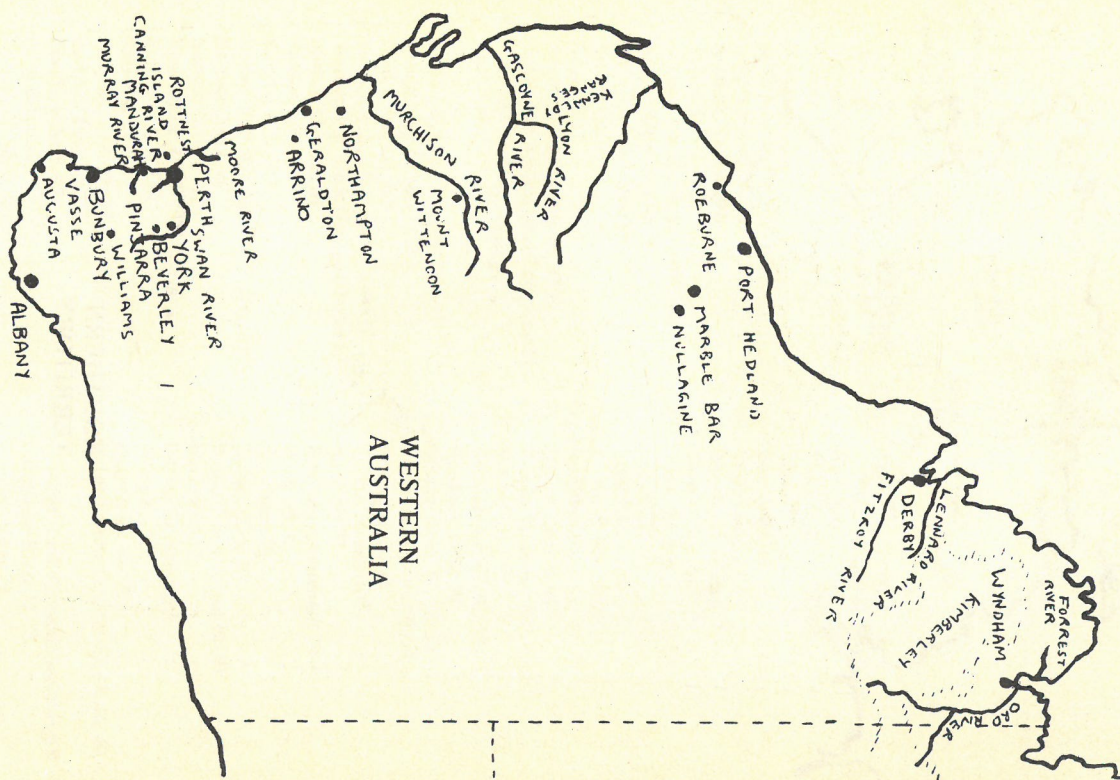
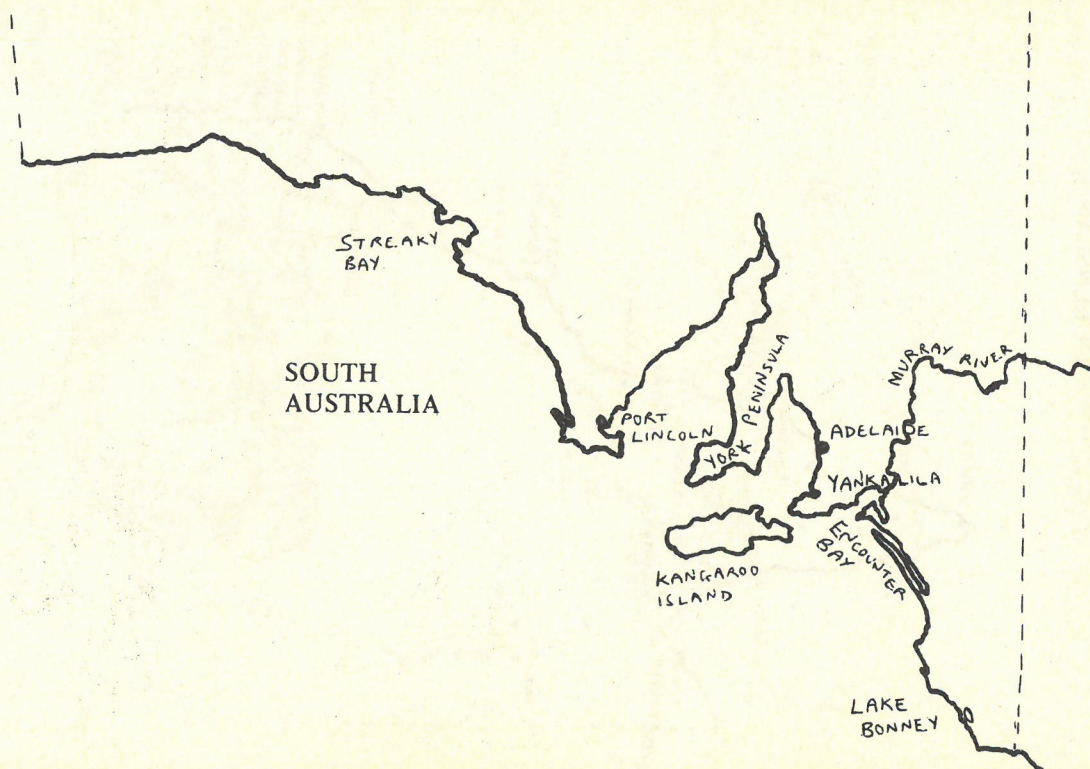
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