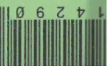


# **The Black Resistance**

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

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## 7 Western Australia

The first recorded act of resistance by West Australian Aborigines was their attack on the representative of Dutch colonialism, William Dampier, at Roebuck Bay in 1699.

Over a century later resistance was concentrated around the first British colony (1826) along the Swan and Canning River, and the coast at Albany. By 1836 the region of confrontation included Augusta, at the Vasse, at Bunbury, at Mandurah, along the Murray River to Pinjarra, across the hills to the Avon Valley, and on a strip between Perth and Albany. As colonial settlement spread northwards, so too did resistance, and the coastal area and immediate hinterland between Perth and Geraldton became the region of conflict.

From 1850 onwards, the Champion Bay and Murchison District as the most northern extension of the colony saw resistance.

1864 has been given as the date of the pastoral occupation of the northwest. First the Roebourne district, shortly afterwards south to the Gascoyne River, then north to the Cossack and later to King Sound, were the new areas of conflict. As it will be noted later, the Gascoyne and the Murchison River area were continuing regions of resistance right into the early 1880s.

With the gold rush and the pastoral occupation of the Ord Valley by overlanders from Queensland, and the settlement of the Fitzroy Valley, the entire Kimberley District in 1882 became a region of prolonged intense Aboriginal struggle right until the 1930s.

Almost about the same time as the start of the Kimberley wars, Aborigines became militant close to the South Australian (now Northern Territory) border west of the Musgrave Ranges.

Unfortunately this brief chronology might convey a far too rigid time pattern of Aboriginal resistance. The intention is not to suggest that the scale and intensity of resistance followed precisely the various stages of colonial settlement, but rather that the general situation indicates that new areas of Aboriginal resistance followed new areas of colonial encroachment, and that older areas of settlement dictated subjugation of the Aborigines.



There may be a tendency to picture a tiny colony confronted and outnumbered by tens of thousands of Aborigines. Statistics on the relative forces facing each other, however, show otherwise. In 1830 in the area around the Swan River, 1 700 colonists faced 750 Aborigines. The figure for 1842 was 3 000 colonists to 3 000 Aborigines in the settled districts. Census takers guessed in 1848 that in the 'located parts of the colony' there were 2 000 Aborigines to 4 622 colonists.<sup>1</sup> The estimate for 1857 was that 3 576 Aborigines were in touch with settlement from the Victoria River plains south to Jerramungup (east of Albany) to some 13 000 colonists. In 1890, the total colonial population for all northern districts (Gascoyne, East and West Kimberley, Kimberley Goldfield and North district) was 5 016. Facing this were some 9 000 Aborigines, 7 000 of whom were scattered in the Kimberleys.<sup>2</sup> It is true, however, that of all the regions it was in the Kimberleys that the Aborigines exerted a numerical superiority. Offsetting this numerical advantage was the fact that only a minority of these Aborigines would have been in regular or frequent proximity and contact with the settlers.

Following the characteristic pattern of colonialism's first aggressive entry into another's land, the occupation of the districts surrounding the Swan River was the scene of the essential collision between the forces of the colonial state and the Aboriginal people.

A public notice issued in Perth by the Governor in 1833, made the proclamation that the people could rely 'on the prompt assistance of the Military' and that 'there are always in my office sixty stands of arms with a full supply of ammunition for those who may require, ready to inflict a prompt and heavy punishment on the natives should their conduct at any time be considered to deserve it by those whose duty it is to judge and to act in such matters'.

Although the mere presence of colonial settlement on Aboriginal soil was an act of provocation and aggression in itself, it becomes clear in this quotation, that violent resistance by the Aborigines was dictated by the violent methods of dispossession adopted by the colonialists.

Fear was evident in the earliest days of the Swan River, where before there had been any bloodshed by blacks, there was a disposition on the part of some of the more nervous settlers to discharge firearms on sight of a savage.<sup>3</sup>

No doubt this 'trigger happy' apprehension (which served the interests of the colonialists admirably) became a real fear when the tribesmen around the Murray River and Swan districts vigorously defended and counter attacked their aggressor. It prompted the Colonial Office in a despatch of 31 March 1833, to say that the settlers must 'look to the Government for repelling any serious or

combined attack from the natives'. Stirling responded to the Home Office by setting up the Mounted Police Corps in 1832.

Two Aboriginal patriots figured prominently in the struggles of those early years. Midgegooroo was executed in 1833 and his kinsman Yagan was finally killed by the means of a subterfuge.

Colonist George Fletcher Moore's account of a meeting of settlers at Guildford which was 'expressive of the opinion that settlers must abandon the Colony if they be not protected in their property' gives some idea of the effectiveness of the Aboriginal resistance.<sup>4</sup>

In 1834, the struggle in the Murray River reached a climax. Governor Stirling, leading a party of police, soldiers and settlers ambushed and opened fire upon a band of about some seventy Aborigines, who, despite their heroic resistance, suffered the loss of over twenty of their number. This was the infamous 'Battle of Pinjarra'.

Towards the end of 1836, the tribesmen over the hills in the Avon district became the new line of resistance against colonial encroachment. Lieutenant H. W. Bunbury, who was stationed at York, noted their resistance:

I am just returned from York where I was for two months on detachment keeping in order natives who had been very troublesome for some time past, robbing the settlers, spearing their stock, and even in one case, severely wounding a soldier.<sup>5</sup>

'The natives', he said, 'only attack a farm where one or two white men are at a time.'<sup>6</sup>

Bunbury spoke quite candidly about his duty at York 'to make war upon the natives'.

It was only until finally 1848 that this region could be said to be conquered.

The use of terms by contemporaneous writers, like 'waging a war', and the employment of the political tactics of setting an example, suggests very strongly, that not only did the Aborigines resist, but that their resistance was organised and thorough going. Further proof of this inference is in a statement made by Governor Stirling in his *Statistical Report of 1837*:

... but they [blacks] are not to be relied upon, for in a great many instances it has been found that, after living for months in the house of a settler they have been all along, employed by the rest of the tribe as spies, for the purpose of conveying intelligence as to the best points of attack on life or property.<sup>7</sup>

Lieutenant Bunbury confirmed this observation when speaking of the Aborigines, 'taking advantage of the experience he has gained by living with one, to do it [rob or murder] with the greatest certainty and least danger to himself'.



With the coming of Governor Hutt in January, 1839, the Colonial authorities sought to adopt new tactics to combat the resistance of the Aborigines (Hutt's period of administration more or less coincides with the extension of settlement northwards in the Victoria Plains region between Perth and Geraldton, and the completion of occupation between Perth and Albany.) Superficially the new tactic was one of deception, though the reality was every bit as violent.

A system of Protectorship whose colonial personnel were 'Guardians of Aborigines' was established in 1840. The task of each Protector was to attach himself to Aboriginal tribes 'conciliate them and induce more settled habits'. At the very best the thinking behind the system was aimed at lulling the Aborigines into a false sense of confidence and to bring them under official auspices. This sort of logic came to its ultimate conclusion in 1852 when tribal 'King Billies' were appointed in each of the occupied districts to act as an influence for the maintenance of order. The worst was contained in the actual practice of the Protectorship.

The early reports of the Protectors showed that they devoted a good deal of their energy to the 'pacification' of the 'natives'. That the Government saw no inconsistency with the so-called protective duties of the Guardians and their punitive (aggressive activities) is understandable when one realises that Charles Symmons' (a Protector) extra responsibilities included Assistant Police Magistrate, Acting Sheriff and Assistant Superintendent of Police. It was a telling testimony of the failure of the Protectorship system to suppress the Aborigines when the title of that office was changed in 1849 by Governor Fitzgerald, to 'Guardians of Aborigines and *Protector of Settlers*'.

Further evidence of the strength of Aboriginal resistance during this period, and the fearful mood of the colonialists, can be seen in the establishment of an exclusively black prison on Rottnest Island. Justified originally for its 'reformatory' and 'adaptive' purpose, Rottnest gaol became feared by Aborigines as a hell-hole.

By 1850, the district around Champion Bay was the new area of conflict. In one victorious battle for the Aborigines, Governor Fitzgerald was actually wounded. The annual report of the Protector of Aborigines for 1854 stated that the settlement of the Champion Bay district (Geraldton) in the early fifties was attended by 'frequent and fatal collision with the squatters.' It is significant that in the Formal Instructions to Governors sent from the Colonial Secretary, pre-eminent position was given to the handling of 'Aboriginal disturbances'. When the first Government Resident

was sent to the northern settlements in 1865, he was instructed to use 'caution and forbearance' and to show the 'natives' that 'you are able to repel and, if necessary punish aggression'.<sup>8</sup>

The occupation of Roebourne, especially the Cossack district, was accompanied by determined resistance by the Aborigines and murderous suppression on the part of the colonialists. On one occasion at Flying Foam Passage some settlers arrested Aborigines for stealing, and while camping with their prisoners, were attacked and wiped out by other tribesmen. This led to brutal reprisals in which up to 150 Aborigines were killed allegedly for resisting arrest.

In the meantime, on the south coast at Esperance Bay some 500 miles from Perth, Aborigines were wreaking havoc with an isolated cattle station owned by the Dempster brothers. The Dempsters were even prompted in desperation to seek advice of the Colonial Secretary, Mr F. P. Barlee. At much the same time around 1864, a search party in the La Grange district looking for 'explorers' (i.e. intelligence detachment) Panter, Harding and Goldwyer, discovered the three men dead, killed by Aborigines. Maitland Brown, one of the party, described the ensuing conflict with Aborigines as an ambush:

We were all heavily armed. We each had a six chamber revolver with six spare sets of chambers loaded ready for insertion, in addition to our double barrelled guns or carbines, giving us each forty-four shots without reloading.

In this so-called ambush 'six [blacks] remained upon the plain dead and dying, and about twelve others stand little chance of recovery'.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst the general trend of Aboriginal resistance was in the north-west, the 1876 report by the Superintendent of Police clearly shows that areas of earlier conquest were continually flaring up. These were areas south and east of Geraldton. In the general context of colonists, complaints of troublesome Aborigines, the report strongly urged that:

the stations ... already recommended to the Eastwood of Geraldton and at Arrino should be established and that an additional mounted constable should be stationed at Northampton, Newcastle, Beverley and Williams River.<sup>10</sup>

South of Roebourne through the Gascoyne and Murchison River districts, Aboriginal resistance was intense for over thirty years. The attitudes of the authorities even at the tail end of this period gives some idea of exactly how persevering and consistent were the activities of the Aborigines in defending their land. M. S. Smith, Superintendent of Police, in his 1878 report to the Legislative Council, explains the character of their resistance:

The Aborigines in several of the outlying districts continue to give trouble to the



settlers (their principal offences being sheep stealing and hut robbing) more especially in the Gascoyne and Murchison districts where these depredations have been very serious leading to collisions between them and the settlers which on one or two occasions have unavoidably led to loss of life.<sup>11</sup>

The responsibilities placed on the settler as an agent of 'pacification' is reinforced when Smith says 'Every settler is empowered to protect his own life, and if to do so he finds it actually necessary to kill his assailant the Law holds him blameless'.<sup>12</sup> Two thirds of the report was devoted to Aboriginal 'depredations' — the comments made by Lance Corporal Henry Mainland being of particular note:

... These natives on the Gascoyne are a very knowing and determined lot, more so than any tribe I ever was amongst.<sup>13</sup>

And their determination was not simply geared to individual acts of stealing, but rather (as Smith relates himself of complaints made by the Aborigines that the white men were taking their country from them) they were resolved to remove colonial presence from their particular land.

*The Criminal Statistics and Report of Superintendent of Police for 1881* suggests that the year (1881) must have been one of extensive 'mopping up operations' by the authorities. Compared with one Aborigine, one European, and one Malay facing trial in the Supreme Court for murder in 1880, the statistics for 1881 show a dramatic increase to sixteen for the Aborigines' figure whilst the Malay is not represented, and the European figure is still one only. Again this report stresses that the 'depredations committed by the natives in the northern District and in the Gascoyne and upper Murchison Districts are of a very serious nature'.<sup>14</sup>

The only substantial official document that is available on the extent of Aboriginal resistance in the Murchison Gascoyne districts is one entitled *Instructions to, and Reports from the Resident Magistrate dispatched by direction of His Excellency on Special Duty to the Murchison Gascoyne Districts, 1882*.

Settlers in the area had made serious complaints that the 'natives' were assaulting them and committing serious 'depredations' on their flocks. The Colonial Secretary Gifford, via the Governor William C. F. Robinson had commissioned R. Fairbairn, Resident Magistrate, to investigate and to report back on these allegations.

Despite the downgrading of the extent of hostile Aboriginal activity, a close reading of the document shows that the authorities were trying to put a lid on a (still) boiling cauldron. And it is significant that the document that is dealt with here was written some thirty years after Aboriginal resistance first broke out (1850). Relative to the earlier years of struggle in the Murchison and

Gascoyne the report focused on what was in 1881 a cooling-off period. However, notwithstanding the declining intensity of struggle, the colonists admitted in their statements that the 'state of affairs on the Upper Murchison quite parallels the state of affairs in Ireland' and the 'natives have committed far greater atrocities upon the settler than even the Zulus did to the British in Zululand' expressed at the very least the fearful respect in which they held the Aborigines.<sup>15</sup>

While Fairbairn claimed that the settlers' accounts were exaggerated, his report revealed that Aboriginal resistance was still significant.

Fairbairn issued instructions to enlist settlers as special constables to conduct Aboriginal offenders to Mount Wittenoom. Fairbairn went on to sentence twenty-nine warriors to various terms of imprisonment, on Rottneest Island, for sheep stealing. He advocated the establishment of a police station on the north side of the Murchison in the neighbourhood of Biringarra, and the stationing of more police at Lyons and Gascoyne Junction and at the Port neighbourhood. The colonists were informed that a stipendiary magistrate would be appointed to the Murchison and Gascoyne districts to deal specifically with sheep stealing. Two Europeans, Charles Brackley on the Gascoyne, and Charles Redfern near the Kennedy Range were killed by Aborigines around the time of Fairbairn's investigation. It was discovered that Aboriginal shepherds had been working undercover for their tribe.

It was in the Kimberley region that the most sustained Aboriginal resistance on the Australian continent took place. Stretching from the early 1880s till 1930, the Aboriginal people fought heroically to defend their land from the colonial intruder. A combination of two factors, the rugged landscape and the build up of experience with the sense of urgency and desperation it engendered, enabled the Aborigines to fight a protracted war.

Some of the earliest instances of conflict were recorded by Patrick M. Durack in his book *Pioneering the East Kimberleys*. The Duracks were among a number of settlers who crossed the continent, with cattle, from Queensland to the Ord River. He describes the Aborigines around the Ord District as very numerous and warlike, stressing the settlers' need for alertness and caution. On one occasion a unit of Aborigines armed with spears and boomerangs attacked Durack's party who only narrowly escaped annihilation.<sup>16</sup> In 1886 just inside the border of Western Australia the Aborigines killed Durack's brother. Subsequently a force of police was sent out by the Government and many Aborigines were shot dead.

The Police Report of 1881, in addition to the Murchison attacks,



made the first mention of Aboriginal resistance in the Kimberleys, and also close to the Northern Territory border. From the Kimberley district it was reported that 'the natives .... appear to be numerous and inclined to be troublesome, and it is only natural that settlers should take steps to protect themselves and their flocks and herds'.<sup>17</sup> A similar claim was made by police at Mount Wittenoom near the Northern Territory border.

In 1884, the Superintendent of Police saw the necessity for additional police protection in Ord River district while the report of the Aborigines Protection Board, 1888, noted that the coast and hill natives of the West Kimberleys were 'hostile' and 'treacherous'.<sup>18</sup>

With the growing uprising of the Aborigines right throughout the northern region, the authorities deemed in *Papers respecting the necessity of increased Police Protection for the Settlers in the Kimberley District from the Aboriginal Natives in 1888*, that the situation had become so serious that there was a need systematically to increase colonial state power in the area. One particular incident involving the continual attacks by Aborigines on a telegraph line under construction from Wyndham to the gold-field was of grave concern to the authorities. Recognizing the importance of colonial communications, the Aborigines had driven the construction party into their tents, continually threatening their lives. (At another telegraph site, the Chain Mangroves near La Grange Bay, tribespeople were successful in eliminating one of their foe.) An extra four mounted constables and native assistants and twenty horses were placed in the East Kimberleys hoping to deter further attacks on the Wyndham telegraph party; the general response of George Phillips, Superintendent of Police to growing Aboriginal resistance was to seek the establishment of a police cordon of patrol which could effectively cover the conflict area.

Sherry's journal shows that the Aborigines in the Kimberley region used the guerilla tactics of attacking when the enemy was weak and withdrawing when the enemy was strong:

Periodical visits of the police to the back stations are taken advantage of by the natives; they retire to the most secure places for their safety and return to their old haunts and renew their depredations when the police leave the neighbourhood ... The natives are becoming so cunning and civilized that they don't fail to take advantage of the absence of police from the neighbourhood of the Lennard River in particular.<sup>19</sup>

That the colonialists themselves recognized that the Aborigines had organized themselves for violent resistance is evidenced in the address of Jas. G. Lee Steere, Speaker of the Legislative Council, on the 28 November 1888:

That an Humble Address be presented to His Excellency the Governor, informing His Excellency that in the opinion of this House it is urgently, desirable that strong and prompt measures should be taken for the protection of the lives and property of the Settlers in Kimberley against the depredations of the natives now becoming alarmingly frequent; and that as much in the interests of the whites as of the blacks [sic]—a state of things should be prevented if unchecked must eventually lead to guerilla warfare and regrettable reprisals.<sup>20</sup>

Given the many years of hell the colonialists still had to face, it is with some irony that the solution to the problem provided by Commissioner Phillips can be viewed:

... the strength of the Police Force in the Kimberley District will be raised to a total of forty-eight of all ranks. This Force will be sufficient to ensure strong and prompt measures being taken for the protection of the lives and property of the settlers in that district, and to check the depredations committed by the natives.

The additional Force will be composed of West Australians accustomed to station life and familiar with the habits of the natives.<sup>21</sup>

The stepping up of repression by the colonial authorities serves as a measure of the resistance by the Aborigines. In the W.A. Parliament of 1892, the Honourable E. T. Hooley asked whether the Government was aware of serious crimes committed by Aborigines in the northern districts of the colony and whether there would be increased police patrols. The Honourable G. Sheriton replied that it was proposed to increase the police force and introduce legislation giving powers to inflict summary punishments.

September 1893 saw a bitter encounter between police and Aborigines on the Behn River in the East Kimberley. Aborigines resisted the efforts of police to make arrests for horse and cattle stealing. A Constable Collins was killed in the affray, whilst twenty-three Aborigines were shot dead. Not satisfied with their victorious slaughter the inhabitants of Derby telegraphed the Commissioner of Police imploring him (because of Collins' 'murder') to send out parties from all northern centres to 'make a complete circuit and punish the natives in the manner they merit'. With customary astuteness, the colonial authorities did not commit themselves, probably anticipating the humanitarian protest that did occur in Perth reflected in the Catholic organ, *The W.A. Record*.

The Aborigines, (particularly at this latter stage of struggle), adopted tactics every bit as brilliant as modern guerilla armies fighting national liberation struggles. In addition to their guerilla units, they had undercover agents infiltrating the enemy's military forces. One notable case was that of Aboriginal patriot and hero, Pigeon, who assumed the role of a native assistant to Mounted



Police — an enemy of his people — in order to better aid the overall struggle. Pigeon gained the necessary credentials as a trusted assistant by rescuing Richardson, his master, in an encounter with some Barker tribesmen. From an opposing political angle Haydon in his book *The Trooper Police of Australia* 'colourfully' describes how Pigeon with the help of Captain (the other assistant) freed seventeen patriots, held by Richardson for cattle stealing and absconding from gaol, Pigeon joined up with a leading militant Elemarra (whom he pretended to arrest), to dispose of Richardson. His task completed, Pigeon and his comrades set out on a course of resisting the occupiers. They wiped out two cattlemen, Burke and Gibbs, who were travelling to the Upper Fitzroy with a herd of 500 cattle.

Significantly Pigeon and his unit's understanding of the political nature of their adversary did not restrict itself to actions against the settler. It appeared that Pigeon's intention in killing the two drovers was to sack their camp for ammunition and firearms, and to set up an ambush for the police who were certain to come looking for the bodies. The plan to trap the police failed, but the militants avoided the troopers and their assistants after a sharp engagement. Despite the capture and subsequent execution of Captain after many hundreds of miles of intensive pursuit by mounted police, Pigeon and his group remained at large. Some three years later, after the killing of a man named Thomas Jasper at a station in the Oscar Range of the West Kimberley, Pigeon was finally killed in a shoot out with Fitzroy Police, led by Sub-Inspector Ord.

An important point to be noted in the whole of the Pigeon affair and the subsequent activities of Aboriginal patriots, was their increased use of guns in meeting their colonial settler enemy on his terms.

The deep seated support Pigeon and his unit had amongst their own people in the Kimberley district was clearly shown by the fact that Queensland black trackers had to be brought in to hunt down Pigeon because of the 'unreliability' (loyalty) of the local Aborigines, whom the authorities were convinced would join the fugitives if employed by the mounted police.<sup>22</sup>

After the stepping up of suppressive activities following the implementation of measures advocated in the 1892 sitting of Parliament, there must have been a temporary let up in the degree of Aboriginal resistance. The report on the West Kimberley District for half year ending 30 June 1896, (including 1894) by the Resident Magistrate at Derby, summed up in these words:

... For the satisfactory state of the district with regard to depredations by natives much credit is due to the police.<sup>23</sup>

This respite was short lived. Growing in understanding of the colonial machinery and its various ways of enforcing its rule, the Aborigines in the East Kimberleys attacked the Church of England Mission at Forrest River. Discussing this attack, the Report of the Commissioner of Police for the year ending 30 June 1898, provided an explanation as to why resistance had flared up again, and thus, why there was a period of relative quiet:

Cattle stealing has been carried on in several places and throughout the northern parts of the colony the police have been fully occupied in looking after the natives. It is noticeable that as the limits of settlement are extended the most remote country becomes the locality where the depredations are most serious.<sup>24</sup>

The Aborigines Department Report ending 30 June 1900 described an attack by the Peedong Tribe upon a station up the Oakover River in the Northwest District. For the serious wounding of the Manager and the killing of the Resident Medical Officer, three of the seven convicted Aborigines were executed.<sup>25</sup>

Settler complaints of attacks in the East Kimberley, showed no easing up whatsoever of Aboriginal resistance. The Commissioners' Report for the year ending 1901 asked approval for the establishment of a special patrol in the district.

Of all the many areas of Aboriginal resistance in Australia it has been the Kimberleys region that has featured briefly in general historical writing, with the usual colourful references to cattle stealing, but never of course to actual organized resistance. The usual explanation of cattle stealing apologetically accounts for black 'crimes' against the colonial settler on the basis of Aboriginal hunger due to the taking of the grazing lands of the kangaroo. Whilst it is true that the Aborigines took and killed cattle for food, this is only part of the picture. Because the Aboriginal people were being thrown off their land by settler occupation, they fought back by attacking the economic basis of the colonists' existence — his cattle. The report of the Aborigines Department ending 1902 shows how the Aborigines quite deliberately attacked herds of cattle with the purpose of hurting the settler:

the bush native till recently or may I say till the interference of their depredations by the police, have been killing cattle and even the milkers. Not being satisfied with the sport of killing on the run they have gone into the business systematically by erecting two slaughter yards.<sup>26</sup>

and even more crucially:

It is not so much the number they kill to eat as the number they wound which die from the effects, and the harm they do the whole herd by frightening them to that extent that they become unmanageable.



From the turn of the century onwards the major centre of Aboriginal resistance was either in the East Kimberleys District or even further extended towards the Northern Territory border. Just as in the earlier period of the 'Kimberley Wars' the Aborigines used the hilly country as a base camp for attacks and retreat, the Aborigines in the East used the desert country. The Commissioner of Police in his Report ending 1902 described how tribesmen on the Sturt River attacked holdings on the edge of the Central desert and then moved into the wastelands where mounted troopers could not follow. They returned to commence cattle killing as soon as the police had gone.<sup>27</sup>

Official reports for the next three years indicated that the local gaols were full with patriots convicted of cattle killing; the Hall Creek sub district was a new area of conflict, and a police station had to be placed in the north-east of the Leopold Ranges. More-over 1905 saw the flaring up of resistance in East and West Kimberley areas which had been considered subdued by police measures. The Police Report for the year ending 1905 noted that 'natives were setting fire to grass' and that cattle killing had increased to an alarming extent.<sup>28</sup> Increased militant Aboriginal activity sent shock waves right throughout the northern part of the State. According to that year's Aborigines Department Report, alarm was voiced at the possession of firearms by Aborigines on the Pilbarra goldfield, who, it was claimed, were clever and more organized than in most places. Some distance south of the major centre of resistance (Kimberleys) letters between the Woodstock station and police at Marble Bar revealed a report that Aborigines were contemplating a simultaneous attack on the 'whites'.<sup>29</sup> Fearful that a new level of armed struggle by the Aborigines was about to start, the police recommended that the Gun Licensing Act be changed to stop Aborigines from obtaining guns except with the approval of the Magistrates.

The effectiveness of Aboriginal resistance is shown in a claim made in the Department's report of 1906 that because of militant Aboriginal activity, it was difficult getting men to remain in the back country risking their lives. In the same Report the Manager of the Ord River Station stated that Aborigines came across from South Australia (N.T.) and set up spies on the settlers' movements in order to inform on the most favourable time for attack or warn on the need to retreat.<sup>30</sup> Cattle killing was again widespread in the West Kimberley, although the police managed to capture (in their own words) 'fifteen out of forty or fifty known cattle killers'. The Chief Protector noted in his Aborigines Report of 1905 that 156 Aborigines were convicted in the East and West Kimberley area for cattle stealing in the same year. In the militant tradition

of Pigeon, another black patriot 'Major', a servant in the employ of Texas Downs Station, in combination with two other militants, 'Nipper' and 'Dibby', attacked a homestead at Blackfellows Creek, killing two men, George Fettel and Thomas Davidson. After killing another man named McDonald at Texas Downs Station, the three patriots retreated into the bush with a party of police on their track. In the fight that followed, the three were finally killed.<sup>31</sup>

During his travel in the region in 1909, the Chief Protector got a first hand taste of Aboriginal resistance. Knowing from previous cases the elaborate intelligence system which the Aborigines had developed, it is quite probable that when they set fire to grass around the Chief Protector's camp, they in fact knew the important status of the person they were harassing.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps more important than this aside, was the Protector's sorrowful belief that gaol was breaking down tribal feuds and disputes. This is further proof of the old adage that repression breeds resistance. Furthermore he reveals (though not consciously) that struggle had created a new unity among the Aborigines who had replaced tribal fights with cattle killing. The liberating power of practical revolutionary struggle was also demonstrated in his report by the fact that Aboriginal women had taken to cattle killing when their men were in gaol.

Of some interest is the sort of political content attached to the Board of Protection that one would have expected long to have passed or been assumed in the functions of the Police Department. Particularly in the first years of the century the Chief Protector seems to have taken on the same concern with Aboriginal attacks as did the Commissioner of Police. The real function of the Protector was to secure Aboriginal obedience to colonial settlement and this had not changed since Hutt's time. It was most probably because of the radicalization occurring in the gaols that the Chief Protector's 1910 Report called for the new political tactics of arresting black 'ringleaders'. Also, behind the scenes no doubt the Chief Protector had a hand in setting up the Aboriginal Mooloolah cattle station as an attempt to stop attacks. This buying off tactic failed as cattle killing continued vigorously. It is not surprising to read in the 1912 Report of the Aborigines Department that Aboriginal resistance was not confined to a few Northern outlying districts:

*Taking them as a whole the Aborigines of our State are like a lot of irresponsible children, and should be treated as such, and the sooner they are taught that they must obey our laws the better it will be for themselves and those who are developing the cattle industry of our far North.*<sup>33</sup>

The Police Commissioner's 1922 Report indicated the main



areas of black resistance by listing of police patrols at the following places — Halls Creek, Roebourne, Fitzroy, Derby, Turkey Creek, Marble Bar, Wyndham, Port Hedland, Whim Creek, Nullagine.

Viewing the whole picture of Aboriginal resistance to British colonial settlement in Western Australia from the benefit of hindsight, the 1920s were the unfortunate years of the organized and successful effort of the authorities to crush and clean out Aboriginal militancy, particularly in the Kimberleys.<sup>37</sup> The period between 1920 and 1930 was the decade of the 'punitive expedition' — the time when forces of well armed Western Australian mounted police, on the pretext of apprehending 'aboriginal criminals' indiscriminately shot, murdered, or in official language 'dispersed' bush warriors, located in areas of resistance. Rather like the United States imperialist aggressor in Vietnam, the logic seemed to be if you cannot isolate and eliminate the fish, the next best thing is to destroy the sea he swims in.

On the 23 July 1922, at the Durack River, a police party rounded up a number of Aborigines and killed them. The Chief Protector referred to the massacre in the following words:

No doubt the police did their duty according to time honoured methods instilled into the force from the earliest days of the State's history, but ... these methods are not in keeping with the times. They can only force them [the natives] to regard us as their enemies and postpone our chance of making them law-abiding and useful people for many years to come.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Chief Protector had enough tactical sense to know on this occasion that outright murder was not the best way to win Aboriginal obedience, the significant thing in this affair is his confirmation that the police were performing their official duty, and that such murderous actions were matters of policy and not unfortunate mistakes. The most infamous punitive expedition (which gained public exposure in a Royal Commission) was the massacre and burning of the bodies of over twenty Aborigines by police in 1926 in the East Kimberleys at Gotege-Merrie, Nowerre and Dala. It is not our business to relate how the police clumsily tried to hide the evidence of its dirty work and went to copybook lengths to ensure that no crucial witnesses were available to appear against them, but suffice it to say that despite the Commission's finding, the perpetrators of this massacre were not brought to trial and the blame was conveniently shifted onto the shoulders of the black trackers. Several matters raised by the Royal Commission are of particular relevance to the character of Black resistance: Firstly the statement of Overheu, a member of the expedition, that Nulla-Nulla station, in which he was a partner,

had been practically ruined by the depredations of bush Aborigines (the loss sustained being 5 000 pounds) clearly shows that cattle killing was still being conducted by militant Aborigines.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, the realisation that black trackers were in danger of their lives if unarmed, proves that the patriotic Aborigines had learned their struggle was not based on the colour of skin, but rather on 'political' loyalty.<sup>37</sup>

If the 1920s was the decade of the punitive expedition, the 1930s saw its end product, the concentration camps. The task which the authorities faced was by cunning and violence to herd the Aborigines into so-called settlements, strategic hamlets. A Royal Commission in 1935 revealed these native settlements resembled nothing less than prisons with public whipping and solitary confinement as punishments for disobedience.<sup>38</sup> If concentration camp seems too harsh a description, then the Annual Report of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 1936, completely validates its use:

The number of convictions for enticing natives from a reserve increased from three to fifteen, (especially in the Moor River Native Settlement).<sup>39</sup>

Even at this late stage, Aboriginal patriots continued their efforts to win freedom for their people, by driving back their colonial tyrants, the British-backed big pastoralists.

#### REFERENCE

- 1 What is interesting is that between 1842 and 1848, 1000 black people have been lost somewhere. Even more significant is that the 1842 figure was given for settled districts whilst the 1848 one was given for the far more encompassing 'located parts'. It could be surmised that between 1842-1848 1000 black people have died, perhaps killed by the colonialists in the wake of occupation.
- 2 For whatever reason or motive, P. Hasluck in his book, *Black Australians*, incorrectly adds in the Murchison District to give a total of 11,000 black people to 5000 white people. The author has subtracted 2000 as an approximate figure for the Murchison District, to give a figure of 9000.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 171 (*West Australian Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 1, Part 10, *The Diary of Mrs Anne Friend*, p. 210).
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 174 (Moore's attitudes towards the black people evolved from forebearance, at the time of the quote, to bitter resentment later on.)
- 5 Bunbury, H. W. *Early Days in West Australia*, p. 59
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 183
- 7 *Statistical Report Upon the Colony of Western Australia*, (drawn up to end of June 1837), Governor Stirling.
- 8 Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 62



<sup>9</sup> In Brown's own report to the Government published in *Perth Gazette*, 19 and 24 May 1865, the numbers of black people involved in the ambush was listed as twenty-five. His pamphlet *Pioneers of North-West Australia*, first published in 1913, produced the number of 200 to 300, though our relating of the incident takes evidence from both accounts. The military preparedness from 1913 and the numbers dead from 1865 suggest that the picture presented here is probably the most realistic.

<sup>10</sup> Western Australian Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* (Fairbairn to Colonial Secretary)

<sup>16</sup> Durack, P. M. *Pioneering the East Kimberleys*. (West Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings, Vol. 2, Part 14, p. 27)

<sup>17</sup> West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Papers respecting the necessity of increased Police Protection for the settlers in the Kimberley District from the Aboriginal Natives—Journal of Sergeant Sherry, p. 8

<sup>20</sup> West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Haydon, p. 325

<sup>32</sup> West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> 1918 must have been a year of militant activity, leading to repression in the Hall's Creek District. Eight black people were arrested for murder, five given the death penalty. (*Police Commissioner's Report for 1920*).

<sup>35</sup> *Report of Royal Commission of Inquiry into Alleged Killing and Burning of Bodies of Aborigines in East Kimberley and Into Police Methods when Effecting Arrests*, p. xiv.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii

<sup>38</sup> Royal Commission, 1935.

<sup>39</sup> West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

## 8 Northern Territory

The first known instance of colonialist aggression was in 1623 when a Portuguese ship, in search of gold, was shipwrecked on the coast of Arnhem Land. While there, they found sufficient quantities for them to make plans for mining it. After their rescue they returned at first opportunity for 'their' gold. The Aboriginal people had other ideas. Quickly realising the aggressive intent of the Portuguese robbers, the Aborigines sent the Portuguese packing. Driving home their advantage, the Australian patriots killed several of the invaders. Following this ignoble and crushing defeat the Portuguese forgot about the gold deposits in the great Southland.

Nearly twenty years later, in 1644 the Dutch colonialist explorer Abel Tasman sailed along the entire coastline of what is now the Northern Territory. From his charts and records we know that Tasman landed at the mouth of the Victoria River but that he was sent on his way most unceremoniously by the justly indignant Aboriginal people. Their correct actions in defending their sovereignty led Tasman to denounce them bitterly, calling them a malicious and miserable race of savages. Had they welcomed Tasman, sold out to Dutch colonialism, given up their independence and sovereignty for a few 'favours', then, and only then, would they have been seen as 'reasonable' and 'civilized'. It was an important action, for as Darwin historian, Lockwood, put it, 'They prevented him from seeing much of the new country'.<sup>1</sup>

These were but the first of many victories won by the Aborigines in defence of their land. Only after a long and bloody conflict, marked by great heroism on the part of the Aborigines and cowardice and treachery on the part of the British aggressors, was Aboriginal military resistance halted, some time in the 1930s.

British colonialist expansion made its first move into the Northern Territory in 1823, when Fort Dundas was set up on Melville Island.

For a month the colonialists saw no signs of the Aboriginal



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