

The Black Resistance

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

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Widescope

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Western Australian Parliamentary Papers.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (Fairbairn to Colonial Secretary)

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

¹⁷ West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ 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

²⁰ West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Haydon, p. 325

³² West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ 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*).

³⁵ *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.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. vi

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiii

³⁸ Royal Commission, 1935.

³⁹ West Australian Parliamentary Papers.

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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'.¹

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

people, although they knew they were there. Then implements such as axes began to disappear. The Aborigines used every chance to take the enemies' tools from him. From these they made excellent spear heads.

The colonialists soon brought more sheep and introduced cattle to the island, both of which would become targets of Aboriginal spears.

It soon became apparent to the Aboriginal people that the military aggression by the colonialists was not only intended to be permanent, but was growing. The colonialists had high hopes for Fort Dundas. A Captain Bremner and a Lieutenant Rowe both gave glowing reports of the Fort's 'possibilities'. They recorded their belief that Fort Dundas would become a place of importance in the eastern world.²

Faced with the realities of this growing threat the Aborigines stepped up their struggle. By 1827, the tide of battle was moving rapidly in their favour, with the colonialists confined to the Fort and its immediate surrounds. Weekly, often daily, attacks were made upon the aggressor forces which, by this stage, were totally harassed and bedraggled.

Soldiers feared for their lives every time they went outside the Fort; some were actually picked off while doing guard duty on the heavily constructed and defended fortress. Because the fort was so heavily defended by cannon and shot, the Aboriginal warriors could not hope to over-run it. The Aborigines were aware of this and therefore followed tactics that were sure to give them final victory. They began a war of attrition. Every work team that dared go outside the fort walls was attacked. Soon, hardly any moved out at all. The fort was put under siege.

By their fierce resistance, and the clever application of military tactics, the Aboriginal patriots made Fort Dundas a living hell for the aggressors who began to plead with their colonial masters to be taken away from 'this vile island'. In 1829, Fort Dundas was 'abandoned', or more correctly, the British invaders were driven off, their tails between their legs, after their inglorious and thorough defeat.

Over the next thirty years, colonialist activities in this area of Australia were limited. Not only did the aggressors have their hands full with the dogged resistance of the Aborigines all over the continent, but, up until the 1860s, the colonialists had no need for new markets in this area, and so no serious explorations of the north were undertaken. In fact, with the patriotic war of resistance raging fiercely in all corners of the mainland during much of this period, it is highly likely that the colonialists could not have

afforded, or handled, the opening up of another frontier — which would inevitably become another military frontier. Only after the military victory of the struggle in N.S.W., Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania did the colonialists fix their profit hungry eyes on northern Australia.

Some aggressions however did take place. Most notable was that carried out by the H.M.S. *Beagle*. In 1839, under the excuse of doing 'survey work', the *Beagle* was exploring parts of the northern coast, obviously looking for areas suitable for commercial 'development'. In doing so, the captain had cause to name two places along the coastline, both of people's struggle — Escape Cliffs and Treachery Bay.³

In 1845, Leichhardt passed through the area gathering information. Eleven years later an exploration team led by Gregory, returning to Brisbane was attacked on the Roper River.⁴

In the 1860s, the first cattle station was formed in the Territory. Called Avon Downs, it was situated on the Barkley, and while information is difficult to come by, it appears the land was liberated within a very short period of time, the station being 'abandoned'.

In 1869, the site of Darwin (then called Palmerstown) was surveyed. The event did not go unchallenged by the Aborigines who attacked the surveying team, killing one and wounding another.

With the surveying of Darwin, a site which, significantly, had excellent port facilities, colonialist land grabbing entered a new and definitely higher level of development. Dispossession of the Aboriginal people was to begin in earnest. It also marked a new stage in the Aborigines' stubborn, bitter, and heroic defence of their land, a struggle that was to rage unabated for well over sixty years.

In 1870, the Overland Telegraph line, connecting Adelaide to Darwin, and Australia to the intercontinental telegraph lines was begun. Its construction represented a serious invasion of Aboriginal land, not only cutting it right down the middle, but representing the fruits of Stuart's dirty work eight years previously.

The timing and hasty construction of the telegraph was the product of competition between the colonial capitalists in South Australia and Queensland who both wanted the (financial) honour of its construction. It was because of this 'battle' that the construction of the telegraph was a top priority project for the enemy, being completed in only eighteen months.

Pike's book, *Frontier Territory*, is, in part, dedicated to the builders of the telegraph. This, in itself, speaks volumes about its importance to the aggressors. The line's completion gave the colonialists an excuse to shower lavish praise upon themselves and the builders in particular. But this was all a load of rubbish, sickening plaudits which serve to cover up their blatant aggression against the Aboriginal people who resisted its construction bitterly. It was precisely because of the Aboriginal resistance that the aggressors praised themselves so much.

In the harsh centre, the aggressors were tormented by the elements and the constant attacks they suffered at the hands of the defending Australian warriors who raided the invader's camps constantly, making off with huge amounts of tools, wire and insulators.

In the territory itself, nine telegraph stations were built. These were at Charlotte Waters (on the South Australian-Northern Territory border), Alice Springs, Barrow Creek, Tennant Creek, Powell Creek, Daly Waters, Katherine Creek and Pine Creek. The stations were all stone forts, each having loopholes in the walls to help fend off attacks launched upon them by Aborigines defending their land.⁵

Many times while the line was being built Aborigines made attacks against these outposts of aggression. Often the invaders were tricked by the apparent friendship of the tribes. At Attack Creek, for instance, Aboriginal warriors approached the outpost calmly and seemingly, without weapons. This tactic lulled the well armed aggressors into a feeling of safety and they momentarily dropped their guard. At this point, the warriors picked up their spears which they had been trailing behind their toes and attacked. It was only the heavy fire power of the invaders that prevented their utter destruction.

The effectiveness of the Aborigines' constant harassment of the invader's supply lines and work teams was very significant. An invader, John Lewis, recalls that one night, as he and his companion approached a telegraph construction team they were met by a volley of shots, not from the Aboriginal people, but from their fellow invaders. So jumpy and trigger happy had they been made by the defending Aborigines that the invaders mistook Lewis and his companion (who were approaching in a perfectly normal manner on horseback), for local warriors.

Completion of the Overland Telegraph did not mean that the Aborigines stopped their attacks on it. Quite the contrary; whenever they had the chance, the Aboriginal people continued their policy of raids and harassment. At the Barrow Creek station, for example, on 23 February 1874, the Aborigines launched a swift

and well executed attack upon the station. The station staff were taken by complete surprise, being outside its protective walls. The superintendent and the linesman fell under a hail of spears, while a third man, though badly wounded managed to reach the safety of the stockade.

Once completed the telegraph stations had a twofold purpose. Obviously, one of these was to relay colonialist messages, but the other purpose was of equal importance. This was their role as bases from which areas hitherto unknown to the invader could be explored. They were bases of aggression.

In 1874 Perrain and Borridaite, whose history of aggression for British colonialism included the African continent as well as Australia, set out from Yam Creek telegraph station. They never returned, paying for their 'exploitation' with their lives. It is worth noting that these same men had claimed that the Northern Territory was every bit as 'wild' as the African continent.

Some two years later, McMin, a pioneer surveyor, and two other men were 'exploring' the lower Katherine and Daly River country for the purpose of gathering information on the nature and suitability of the land for colonialist exploitation. On the Daly River, these invaders were beaten back and forced, by the ferocity of the people's defence, to give up their aggressions.

It was around this time that the first moves were made by the invaders to establish themselves on a wider scale (in the 1870s, Darwin had a population of some 600) and carry out serious exploitation of Aboriginal land. To this end, attempts were made to establish a cattle industry. The invaders' early attempt met with dismal failure.

In September 1873, 500 head of cattle left Northern Queensland bound for the Pine Creek gold fields. Aborigines attacked them constantly, spearing many. Drovers had many narrow escapes and wild stampedes became the norm. Supplies were lost because of the vigilance and ferocity of the Aborigines' attacks. To a man, the drovers deserted the herd. Nation and Elvoy, in charge of the herd, had to abandon it and head for the nearest outpost which was Daly Waters some 320 kilometres west. Without pause the Aborigines pursued them ruthlessly all the way pressing home the attack on many occasions. Only Elvoy made the Daly Waters station. Nation was dead, and all the cattle were gone.

The next attempt by the invaders met with the same fate as the first, only this time it was the invader Lewis who felt the fury of the people's resistance. In 1875, Lewis formed the Coburg Cattle Station and overlanded to Port Essington where he intended to set up a buffalo station at the Coburg Peninsula.

If he intended stocking the lease with cattle he soon changed his mind. Solid

ranks of spear-armed warriors that Lewis and his men encountered on the E. Alligator would have been the main reason they barred the entry of the first white man to take up pastoral country in Arnhem Land.⁶

Over the next few days the Australians launched three very determined attacks upon the invaders; according to Lewis, at one stage, their (the invaders') rifles were smoking hot.

Upon their arrival at Port Essington they soon discovered that the Aborigines of the area knew of the attacks made upon Lewis at the Alligator. The tribes had been communicating by smoke signals, the actual message that was relayed to Lewis being — 'White fellow coming through here, and we had a row with them.'

It was only in the late 1870s that enough cattle to start the pastoral industry came to the territory. To do so, claims Pike, the cattle kings had to 'fight their way through ranks of spear armed warriors determined to defend their ancient tribal lands from white invasion.'⁷

Invaders, like Costello, who set up a station in the Limmern River valley, found themselves in a situation where it seemed as though the country was inhabited by thousands of hostile Aborigines. As events unfolded it became clear that Costello's fears were soundly based.

Faced with colonial invasion during the mid 1880s, the Anvella, Mbiah and Goodanji tribes quickly united their forces under the leadership of the great people's warrior, Mirrimicki. Faced with a common and better-armed foe, the Aboriginal people used tactics of constant harassment, killing invaders when opportunities arose and destroying their cattle in the fight to hold onto the land. The terrain was most suitable for this form of people's warfare — in the ranges at the headwaters of the McArthur and Limmern Rivers there were hundreds of hideouts from which the warriors could launch their attacks and swiftly retreat to when the invaders hit back.

The first invader to fall victim to people's justice for his role in the colonialist aggression was one of Costello's stockmen. He fell within sight of Costello's homestead. The Aborigines set out to trick the stockman by appearing friendly and inviting him to watch a corroboree. With his defences down he was executed.⁸

Shortly after this, two fencemen, and a wandering parson, camped near the Wickham River were killed. So vigilant were the Aboriginal warriors in this period that it was suicidal for any of the invaders to go alone in the region unless heavily armed.

During the 1890s, the developing capitalist economy in Australia suffered great crisis and Costello had to abandon his four stations in the Northern Territory. While the capitalist economic crisis

was the major factor in his withdrawal from the Northern Territory, there is little doubt the patriotic resistance waged by the Aboriginal people had made significant blows against Costello's economic position. The land was liberated.

In the same period two other invaders, Aries and Broad, opened the McArthur River station. The Aboriginal people, under the leadership of Mirrimicki gave the new invaders a rougher time than Costello.

The homestead was attacked four times and only its solid construction and the weight of fire power prevented the Aborigines over-running the station.

Broad never lived to enjoy the results of his ill-gotten property gains. Caught in the open one day, he was speared to death. With the Aborigines closing in on three sides Aries fled to the outstation, Broadmere. With the cook, Aries made off for McArthur River homestead — which was attacked shortly afterwards. Broadmere was thoroughly liberated of all useful material.

After this attack on the homestead, the invaders sent out a punitive expedition. The Aborigines, utilizing guerilla tactics, withdrew to the safety of the nearby hills. After Broad's death, the spearing and constant harassment of cattle continued for years. At Broadmere, Aborigines killed an invader known to be especially 'hard' on the tribes.

In 1883, with a thousand head of cattle, the McDonald brothers left Goulburn and overlanded to the Kimberleys. It took them eighteen months to reach the overland trail in the Northern Territory. The Aborigines on seeing the arrival of the huge herd had no doubts as to how to deal with aggression on this scale. They attacked the herd at once, greeting the McDonalds with a show of spears, scattering cattle in all directions in a mad stampede.

From this moment the invaders were given no peace at all but were subjected to an intense and nerve wracking trip. At the Limmern River an all out attack was once again launched. Again, only through vastly superior weapons, were the invaders able to fend off the determined attack.

This overland track, the scene of so much of heroic resistance was not the only track where the invader fell before the people's vengeance. In the 1880s especially, the track west of Burketown saw countless numbers of cattle and horses speared by the Aboriginal defenders. Over the years many invaders were killed on this track and any of the cattle drovers who contemplated using it had to expect that the least that would happen would be constant cattle losses through spearing, the maiming of horses, the looting

of stores and the stampeding of the rapidly panic stricken cattle. The invaders came to know from the actions of jumpy horses that Aboriginal warriors were constantly with them, hidden by the protective caves of their beloved land.

During this period the invaders lived under a state of siege. Vast cattle stations (often covering areas as big as Wales, Holland, or Belgium) were subjected to bitter campaigns of people's war aimed at their removal. Aborigines inflicted vast economic losses on the invaders, many of whom were forced to pull out before the strong and united militancy of the Aboriginal people.

It appears that the brutal force used by the punitive expedition was regarded by many influential colonialists to be in excess of what was needed at the time. It was, in short, a question of tactics, and the public airing of these tactical considerations has given us valuable insights into the real nature of the colonial state and its relation to the Aborigines.

The South Australian *Register* covered this revelation from R. Morice, a Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory and a believer in the use of liberal tactics of oppression, as against those of open force. In speaking of the punitive expedition he revealed that:

The man who formed this party insisted that they should be allowed to go unaccompanied by a single policeman. The Minister of Justice and Education is reported to have hesitated about giving his consent to their going, but finally yielded to the urgency of the Governor Resident, who strongly pressed it. As a slave to his conscience, or to save appearances, he gave, however, instructions that they were on no account to fire on the natives unless in self defence.⁹

It should surprise no one that the highest levels of Colonial Government were implicated in such vicious acts of suppression. Their task of administering power for British Colonialism demanded such actions.

The *Northern Territory Times* felt that the punitive expedition was quite justified. The situation was too grave to worry about 'legal' considerations. The punitive party was justified, it said, because:

They suppressed what was undoubtedly a carefully organised rising of a numerous tribe of natives, having for its object the utter annihilation of the handful of white settlers ...¹⁰

And from the colonialist's point of view, that of the aggressor, this was quite consistent with the realities of their situations. The South Australian *Register* summed it up well when it said:

It is quite clear that unless the government do something in the way of providing effective police protection in the interior of the Territory, the attempt of extending settlement and developing the natural resources of the country must be abandoned.¹¹

An editorial of the *Northern Australian* stated that there was:

a necessity for using extreme measure to command obedience to our laws, as experience has already proved to us that to keep a state of order among the Aborigines in a young country harsh measures are indispensable in the beginning.¹²

In these honest lines, the *Northern Australian* laid bare the role of the law in the dispossession of the Aboriginal people from their land.

As a final word on the Daly River killings, it is worth noting the range of tactics used by the colonial ruling class to quell the popular struggle. After the killings there came a bloody repression, and then, in 1886, the colonialists called in their ever reliable reserve forces — the missionaries — to contain and undermine the struggle of the Aboriginal people of the Daly River area. As if to demonstrate the effectiveness, and hence necessity, to the process of colonial dispossession, Pike writes that they taught 'the warriors to forsake their spears for garden hoes and help grow maize, cassava and vegetables.' But their full objectives (to turn the Aborigines through Christianity, into useful units of capitalist production) failed dismally as the Aborigines refused to forsake their rich culture for the colonialist one. The mission was abandoned in 1899 and was not re-established until 1955.

The fights that took place within the ruling colonialist circles did not alter the course of Aboriginal struggle. As a case in point, Rosewood station was the scene of massive stock losses caused through Aboriginal guerilla raids. The 'owners', the Duracks, had to call in the police in a vain attempt to turn the tide of struggle. As just payment for this, the black patriots killed the aggressor soldier (Constable Collins) for his trouble. Some years earlier, in 1886, the then 'owner' of this colonial outpost, 'Big Johnnie' Durack had been killed by the Aborigines: '... after the death of Big Johnnie Durack a chain of fires blazed defiance from range to range'.¹³

The colonialist land grabber, Bradshaw, was a major aggressor in this period, continuing his activities into the twentieth century. He was involved in the actual and attempted theft of absolutely staggering areas of Aboriginal land.

Bradshaw's first colonial enterprise was in the 1890s when he stole a tract of land from the Aborigines in the East Kimberley regions on the Forrest River. In reply, the Aborigines delivered such a serious blow to Bradshaw's enterprise that the land was quickly liberated and Bradshaw's men thrown out.

But aggressors of Bradshaw's ilk did not give up so easily. The smell of profit drove him to more land grabbing. Bradshaw's

Run, his next enterprise, had a coastline of one hundred miles between Port Keats and the Victoria River. On this run Bradshaw had 20 000 head of cattle. His stockmen were all heavily armed, constantly in fear of Aboriginal reprisals, yet in spite of these precautions, people's raids inflicted massive losses every year. Aboriginal activities claimed hundreds upon hundreds of Bradshaw's cattle every year. Even in 1940 the cattle were still nervy because of the continued spearing activities of the Aborigines, who, 111 years before had won their first victory over British colonialism with their expulsion of Fort Dundas from Melville Island.¹⁴

Early this century Bradshaw returned to England to get the British ruling class interested in backing a grandiose and criminal scheme to dispossess the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land and use it for large capitalist agricultural and grazing enterprises. As a beginning to this scheme he grabbed 26 000 square kilometres of Arnhem Land and called it Arafura.

Arafura was situated very close to the liberated area of land which the colonialists had called Florida station. Aborigines responded to this new aggression by launching a remarkably swift, effective and powerful campaign to expel the invader. Within two years 1 000 head of cattle had been destroyed; the station homestead attacked with the death of several gardeners; and the herds crazed by the incessant stampeding and scare tactics of the Aboriginal defenders. The campaign ended in victory. Inside of four years the land was freed and Bradshaw's dreams of an Arnhem Land profit bonanza had been shattered. Thus the Aborigines had delivered a strong blow to imperialist designs on Arnhem Land. And to add insult to injury, in 1905 an Aboriginal warrior crept aboard Bradshaw's lugger, the *Bolweria*, as it lay in Port Keats and killed all the crew, one of whom was Bradshaw's brother.

But 'established' pioneers were by no means the only aggressors subjected to the vengeance of the resistance. We will probably never know how many explorers, pioneers and other colonialist agents fell to the resistance or were beaten off by it. We do know that it was substantial. Take the case of Milligan and Lyger. These two men had their supply waggons attacked at Jasper's Gorge (between the Victoria River Downs and the Depot Landing). Both teamsters were badly wounded but managed to escape. The Aboriginal assailants took everything they could use from the invader's supplies and destroyed the rest. This was a major setback to Milligan and Lyger as they had lost a year's supply of goods before getting anywhere.

Notwithstanding Federation, the British rulers continued to inflict their aggressive policies upon the Aboriginal people. The Aborigines in turn rigorously continued their resistance.

In many areas the aggressors were still under a virtual state of siege. In 1905 a man called Anning bought the Wollogarang station. Shortly after he was admonished by the station's manager for smoking outside one night. The manager's reasoning is instructive:

Some night a blackfellow will see the glow of your pipe, but you wouldn't see him until you felt the spear go through you.¹⁵

While Anning learnt his lesson and managed to stay clear of the vengeance of the resistance fighters, others did not. In late 1910 a man named Stewart was killed south of the Tanami and a couple of years later two prospectors, Cronin and Smith, heading east through Pintubi Land, came across a jealously guarded water-hole of the Aboriginal people. Cronin was killed, the camel speared and all the supplies taken. Smith managed to get away.

Over much of the Territory unknown numbers of cattle were claimed by Aboriginal marksmen. The main thrust of the Aboriginal resistance — hitting the invaders' pocket and causing him to suffer economically — was going on continually. But the invaders themselves were always the ultimate target when the opportunity presented itself.

In 1918 it was decided that Condon, the manager of the Bullitta station, was to be killed. An Aboriginal warrior came up to the homestead and asked Condon to come and attend a very sick warrior some half mile distant. Condon armed himself and came. Behind a thick trunked baobab tree an Aboriginal warrior lay in waiting for Condon. As he passed he threw his spear. Unfortunately, Condon was only hit in the arm and made it back to the homestead. He did not stay on as manager for long.

Crisp was the next manager of Bullitta station. He did not last long either. On 16 December 1919 Crisp found the carcass of a speared bullock and decided to catch those responsible. He and his two stockmen were well armed with rifles and revolvers. Bullitta station area was regarded as a 'bad' area. Down at a river that ran through the area Crisp came across a group of Aborigines. As he approached, his attention was directed to three armed warriors. Crisp and the stockmen headed towards them. Crisp galloped in pursuit of one that headed for some limestone. As he passed a tree at full gallop a resistance fighter came out and launched his spear. It was a direct hit. Within minutes Crisp was dead. One of the stockmen headed for the nearest police station, which was at Timber Creek, sixty-five kilometres away. On every hilltop fires blazed signalling yet another success to the resistance fighters.

The invaders still regarded the Aboriginal people of this area as 'cheeky' well into the 1920s and, in 1928, about twenty cattle carcasses were found in a gorge.

In 1928, the Aboriginal people of central Australia made a last stand against the invasion of their land. It was an heroic and historic stand. M. Terry, who was participating in an exploration for minerals at the time of this struggle said that the Aboriginal people were driven to take up arms against the invasion of their land. The war, remarks Terry, was marked

by violence, bloodshed, death as the Aborigines attempted to terrorize, burn out and starve the whites who clung to the frontier in the centre.¹⁶

The struggle itself was waged over a diffuse front of some 250 kilometres the centre point of which was the Lander River, about 325 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. Napperley and Coniston stations, Mt. Peak, Ryans Well and Thompson's Rock Hole all figured in the struggle. Aborigines had come from as far away as the Western Australian border, across harsh deserts, to join their comrades in their heroic struggle against the aggressors.

For forty years the aggressor settlers had been trying to 'settle' the land west of the Lander and establish cattle runs. They had never been able to fully succeed in their aims and the period was marked by sporadic resistance. In 1910 gold was discovered near the Western Australian border. The prospectors that followed inevitably gave rise to attempts by the Aborigines to expel the gold seekers. In the same year, Barnes and Leahy were attacked and speared. This was followed by the death of Stewart who was killed while prospecting with two accomplices. Another prospector, Oates, then encountered a 300 strong war party and beat a hasty retreat from the area. Following this, in the early 1920s, Laurie was attacked near the Granites, close to the Western Australian border.

By 1926 the hostility of the Aboriginal people was escalating into what the aggressors called 'open defiance and lawlessness'. In the area east of the Lander, which the settlers had held for years, an Aboriginal raiding party, after spying on the settler Chapman to trace his movements, raided his cache of stores only three days after they had been restocked. What they couldn't take they fouled, making sure that Chapman could not use them.

Later that year, Matthews, a cattleman, took his herd of cattle to Mt. Peak, looking for better grazing areas. Shortly after his cattle had begun to graze a party of Aborigines confronted him. The spokesman of the group told Matthews to leave Aboriginal land:

This land no more longa white fella, longa black fella. White fella can't sit down longa black fella. White man shift.¹⁷

At first Matthews refused to go, letting his cattle continue to graze. He had been named. Within a matter of days the Aborigines had inflicted serious enough casualties to Matthews' herd for him to go. The Aborigines had been quite justified in their demand and perfectly reasonable in their actions to get the trespasser to shift.

By 1928 the situation was intensifying. The Aborigines had resolved that the colonialists had to go. This was not a crazy aim. In nearly 650 000 square kilometres of land in this area there were only 400 whites. And in the area of the struggle they numbered in the dozens. They were, of course, gravely disadvantaged when it came to weaponry, the settlers' arms being ever more sophisticated than their nineteenth century counterparts. Either way, the Aborigines were not going to give up their land without a fight.

In mid 1928 an expedition party in search of gold passed through Tanamis' as they headed on toward the nearest water point on the Lander River 400 kilometres eastward. For much of their journey the Wailri Aborigines kept the invaders under fairly close surveillance without letting themselves be seen. When the right moment presented itself the party decided to attack the trespassers. Waiting until nightfall the party encircled the prospecting party on three sides, firing the grass as they went. The prospectors were soon surrounded on three sides by a maze of fire which was fanned by a brisk breeze. From reports made by prospectors of the attack, this was a frightening moment. Only because of their superior firearms were they able to successfully withdraw from the trap.¹⁸

By August, the Aborigines had developed their overall plan of attack. The struggle was now approaching its climax. Already they had warned the aggressors of their intention to take up arms in defence of their land. The time had come for concerted action. They decided to attack Coniston station and from there, to attack all invaders they came across.¹⁹

They left camp and headed along the Lander River. Before they reached Coniston station they came across the camp of a dingo poisoner called Brooks. Brooks was wary of their approach but was skilfully lulled into a false feeling of safety. He was then killed. One of his attackers was a woman. Before leaving the camp they took all the provisions that could be of use to them and destroyed what remained. They then made for Coniston station.

The owner of Coniston was a man called Stafford. Before the war party reached Coniston, Stafford was forewarned of their plan by a traitorous Aborigine who had worked for Brooks. The important weapon of surprise had been lost. Stafford quickly

turned the station into a fortress and was able to beat off a most determined Aboriginal advance. Wisely, the Aborigines retreated, but through an Aboriginal stockman, continued to send warnings to Stafford and his crew that they would kill every white cattleman in the area beginning with Stafford, and every Aboriginal traitor who helped the whites. Meanwhile, they began destroying Stafford's cattle.

By the sixteenth of the month the Northern Territory police intervened and led punitive parties to capture the Aborigines who had killed Brooks. In collaboration with an organised settler force several violent clashes ensued. Significantly, at one of these punitive expeditions, Stafford was singled out for attack, but unfortunately Stafford escaped injury.

On the 28 August the Aborigines attacked the aggressor Morton, who was very nearly killed.²⁰

Two days later they planned to attack Napperley station. This station was run by Turner and Tillmath, Turner being absent at the time. Realising that while Tillmath was inside the homestead an attack would most likely fail as well as being costly, the Aborigines tried to lure him out. In full view of Tillmath they pretended to beat a young child. The plan almost worked, but Tillmath was warned of the danger by a traitor Aborigine whom he employed. Seeing that the trick was failing the Aborigines taunted Tillmath to come out and fight, saying that the country belonged to them. Tillmath stayed put, and the Aborigines, realising an attack would not succeed, withdrew.

The punitive expeditions that followed these raids claimed many of the patriots' lives, and broke the back of the resistance. An 'official enquiry' followed the massacres. It need hardly be pointed out that it was a whitewash. However the views expressed by a police sergeant at Alice Springs who gave evidence during the enquiry are very instructive. In justifying the punitive expeditions he said:

if severe steps are not taken they will drive the pastoralists out of the country.²¹

Arnhem Land was the last military stronghold of the Aborigines. For the previous 350 years (that we know of) the Aboriginal people had been steadfastly resisting any attempt by the colonialist powers to penetrate the area. Even up to the 1930s, the colonialists regarded it as an unknown area, largely unsettled and unexplored. This fact in itself is indicative of the vigilance of the Aboriginal people.

Attempts to penetrate the area had been made. Land had been seized from the Aborigines only to be liberated in the course of

ruthless struggle. As a Northern Territory policeman of the times said, they were a people with a long history of 'wins'.

In 1929 the Aborigines of Arnhem Land, resenting the intrusion of a group of Japanese fishermen on their shores, attacked and killed them. The police eventually heard of this and moved in to get the 'culprits'. Before the police patrol reached the area the Aborigines learnt of their approach and were making the necessary preparations. A council of elders was held to decide what action should be taken over the police interference into their affairs. It was decided that the patrol must be attacked and driven off.

Over the next two days the police patrol was kept under close surveillance. The police became very apprehensive as they knew they were being watched, and with the reputation of the Arnhem Land Aborigines even the limited imagination of these gentlemen was soon able to realise what was intended for them.

The following day, just after the police broke camp they saw approaching them a war party in crescent formation closing in on them. The Aborigines had thrown down the gauntlet and challenged the aggressors to a fight. The police beat a hasty retreat, assisted by a hail of spears.

But the police aggressors were not going to be let off lightly. In spite of horses the police were doggedly pursued by the Aborigines for some 160 kilometres before they finally outpaced the angered defenders.

After this incident of aggression, the Aborigines vowed to kill any policeman who ventured into their territory. This ultimatum filtered through to the settler forces some time in 1930.

All during 1930 a fake peace existed. The Aboriginal people were ready to back up their words with deeds, but the various components of the settler forces were not game enough to be the test case. But then, in 1931, the Aborigines took the offensive. In collaboration with their comrades on the east side of the Daly who were working for peanut farmers, warriors from the west of the river crossed and ransacked the stores of a man named Higgins. During this period a bushman called Watts was killed at his camp one night. He was soon followed by another bushman, Tetlow, who was killed thirty kilometres west of the Daly.

During 1931 the situation continued to improve. The Aborigines were still resisting bitterly and were strongly united in their aims. A policeman was killed at Blunder Bay. Two prospectors fossicking around for tin in an area that used to be part of Bradshaw's Run, were also killed. They had, according to all accounts, scoffed at suggestions by the edgy settlers to watch out for 'hostile blacks'.

Then, in September, four more Japanese fishermen were killed

and their lugger destroyed. Hall, in his *Dreamtime Justice* was able to reconstruct this event, probably from information supplied to him by 'black' trackers (one of the police trackers, Big Pat, was a cousin to Wonggo, the leader of the Aboriginal people of the area) or from participants sometime after the event.

In September a Japanese lugger with four crewmen landed on eastern Arnhem Land. They came in search of a seafood found amongst the rocks, with the intention of making the Aborigines do all the labouring work entailed in reaping the harvest. This was not how the Aborigines had things planned.

Immediately teenage girls were sent out to the boat to fraternize with the Japanese. They were sent in order to spy upon them, to observe conditions on the lugger, and to begin to ease the tensions of the Japanese. But the Japanese remained wary. The militancy of the Aboriginal people was too well known for them to be otherwise. It took patience and skill, and two weeks, to lure them into the trap.

After consulting the elders, Wonggo agreed to provide the Japanese with labour. Even so, the Japanese remained heavily armed while on shore. It took two weeks of patient confidence-building before the Japanese disarmed themselves by leaving their arms in a stack on the beach. This was what the Aborigines had been waiting for.

Three groups of warriors waited in readiness behind the sand dunes. The first were to cut the Japanese off from their weapons; the second to charge in and kill; and the third were to prevent any of the Japanese from reaching their dinghy. To maintain the appearance of normality Wonggo went down to the beach to fish. When he had finished he gave the signal for the attack. As with the last group of Japanese fishermen, the attack went perfectly. Everything which the Japanese had that was useful was taken. The rest, including the lugger, was destroyed.

When the authorities heard of the killings they quickly sent a police party of nine (including six trackers). Hall was one of the nine. He described the mission as 'suicide'. They headed first for the Christian Mission on Groote Eylandt to use the missionaries' launch in their attack. It was, says Hall, to be 'a combined land and sea action'. As was to be expected from such colonialist agents as the missionaries, they were most eager to be of assistance. The missionaries were very agitated. They had heard that the mainland Aborigines planned to wipe them out and liberate their 'flock'. The Aborigines made no bones about it. The missionaries had a group of half-caste girls corralled at the mission. These girls were Aborigines and belonged with their people.

The police helped the missionaries make a few preparations and hastened off toward the mainland on their mission of aggression. Realising that the great vigilance of the Aborigines would be a severe problem they stopped at Woodah Island in an attempt to rekindle tribal differences by enlisting island Aborigines to help in their aggression. For this trick to work, the cooperation of one of the islanders was essential. This man was Tuckiar, described by Hall as a leader and a tough egg.

Tuckiar was a man who had no love of the settler forces. He treated them with the respect their firearms warranted, but suffered no illusion as to the nature of the intentions. Though still a relatively young man, he was no novice to the struggle. The missionaries had long described him as a 'bad hat', mixed up in a lot of trouble, a 'criminal'.

In late 1932, Tuckiar and his comrades had lured two traders ashore to look at a collection of turtle shells on which the traders hoped to make a big profit at Darwin. Though armed, they were quickly disposed of even though one of the traders, a man called Hogan, had been warned in Darwin about the 'hostile blacks' of the area. Only a few months later, Tuckiar and his men were to take on the settler police patrol and give them a lesson in military tactics.

In accord with their plan the police left Groote Eylandt and headed for Woodah Island in an attempt to gain Tuckiar's support. Tuckiar had other ideas. On seeing the approaching police launch, the militants hurriedly left the beach and made for the safety of the forest.

Next morning, when the police landed Tuckiar and his men remained concealed, but sent a group of women out to dig for yams. As planned the women were discovered and interrogated. They told the settler police that the men had gone fishing and would be back later. It was a worrying situation for the aggressors.

Then a group of men were seen landing in canoes some distance off. The police set off in pursuit, leaving McColl and one of the trackers behind with the captives. Suddenly, a clicking sound came from the jungle. The women all responded to it and stood up. McColl was worried by this and eagerly accepted one of the women's offer to take him to the Aborigines hidden in the jungle. This must have been a jubilant moment for the women who knew that the tapping was a signal that one of the women was to guide the aggressor into the dense jungle and to a small clearing where the Aboriginal patrols lay in waiting. The plan went to perfection. A highly significant development of this episode was discovered by the police. The story of the execution of McColl had spread up and down the coast — Aboriginal children were now playing at

spearing policemen with their toy spears.

A second policeman, Mahoney, was attacked by a small band of patriots and literally had his head shaved. He emptied his pistols into the jungle and ran for it. The police had been beaten and demoralised and Hall reckoned that at least fifty well-armed men, with supplies for one year were needed to conduct the sort of activity they were on about.

The open challenge to the police, the unity between Aboriginal workers east of the Daly River and those on the coast near Groote Eylandt (a distance of some 325 kilometres), the death of McColl, these represented a high point in the struggle for independence waged by the Aborigines of this period. Yet, after the death of McColl the resistance suddenly appeared to stop. It is difficult to know why this happened and what factors led the Aboriginal people to stop their armed struggle.

We do know that the missionaries played a big part in this. After McColl's death, missionaries from Groote Eylandt went out and deceived Tuckiar into surrendering and then talked the Aborigines on the mainland to stop struggling. Wonggo and his comrades may have been tricked by the missionaries, but a more probable reason was that they were offered significant concessions by the authorities to stop them uniting with other Aborigines across a 325 kilometre front. Certainly, Aboriginal strategy needed to change. A struggle for complete independence was no longer feasible. Settlement was now a permanent reality. A degree of territorial independence was not, however, an unrealistic aim. After many, many generations of struggle these Aborigines realised that it was not possible to expel the colonists. One has to come to terms with reality. It is highly likely that the change in Aboriginal strategy was an attempt at coming to (favourable) terms with the reality of the permanence of European settlement.

Tuckiar's fate should not pass without comment. After his arrest he was taken to Darwin and tried. He was found not guilty and released. He began to head for home and was never heard of again. He had served his people well.

REFERENCE

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- 2 Pike, G. *Frontier Territory*, p. 6
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 15 and 17
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 1
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 79
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 163
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 164
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 206
- 9 Markus, *From the Barrel of a Gun*, p. 18
- 10 Markus, p. 31
- 11 Markus, p. 14
- 12 Markus, p. 29
- 13 Pike, p. 198
- 14 Pike, p. 236
- 15 Pike, p. 235
- 16 Terry, M. *The War of the Warramullas*, p. 2
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 4
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 7
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 8
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 9
- 21 Hall, V. *Dreamtime Justice*.