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A Wild History

The making of Victoria River Pastoral Society

Darrell Lewis

December 2004

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The
Australian National University.**



DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has previously been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and, to my knowledge, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature: Darrell Lewis

Date: 20th December 2004

ABSTRACT

A Wild History: The Making of Victoria River Pastoral Society

This thesis examines the formation of settler society in the Victoria River district of the Northern Territory. It is a fine-grained study of individuals, their stories and their actions, many aspects of which have not been addressed or examined as closely elsewhere in Australia. Within the matrix of this story are characters whose lives give flesh and blood to many of the key icons of European mythology – the brave explorers, the noble pioneers, the ‘wild blacks’, the wild bush and ‘the battler’. Beginning with the experiences of the European explorers and continuing through the period when the big stations were formed and on to the time of the ‘small men’ – cattle duffers, and others with more legitimate aims – the thesis looks closely at the process of settlement. It focuses on the interaction of the whites with the Aborigines, with each other and with the environment, showing how these and other factors laid the foundations of a unique frontier society.

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IMPERIAL-METRIC CONVERSION

Australian currency was based on the pound (£) which consisted of 20 shillings (20/-) of 12 pence each. It was converted to \$2.00 in 1966, but in the late 1800s and early 1900s the pound was worth considerably more than it was in 1966. For example, in 1905 in Queensland the wages for a station hand were £1 per week.

The only other conversions of relevance to this thesis are:

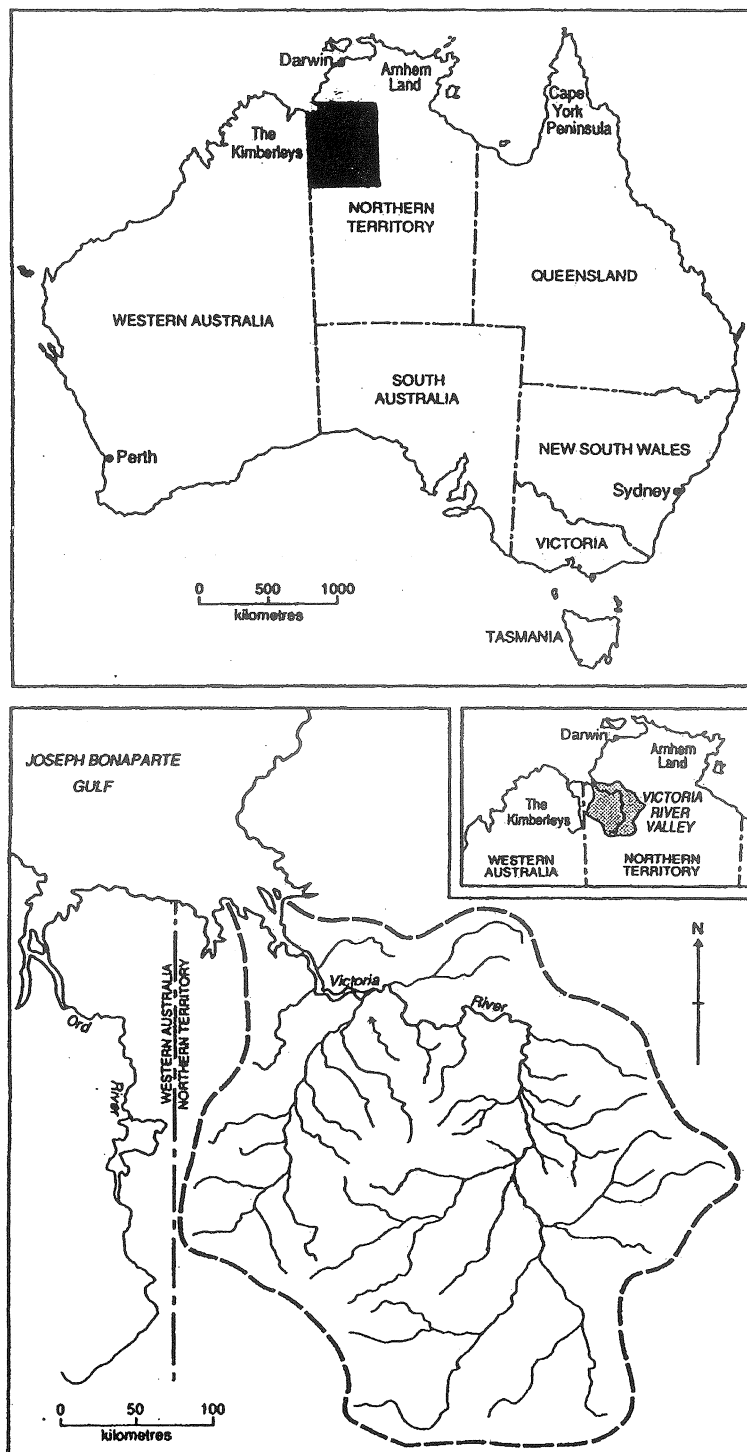
One mile	= 1.6 kilometres
One square mile	= 2.6 square kilometres
One ton	= 1061 kilograms

INTRODUCTION

The Victoria River country of North Australia is almost mythic in its wild beauty, the glamour of horsemen and cattle, the violence and danger of frontier times, and the sheer size and remoteness of stations such as Bluey Buchanan's Wave Hill, Captain Joe's Bradshaw, and Victoria River Downs – VRD or 'The Big Run'. Located between two iconic regions of Australia – the Kimberley to the west and the Gulf Country to the east – it is an immense and complex tract of country, at times sweeping and majestic, at times rugged and grand. The Victoria River itself, along with the Ord, rises in the arid sand plains of the northern Tanami desert and winds northward through increasingly well-watered savanna grasslands and range country, to the estuarine reaches where the highest and most rugged mountains predominate. Mesas and flat-topped ranges of broken sandstone and limestone border much of the Victoria catchment or cut haphazardly across the valley floor through a mosaic of basalt and limestone plains. The region has a wide variety of floristic communities: on part of the high-rainfall coastal fringe there are wetland areas, and 'jungles' line some sections of the rivers and waterholes. Further inland open savanna predominates, but there are patches and swathes of country known locally as 'desert' – spinifex-covered hills, and arid scrub and woodlands. Cliffs and gorges are common, and extensive Mitchell grass downs have provided the foundation for great cattle empires (see plates 1 to 7).

On its eastern side the valley of the Victoria is bound by a 150 kilometre wide belt of savanna country, largely waterless in the dry season. To the west a long stretch of the Ord River flows very close to the Northern Territory-Western Australian border, and much of the eastern Ord River catchment lies on the Northern Territory side, within the Victoria River district. There is no topographical barrier between the two rivers – the major sandstone ranges of the district run roughly east-west and intervening plains provide natural corridors from one valley to the next. However, further to the west there is a barrier of sorts

– a belt of stony, spinifex-covered country of limited pastoral value that separates the best lands of the Fitzroy River from those of the Ord River.



Maps 1 & 2: The Victoria River district, Northern Territory.



Plate 1: A big mesa and cliff-lined ranges on Coolibah station, lower Victoria River (Lewis collection).



Plate 2: The estuarine reach of the lower Victoria River with the Yambarran Range in the background (Lewis collection).



Plate 3: Boab and big sky, Bradshaw station, northern Victoria River district (Lewis collection).



Plate 4: Rolling downs and Mitchell grass country in the central Victoria River district (Lewis collection).



Plate 5: A typical example of the big gorges found in the sandstone country of the Victoria River region. Stokes range north of VRD (Lewis collection).

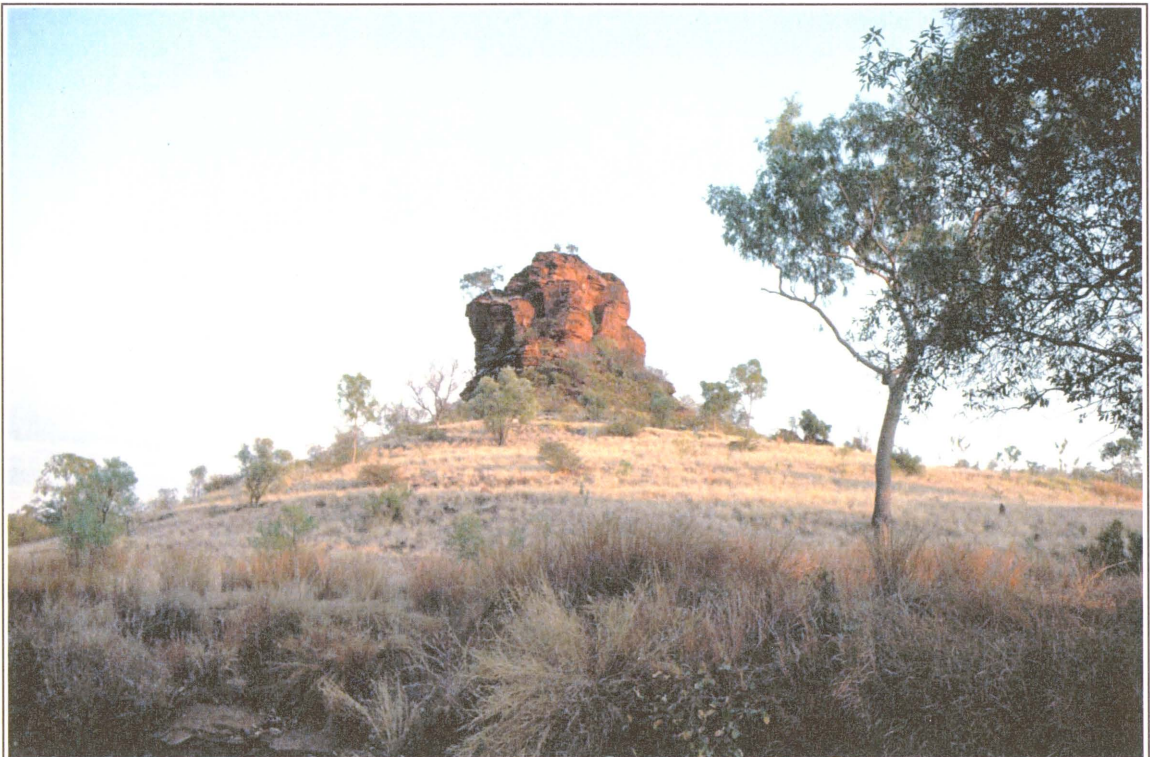


Plate 6: Unusual rock formations are common in the region. This is Gregory's Remarkable Pillar in the central part of VRD (Lewis collection).



Plate 7: Waterhole on the upper Wickham River in the centre of the district (Lewis collection).

Map 2 shows the Victoria River valley which takes up the greater part of the Victoria River district. Officially, the district extends beyond the actual valley though the precise boundaries vary according to context. Only the Northern Territory-Western Australian border remains constant, but in many ways for the inhabitants of the region it exists only as a line on paper. In fact, almost all the boundaries in whatever context are administrative and thus arbitrary. Topographically and biologically the district is part of the Kimberley, and some of the Aboriginal language areas and cattle stations overlap the state border. Stockmen, criminals and some of the early police patrols ranged from one district to another. As a result, in my research I have taken a quite expansive view of the district, following up characters and stories in what might be termed the 'Greater Victoria River District'. At its greatest extremes, for me this includes the country between Wyndham, Halls Creek, Tanami, Newcastle Waters, Katherine, Daly River police station and Port Keats. However, in this thesis my focus is generally on a more limited and conventional view of the district, confined within the Northern Territory and not extending beyond Bradshaw station in the north, Wave Hill station in the south and Delamere station in the east.

In this thesis some of the many stories and events that occurred in the unique Victoria River landscape are revealed – stories and events that laid the foundation of the pastoral society that formed there. The thesis has had a long genesis in my thirty-three years of direct experience with the Victoria River district – but its ultimate origins are earlier, and lie in romance: in the romantic images of Australia's explorers, pioneers, Aborigines, and the unlimited 'wilderness' of the 'early days'.

I grew up in Wagga Wagga in the 1950s, a time when the images of Russel Ward's 'Australian legend' were still a powerful force in much of Australia.¹ For me, and for most of my peers, these images were the stuff of childhood fantasies, received wisdom of a period long since past. Wheat grew and sheep grazed in small paddocks where wild bush once prevailed. Stock was moved short distances in trucks or on trains instead of on great

¹ R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958.

treks with drovers, and the Aborigines were said to have 'died out' in the times beyond human memory. Yet it was commonly believed that 'out there', in the centre and north of the continent, time had somehow stood still and what was now the folklore of the south-east remained a living reality.²

Time may have stood still 'out there', but once in a while the 'legend' came to town. Near the primary school I attended lived the McKenzies, a family with several sons of local infamy. One or two were 'bodgies' – wild boys who got drunk, had fights with the police, chased women, and thus were heroes to the collective boyhood of the town – and at least one was a stockman and drover. Once or twice a year, replete with spurs, big hat and whip, Jingles McKenzie would arrive from 'back o' beyond' and ride his horse down the laneway that ran beside the school playground. Whenever this momentous event occurred, word would fly around the schoolyard in an instant – 'It's Jingles McKenzie!' – and every boy would rush to the paling fence and watch in awe as Jingles rode by. One or two of the gamer boys would call out, 'g'day Jingles', and this cry was then taken up by others. Jingles was the pioneer, the drover, the stockman and the bushranger all rolled into one, right there, in the flesh!

Like many young Australians of the 1950s, I was interested in and influenced by the idealised images of the 'early days', but my own interests were somewhat more extensive and intense than those of my peers. To my fascination with various aspects of Australian history was added an equally intense interest in the natural world – fossils and minerals, flora and fauna. In short, my interests included almost everything to be found in the Australian bush environment. In part this was due to the influence of my parents, particularly my father who told me stories about the outback, about how he had once gone droving, and had also driven a bullock team. Some of the 'facts' he passed on were riveting stuff for a small Australian boy:

² This is my memory and perception of an attitude that existed in Wagga as I grew up. I have since learnt that a similar attitude was first noted by C.E.W. Bean in the early 1900s (C.E.W. Bean, 1911, cited in R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 230).

In parts of the Northern Territory white men were still being speared in the 1930s...there are places in the outback where whites have not been for fifty or sixty years...the Aborigines lived off the land and were the best trackers in the world.³

Apart from being a teller of (perhaps) tall stories to short children, my father was a hunter who taught me to shoot and hunt from age six (plate 8), and he was later a collector of antique firearms, so the romance of the early days became tangible in the form of old muzzle-loaders, Colt revolvers, Snider carbines and Winchester repeaters (plates 9, 10).

Unlike most of my peers, as I grew older my interest in the early days and the outback grew, rather than diminished. In high school I acquired a stone axe ploughed up on the family farm of a schoolmate, the first of many Aboriginal artefacts I eventually collected (plate 11), and at age fourteen I began to attend meetings of the local historical society and to go on historical society excursions to Aboriginal, convict, pioneer and bushranger sites. At the same time I became a keen birdwatcher. There were very few native mammals left around Wagga or I would have been an 'animal-watcher', too. By the time I reached my mid-teens I found bushwalking to be an ideal way to combine all of these interests, and eventually I developed bush skills that were to be of inestimable value in the commission of many projects in years to come, including the research for this thesis.

My first opportunity to visit 'out there' came in the summer of 1969-70 when a friend and I each bought a motorbike and together rode 3000 kilometres into a Cape York wet season. We left the Cape a week ahead of a one-metre deluge, but such rains were part of the romance of the outback so even if I had been caught in the monsoon and drenched to the bone, it would only have 'wet' my appetite. That trip was only three weeks long. My first real experience of the north was in 1971 when I joined a Bureau of Mineral Resources (BMR) geological survey of the Antrim Plateau basalts in the Victoria River and eastern Ord River country. This job lasted more than four months and required driving thousands of kilometres along the backtracks of most of the stations in the district, as well as into the

³ These statements are, of course, based on memory, rather than being the exact words my father spoke.

neighbouring Tanami Desert and East Kimberley. It was my first introduction to an amazing stretch of country that I have since come to know intimately.

During my BMR trip the romantic images of childhood gained a degree of substance. Here, for example, I saw Aboriginal and European stockmen still living and working in rough conditions, riding horses, eating beef and damper, and using equipment made from greenhide (plate 12). Parts of the cattle runs were relatively unknown to Europeans, and wildlife (including flies and mosquitoes) abounded. As I travelled along the roads and backtracks of the stations I saw ruins of old stockyards and an occasional grave, including one which declared that the person buried there had been 'Killed by Blacks' (plates 13, 14).⁴ Far more common than European remains were Aboriginal sites. There were surface scatters of artefacts everywhere, as well as many stone arrangements, quarries and rock art sites (plates 15-18). These signs of traditional Aboriginal life, and especially the discovery of a few broken boomerangs, brought a sense of immediacy, a feeling that what in the south was a hundred years gone was here only yesterday. At the time I did not realise that this was, literally, the truth, and that it did not apply only to Aboriginal culture but to the very frontier itself.

There can be no doubt that the 'magic' of the country affected other local whites in much the same way. While I was in the district I perceived a general view or feeling among local whites that, historically speaking, the region must have been a very wild place (over thirty years later this feeling still prevails). To some degree this is engendered by the landscape – perhaps due to the vastness of the legendary stations, the rugged and inaccessible ranges, the gorges, the 'devil-devil country',⁵ and so on, there is a distinct and compelling aura to

⁴ This phrase is on the headstone of Tudor Shadforth at the old Ord River station cemetery.

⁵ In the Victoria River district, 'devil-devil' or 'debil-debil' country is a term used to refer to areas covered with large tussocks, thirty centimetres or more in height and much the same in width, separated from each other by gaps of fifteen to thirty centimetres. Often there are also holes extending below the nominal 'surface'. Such country is extremely dangerous for horsemen, and terribly difficult and slow to drive a motor vehicle over. From personal experience I know that in extreme cases it is all but impossible to drive over, even in low gear in four-wheel drive. The term is in use elsewhere in Australia with respect to similar landforms (see the *Australian National Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 193-194, 198; for a detailed description of their formation see H. Basedow, Physical Geography and Geology of the Victoria River District, Northern Territory of Australia, *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch*, session 1914-15, vol. 16, pp. 147-217).

the region.⁶ In some instances the feeling was (and is) derived from stories accessible in print; no matter that comparatively little of the history of the region had been written and much of what has been written is either inaccurate or generalised, or both. In other instances the basis of this feeling was almost certainly (limited) local knowledge, transmitted from person to person since the early days. To give just two examples, Charlie Schultz, owner of Humbert River station from 1928 to 1971, told me he had heard from the old-timers that the police shot many Aborigines in the Humbert River ranges after the spearing of 'Brigalow Bill' Ward (see chapter 9).⁷ Similarly, a former manager of Auvergne station told me he had heard that the bones of many Aborigines shot by police were scattered across the Razorback Mountain (plate 19).⁸

I remember on one occasion looking out from a hilltop across a vast expanse of tropical savanna and ranges and wondering what the history of the region was, but in 1971 the history was still largely 'hidden'. The only books readily available were Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles*, primarily an account of the Durack family in the East Kimberley, Ernestine Hill's *The Territory*, a rollicking, romanticised, Territory-wide 'yarn', which touched on the Victoria River district here and there but lacked depth and reliability, and Jock Makin's *The Big Run*, a rather dull history of Victoria River Downs station. For me these books did little more than reveal a glimpse of the past, and they clearly left a great deal unsaid.

My lasting impression of the Victoria-Ord district was of a vast area of basalt plains, and spectacular limestone and sandstone ranges, a region rich in wildlife and Aboriginal cultural remains, and which surely had a rich European history – but what was this history?

⁶ This 'aura' has also been noted by Lyn Riddett in her book, *Kin, Kine and Country: The Victoria River District of the Northern Territory 1911-1966*, Australian National University North Australia Research Unit Monograph, Darwin 1990, pp. 1-7, and by J. Makin in his book, *The Big Run: The Story of Victoria River Downs Station*, Weldon Publishing, 1992, p. 9 (first published by Rigby, 1970).

⁷ Personal communication, Charlie Schultz. This comment originally was included in the manuscript of Charlie's biography, *Beyond the Big Run* (University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1995), but at his insistence it was taken out because, as Charlie put it, 'the townies wouldn't understand that it was them or us in those days'.

⁸ While the historical basis of both stories, and of others, can be found in the documentary record, it is now highly unlikely that any Aboriginal bones from a police shooting are still to be found on Razorback Mountain (Auvergne station).

Little did I then realise that one day I would write the more detailed history of the region that I was hungering for.

In the years since 1971 I have been privileged to learn a great deal about the archaeological, historical, social and physical dimensions of the district. One thing that has become clear is that the topography described above has had a major influence on the ethnography, ecology and European history of the region. With respect to European settlement, the 'Great Land Rush' – the wave of settlement that began in New South Wales and swept through Queensland and across the Northern Territory – finally 'broke' against the 'shore' of the ranges between the east and west Kimberley. With one or two exceptions – 'splashes' if you like⁹ – it could go no further because to the west most of the land had been taken up by settlers from the southern parts of Western Australia.¹⁰ All the flotsam and jetsam of the final frontier was swept in, cast up, and left high and dry in the backwash.

Today, one of the interesting social features of the region is the near absence of 'family dynasties' among the white people. In New South Wales and Queensland, villages and towns sprang up in the wake of the frontier. Mines were discovered and stores built, and closer settlement quickly followed so that relatively large and stable populations soon became established. Third, fourth and fifth generation descendants can still be found in the areas where their pioneer ancestors settled. This never happened in the Victoria River-eastern Ord region.

Throughout its history the European population of the Victoria River region has remained comparatively small. For almost a hundred years there were no villages or towns in the district; Katherine, Wyndham and Halls Creek were the nearest settlements, all well outside

⁹ One of the few and possibly the only West Kimberley station settled from the east was Fossil Downs, taken up by the McDonald brothers and stocked in 1886 (J. Carter, *In the Tracks of the Cattle*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, p. 85; M. Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles*, Corgi, Sydney, 1986, pp. 263-64).

¹⁰ Apart from a failed attempt at Camden Harbour in 1863 (C. Richards, *There Were Three Ships: the story of the Camden Harbour expedition, 1864-65*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1990), settlement in the west Kimberley began late in 1879 with the arrival of George Brockman and 400 sheep on the Fitzroy River (M. Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles*, p. 229).

the region. There have only ever been one or two mines in the district,¹¹ too small and too short-lived to attract a large population and lead to a town being established (plate 20). No descendants of the original pioneers live in the region today and only a few families in the district have roots that extend as far back as the 1950s. Very few of the older locals were born or grew up in the district and there has always been a relatively high turnover of cattle station staff.

A number of factors may have contributed to this situation. The climate is one of the harshest in Australia with very high temperature and humidity levels for about two thirds of the year.¹² The region is remote and until the 1960s land access was difficult; in some areas it remains so, particularly during the summer wet season. The lack of towns meant that health, educational and other services taken for granted elsewhere were not available. Whatever their reasons may have been, most white people who came to live in the region eventually returned to places where the amenities of 'civilisation' were more readily available.

For the first hundred years of European settlement there was very little scientific research in the region. In part, this was because other regions were easier to get to and had towns or Aboriginal reserves that could serve as a base for such research. Almost all the land in the Victoria River district was controlled by cattle station people, so if they were not interested in or were hostile to any proposed research, they could prevent it from happening. W. Arndt, a scientist with the CSIRO in the 1960s, summed up the situation:

Missions were not established, and ethnologists were not welcome. The 'soft touch' of the anthropologist was regarded as a threat to the maintenance of discipline and there were locally justifiable dark deeds to hide from the prying eyes. This ban was effective because one man, viz, the manager of Victoria River Downs (V.R.D.)

¹¹ In the 1970s a heavy mineral called barite, used in heavy-weight parchments and in oil-drilling, was mined on Kirkimbie station in the south-west of the district (I. Sweet, et al, *The Geology of the Southern Victoria River Region, Northern Territory*, Department of Minerals and Energy, Bureau of Mineral Resources, Geology and Geophysics, Report no. 167, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1974, pp. 120-22).

¹² D.H.K. Lee, 'Variability in Human Response to Arid Environments', In W.G. McGinnies and B.J. Goodman (eds), *Arid Lands in Perspective*, University of Arizona Press, Tuscon. 1969, p. 234.

station controlled 18,000 square miles, and it was extremely difficult to travel or survive in this area without his approval and material assistance.¹³

The practical difficulties of living and working in this environment and the physical isolation of the area have caused the region to remain a backwater for most of its history, collecting more human flotsam and jetsam as time went on. Frontier conditions survived until very recent times, and some elements persist to this day.

One result of the general absence of family dynasties and the high turnover of station staff has been a weak transmission of local knowledge from generation to generation among local whites. In contrast, Aborigines do not come from somewhere else, stay for a period and then leave. Instead, their family dynasties extend back to the Dreaming. As a result, older Aborigines know their country intimately from years spent working on the stations and going on extended wet season walkabout. Their parents and grandparents told them stories of early contact and showed them the places where 'something happened' – old homestead sites, graves, massacre sites, and so on. Generally speaking, Victoria River Aborigines know far more than local whites about the history of the stations on their traditional lands, and are in fact the 'keepers' of much 'European' history.¹⁴ Nevertheless, a great deal has been forgotten by the Aborigines or was never known to them, and as non-literate and non-numerate people it is often difficult to place the stories and events they do remember into a time frame that makes sense to non-Aborigines. Thus, much of the history of the region has been lost or remains hidden.

Soon after my return to New South Wales late in 1971, an opportunity arose to work as a volunteer on an archaeological survey in the Snowy Mountains region. In the course of this work I soon realised that prehistory was a topic combining elements of all my lifelong interests – Australian flora and fauna, geology, Aboriginal culture, European history, bushwalking and bush work. The following year I again worked for the BMR, this time in western Arnhem Land where I was exposed to the fabulous rock paintings of the Arnhem

¹³ W. Arndt, 'The Dreaming of Kunukban', *Oceania*, 1965, vol. 35(4), pp. 241-59.

¹⁴ See D. Rose and D. Lewis, 'A Pinch and a Bridge'. *Public History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1994.

Land plateau 'stone country'. Thus it was that for the next twenty years I was involved in Aboriginal studies, working as a volunteer on archaeological digs and surveys in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, and in the Victoria River district in various capacities, including employment as a site recorder with the Northern Territory Museum, a field officer with the Northern Land Council preparing site maps and histories for several Aboriginal land claims, and a consultant with the Australian Heritage Commission and the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Authority (now the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority).

Between times, I managed to do a great deal of freelance rock art research in west Arnhem Land and in the Victoria River district, and in 1983 I completed an honours degree in prehistory at the ANU, with a thesis on Arnhem Land rock art. This was later revised and published as 'The Rock Paintings of Arnhem Land, Australia'.¹⁵ In 1990 I completed a masters degrees in prehistory (ANU), completing a thesis on the rock art of the Victoria River region.¹⁶ Out of this research came another publication, *The Shape of the Dreaming*.¹⁷

In 1980 I met my future wife, Debbie Rose. Debbie had only recently arrived in Australia from the USA, and was seeking a field location where she could carry out research for a doctorate in anthropology. By chance, she was eventually accepted to work at Yarralin Community on Victoria River Downs, the home of many of the people I had worked with in 1975 and 1977. I joined Debbie and between November 1980 and June 1982 spent a total of sixteen months living at Yarralin. This resulted in an intensive education in Aboriginal culture, and consolidated relationships of trust and friendship between myself and many Aboriginal people in the region that had already begun with my earlier Museum and Land Council work.

¹⁵ D. Lewis, *The Rock Paintings of Arnhem Land, Australia: Social, Ecological and Material Culture Change in the Post-Glacial Period*. British Archaeological Reports International Series 415. Oxford, 1988.

¹⁶ D. Lewis, "They Meet Up At Bilinara": *Rock Art in the Victoria River Valley*. Unpublished Masters thesis, Australian National University, 1990.

¹⁷ D. Lewis and D. Rose, *The Shape Of The Dreaming: The Cultural Significance Of Victoria River Rock Art*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988.

During our time at Yarralin the Aborigines told us many stories of the early days. Some of the oldest people who taught us had grown to adulthood in the bush, with two men being born circa 1910. They thus had lived through the greater part of the period of white settlement and had been told about earlier events by their parents and older relations – people who had seen the white settlers come and had fought against them. Almost all of our original teachers have since died, taking their wealth of knowledge with them and breaking the direct living link to the early days of the region. Eventually Debbie and I began work on a history of the region, to be told from an Aboriginal perspective. With our Aboriginal teachers as guides we visited many historic sites, and I began to seek out historical documents in the Northern Territory Archives and elsewhere. This research culminated in Debbie's award-winning book, *Hidden Histories*, published in 1991.¹⁸ As well as field trips into remote corners of the district, I began the first of a series of long-distance solo bushwalks through country inaccessible to motor vehicles, the first being across the rugged Stokes Range, north of Jasper Gorge, and others into the headwaters of the Wickham and East Baines Rivers and into Bilimatjaru, the great Gordon Creek sandstone massif on VRD.

For a variety of reasons, by the time I finished my Masters degree in 1990 I had become disenchanted with Australian archaeology as a discipline, and decided on a career change to Australian history. Fortuitously, at this time the Northern Territory branch of the Australian National Trust was hiring people to carry out historic sites surveys throughout the Northern Territory. I was hired to do surveys in the Victoria River district and eventually produced four major reports – *The Ghost Road of the Drovers*,¹⁹ *In Western Wilds*,²⁰ *The Boab Belt*,²¹

¹⁸ *Hidden Histories* was published by Aboriginal Studies Press in 1991 and was awarded the Stanner Prize for the 'Best Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1992-93.'

¹⁹ Lewis, D. *The Ghost Road of the Drovers: Report on the History and Historic Sites of the Murrniji Stock Route*. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (NT), 1992. This report deals with the history and historic sites along the famous Murrniji stock route which runs from Top Springs, in the south-east of the Victoria River district, to Newcastle Waters station.

²⁰ Lewis, D. *In Western Wilds: A Survey of Historic Sites in the Western Victoria River District*. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (NT), 1993. A survey of historic sites on Bullo River, Auvergne, Newry, Rosewood, Amanbidji, Waterloo, Mistake Creek and Limbunya.

²¹ Lewis, D. *The Boab Belt: A Survey of Historic Sites in the North-Central Victoria River District*. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (NT), 1996. This is a survey of historic sites on Bradshaw, Coolibah, Fitzroy, Bullita, northern Victoria River Downs and northern Humbert River.

and *The Final Muster*.²² All the cross-cultural, site recording, writing and bush skills I had developed during my archaeological career were now directed towards my historic site surveys and report writing. I have also since been employed on social history projects by the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory,²³ the Timber Creek Community Government Council,²⁴ and the Northern Land Council.²⁵

To carry out field surveys in the Victoria River country I drew upon my extensive contacts with Aboriginal people. They guided me to many sites I never would have been able to locate by myself, and they often were able to provide detailed information on the significance of the sites. A case in point is Old Jimmy Manngayarri, who guided me to a series of lone graves and early homestead sites on Limbunya station (plate 21). Jimmy was able to accurately name the men who had lived or died at these sites, and tell stories about what had happened at each place. My reports to the National Trust were the first to incorporate Aboriginal oral history and this has since become an important requirement for many other National Trust reports.

I was also directed to some sites by local station whites, especially to marked boabs which usually have little significance to Aborigines who cannot read the inscriptions. In the course of these surveys I documented unique collections of drovers' graffiti on stock route water tanks, and recorded over one hundred boabs with inscriptions that cover almost the entire period of European exploration and settlement, as well as traditional Aboriginal designs (see Appendix A). Once again I took the opportunity to make long bushwalks through areas of rugged country, including a 120 kilometre solo trip down the Fitzmaurice River and

²² Lewis, D. *The Final Muster: A Survey of Previously Undocumented Sites throughout the Victoria River District*. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (N.T.), 2000. This survey was to document sites throughout the district which could not be found during earlier surveys or which were not known to exist when these surveys were carried out.

²³ This organisation is now known as the 'Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission'. The projects included producing text and images for a permanent display on the history of the Gregory National Park.

²⁴ This was to produce a manuscript which eventually became *A Shared History: Aborigines and white Australians in the Victoria River District, Northern Territory* (Timber Creek Community Government Council, Darwin, 1997).

²⁵ I have produced site maps and Aboriginal histories for the Yingawunari – Top Springs land claim and the Jasper Gorge – Kidman Springs land claim, and Aboriginal histories for native title claims over the Bradshaw Field Training Area (formerly Bradshaw station) and the Timber Creek town area. All this material is now held by the Northern Land Council.

across to Bradshaw homestead, and a 110 kilometre wet season walk from the lower Fitzmaurice to Bradshaw homestead.

Because of the Aboriginal strikes of 1966-72, and more particularly the passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in 1976, in the 1970s and 1980s there was a lot of fear among local whites that their stations could be lost to or damaged by Aboriginal land claims and 'sacred sites.' Because I was then working on Aboriginal-related topics, whenever I called in at a homestead the white staff were usually suspicious and unfriendly, so I kept away from them as much as possible. However, as I later discovered, many of the cattle station whites were interested in local history, so when I began the National Trust historic sites surveys I was usually welcomed and was finally able to get to know many of these people for the first time, including some of the 'old-timers' of the region.

Through my growing contacts within the 'cattle station network' I heard about former residents of the Victoria-Ord district living in, literally, the 'four corners' of Australia. One member of this old-timers' diaspora was Charlie Schultz, whom I have already mentioned. I met Charlie in 1990 when he was living at Yankalilla in South Australia. He told me he had arrived on Humbert River station in 1928 and had soon met men who were already old-timers, both black and white. From them he learnt a great deal about the history of the previous forty-odd years, and he himself spent forty-four years in the district (plate 22). Debbie and I had already interviewed the Aboriginal people who had lived and worked on Humbert River station. We had visited many of their historic sites and heard not only their own stories, but also stories they had heard from their parents and grandparents. Our conversation with Charlie Schultz added yet another rich and contrasting dimension to their history. He told us about the events of his own lifetime, as well as events involving himself, our Aboriginal teachers, and their forebears. In addition, he had a wealth of stories about the lives of white people in the district – stories he had witnessed, stories he had heard, and views he had formed during the course of his active life. Eventually I was privileged to be able to collaborate with him to produce his biography, *Beyond the Big Run*.²⁶

²⁶ C. Schultz and D. Lewis, *Beyond the Big Run*, 1995.

During his years in the Victoria River district Charlie amassed an extensive photo collection and various personal and family papers, all of which I was able to copy. In the years since meeting him I have tracked down many other former Victoria River district residents (or their descendants) and in many instances they have had collections of photographs or documents that I was able to copy. This freelance work has led to publication of the memoirs of an early Northern Territory policeman,²⁷ and made it possible to publish a photographic history of the region.²⁸ In the fourteen years since I copied Charlie Schultz's collection I have copied over 5,000 early photographs from the Victoria-Ord region.

My last major project in the Victoria River country before beginning this thesis was to produce an environmental history of the district, based upon personal observations, historical records, Aboriginal and European oral history, and repeat photography. Recording the memories of old-timers, both black and white, was possible because of relationships built up over many years, and the repeat photography aspect was facilitated largely from having copied the various privately held collections around the country. The results of this project were published by the Tropical Savannas CRC in Darwin in 2002 as *Slower than the Eye Can See*.²⁹

With the completion of my National Trust report, *The Final Muster*, the entire Victoria River district had been surveyed for historic sites, and rather than seeking similar work in a 'new' part of the Territory, I decided to apply for a scholarship to complete a PhD on the history of the region. This thesis is the result of my application. It is a fine-grained study of the individuals and events that laid the basis of settler society in the Victoria River district of the Northern Territory, many aspects of which have not been addressed or examined as closely elsewhere in Australia.

²⁷ D. Lewis (ed), *Patrolling the 'Big Up': The Adventures of Mounted Constable Johns in the Top End of the Northern Territory, 1910-15*. Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1998.

²⁸ D. Lewis, *A Shared History*, 1997.

²⁹ D. Lewis, *Slower than the Eye Can See: Environmental change in northern Australia's cattle lands*, Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2002.

To my knowledge there are few comparable studies elsewhere in Australia where a researcher has been able to combine a wide knowledge of the topography and environment of an area, long-term relationships with local Aboriginal and white people (and thus a large body of oral history), and the amount and range of photographs and written material I have been able to gather. One that comes close is the study of frontier relations in the Gulf Country, written by Tony Roberts and currently in press.³⁰ His study focuses specifically on conflict between blacks and whites, whereas mine is more concerned with themes and processes of social relations on the Victoria River frontier. While Tony has not gathered an equivalent collection of early photographs, he has spent several decades working in the Gulf Country collecting oral history from Aborigines and whites, and has compiled an impressive amount of archival material. As might be expected, there are many similarities between the Gulf Country and the Victoria River region, but there are also important differences. European incursions into the Gulf country began earlier than on the Victoria River, there were more of them, and there appears to have been much more violence, although this might well be a factor of better documentation in the Gulf area.

The thesis is focussed on the process of settlement. It explores the question of how a small number of white men gained control over a vast region of tropical Australia. It is impossible to separate the history of black and white in this region, but it is possible to emphasise one group or the other. Debbie Rose's *Hidden Histories* presents a history of the region from an Aboriginal perspective; I have chosen to tell a white man's history – literally a white *man's* history because from the beginning of European contact and for much of the settler period, white men have outnumbered white women by as much as fifty or a hundred to one. During the first forty to fifty years of white settlement – the period covered by this thesis – there were extremely few white women in the district at all, and there is virtually no documentation about them.

³⁰ T. Roberts, *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, in press.

Even more specifically, the thesis explores two major themes: the various moments and types of encounter, and the formation of a local settler society. This local white society was widely dispersed; it was nomadic (in Ward's terms); and it was a coherent group of people not only because of a primary shared objective – settlement – but equally significantly because these men were participants in a relatively closed communicative network. Their society was primarily oral, and their currency was stories. They knew, or knew of, each other, told each other's stories, shared or disputed each other's opinions, and sustained their own oral culture through the telling and re-telling of accounts of, and commenting on, the events that encapsulated the process of settling a frontier.

Within the matrix of this story are characters whose lives give flesh and blood to many of the key icons of white Australian mythology – the brave explorers, the noble pioneers, the 'wild blacks', the wild bush and 'the battler'. Beginning with the experiences of the European explorers and continuing through the period when the big stations were formed and on to the time of the 'small men' – cattle duffers, and others with more legitimate aims, the thesis looks at the process of settlement. It focuses on the interaction of the whites with the Aborigines, with each other and with the environment, showing how these and other factors interacted to lay the foundations of a unique pastoral society.

The topic is broad, and I have not been able to cover all major aspects. Among various omissions are miscegenation, the role of alcohol, and the annual races. Miscegenation was common throughout the Australian frontier and certainly was present from the earliest times in the Victoria River district. Early records are few, but it certainly was an important component of white male identity in the region in the years that post-date the period covered by this thesis. Alcohol appears to have been an important factor in many of the violent conflicts between Aborigines and settlers, and between the settlers themselves, and also in the high frequency of suicide among white men in the district. The races, initially impromptu and later organised into annual events in various places, were an important component in social cohesion. It was at such gatherings that the oral culture was

maintained, friendships and alliances cemented, and grudges 'worked out'. The annual races were also a site where miscegenation and alcohol consumption were focussed.

While this thesis tells stories of white men, it does not focus on the usual 'big name' explorers, cattle barons and pastoral empires. Instead, it has more to do with ordinary workingmen of this long-term frontier region – the stockmen, station managers, bagmen, teamsters, police and others. Brutal frontiersmen like Jack 'The Gulf Hero' Watson who collected Aboriginal ears and skulls; big-time cattle thieves like 'Diamond' Jim Campbell, caught with over 400 head of Victoria River Downs cattle and forced to flee into the wilds of Arnhem Land; and battlers like 'Brigalow' Bill Ward who, when his small block was taken from him by the government, defiantly remained there, only to be speared by the 'bush blacks'.

Most of the men who lived in the north were highly mobile, moving from job to job across a vast expanse of country, and they often worked at diverse occupations, at one time perhaps a stockman, at another a prospector and yet another maybe a teamster. Their tracks criss-crossed over the years and together they formed a network of individuals and stories. Within this oral culture stories were told and retold around many a campfire, in flood-bound homesteads and during the occasional 'gumtree spree'.³¹ Some of the stories were not for 'pubic' consumption – accounts of murders, massacres, cattle heists and so on – and so were not written down, or only mentioned in passing and often in ambiguous terms. Other stories were benign, but nevertheless many were lost. In this thesis I have attempted to resurrect stories that 'disappeared' long ago and also to fill out some of the stories that did survive, and to correct them where errors had crept into surviving accounts. I have included considerable detail in many of the stories to reveal many of the connections that existed between the men of the north Australian 'nomad tribe'.³²

³¹ According to William Lavender who worked in the Victoria River country during 1912, a 'gumtree spree' was the name given to a drinking session held out in the bush away from the homestead or other European centre (P. Woodley [ed.], *"Young Bill's Happy Days": Reminiscences of Rural Australia, 1910-1915*, Master of Arts thesis, ANU, July 1981, p. 306.

³² The term 'nomad tribe' was coined by Russell Ward to describe the highly mobile outback workers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 1958).

Recapturing the stories has only become possible through more than thirty years of gathering together fragments from diverse sources, often preserved by chance and circumstance: documents and photographs in public and private archives, both here and overseas; oral traditions of both Aborigines and whites; carvings on boab trees, graffiti on stock route water tanks, and field trips to the places where events occurred. The result is, in effect, the reinvigoration of the original oral tradition. Analysis of these sources shows how a frontier is not a firm line in time or space, but rather, a shifting historical phenomenon, and different kinds of evidence travel within and beyond it at different rates.

The thesis is organized around three loosely chronological themes and processes. The first (Chapters 1 and 2) examines people and country prior to settlement, and includes the explorers and others who visited but did not stay. In Chapter 1 I describe the physical and social landscape that the first Europeans encountered, with particular emphasis on features of both which I believe were critical to the way that settlement took place, and in the way that social relations developed between black and white. This forms a baseline against which the effects of European settlement can be measured and understood.

Chapter 2 looks at the long period before European settlement during which Aboriginal people had increasingly frequent direct and indirect contact with outsiders, primarily with Europeans but possibly also with Asians. At one point there was a short but remarkable period of friendly relations which pointed to a possibility for the future. Unfortunately, this did not come to pass. After the explorers, Aboriginal contact with Europeans became more frequent, and knowledge gained through direct experience almost certainly was supplemented by information coming into the district along traditional information networks. Consequently, before the settlers arrived on the Victoria the Aborigines possessed much greater knowledge of Europeans than had previously been supposed. I suggest that this growing knowledge of whites laid the foundation for the Aboriginal response to the settlers when they finally arrived.

The second set of chapters (3 to 7) examines themes and processes of settlement, focusing on the establishment of enduring social relations and environmental processes. Within this set of chapters, Aboriginal warfare, resistance, and subsequent accommodation to white settlement is explored in detail. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are sub-sets to Chapter 4 ('Unquiet Times') – case studies of particular aspects of the Victoria River frontier.

In Chapter 3 I describe the process by which land was taken up, cattle brought onto the stations and homesteads built, and the almost instant impact this had upon the ecosystems and Aboriginal societies in the region. Ecological impacts began slowly, but accelerated as cattle numbers increased, and no doubt this contributed to the difficulties Aborigines experienced of surviving in a land now occupied by white men with horses and guns.

Evidence for the Aboriginal response to the invasion of their land is presented in Chapter 4. Here I have tried to outline the distinctive contours of this particular frontier, and attempted to go beyond generalities and instead to map the specific development of frontier relations in this particular district. The detail included makes it possible to date and speculate about outbursts of violence and peaceful interludes across the region in the period before the first station blacks' camps were established. I argue that this reflects inter-group communication and collective decision-making on the part of the Aborigines, and this is important in the context of current Australian historiography, with its ongoing debates on the true nature of frontier relations between whites and Aborigines, and amongst the whites themselves.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are quite detailed studies of processes addressed at a more general level in Chapter 4. Each of them is iconic in some way, both regionally and nationally: 'Jasper Gorge', examines a place of fear and conflict; 'Captain Joe's Bradshaw' deals with a 'noble pioneer' and the violence inherent in the development of a station; and 'The Wild Wardaman Warriors' is the story of one particular Aboriginal group's determined resistance to the settlers. Together they reveal the distinctive character of both the terrain and early history of the Victoria River district. None of these stories has been dealt with so comprehensively before, probably because no other writer has had access to the range of

evidence presented here – the archival sources, the written and oral memories of black and white cultures, the material remains of early settlement, and knowledge of the landforms and environment. Indeed, this applies to every chapter of this thesis.

The third set of chapters (8 to 10) examines processes and themes that were briefly and vibrantly part of the life of the district, and highlights the role of the dreamers, the duffers and the battlers. Chapter 8 deals with the most spectacular failure of pastoral enterprise in the Victoria River country and a significant turning point in the history of the district – the attempt to establish sheep stations in the region. It is a story of southern dreams inappropriately imposed on a northern landscape, and reveals the disjunction between white settlers' desires and the realities of the northern climate and environment.

Chapter 9 is a detailed study of the second wave of settlers, an under-society of cattle duffers who came into the district around 1902-04 and left around 1910-12. By the very nature of their occupation the history of such men is elusive. In what may be termed 'cattle duffing literature' there are plenty of self-portraits and memoirs and biographical studies of individual duffers, the stuff of outback legend, but as far as I can determine, no one has ever tried to draw the biographies of these elusive men together, and explain their distinctive culture and historical trajectory as I have done here. In this chapter I attempt to provide answers as to who the Victoria River district cattle duffers were, why they appeared when they did, why they disappeared, and what happened to them. I try to place them in history – in the economic and regional circumstances of their period. By looking at them in this way it is possible to tease out general issues about social relations and frontier morality.

Finally, Chapter 10 portrays a type of settler different from the cattle duffers – battlers who, at least in most cases, had more legitimate aims. It is primarily concerned with three men, a father and his two sons – true 'battlers' who sought to build a life for themselves in the face of overwhelming odds. When these men first appeared in the district, Victoria River pastoral society had already taken the form it would retain for at least another fifty years,

and they faced opposition from two great powers. One was the multi-national Vestey's Company, owner of a vast amount of country in the Victoria River and Kimberley districts, and the other was the Western Australian government, based more than two thousand kilometres away in Perth. In their story we are once again given a poignant glimpse of a different Australia that might have been, but which never came to pass.

The final chapter covers the period 1916-1930; all the others cover earlier times. The end point of 1930 is a happy coincidence with the word length of a thesis and the final aspect of the 'founding years' of Victoria River pastoral society. The scene was now set for decades of relative social stability. Most of the region remained in the hands of big stations, with an occasional cattle duffer or battler taking up a piece of 'left-over' country (and almost inevitably failing to become established), and with most Aborigines living in station camps and providing an unpaid workforce.

I end this thesis with an epilogue in which I outline various changes that took place throughout the twentieth century, and I examine aspects of the founding society that still existed when I first went to the region in 1971. Some of these aspects continued long after I first arrived there, and in spite of many changes during the past twenty years, some aspects continue until the present time.

Chapter 1

THE VICTORIA RIVER – LAND AND PEOPLE

The complex, distinctive and often dramatic topography of the Victoria River country came into being over millions of years. Beginning in the Proterozoic period, 2.5 billion to 543 million years ago, seawater covered the region several times, laying down vast beds of sandstone and limestone. Each time these beds were exposed they were weathered into gorges and valleys, and in some areas folded and faulted, only to be overlain by new sediments when the sea encroached again. One of the great lava flows of geological history occurred here, too, creating the great Antrim Plateau Volcanics, a formation that covers much of the Victoria River district and extends well into the Kimberley.¹ These geological events, and subsequent weathering, are the European scientific understandings of the origin of the complex of ranges, mesas, gorges and plains that give the region its distinctive topography today.

Although fundamentally different from scientific explanation of how the Victoria River district achieved its present form, at a broad level Aboriginal beliefs about the creation of the world have some interesting parallels. Victoria River Aborigines believe that in the beginning the earth was covered with salt water. The water rolled back to reveal a land devoid of life, but with some geographical features already in existence. Right across the newly revealed land, all the different forms of life, including some entities regarded by Europeans as inanimate (for example, the moon) or imaginary (for example, Rainbow snakes), emerged from the moist ground. These were Dreaming beings, each of which interacted with or avoided other Dreaming beings, and performed actions which left indelible imprints on the newly-emerged landscape. Walking, dancing, digging or fighting,

¹ I. Sweet, et al, *The Geology of the Southern Victoria River Region, Northern Territory*, Department of Minerals and Energy, Bureau of Mineral Resources, Geology and Geophysics, Report no. 167. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1974; I. Sweet, et al, *The Geology of the Northern Victoria River Region, Northern Territory*, Department of Minerals and Energy, Bureau of Mineral Resources, Geology and Geophysics, Report no. 166, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1974.

lighting fires, discarding artifacts or foods, leaving on the ground their bodies, parts of their bodies, or bodily secretions, they created many of the natural features still to be seen in the landscape today.²

Some of the Dreamings travelled great distances across the land while others were 'localised' – active within quite limited areas. Aborigines today say that the Dreamings, whether animate or inanimate (in European terms), travelling or localised, were at one and the same time human beings. Aboriginal groups trace their ancestry to one or the other of these Dreamings. As well as shaping the land the Dreamings also laid down 'laws' and patterns of behaviour followed by generations of Aborigines and still followed by many Aborigines today.³

Along the coast west of the Victoria River mouth there are large wetland areas similar to those found in the great Kakadu National Park, and also extensive saline mudflats. These are now embraced by Legune station and are bounded on the south by a large area of rough stony ranges riven with gorges. A large tributary of the Victoria, the Bullo River, flows out of these ranges and across a small plain, the heartland of present-day Bullo River station. The southern side of the ranges ends abruptly in an immense southwest-northeast trending escarpment up to 300 metres high and eighty kilometres long, now known as the Pinkerton Range and formerly as the Ballyangle Range.⁴ South of the escarpment are the Whirlwind Plains, drained by the East and West Baines Rivers, and now occupied by Auvergne and Amanbidji stations.⁵ There are extensive stretches of black soil Mitchell grass country on

² D. Lewis, "*They Meet Up At Bilinara*": *Rock Art in the Victoria River Valley*, Unpublished masters thesis, Australian National University, volume 1, 1990, p. 92; D. Lewis and D. Rose, *The Shape Of The Dreaming: The Cultural Significance Of Victoria River Rock Art*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, p. 46.

³ D. Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992.

⁴ Ngarinman elder Bobby Witipuru told me that 'Ballyangle' is the traditional name of a billabong at the foot of this range. Until the 1930s the name was applied to the entire range and the Aborigines who lived there were sometimes referred to as the 'Ballyangle blacks' (e.g. see E. Hill, *The Territory*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 244). It was renamed the Pinkerton Range by the Surveyor General of the Northern Territory, W. Easton (personal communication, Vern O'Brien).

⁵ Amanbidji station, formerly known as Kildurk, was part of Auvergne station until 1949 or 1950.

the Whirlwind Plains, as well as swathes of scrubby 'spewy' ground⁶ and patches of 'devil devil' country.

East of the Victoria River mouth lies the wild and remote Fitzmaurice River valley, a remarkably straight, west-flowing stream. It drains a large area of rugged and largely inaccessible stony ranges, peppered with springs, waterholes and gorges, and for much of its length it has a permanent, spring-fed flow. The southern side of the valley ends abruptly in a great southwest-northeast trending escarpment, the Yambarran Range,⁷ an eighty kilometre continuation of the Pinkerton Range (see plate 23). South of the Yambarran Range is a plain drained by Angalarri Creek. In turn, the Angalarri plain is bounded by the Victoria River, and almost all of the country south of the Fitzmaurice and north of the Victoria now forms the 8,700 square kilometre Bradshaw Field Training Area (formerly Bradshaw station).⁸

South of Bradshaw, Auvergne and Newry Stations, lies a long belt of largely inaccessible sandstone country. The eastern half comprises the spectacular Stokes Range, cut through by the fifty kilometre long Victoria River Gorge. The western half consists of ranges which appear to be unnamed but are effectively a continuation of the Stokes Range. They form the headwaters of the East and West Baines Rivers, with many tributaries running through sandstone gorges and with barren sandstone country in between. One of the main gorges is known to local Aborigines as Pumuntu (Boomoondoo), and this name has sometimes been applied to the entire West Baines sandstone.⁹ The Stokes Range/Pumuntu sandstone belt cuts across almost the entire Victoria River district and forms the northern boundary of the

⁶ A Northern Territory or North Australian term for a type of soil that is hard when dry but which cannot support much weight when it is wet. It often has a thin hard crust covering a wet layer which is regarded as 'bottomless' – very nasty to get bogged in! Although the first edition of the Australian National Dictionary does not have this term, Julia Robinson at the Australian National Dictionary Centre, ANU, has advised me that they have on file five references (1899-1981) to the term.

⁷ This was originally named the 'Sea Range' by Wickham and Stokes (J.L. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia...During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle in the years 1837-43*, T. and W. Boone, London, vol. 2, 1846, p. 227).

⁸ 'Defence's last buy for Top End move', *Northern Territory News*, 23-1-1996; 'Bradshaw takeover underway', *Katherine Times*, 25-9-1996.

⁹ T. Ronan, *Once There was a Bagman*, Cassell Australia Ltd., Melbourne, 1966, p. 227. Creeks on the western side of the West Baines headwaters rise in basalt country on Rosewood and Waterloo stations.

immense Victoria River Downs, as well as of smaller stations such as Killarney, Humbert River and Limbunya, and to a lesser degree, Mistake Creek.

On the inland side of the Stokes and 'Pumuntu' Ranges lie the great downs and plains of Mitchell grass that eventually blend into the arid sand plains of the northern Tanami Desert. However, scattered across these plains are large areas of rolling basalt hills, occasional sandstone and limestone ranges, flatter patches and outcrops of rough sandstone and limestone, many gorges, and areas locally termed 'desert' – waterless swaths of spinifex, eucalypts and acacia scrub.

The varied geological history of the district and the way it was been shaped over millennia laid the basis of European land settlement in the district, and influenced other aspects of local history. The basalt produced the rich basaltic black soil Mitchell grass plains, most of which were taken up early by wealthy pastoral companies. Later 'small' men tried with varying success to eke out a living in 'left-over' areas, most of which had only patches of good soil, or poor soils derived from sandstone and limestone (see Chapters 11 and 12).

The history of Europeans on the Victoria River frontier is a history of conflict and accommodation with the Aborigines. From the first European explorers to the present day, Aborigines have been present and involved with white people in one way or another. In early frontier times they were a largely unseen and threatening 'presence' in the bush. Later, when employed by the whites they were 'boys' and 'lubras' (or 'gins') – stockmen, domestics, assistants, guides, lovers and trackers.¹⁰ It is beyond the scope and focus of this thesis to comprehensively describe the various Aboriginal groups that lived in the district. However, there are a number of important aspects of the way of life and social organisation of the 'tribes' that are directly relevant to the way social relations developed between them and the European newcomers, and these aspects are outlined below.

¹⁰ See D. Lewis, *A Shared History: Aborigines and White Australians in the Victoria River District, Northern Territory*. Published by Create-A-Card, Darwin, on behalf of the Timber Creek Community Government Council, 1997.

The regional population was divided into at least thirteen different language-groups or 'tribes' (see maps 3 and 4). Those whose traditional lands lie largely or wholly within the bounds of the Victoria River valley are the Gurindji, Bilinara, Karangpurru, Ngaliwurru, Nungali, the eastern, western and Wolayi ('sandstone') Ngarinman, the Jaminjung and Kadjerong.

The Mudbura, divided into eastern, central and western groups, straddle the watershed that divides the south-eastern portion of the region from the Barkly Tableland.¹¹ Likewise, Wardaman country extends from the Victoria River catchment to the Katherine-Daly catchment,¹² while Malngin territory overlaps the western headwaters of the Victoria River, but lies largely within the Ord River valley.¹³ Miriwung territory may lie partly within the Victoria River valley, but is primarily within the Ord River and Keep River catchments.¹⁴

Defining the 'boundaries' of Aboriginal social groups today or in the past is problematic. Therefore, on the maps provided I have marked them as broad bands of stippling. Modern studies suggest that, traditionally, Aborigines did not think of their country as having a boundary in the way that Europeans do. Instead, different areas of country received their identity through the action of particular Dreaming beings. The 'travelling Dreamings' moved across the land, and at various points they changed the language they were speaking. The stretches of country between these 'change-over' points became language or 'tribal' areas,¹⁵ commonly referred to in Aboriginal English as 'countries'.¹⁶

¹¹ P. Sutton, L. Coulthart and A. McGrath, *The Murrniji Land Claim*, Northern Land Council, Darwin, 1983, pp. 70-74.

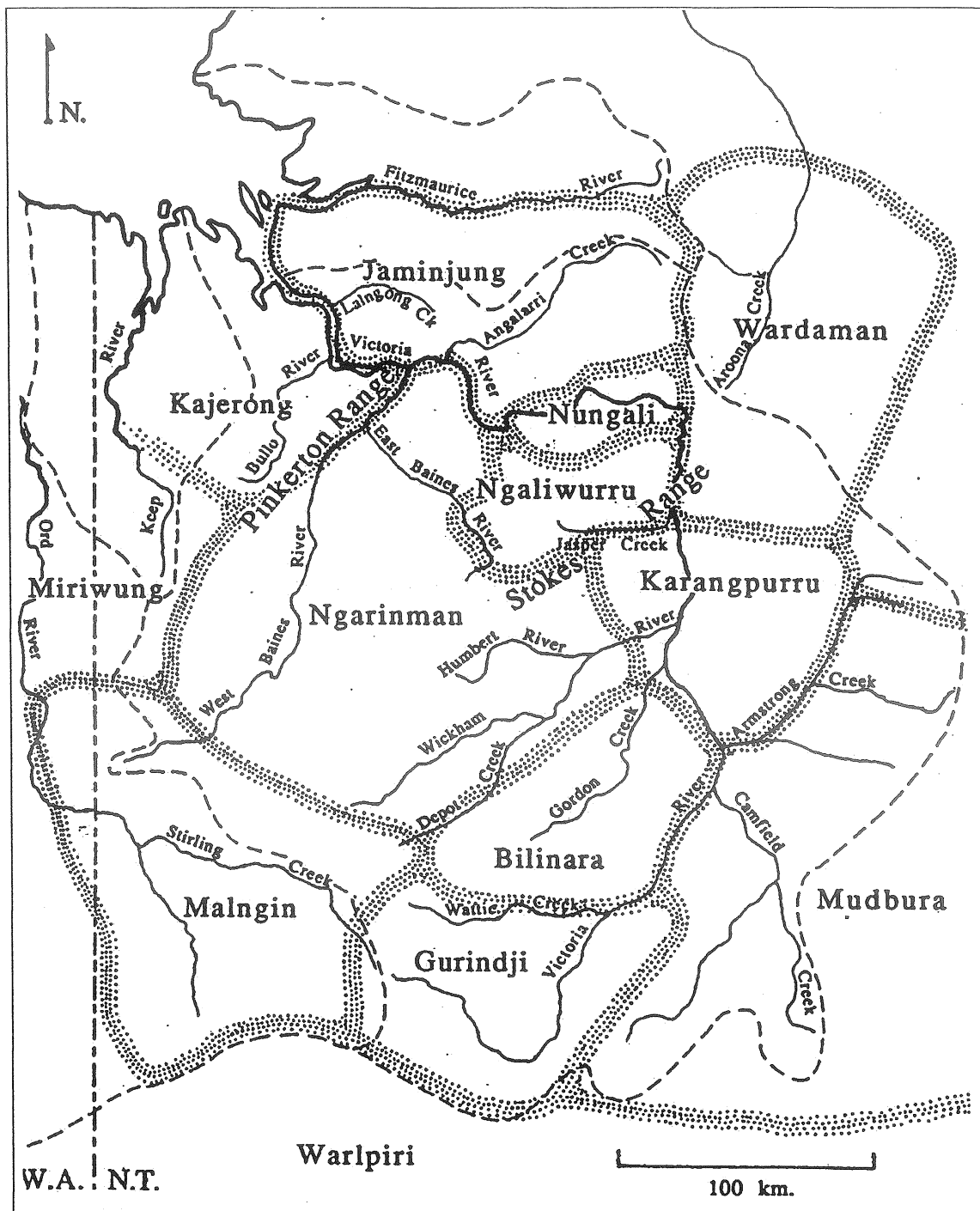
¹² F. Merlan places the north-eastern boundary of the Wardaman in the vicinity of the Scott Creek-Katherine River junction, about sixty kilometres from Katherine (*A Grammar of Wardaman: A Language of the Northern Territory of Australia*, Mouton de Gruyter, New York, 1994, p. 7).

¹³ Personal communication Jimmy Manngayarri with whom I mapped much of Malngin country including the eastern boundary between the Malngin and the Bilinara. Although it is largely within the Ord River catchment it is wholly within the Northern Territory.

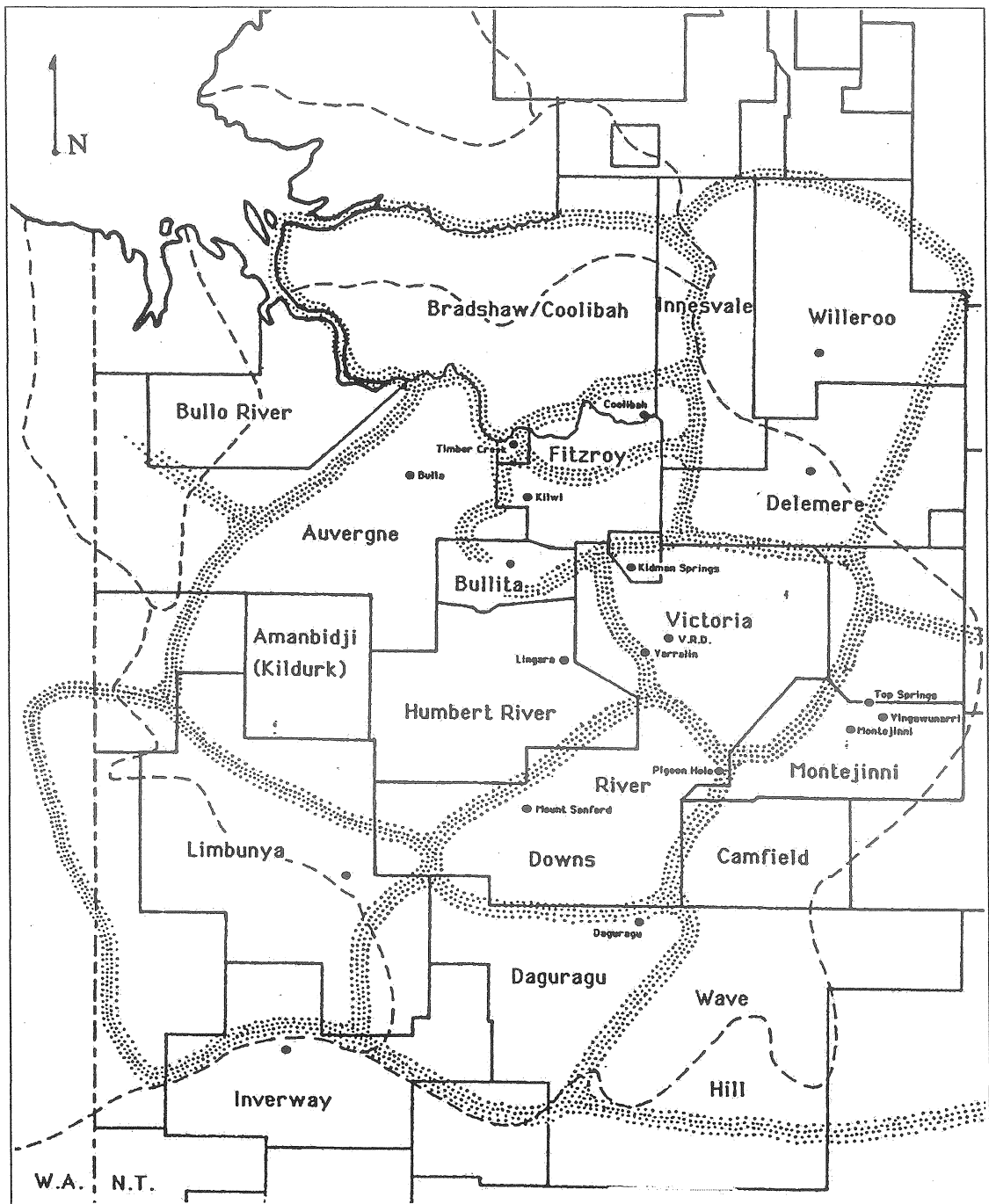
¹⁴ N. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*. Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974, p. 248 and map 'Australia, north-west sheet'.

¹⁵ D. Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, p. 54-55.

¹⁶ J. Arthur, *Aboriginal English: A Cultural Study*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 119-20.



Map 3: Language areas or 'tribes' in the Victoria River district. I have used stippled lines because the boundaries are not 'exact' in the way that Europeans think of boundaries.



Map 4: Victoria River 'tribal' areas in relation to pastoral leases as they were c1990.

Like Aborigines elsewhere in Australia, Victoria River district people were hunter-gatherers (plates 24-26). Based on numerous studies in Australia and overseas, scholars estimate that the typical size of self-identifying hunter-gatherer groups was at least 500 and possibly as high as 1,500.¹⁷ If these estimates are applied to the entire Victoria River district the Aboriginal population was somewhere between 5,500 and 16,500 people. Victoria River Downs alone probably supported between 1,400 and 4,200 Aborigines.¹⁸

Defining people as belonging to one 'country' as opposed to another is also problematic. It was (and is) common for marriages to be arranged between individuals of different language groups and hence between different countries. This means that, potentially, an individual could have grandparents from, and therefore rights and responsibilities for, four different language areas. For practical reasons people usually exercised their rights for only two or three 'countries'. Nevertheless, most individuals could travel through, live in, and identify with several different language areas. They learnt to speak these different languages, and could legitimately range over vast tracts of country.

There was, however, a dynamic tension between the various groups, and limits beyond which individuals could move only in particular circumstances or not at all. If people made unauthorised visits to country where they were considered strangers, they risked being killed by local people. Consequently, if individuals transgressed Aboriginal law they had nowhere to go where they were unknown, and thus evade punishment.

The circumstance of multiple identities could be used by individuals to disassociate themselves from an individual or group deemed to be responsible for a particular event, even if they shared a common identity with that individual or group. Anthropologist Deborah Rose cites an example of this when a Mudburra man killed a Ngarinman woman. Individuals who had both Mudburra and Ngarinman affiliations began to emphasise their

¹⁷ J. Birdsell, 'Some Environmental and Cultural Factors Influencing the Structuring of Australian Aboriginal Populations', *American Naturalist*, vol. 87, 1953, pp. 171-207; N. Butlin, *Our Original Aggression: Aboriginal populations of Southeastern Australia 1788-1850*. George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, pp. 175; J. Peter White and D.J. Mulvaney, 'How Many People?', in D.J. Mulvaney and J. Peter White (eds), *Australians to 1788*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney, 1987, 115-117.

¹⁸ D. Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human*, p. 7.

Ngarinman identity and play down their connection to the 'murdering' Mudburra.¹⁹ Similar dissociation probably sometimes occurred when early police questioned Aborigines about the murder of a European, or other crimes. Multiple identities also meant that if food resources ran low or there was a looming danger in one language area, individuals or groups with appropriate affiliations could move to another. This flexible identity has led to problems in accepting the reliability of historic records where a particular 'tribal' identity is attributed to Aborigines involved in an event at a particular place.

As well as links through marriage, different groups were interrelated through trade and ceremonial ties, and these relationships endowed the region with a distinctive cultural identity. Today this distinctiveness is perhaps most readily identifiable in Victoria River rock art which is clearly different from Arnhem Land to the north-east, the Daly River to the north, the desert to the south and the Kimberley to the west.²⁰

Trade, marriage and ceremonial relationships, sometimes referred to as 'information networks', were the means by which Aborigines could travel hundreds of kilometres into regions far beyond their own 'country'. Information about this long-distance travel was gathered by the early ethnologist, R.H. Mathews, who sent questionnaires to Victoria River district residents in the 1890s seeking information about the Aborigines. From the settlers he learned about:

Periodic journeys...made into the territories of adjoining and distant tribes for the purpose of exchanging manufactured or natural products. The routes along which the people travel on these occasions seem to have been used and acknowledged from time out of mind. ...the natives of the upper Victoria travel eastward to Newcastle Waters; thence northerly to Daly Waters, Birdum Creek and Katherine River, returning by way of Delamere and Gregory Creek. Residents of the Wickham River go westward to the Negri and Ord Rivers, which they run down a long way, coming back by Auvergne on the Baines, and thence up the Victoria River home. There are several of these bartering or trade routes in different districts, and the journeys, which occupy a long time, are marked by good feeling and festive corroborees throughout.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid: 153-64.

²⁰ See D. Lewis, "*They Meet Up At Bilinara*", 1990; D. Lewis and D. Rose, *The Shape Of The Dreaming*, 1988.

The Norwegian zoologist and explorer Knut Dahl also mentioned such long-distance travel. While visiting the lower Victoria River in 1895 he met a 'myall'²² Aboriginal man who had visited Pine Creek, apparently out of curiosity to see the whites.²³ When people made these long trips they were likely to meet other people who had travelled a similar distance from a different direction, so there were 'chains of connection' across most of the continent, and people received goods and information from regions far beyond their maximum range of travel.²⁴ Baler shell ornaments originating on the Kimberley coast were worn in the Victoria River district and are known to have reached South Australia.²⁵ Boomerangs from the Newcastle Waters area reached the Victoria and many were passed northwards to the Daly River region. In return the Daly River people sent bamboo spears south, some of which were passed on to Newcastle Waters and beyond.²⁶ As well as material items, songs, dances and stories flowed along these networks.²⁷ This long-distance travel and information flow from much greater distances has implications for understanding the reaction of Aborigines to the settlers when they eventually arrived in the Victoria River district (see Chapter 6).

Thousands of years of accumulated experience gave Victoria River people a deep knowledge of the ecology, resources and terrain of their territories, and they developed sophisticated methods to control their environment, and to maintain and promote the growth of foods upon which they survived. The most visible, powerful and dramatic of their land management techniques was the use of fire. A common understanding of the reason for Aboriginal burning is that they wanted to clear the grass and undergrowth to make walking easier and safer, and to assist in hunting and gathering food. While this is true, there was much more to Aboriginal burning than this. Fire and smoke were (and are to

²¹ R.H. Mathews, 'Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of the Northern Territory'. *Queensland Geographical Journal*, vol. 16, 1901, pp. 69-89.

²² 'Myall' was the term applied to Aborigines who maintained a traditional and independent life in the bush, and who were ignorant of European ways.

²³ K. Dahl, *In Savage Australia: an account of a hunting and collecting expedition to Arnhem Land and Dampier Land*, Phillip Allan & Co., Ltd. London, 1926, pp. 183-84.

²⁴ D.J. Mulvaney, 'The chain of connection: the material evidence', in N. Peterson (ed.) *Tribes And Boundaries In Australia*, Social Anthropology Series No. 10, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1976, pp. 72-94.

²⁵ D.J. Mulvaney and J. Kamminga, *Prehistory of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 97.

²⁶ Personal observation.

²⁷ D.J. Mulvaney, in N. Peterson (ed.) *Tribes And Boundaries In Australia*, pp. 72-94.

this day) central to virtually every aspect of daily life, and to every life passage. Birth, initiations, dispute resolutions, and funerals all require fire and smoke. Rights to use fire in particular contexts is allocated among kin and defended in the same way that rights to songs, designs, and other forms of knowledge are defended.²⁸

Scientific, historical and anthropological studies of Aboriginal land use around Australia have shown that burning practices were highly systematic, complex, and based on an intimate knowledge of their territory, ecology and local climatic conditions.²⁹ To give just a small number of examples, Aborigines in many areas knew that fires lit at particular places would burn into previously burnt or wet areas and go out, and they knew that fires lit at certain times of the day in certain seasons would go out later in the day because of predictable wind change, or overnight as the dew fell. Some Aborigines burnt firebreaks around valued, resource-rich and fire-sensitive plant communities such as rainforest patches, or around certain sacred sites or burial grounds. They knew that burning at the appropriate time would promote the flowering of certain plant species, and the growth of particular food plants, or would attract desired animals to the area, and they knew that if they burnt certain food plants in patches over time the plants would fruit over an extended season. Conversely, if they carried out a single large burn they could ensure the production of a large amount of food for a short time period, useful for ceremonial gatherings.

Fire clearly was an essential tool in the maintenance of Aboriginal life and in some environments, at least, the number of fires lit in a year could be enormous. For example, the Gidjingali people of central Arnhem Land live in a high rainfall coastal area that was never been taken over by European pastoralists, and where their traditional burning practices have not been disrupted. A detailed year-long study showed that the Gidjingali lit well over 5,000 fires, and increased the rate of fires caused naturally by lightning strike by a factor of

²⁸ Personal communication, Dr Deborah Rose.

²⁹ S. Pyne, *Burning Bush*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1991.

tens of thousands to one.³⁰ As elsewhere in Australia, the fires lit by these people kept fuel loads low, and produced a mosaic effect of burnt, unburnt and regenerating areas.

In the Victoria River District, traditional burning was not documented while it was still being practiced largely uninfluenced by Europeans, or was still fresh in the minds of Aborigines who had lived in the bush before Europeans arrived. Consequently, other ways have to be found to cast a light on traditional burning practices. One way is to ask present-day Victoria River District Aborigines what they might know about traditional burning. While a relatively small amount of research has been carried out specifically on this issue, in the course of other research over the past twenty years much has been learnt about Victoria River Aboriginal uses of fire. Among the many possible reasons for Aborigines to light fires are the following:³¹

- * for hunting
- * for defence or attack
- * for land management
- * for cooking
- * for boiling water, using stones heated in a campfire³²
- * for warmth
- * for light
- * in ceremony (mortuary and other rituals)
- * burning down trees for firewood
- * removing grass and vermin from an area prior to camping
- * healing — to create warmth and steam, using medicinal plants (also gender restricted rituals)
- * to make the ashes used with 'bush tobacco'
- * as part of the process of leaching toxins out of certain foods to make them edible
- * to extract resin from spinifex
- * to drive away dangerous supernatural beings
- * to erase the physical traces of life so that the spirits of dead people will not want to return
- * for hardening the points of spears and digging stick
- * to anneal stone to make it better for working into spearheads and other tools
- * to alter the chemical structure of haematite, transforming yellow ochre to red ochre.
- * communication — signalling the presence of people in an area.³³

³⁰ R. Jones, 'The Neolithic, Palaeolithic and the Hunting Gardeners: Man and Land in the Antipodes', in R. Suggate, and M. Cresswell (eds), *Quaternary Studies*, The Royal Society of New Zealand, 1975, pp. 21-34.

³¹ Unless stated otherwise, information on the uses of fire by Victoria River Aborigines was compiled by Dr Deborah Rose during more than two decades of work among Victoria River District Aborigines.

³² R.H. Mathews, 'Rock-holes used by the Aborigines for warming water'. *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 35, 1901, pp. 213-16.

Aboriginal use of fire to clear unwanted grass and undergrowth maintained, and quite possibly created, the extensive grasslands so prized by European cattlemen. Ironically, it was the burning of country, and more particularly the burning of the grass required by the pastoralists, that brought Aborigines into conflict with the settlers.

The territories of most groups contained areas that were more productive than others. Generally speaking, there was much more food on the lowland plains, and along the river systems and around other water sources, than in the rocky sandstone, limestone and basalt ranges. Different foods were abundant at different times of the year, and at different places, and the Aborigines knew exactly when and where in their 'country' such resources were available. They thus led a relatively structured life, moving to and exploiting different resources in a methodical way. It is likely that the knowledgeable and regular use of fire by Victoria River Aborigines over thousands of years facilitated the rich biodiversity of the region and as well as creating the particular vegetation patterns that existed in the region when the first Europeans arrived.

A good picture can be formed of the pre-cattle Victoria River environment by drawing on a range of sources: the reports of explorers Stokes, Gregory and Forrest, and those of a number of early settlers, early photographs, modern studies and the memories and Dreamings of Aborigines.³⁴ Dominant features of the landscape observed by early Europeans were the lightly timbered open grasslands, the very dense and complex riparian vegetation, and the steep banks on the rivers and creeks. The open nature of the country was briefly remarked upon by Lieutenant John Lort Stokes in 1839. His explorations were largely confined to a narrow corridor along the Victoria River, but occasionally he moved away from the riverbank, or obtained a more expansive view from a hilltop. For example, after taking the view from Curiosity Peak, Stokes was able to describe the trees on Whirlwind Plains (present day Auvergne station) as 'mostly white gums, thinly scattered

³³ This list of reasons for burning was provided by Anthropologist Dr Deborah Rose, and is reproduced in D. Lewis, *Slower than the Eye Can See: Environmental change in northern Australia's cattle lands*, Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2002, p. 52.

³⁴ Ibid.

over it.³⁵ Similarly, in the area around present-day Fitzroy station he described 'a fine plain...lightly and picturesquely timbered with the white gum.'³⁶

Augustus Gregory's expedition of 1855-56 followed the Victoria River to its source and beyond, and in the process saw a lot of country away from the river. A number of expedition members commented on the open and grassy nature of much of the country. References to 'fine grassy flats' are common in Gregory's journal,³⁷ and James Wilson, the geologist on the expedition, estimated that the district contained more than 5,000,000 acres of 'well-watered pasture-land', and he remarked that 'North-West Australia is in reality a grassy country. In no part of the world have I seen grass grow so luxuriantly, and Mr. H. Gregory observed to me...that he had seen more grass land than during all his life before.'³⁸

Similar observations of 'splendidly grassed' and 'thinly timbered' country were made by a number of early settlers and visitors to the region, and some of these provide more detail than the accounts of the explorers. In 1884 the Government Resident reported the observations of Nat Buchanan, the pioneer of Wave Hill station:

Mr. Buchanan describes the country as being chiefly basaltic, well watered... There is also a large quantity of pigweed...and wild melons, the last being so plentiful in places that Mr. Buchanan states it would be easy to load drays with them...small mobs of working horses have been known to go without water for weeks at a time, getting sufficient for their wants from the abundant supply of wild melons. These melons grow during the months of June, July and August, and are, therefore, doubly valuable... the grasses are principally Mitchell, Landsborough, or Flinders, and blue grasses, with some barley grass, salt-bush, cotton bush, pigweed and plenty of saline herbage. There is also a bush like an orange tree which the cattle devour readily, and which is evidently very nutritious. The country is well watered back from the river and its tributaries, which are permanent. The timber is good and in sufficient quantities for building and fencing, but the bulk of the country is open plains with bald hills.³⁹

³⁵ J.L. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia*, vol. 2, p. 58.

³⁶ Ibid: 81.

³⁷ A.C. Gregory. 'North Australian Expedition', in A. Gregory and F. Gregory. *Journals of Australian Explorations*, facsimile edition, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1981, pp. 99-194 (first published 1884). For typical observations, see entries for 4-12-1855, 5-12-1855, 17-1-1856, 2-4-1856.

³⁸ J. Wilson, 'Notes on the Physical Geography of North-West Australia'. *Journal of the Geographical Society of London*, vol. 28, 1858, p. 141.

³⁹ Government Resident J.L. Parsons, 'Quarterly Report on Northern Territory', 11-11-1884, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol., 3, no. 53B, pp.2-3.

Buchanan also took the first cattle to stock Ord River Station in 1884, and provided comments on that area: 'Mr. Buchanan...reports the country to be very good, basaltic and limestone plains with bald hills, well watered with creeks and springs, timber rather scarce, and herbage chiefly Mitchell grass.'⁴⁰

In the same report the Government Resident also published a letter from Lindsay Crawford, the first manager of Victoria River Downs:

At the junction of the Wickham and Victoria it [the vegetation] consists of mimosa plains, well grassed with Mitchell and barley grasses, cotton bush, blue grass, blue bush, &c. This extends for some twenty miles, when it runs into high downs, with good grasses, and the only timber being nut tree, similar to the quandong. There are lots of herbs and melons. This sort of country extends right up the river, getting slightly better until, at Camfield Creek, you meet with salt bush. Splendid sheep country.⁴¹

Steep river and creek banks and dense riparian vegetation were first remarked upon by Stokes. On several occasions he and his men encountered banks so steep that they found it difficult to cross creeks⁴² or to access river water,⁴³ and they often had difficulty forcing their way through dense thickets of 'reeds'. For example, on a section of the river which now forms part of the boundary between Fitzroy and Bradshaw stations Stokes noted that islands in the bed of the river were 'covered with reeds and acacias'.⁴⁴ Moving further upstream he encountered reeds throughout the day:

We found the banks of the river thickly clothed with tall reeds, through which with some difficulty we forced our way; [we came] ...to the head of a steep gully, the banks of which were covered with tall reeds; The banks were so high, and so thickly covered with tall reeds, that it was only by the very green appearance of the trees...that its course could be made out; We found here considerable difficulty in forcing our way through the tall and thickly growing reeds which lined the bank.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² J.L. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia*, vol. 2, p. 75.

⁴³ Ibid: 68, 77, 87.

⁴⁴ Ibid: 64.

⁴⁵ Ibid: 67-69. See also page 87.

These 'reeds' were found at various other places during the rest of their foot explorations, and fifteen years later Gregory's expedition, too, encountered dense riparian vegetation, including 'reeds', presumably the same species that Stokes saw. James Wilson mentioned 'extensive beds of reeds growing along the rivers',⁴⁶ and on April 27th 1856 Gregory himself noted that his party,

left the camp and steered east to the Victoria River, but as we could not find a fording place, turned north to the Wickham... The bank of the Victoria being so densely covered with reeds that the water was not accessible...after three hours' search found a practicable ford... thick brush and reeds...filled the bed of the river.⁴⁷

When explorer Alexander Forrest reached the junction of the Wickham and the Victoria rivers in 1879 he had great difficulty getting across the river, 'Owing to the depth of water and the prodigious growth of palm trees and bamboo cane down to the water edge'.⁴⁸ The 'reeds' encountered by the explorers have only recently been identified as Fairy Wren Grass (*Chionacne cyathopoda*), a bamboo or cane-like plant which grows in dense tangles up to five metres high.⁴⁹

The dense riverside vegetation provided good cover for the Aborigines whenever they encountered the explorers, and later, the settlers and other Europeans. Stokes' party came across two Aboriginal children who 'scampered down the bank in very natural alarm, and were soon lost among the tall reeds',⁵⁰ and near the Wickham River-Victoria River junction Gregory's party heard Aborigines calling, but could not see them because of the 'thick brush and reeds'.⁵¹ W.H. Willshire, the first policeman stationed in the Victoria River district, was unable to follow the tracks of Aboriginal cattle spearers into one creek because it was 'impassable for reeds & large rocks'.⁵² On another occasion he came upon a camp of

⁴⁶ J.S. Wilson, 1858, p. 145.

⁴⁷ A.C. Gregory. 'North Australian Expedition', p. 149.

⁴⁸ A. Hicks, 'The Kimberleys Explored: Forrest Expedition of 1879'. *Journal and Proceedings of the Western Australian Historical Society*, New Series, vol. 1, 1938, pp. 11-19.

⁴⁹ Personal communication, K. Kelly, author of *Hard Country Hard Men: In the Footsteps of Gregory*, (Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 2000); Personal communication, Darryl Hill, former field officer with the Victoria River District Conservation Association.

⁵⁰ J.L. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia*, vol. 2, p. 72. See also page 87.

⁵¹ A.C. Gregory. 'North Australian Expedition', p. 149.

⁵² Timber Creek police journal, 28-7-1894. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.