‘cattle killers’, most of whom ‘escaped in the tropical growth’ while others ‘were protected by an impenetrable phalanx of reeds.’

In sum, at European contact the Victoria River district was found to be a region of spectacular ranges and wide plains where springs and permanent waterholes were common. The plains were savanna grasslands, lightly timbered and often almost treeless, with a rich and complex community of annual vines and shrubs. Along the rivers and creeks vegetation was usually very dense, with large trees and often great masses of ‘reeds’, and the banks of the streams were often very steep. This was a land of plenty for thousands of Aborigines whose ancestors had lived in and managed the land for tens of thousands of years. Unfortunately for the Aborigines, their country was a veritable paradise for European pastoralists. Inevitably, the settlers and their great herds of cattle would come, and cattle – ‘the shock troops of Empire’ – would march across the traditional lands in their tens of thousands (see Chapter 5). With the coming of the cattle, nothing would ever be the same.

Long before the European settlers and their cattle arrived in the Victoria River district, Aborigines living there had been in contact with or had heard about outsiders. First there was direct or indirect contact with Asian and European seafarers. Next came European land-based exploring expeditions, and finally, a series of prospectors and land-seekers criss-crossed the region.

Earliest of all are likely to have been Asian seafarers. For thousands of years, maritime cultures have sailed the seas of the ‘spice islands’ to the north of Australia, and at various times trading vessels from as far away as the Middle East, India and China frequented the region.¹ For these same thousands of years the summer monsoons have blown from the northwest, and it is virtually certain that on occasion there were ships that took advantage of the prevailing northwest winds to sail to Australia’s shores, or were carried there unwillingly during violent tropical storms. To date, very little evidence of such visits has come to light, and what exists is ambiguous or even tenuous.² However, it is known that about 300,³ and possibly more than 1000 years ago,⁴ ‘Macassan’ sailors began to make regular seasonal visits to parts of the north Australian coast to harvest trepang and other resources. While there is no hard evidence that Macassans visited the coast or rivers of the Victoria River district – no pot shards, ship wrecks or other relics have been found – there can be little doubt that Victoria River people were at least indirectly influenced by the visits

² Ibid.
⁵ The term ‘Macassan’ is generally used to denote any south-east Asian visitor to Australia, some of whom came from Macassar and some of whom came from elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago.
of Macassar men, and the possibility exists that they had occasional direct experience of
them.

In the early 1900s there were reports of a ‘forest’ of tamarind trees (*Tamarindus indicus*) in
the Port Keats area, some specimens fourteen to seventeen metres high and 1.6 metres in
diameter, a size that suggests considerable age. Tamarinds are known markers of Macassan
campsites and if these trees grew from seeds left by Macassans, rather than from seed
traded from the Arnhem Land coast or washed ashore, Victoria River Aborigines who went
to the Port Keats region to fulfil ceremonial and other social obligations are likely to have
seen the Macassan visitors for themselves. Even if they did not actually see the Macassans,
they would soon have heard about them from information and possibly goods flowing
southwards along the information networks described in Chapter 1.

There are intriguing hints that Macassans may have occasionally entered the Victoria River.
On Newry station there is a painting of a proa. The Aborigine who made this painting
could have seen a proa in the Port Keats area or sailing along the coastline north of Newry,
but it is also possible that the proa was seen in the Victoria River. When Ngarinman elder
Bobby Wititpuru and I were mapping historic and Aboriginal sites on Auvergne station in
1992, he told me about a spring near Curiosity Peak where ‘Malay men’ obtained fresh
water ‘before kardia’ (Europeans). Curiosity Peak is a short distance below the junction of
the Victoria and Baines Rivers and about 100 kilometres from the coast. It is on the tidal
reach of the river which up to this point is navigable by large boats; a short distance
upstream is Shoal Reach, a major obstacle to all but very shallow-draught vessels.

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6 L.C.E. Gee, ‘Journal and Detailed Description of Country Traversed’, *Explorations Made by the
7 Government Resident to the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, 23-3-1906, Government
Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) Inwards Correspondence – 1870-1912. Northern
Territory Archives, NTRS 790, item 14959.
9 Personal communication, Howard McNickle. McNickle, who is now deceased, was a freelance amateur
rock art recorder who carried out extensive rock art locating and recording surveys, largely on foot, on
most stations in the Victoria River district in the 1980s and 1990s. His research received some financial
support from the Museums and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory and the Australian Institute of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Some of the results of his work were published in *Rock Art
10 Mr. Wititpuru is now deceased.
The first policeman stationed in the Victoria River district claimed in 1896 that ‘The racial peculiarities of the natives about here incline very much to the Malays. Many are copper-coloured and very good looking’.\textsuperscript{11} At the very least, this indicates gene flow from neighbouring or distant groups who had contact with Macassans, but it also could indicate occasional direct contact with Macassans themselves. Another indication of ‘Malay’ influence is the style of beard worn by Victoria River Aborigines at European contact. In a sketch made by Thomas Baines in 1856, an Aboriginal man from the lower Victoria River is shown wearing a wispy goatee-like beard with the ends fastened together,\textsuperscript{12} very similar in style to the way that some Macassar men wore their beards.\textsuperscript{13} This style of beard could have been adopted after Macassar men were seen on the lower Victoria River or near Port Keats, but it could also have been adopted further afield and the style then spread to the Victoria River district.

Victoria River people might also have suffered from disease introduced by alien visitors. Several studies suggest that smallpox epidemics may have swept Australia in the 1790s, the 1820s-30s, and again in the 1860s-70s. At least two of these epidemics appear to have arrived somewhere on the Arnhem Land coast, and spread inland from there, reducing Aboriginal populations by up to forty-five percent wherever they occurred.\textsuperscript{14} If this was the case then the Aboriginal populations encountered by the first European explorers and settlers in the Victoria River district may have been much lower than they were fifty or one hundred years earlier.

\textsuperscript{11} W.H. Willshire, \textit{Land of the Dawning: Being Facts Gleaned from Cannibals in the Australian Stone Age}, W.K. Thomas and Co., Adelaide, 1896, p. 34. A similar observation was made in 1905 with respect to the Fitzmaurice River Aborigines (Northern Territory Blacks’, \textit{Adelaide Register}, 23-12-1905.).

\textsuperscript{12} For example, see the illustration on page 69 of R. Braddon, \textit{Thomas Baines and the North Australian Expedition}. William Collins Pty. Ltd., Sydney, 1986.

\textsuperscript{13} Mulvaney and J. Kamminga, \textit{Prehistory of Australia}, p. 417.

European knowledge of the Victoria River region began with explorations by ship along the coast. The Dieppe map, compiled by Portuguese seafarers in the early 1500s, shows what some believe is the north Australian coastline, including an opening in the Victoria River-Fitzmaurice River area, and thus the coast of the Victoria River district. Abel Tasman sailed the northern coastline in 1644 but he does not appear to have seen the mouth of the Victoria River.

There is tantalizing evidence for an undocumented European landing on the Fitzmaurice River in 1814. In the late 1990s I documented a marked boab at the head of the tidal reach of the Fitzmaurice River where it cuts through the Koolendong Valley, on Bradshaw station. Carved on the trunk of this boab is a partly indecipherable name, and a clear date of 1814. From what can be deciphered the name appears to be ‘Casabila’ or ‘Casabilo’, possibly Spanish or Portuguese (perhaps from Portuguese Timor). While the authenticity of the inscription cannot be proven one way or the other, it is a distinct possibility that this boab documents an otherwise unknown visit to the Victoria River district.

In 1819 Phillip Parker King was sent from Sydney to chart the northern coastline. He saw a large opening and made it close to the entrance to Queens Channel – the mouth of the Victoria – but unfavourable winds and currents, and dangerous shoals and rocks prevented him from exploring further. Twenty years were to pass before Europeans once again attempted to explore this opening.

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18 Inscription on a Fitzmaurice River boab: ‘Casabila 1814’.
Unknown visits to the region aside, official European knowledge of the Victoria River region began in October 1839 when an expedition led by Captain John Wickham arrived there in *HMS Beagle*. The ship entered the river mouth on a rising tide during a dark cloudy night, and when it was well into the river the moon rose above the hills and lit up the landscape. All on board were deeply impressed with the scene suddenly revealed to them and Wickham’s First Mate, Lieutenant John Lort Stokes, captured the mood:

"This is indeed a noble river!" burst from several lips at the same moment; "And worthy," continued I, "of being honoured with the name of her most gracious majesty the Queen:" – which Captain Wickham fully concurred in, by at once bestowing upon it the name of Victoria River.20

Wickham’s expedition explored both the Fitzmaurice River and the Victoria River by boat to the head of the tidal reaches, but Wickham himself became ill before his explorations were complete so he handed responsibility to Stokes, and it was Stokes who led much of the exploration and who later wrote the only published account of the expedition.

Along the tidal reaches of the Victoria (between the river mouth and ten to fifteen kilometres above Timber Creek), very few signs of an Aboriginal presence were noted,21 but when Stokes led a foot party along the freshwater reaches he quickly found evidence for a large population, and became quite worried about the possibility of attack.

Stokes’ party walked upstream for six days, to a point close to the location of the present-day Coolibah homestead.22 Along the way they discovered an abandoned village of thirteen huts,23 old campfires with food remains, burnt-off areas, and then they began to see the Aborigines themselves. First they saw two children who fled into ‘tall reeds’, and shortly afterwards they saw, ‘three women carrying bundles of bark at their backs... They were quite naked, with the exception of a slight covering of bark around their waists.’ The

21 Ibid: 50
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid: 69.
women called out and were answered by what sounded like a large party nearby, which caused the explorers to hurriedly move on. Later that day they saw a party of natives cross the Victoria and head downstream.

There can be little doubt that the Aborigines quickly discovered the white intruders and kept them under observation, and eventually some decided to make contact. When Stokes’ party was resting on the riverbank on present-day Coolibah station they heard ‘the shrill voices of an evidently large body of natives’. The explorers prepared themselves for attack, but instead they experienced a peaceful encounter:

two natives, accompanied by a large cream-coloured dog that howled mournfully, came down suddenly, shouting “Ho! ho!” upon the opposite bank, as though more clearly to reconnoitre our position. They were fine looking men, with bushy hair and spare limbs, quite naked, and apparently unarmed – a usual indication among the aborigines of Australia that their intentions are peaceful. They amused themselves for a time by making all sorts of gestures, shouting still “ho! ho!” to those of their body in concealment... I was of course very glad that no appeal to force was necessary...against those to whom we appeared in the character of invaders of a peaceful country.

This was the closest contact with Victoria River Aborigines experienced by any of the Europeans on the Stokes/Wickham expedition. The Aborigines eventually withdrew, leaving Stokes to remark that,

the condition and appearance of the two who made themselves visible, indicated their residence in a country fitted to supply abundantly all natural wants... I could not help comparing the bold, fearless manner in which they came towards us – their fine manly bearing, head erect, no crouching or quailing of eye – with the miserable objects I had seen at Sydney. I now beheld man in his wild state; and reader, rest assured there is nothing can equal such a sight. Before me stood two of the aboriginal inhabitants of Australia who had never, until then, encountered the hitherto blighting look of an European.

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26 Ibid: 78
27 Ibid: 79.
28 Ibid: 80.
When the explorers finally returned to their boats they learned that some expedition men hunting on a hillside had seen a large party of Aborigines 'crawling along the ground with evident caution' 29 towards a watering party. Stokes assumed that the Aborigines were 'intending if possible to surprise them', but it is at least as likely that the Aborigines were merely curious and were sneaking up to get a closer view of the strange white men.

The Wickham/Stokes expedition was not on the Victoria for long and did not establish a land-based depot, so there was little time or opportunity for the Aborigines to become sufficiently familiar with them to make sustained contact. As a result, the Europeans learnt very little about local Aboriginal society. Even though his explorations did not extend beyond the lower Victoria River, Stokes painted a glowing picture of the region and his report was an encouragement to further exploration. Before leaving the Victoria Stokes expressed the desire that, 'ere the sand of my life-glass has run out...smoke may rise from Christian hearths where now alone the prowling heathen lights his fire.' 30 Stokes died on June 11th, 1885, just two years after the first (at least nominally) Christian hearths appeared on the Victoria. The irony is that today there may well be more Aboriginal Christians in the district than there are European Christians, and over the years many of the local whites could easily have qualified as 'prowling heathens.'

Sixteen years after Stokes, in 1855, an expedition led by Augustus Gregory was sent to explore the upper Victoria River and to determine whether it might in fact be a 'highway' into the interior of Australia, perhaps even to the fabled inland sea. 32 The expedition horses were landed near Port Keats and a small party led by Gregory travelled overland, through the broken country of the Fitzmaurice River valley and on to the Victoria River. 33 Other expedition members continued on to the Victoria River in the expedition ship, Tom Tough,

29 Ibid: 89.
with the intention of setting up a base camp from which inland expedition could take place.  

Being a sailing ship, the *Tom Tough* was largely captive to the tides, and as it moved upstream it grounded on rocks and was severely damaged and disabled. Water entering the hold destroyed a large quantity of stores, and the ship was carried by the tides from one shoal to another until finally being stranded for some weeks between the junctions of the Baines River and Angalarri Creek (about fifty kilometres below Timber Creek). The *Tom Tough* was carrying a cargo of over 160 sheep and while it was incapacitated it had a severe list, so the sheep were crowded on top of each other in the hold. This crowding, together with heat and lack of water, caused a great many deaths among the sheep before a place with water and grass was found where they could be unloaded.

A depot camp was soon established at a point about ten kilometres below Timber Creek and from there Gregory made a number of forays into the interior, far beyond the point reached by Stokes, eventually travelling right up to the watershed, down the inland-flowing Sturt Creek to where it ends in a huge salt lake. When Gregory eventually returned to the main base camp the expedition broke up. Gregory started off with a group on horseback to travel 3200 kilometres across northern Australia and down to Moreton Bay (Brisbane), while the remaining expeditioners boarded the *Tom Tough* and left to obtain provisions at Kopang. From there they were under instructions to sail to the Albert River in the Gulf of Carpentaria for a rendezvous with the overland party, and then continue on to Sydney.

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
Figure 1: In this scene, probably drawn from memory and imagination, Thomas Baines has included friendly Aborigines, Mrs Gourlay (the wife of the captain of the Tom Tough), their children, and Mrs Gourlay’s maid (The Leisure Hour, 1868).

From the point of view of his contemporaries, the major result of Gregory’s explorations was to make known the tremendous extent of prime grazing land in the region, grazing land for which the Victoria River country is now famous. One of the enduring mysteries of Victoria River history is why this pastoralists’ bonanza remained untouched for almost thirty years.

A number of expedition members eventually published papers relevant to their own expertise and experience, but the only detailed published accounts of the expedition by an expedition member are the reports by Gregory.38 These provide relatively short day-by-day

38 A.C. Gregory, 'Journal of the North Australian Exploring Expedition, under the command of Augustus C. Gregory, Esq. (Gold Medallist R.G.S); with report by Mr. Elsey on the Health of the Party.' Journal of the
descriptions of events. However, expedition members who occupied the depot camp kept an official camp journal, along with personal diaries; they also wrote letters to friends and family in England, some of which have been preserved in archives and none of which has been published. These unpublished documents include relatively detailed information on the environment and the Aboriginal inhabitants of the region. Combined with the published reports, they provide a kind of ‘foundational document’ for the Victoria River district – a base line from which to measure the changes wrought by European settlement.

These records document some amazing encounters between the explorers and the Aborigines, and reveal a poignant ‘what might have been’ in view of later race relations in the region. Gregory’s journal records that during his inland forays he often saw signs of Aborigines and occasionally heard them calling, but he had only a few fleeting glimpses of the people themselves. However, at the main depot camp the situation was much different. This camp was permanently manned for nine months, but Gregory himself spent only half that time there. Understandably, his journal is primarily concerned with what he experienced himself and it provides scant detail about the experiences of the men who manned the depot camp while he was away.

To give one example, on his return from his second excursion inland, Gregory recorded that during his absence, ‘The natives have been frequently at the camp in small parties, and on these occasions were very quiet in their demeanour.’ He was also told that Aborigines met by small detached parties of men away from the base camp had made ‘hostile demonstrations’, and on one occasion had to be fired on, with one man being slightly


wounded.\textsuperscript{41} The fact is that Gregory's brief and dry journal entries gloss over these events; far more occurred between the Aborigines and the men stationed at the depot camp than either Gregory's journal or later books about his expedition would suggest. Furthermore, not all encounters away from the base camp were hostile.

The camp journal, diaries and letters written by men based at the depot camp contain accounts of peaceful 'first contact' between the Aborigines and the Europeans. In combination with some of Gregory's observations they provide an insight into many aspects of Aboriginal society at the time – people's physical appearance, their material culture, social relations and land use – and their varied reactions to the Europeans. They also hint at a greater awareness of Europeans than might otherwise have been expected.

Initial contacts were either cautious and low key, or unfriendly. The first 'cheek by jowl' encounter occurred on November 16\textsuperscript{th} when Gregory was leading a party on a short reconnaissance to the freshwater reaches of the river. At Palm Island, eight kilometres above the mouth of Timber Creek,

A native approached the bank of the river and came to us, and a parley commenced which was rather unintelligible, and when he found that he could not make himself understood by words, resorted to the language of signs, and expressed his contempt of us in an unmistakable manner.\textsuperscript{42}

During the following week or so, Aborigines twice visited a party cutting trees at Timber Creek. While these visits were described as 'neither decidedly friendly or hostile,' the Aborigines pilfered some items 'imprudently left lying near one of the logs' and later 'set fire to the grass about 200 yards from the camp, and then retired.'\textsuperscript{43} In December two men looking for strayed horses about twenty-five kilometres to the west thought themselves

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid: 150-151.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid: 112. Undoubtedly the man turned and exposed his backside to the Europeans.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid: 113 (first published 1884).
threatened by a large group of Aborigines; they scattered them by charging them on horseback.44

Gregory set out on his second and major excursion inland on January 2nd 1856 and two days later a remarkable incident occurred near the depot camp. On that day two of Captain Gourlay’s crewmen were hunting on the opposite side of the river when four Aborigines appeared. One of the hunters was already on his way back across the river with a kangaroo he had shot, so Gourlay went across to pick up the other crewman, and Wilson recorded in the Camp Journal that,

During the time he was ashore the Capt’n had a parley with the Natives and observed that they spoke a few words of English. One asked for tobacco and seemed to understand its use perfectly when a small piece was given him – he said tomorrow in a manner the Captain understood to mean, that they would come tomorrow. Mosquitos being exceedingly troublesome to him he would strike the place where they stung him with his hand and say, no good, no good.45

In spite of the friendly nature of this meeting, Wilson was afraid of problems arising if similar incidents occurred, so he gave orders that no hunting was to be done on the opposite side of the river as long as Aborigines were in the area.46 The same Aborigines appeared at the same place the next day but were ignored. They came again the next day, and the next, and were ignored each time.47 In the meantime work was begun on digging a defensive ditch to enclose the depot camp to give it a degree of protection against possible attack, and to serve as a boundary line inside which Aborigines were not to be allowed.48

Wilson was perplexed at the apparent use of English by the Aborigine and his familiarity with tobacco, and he speculated that when the British settlement at Port Essington existed

44 Ibid: 118 (first published 1884); The men were Thomas Baines and R. Bowman. Baines later recreated this encounter in an oil painting, a copy of which is reproduced in R. Braddon, Thomas Baines and the North Australian Expedition, p. 37.
46 Ibid: entry for 5-1-1856.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid: entry for 7-1-1856.
Aborigines living in the area might have learnt 'a considerable number of English words' and transmitted them to the neighbouring tribes. He noted that the man who appeared to use English words was older than his companions, and might have learnt the words he used (and gained a knowledge of tobacco) when he was living with Aborigines much further to the north.\textsuperscript{50}

Wilson's speculations that English words and knowledge of tobacco may have been passed from tribe to tribe from the old Port Essington Settlement were quite possibly correct. As described in Chapter 1, Aborigines throughout Australia were connected to each other via trade and information networks.\textsuperscript{51} George Windsor-Earl, the official linguist and draughtsman at Port Essington,\textsuperscript{52} noted that information passed rapidly from tribe to tribe so that, 'an event of any importance is known over a large extent of country in the course of a very few months.' He also noted with surprise that Aborigines visiting from further inland spoke of 'white people who dwelt in the country to the south, and who built houses of stone', and he assumed that this must refer to houses in the infant settlement of Adelaide, over 3000 kilometres away.\textsuperscript{53}

When explorer Ludwig Leichhardt first entered the plains of the South Alligator River in November 1845, he met Aborigines who repeatedly said the words 'perikot' and 'nokot'. Because of their accent, at the time Leichhardt did not recognise what the Aborigines were saying, but later he realised the words were 'very good' and 'no good'.\textsuperscript{54} This was about 200 kilometres from Port Essington, and apparently these words used so often by the whites

\textsuperscript{50} J.S. Wilson and J.R. Elsey, entry for 4-1-1856. Mitchell Library, Z.C 411-1 (microfilm copy CY 602).
\textsuperscript{51} N. Peterson, N. (ed.) \textit{Tribes And Boundaries In Australia}. Social Anthropology Series No. 10, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1976. See particularly the chapters by Peterson, pp. 50-71, and Mulvaney, pp. 72-94.
\textsuperscript{53} George Windsor-Earl, cited in H. Reynolds, \textit{The Other Side of the Frontier}, History Department, James Cook University, Townsville, 1981, p. 10.
there, and with such emphasis, that they made a impact on the Aborigines who heard them and were passed along from tribe to tribe to this place. It is of interest to note that among the Larrakia Aborigines in the Darwin area, ‘perikot’ is the term they use for ‘white man’.55

Months after the first encounter with the supposed English-speaking Aborigine, expedition surgeon and zoologist Joseph Elsey had the opportunity to converse with him (see below) and as a result he rejected the claim that any local Aborigines knew words of English, although he admitted that several words sounded like ‘tobac’ and ‘no good’.56 Given that Leichhardt had not recognized the words ‘very good’ and no good’ after more than four years experience of listening to Aboriginal English, it is quite possible that the Victoria River Aborigines were attempting to speak English and that Elsey was not experienced enough to understand what he was hearing. In addition, the fact remains, first, that upon (apparently) asking for ‘tobac’ and being given a piece, the Aboriginal man ‘seemed to understand its use perfectly’ – the implication being that he began chewing it – and second, that he apparently said ‘tomorrow’ and did indeed come back the next day.

Apart from the discovery of some footprints near the depot camp on January 18th,57 the Aborigines seem to disappear from the depot area for six weeks, but down river below the Angalarri Creek junction there were remarkable encounters on January 31st, February 1st and February 3rd. On January 31st Wilson, Captain Gourlay and some sailors set off from the depot camp to look for a suitable place to careen the Tom Tough so that repairs could be carried out. Darkness had fallen as they neared the Sea (now Yambarran) Range when they noticed some Aboriginal campfires. Some of Wilson’s men ‘cooeed’ but got no answer, so Wilson ordered a gun to be fired. Upon hearing the gunshot one might have expected the Aborigines to flee, but instead they began calling to the Europeans and one came towards them with a firestick. The two groups kept calling to one another as the boat passed, but no contact was made and shortly afterwards the Europeans camped for the night.58

55 Personal communication, Deborah Rose, who worked on the Cox Peninsula land claim in which Larrakia people were claimants.
57 Ibid: entry for 18-1-1856.
58 J.S. Wilson, entry for 31-1-1856, Mitchell Library, ZC 411-2 (microfilm copy CY 602).
The next day saw the most extraordinary encounter of the entire expedition. A few minutes after Wilson and his men resumed their journey downstream they were again hailed by Aborigines. Wilson directed his men to keep going and the Aborigines followed them by running along the riverbank. Eventually Wilson’s party pulled up on the opposite bank for breakfast, and across the river the Aborigines gathered to watch them.59

As the explorers landed they shot at a flock of cockatoos feeding on wild melons growing there and ‘As they rose and were flying overhead one of the men fired up amongst them.’ A cockatoo fell from the sky and Aborigines watching from across the river, ‘simultaneously gave a yell of mixed admiration and astonishment.’60 Some of Wilson’s men went into the nearby bush to try and shoot more game but they soon hurried back, saying they had been hailed by what seemed to be another large group of Aborigines. A conversation ensued between the Aborigines on both sides of the river, and as a result,

nine of those on the off side marched into the water until out of their depth, then swam to a sandbank in the middle across which they marched in the same regular order and again swam toward the bank carrying their spears above water in the left hand. As they approached the bank (about 200 yards below where our boat was moored, an elderly native swam out to meet them bearing in his hand a green bough. The green bough, the well known emblem of peace.61

Wilson’s men feared an attack and loaded their muskets with ball, then ‘stood on the high bank and expressed in high terms their admiration of the novel scene... The place added materially to the effect. The broad river, the repulsive red cliffs of Sea Range, the picturesque Dome62 in the back ground’. The two groups of Aborigines came together some distance away and then came, unarmed, towards the Europeans. Wilson’s party still feared an attack and made signs for them to stop.

60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 The ‘Dome’ is a conical hill on the east bank of the Victoria River at the very end of the Yambarran Range’ (Millik Monmir 1:100,000 map, sheet 4967, coords 284 981).
All of the Aborigines were young men except for one ‘rather elderly man’ who had come about thirty yards in advance of the others. This man apparently understood the signs made by the whites and ordered his countrymen to keep back. He ‘trampled down the long grass round where he stood to show that he had no concealed weapon’ and then pointed to a running sore on his back. Wilson’s men were still fearful and wanted to drive the Aborigines away, but Wilson ordered them to hold their fire, making the rather droll remark that the Aborigines ‘came rather to have their wounds healed than to have others added.’ He and his men then went up to the injured man.

The expedition surgeon was not with Wilson’s party and they had no medicines, so they improvised a treatment. First, one of the men prepared a quid of tobacco. Then, believing he needed to convince the Aborigines that powerful magic was involved, he

Muttered a lot of gibberish performed a number of gymnastic movements, which ended (muttering all the time) by taking off his hat looking at the sun, first over his right shoulder then over his left and dashing his hat with violence to the ground proceeded to apply the solaceing [sic] weed

The quid of tobacco was then bound in place with a strip torn from the man’s shirt. The puzzle is, what made the injured man think that these strange intruders could help with his wound? It is interesting to speculate that the injured man sought help from Wilson’s party because he had heard that the Europeans at Port Essington were good at healing wounds and curing sickness.

While this ‘treatment’ was in progress the crewmen had approached the other Aborigines and ‘an amicable understanding established’. Wilson thought that the friendliness of the Aborigines was probably due to the ‘peaceful and distant disposition’ the expedition members had maintained since they’d arrived, and because the Aborigines ‘had evidence of, and felt our superiority.’

According to Wilson, the Aborigines indicated that they knew of the expedition’s depot camp and seemed anxious to make a visit. They also invited him to a corroboree at their camp that night, but he declined. Wilson and his men then finished their breakfast, gave the Aborigines a few small gifts, and continued on downstream. The Aborigines followed them along the bank for a distance but were eventually left behind. Then, as Wilson’s party was passing the Dome, a large group of women, children and old men watched them from the hillside and called out to them, but once again the Europeans continued on.\(^{64}\)

On their return upstream two days later Wilson and his men camped near where they had met the large group, and had another peaceful encounter. This time there were only six men, four that they had seen before and two others who were very young and who ‘stood aloof.’ These young men had their two front teeth knocked out and Wilson was ‘given to understand by the others that they belonged to another tribe up the River.’\(^{65}\) Modern ethnographic studies suggest that the young men were probably undergoing ‘young men’s’ initiation, a prolonged process during which the neophytes are largely removed from society, placed under the strict control of initiated men, and taken on trips into the territory of neighbouring groups.\(^{66}\)

The men in this group were fascinated with the physical appearance of the Europeans and in a manner strangely reminiscent of late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century anthropological studies of Aborigines, they examined them ‘with extreme minuteness.’ They noted that not all of the whites had hair of the same colour and were astonished at their ‘superior muscular proportions which they observed with admiration.’ One man opened Wilson’s shirt and examined his chest ‘with the minuteness that a Military Doctor might be supposed to do that of a young recruit’. Then he compared each part of Wilson’s arm with the same parts of his own. He noted that Wilson’s hand was not as large as his own and called to one of his friends to come and look at the difference. While the second man was holding Wilson’s hand in his own, Wilson grasped it as hard as he could, causing the man to wince and sing

\(^{64}\) Ibid.
\(^{65}\) Ibid: entry for 2-2-1856.
out. According to Wilson all the Aborigines laughed and the butt of his joke 'seemed both pleased and astonished while he rubbed his hand and described his sensations to his brethren."

The men with Wilson then began to barter with the Aborigines and exchanged a blanket and a red woollen shirt for two spears. They were keen to obtain a stone tomahawk but Wilson noticed that the Aborigines seemed to value these very highly, and in a perceptive and considerate insight he admonished his men to only trade something which would be of equal service to the Aborigines. Eventually they parted 'in the most amicable manner' and the Aborigines followed the boat for some distance before dropping out of sight.

The next encounter occurred at the depot camp over a month later. On March 2\textsuperscript{nd} Elsey was in a gully above the camp when he was alarmed to see three Aborigines approaching. He rushed back to camp to wait for them at the embankment, and described how,

They came forward boldly, and the eldest of them walked directly up to me & jumping the ditch, stood by my side. I immediately intimated that he must recross the ditch whereon he jumped back laid down his spears & woomera & jumped back again, but it was not till I pushed him over that he seemed to understand that neither he nor his weapons were to cross the ditch. They were very cheerful & communicative, but had no Knowledge of English, though several words sounded very much like “tobac” “no good” &c.

Elsey went to his hut to get the Aborigines some old clothes and when he returned he found the oldest of them back inside the ditch again. Elsey got him outside the ditch once more, and somehow made it clear that he must stay out. He then 'gave him an old merino waistcoat, the second an old pair of drawers & the third a finely made handsome youth, an old silk handkerchief to tie round his head.' After about an hour they left and 'promised to renew their visit.'

\footnote{J.S. Wilson, entry for 2-2-1856, Mitchell Library, ZC 411-2 (microfilm copy CY 602).} \footnote{Ibid: entry for 3-2-1856.} \footnote{Ibid: entry for 2-3-1856.}
While Elsey was dealing with these Aborigines, Wilson and his party were in a boat on their way back to the Depot. On the morning of March 2\textsuperscript{nd} his men were trying to shoot some cockatoos in the trees, a short distance below the mouth of Timber Creek, when they came upon a large group of Aborigines. Some had climbed high into trees to watch their approach while others were on a high rocky bank that jutted out into the river.\textsuperscript{70} They called out and invited the whites to land, 'but not liking appearances about them' Wilson directed the boat to move further towards midstream. As they passed the Aborigines the boatmen noticed three of them standing hidden in the shade of a bush with their spears fixed in their woomeras. At the command of an old man, one of the three men ran as close as he could and prepared to throw his spear at them. A shot was fired in his direction and his arm dropped 'as though it had been shot down.' In fright he ran back to his friends and then a gun loaded with shot and ball was fired at them. The whites saw the ball hit the rocks and miss the Aborigines, but some of the shot may have hit them 'as several of them jumped as though they had been struck unexpectedly, and they all scampered off across the rocks yelling like so many frightened imps.' Wilson did not believe that any of the Aborigines had been seriously injured, but he thought it would be 'a sufficient warning to them' not to try and throw spears at the white men again.

In a note at the end of this entry Wilson described how on March 11\textsuperscript{th} Elsey made a trip upstream to Reach Hopeless (about twelve kilometres above Timber Creek), and as he began his return he found himself cut off when Aborigines appeared on both banks.\textsuperscript{71} Luckily they proved friendly and some were the men that Elsey had seen at the depot camp a few days earlier. Several others were in the group that Wilson's men had fired upon the previous day.\textsuperscript{72} According to Wilson these men,

\begin{quote}
seemed anxious to explain [to Elsey] some affair which he supposed to be their meeting with us, and one of them a young fellow showed him two small fresh scars on his arm from bird shot wounds, [and] he patted the gun in a conciliatory manner.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid: entry for 3-3-1856.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
Since then he has been met with several times and has been to the camp, but always with expressions of good feeling.  

From this time it is clear that relations between the Europeans and the Aborigines improved rapidly. On March 28th Elsey recorded that 'In the afternoon the natives again appeared on the opposite side of the river & were soon recognised as our acquaintances up the river by their calling out “bit of sugar” & c. The Aborigines appeared across the river again on the following two days, and on both occasions Elsey and others went over to them. On the first occasion Elsey wrote that the Aborigines,

were without arms, very friendly & merry & one of them at last understood my endeavours to catch some of their words & gave us a number by which we were enabled to ask for a stone tomahawk, which they promised to bring the next day.

The Aborigines returned the next day, bringing with them two stone tomahawks, and Elsey added to his word list, recording twenty words of the local language, ‘most of them signifying parts of the body.’ Unfortunately, these word lists are not to be found in any of the surviving records from the expedition. When Aborigines came to the depot camp again two weeks later (April 13th) Elsey wrote that,

At dinner time two of our black friends, Deana & Dearbigen made their appearance, and begged some clothes for their gins. I gave one a cotton waistcoat, the other a pair of drawers. They gave me a few additional words of their vocabulary, and were greatly astonished at the sketches in Stokes’ works, especially of their own drawings, to most of which they gave names.

73 Ibid.
74 J.S. Wilson and J.R. Elsey, entry for 28-3-1856. Mitchell Library, Z C 411-1 (microfilm copy CY 6C0)
Note: It is not explicit that this and the entries for the following two days were written by Elsey rather than Wilson, but Wilson appears to have had a much less trusting attitude towards Aborigines than did Elsey.
75 Ibid: entry for 29-3-1856.
76 Ibid: entry for 30-3-1856.
77 On page 170 of volume two of J.L. Stokes’ book, Discoveries in Australia, there are illustrations of Aboriginal rock engravings from Depuch Island, Western Australia. Presumably these are the pictures shown to the Aborigines.
78 J.S. Wilson and J.R. Elsey, entry for 13-4-1856. Mitchell Library, Z C 411-1 (microfilm copy CY 6C0)
In a private letter written in May, Elsey told of a visit to the depot camp by Aborigines and in spite of the different spellings he gives to the names of the men, it is almost certainly the same visit as that which occurred on March 2nd.

I was roused from my solitary dinner of preserved beef & rice...by the cry “Doctor, there are natives coming to the camp,” so I was obliged to jump up, take down my rifle, and gird on my revolver and march out to meet them. They proved to be two old friends, Drand & Deartijero, with whom I had become very intimate during a voyage up the river. When I had satisfied their modest desires, frightened them with a looking glass, astounded them with a telescope, and presented one with an old merino waistcoat & the other with a pair of cotton drawers cut off at the knee, both being singularly suitable garments for bush wear.79

The two Aborigines came to the Depot again the next day, and Elsey,

had a long chat with them, & obtained a number of words & was surprised to find that they understood the use of the boomerang which they call Karlee. They do not appear to use it themselves, but described with great exactness its course & the peculiar sound it makes in its passage. A still more interesting fact to me was that they recognised at once a drawing of the Australian Porcupine Anteater, or Echidna, & pointing to some ants which were attacking a brown snake we had given them, intimated that they constituted its food.80

There was another visit by Aborigines to the Depot on April 27th, but no details were given.81 On the morning of April 10th Wilson was on board the Tom Tough where it was careened near the Dome, when, ‘The tribe of natives whom we had seen on a previous occasion down this way, having seen the vessel they came to pay us a visit, and crossed the River for that purpose. They were quite peaceable and sat on the bank watching our movements with Astonishment.’82 In the afternoon the Aborigines noticed some smoke ascending near Curiosity Peak and moved off in that direction, indicating that they would return later.

Wilson returned to the depot camp on May 14th and he records that on the way he and the men with him, ‘dined in the boat at Sandy Island under the scrutinising gaze of a tribe of

81 Ibid: entry for 27-4-1856.
82 J.S. Wilson, entry for 10-4-1856, Mitchell Library, ZC 411-2 (microfilm copy CY 602).
Natives.' A week or so later Wilson, Elsey and the expedition botanist, Ferdinand Mueller, made another boat trip down river, and on their return they stopped for breakfast at 'Stony Spit' (below Sandy Island). There they were joined by an Aborigine who had previously provided both Elsey and Mueller with words lists, and he later went with them in the boat back to the depot. In a paper Wilson published after returning to England, he expanded on this meeting:

we were joined by the old native Deeanna with whom we had already formed a little intimacy. Having given him some bread and tea, he enquired by signs what bread was? In answer I took some seed from a tuft of grass growing by where we were sat, and placing it between two stones, rubbed it and showed him the flour; immediately he saw me adopt this operation he expressed satisfaction as though he understood perfectly.

The camp journal kept by Wilson and Elsey was discontinued shortly after Gregory's return on May 9th 1856, and for about a month only Gregory's published journal is available. During this time Gregory made few mentions of Aborigines. In one instance he noted that a few days after he arrived back, 'A small party of natives came to the camp in the morning and bartered a few trifles, and then retired.' It was probably on this occasion that Thomas Baines made the sketches of Aborigines at the depot camp that are in his collection.

One of the last encounters nearly ended badly. On June 4th 1856 in the vicinity of Curiosity Peak, four crewmen from the Tom Tough went on shore to barter with a group of about twenty Aborigines. One of the Aborigines stole a tomahawk from the boat and the Europeans quickly held another captive to secure its return. This led yet another of the Aborigines unsuccessfully to try to wrestle a gun from one of the crewmen, whereon all the Aborigines decamped. The tomahawk was found later and based on the descriptions of those involved the incident was later recorded in a sketch by Thomas Baines. Victoria

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83 Ibid: entry for 21-5-1856.
84 Ibid: entry for 28-5-1856.
87 For examples, see R. Braddon, Thomas Baines and the North Australia Expedition, pp. 68, 69; see also the dust jacket and page 83 of J. Cumston, Augustus Gregory and the Inland Sea, 1972.
River Aborigines are only mentioned once more in any document from the expedition. When the depot camp was abandoned and the *Tom Tough* was moving downstream towards the open sea, some Aborigines at Holdfast Reach called out and one ran for some time along the riverbank.90

After the expedition ended James Wilson summarised his view of relations between the Aborigines and the explorers on the lower Victoria: ‘except on one occasion, our intercourse with them was always amicable, and...there is no impression left on the minds of the native population unfavourable to their English visitors.’91 Of course, there were actually a number of mildly unfriendly encounters, but overall this appears to be a fair summation. Sadly, relations between Europeans and Victoria River Aborigines were not to be so friendly and mutually fascinating for a long time to come.

Gregory’s expedition revealed the tremendous extent and richness of grazing lands in the Victoria River country, but for almost a quarter of a century the region remained free from what Stokes had called the ‘blighting look’92 of Europeans.93 The next ‘blighting look’ came in 1879 when Alexander Forrest’s party made a west-to-east traverse of the district, and it was Forrest’s report of limitless grasslands that caused a land rush to the region. At least, that’s the popular belief. The facts are otherwise. When it reached the western edge of the Victoria River country Forrest’s party was in dire straits, suffering sickness and hunger (plates 27, 28). Desperate to reach ‘civilisation’ on the overland telegraph line, they rushed across the region, in the process adding very little to European knowledge of the district.94

While Forrest’s report may have caused or at least accelerated a land rush to the Kimberley, in the Victoria River district the rush had already begun. Pastoral applications were being

93 Ibid.
made from at least March 1876,\(^{95}\) and by the time Forrest arrived large areas had been taken up on paper\(^{96}\) and several private land-seeking expeditions had visited the region. In fact, between Gregory’s expedition and the arrival of the first settlers in 1883-86, at least twelve parties entered the Victoria River district, and it is highly likely that there were other expeditions now lost to history.

To give a few examples of possibly undocumented expeditions, first, in 1878 the great bushman-explorer Nat Buchanan took up a lease, apparently sight unseen, over an area west of Timber Creek (plate 29). The following year he relinquished this lease and instead took up leases over vastly superior country further south, leases which formed the nucleus of Wave Hill station. It is quite possible, indeed probable, that Buchanan visited the region in 1879 to see for himself where the best land was, and adjusted his leases accordingly.\(^{97}\)

Second, at Murranji waterhole, on the fringe of the Victoria River district, there was once a tree marked ‘JS 78’.\(^{98}\) Officially this waterhole was first discovered by Nat Buchanan when he opened up the Murranji Track in 1886,\(^{99}\) but in 1905 a drover named John Skuthorpe claimed that he had marked the tree during a trip he made to Cambridge Gulf in 1878.\(^{100}\) Skuthorpe’s claim was scoffed at by others\(^{101}\) who claimed a man named John Scanlan had marked the tree during a trip he had made to the Victoria River country.\(^{102}\) Whoever it may have been, someone was at Murranji in 1878 and may have continued on to the Victoria River country. Third, there is an intriguing possibility that on his final expedition the long-

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\(^{95}\) Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia), Inwards Correspondence – 1870-1912. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item A1447.

\(^{96}\) For example, see Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia), Inwards Correspondence – 1870-1912. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, where numerous applications are documented.

\(^{97}\) According to Bobbie Buchanan (In the Tracks of Old Bluey, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 1997, p. 64), the new leases taken up by Nat Buchanan covered much of the best grazing land in the Victoria River district, and it seems likely that he knew where the best land was through personal observation.


\(^{99}\) G. Buchanan, Packhorse and Waterhole, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1933, p. 121.


\(^{101}\) Skuthorpe already had acquired a reputation for being the ‘champion truth-teller of Queensland’ from having claimed, in 1881, to have discovered Leichhardt’s journals and other relics (‘The Skuthorpe Libel Case’, Sydney Morning Herald, 8-2-1881).

\(^{102}\) H7H [Healy Hutchinson] ‘Odd Stock and Other Notes’, The Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton), 20-1-1906.
lost explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt, may have passed across the southern fringe of the region. This possibility is examined in detail in Appendix B.

The accounts left by the known expeditions vary in length and detail, and it is often difficult to discover the background of the people involved, or the ramifications of their visits, particularly with respect to the land-seekers. What is clear is that there were sometimes connections between the people involved in different expeditions and quite likely there were links between others for which we have no clear evidence. Just what these connections might have meant in terms of eventual pastoral settlement is difficult to unravel, and would require an intensive study of its own. However, in some cases extensive reports on these expeditions were published in newspapers and there can be little doubt that these reports influenced or assisted those who came later.

So why do these incursions matter? Apart from their inherent interest, they may have influenced later events when the first settlers arrived. During Gregory’s expedition the Aborigines at first avoided the strangers, but in the one place where the Europeans could be secretly scrutinised for a long period – the main depot camp – Aborigines eventually made sustained friendly contact. By the time the settlers arrived almost thirty years later things had changed, and the pre-settlement incursions almost certainly had something to do with this. Below I provide brief accounts of these incursions, and I have also included two post-settler incursions because for a short time after the first rough homesteads were established, the country was still almost totally ‘terra incognita’ to Europeans.

No sooner had Gregory left the Victoria River country than Lieutenant Chimmo arrived. Concerned for the safety of Gregory’s expedition, the ‘Governor General of Australia’ sent Chimmo in the paddle steamer Torch to offer Gregory any assistance he could. Chimmo arrived at the Victoria River Depot Camp two months after Gregory had left, so

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103 According to J. Cumston (Augustus Gregory and the Inland Sea, p. 44), at this time the Governor of New South Wales also held the title of ‘Governor General of Australia’.
his assistance was not required.\footnote{W. Chimmo, 'Account of the Search for the North-Australian Exploring Expedition under Mr. A.C. Gregory'. \textit{Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London}, vol. 1, sessions 1855-6 and 1856-7, pp. 255-263.} He found a message Gregory had left hidden in the forge and added the name of his ship to a boab that had been marked by Baines, and then left (see fold-out, page 374).

\textbf{Letter in Forge.} \footnote{Message carved on a boab at the Depot Camp.}

When the South Australian Government decided to establish an outpost on the Northern Territory coast in 1864, Government Resident Boyle Travers Finniss was ordered to examine several locations for their suitability as the site for a settlement.\footnote{B. Reece, entry on Boyle Travers Finniss in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), \textit{Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography}, vol. 1. Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1990, pp. 95-97.} One of the areas he examined, in 1865, was the lower Victoria River, but he deemed it unsuitable and instead chose Escape Cliffs near the mouth of the Adelaide River.\footnote{Report by B.T. Finniss to the Governor of South Australia, 1-9-1865. 'Dispatches From Northern Territory'. \textit{South Australian Parliamentary Papers}, vol. 2, no. 83, 1866, pp. 9-10.} This site turned out to be ill-chosen and was abandoned at the end of 1866.\footnote{K. De La Rue, \textit{Evolution of Darwin, 1869-1911: A history of the Northern Territory's capital city during the years of South Australian administration}. Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, 2004, p. 4.}

After this fiasco the South Australian Government made another attempt to find a suitable place for a settlement. In 1867 the famous captain, Francis Cadell,\footnote{Among other exploits, Cadell was the first man to take a steam ship up the Darling River.} was sent to make this new examination, including, once again, the Victoria River (plate 30). Cadell was on the lower Victoria River from early to mid November, at the height of the notorious 'build up' to the summer monsoon – a period of extreme heat, great humidity and fierce electrical storms. In these torrid conditions his crew became ill and Cadell could not get quite as far as the Whirlwind Plains. He was less than impressed:

\begin{quote}
owing to the numerous dangers of that rapid and shoal-encumbered river, also taking into consideration the 100-mile belt of the most wretched, rocky, barren and
\end{quote}
Eventually a new settlement was established in 1869, on the shores of Darwin Harbour. Within a few years construction of the overland telegraph line commenced and in the process gold was discovered in the Pine Creek region. This led to a small gold rush in 1872 and continued prospecting throughout the ‘Top End’ over the following decade, with many parties eager to be ‘first on the field’. Several made plans to prospect in the Victoria River district.

In June or July 1876 a group of prospectors examined the lower Victoria River by boat. They travelled upstream as far as Curiosity Peak, near the mouth of the Baines River, but they found no trace of gold or other valuable minerals before retuning to Darwin. The following year three men, A.W. Sergison, Roderick Travers and a man named Moore rode horses into the Victoria River country via the headwaters of the Fitzmaurice River, and travelled back and forth across what later became Bradshaw station (map 5). On their return Sergison and Travers formed a company and obtained pastoral leases over a huge extent of country, including a large part of the Victoria River region. They never stocked the land and Sergison later transferred his share of the leases to the wealthy Melbourne businessmen, Fisher and Lyons, who were to eventually form Glencoe, Daly River and Victoria River Downs stations.

113 Ibid: 95-96.
114 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 8-7-1876.
115 A. Sergison, The Northern Territory and the Pastoral Capabilities, with Notes, Extracts, and Map, Sands and McDougall, Printers, Melbourne, 1878.
Map 5: Section of Sergison and Travers’ map showing their route across what later became Bradshaw station.

In May 1878 Adrian Sullivan, John Mylrea\textsuperscript{117} and Arthur McDonald set out from Springvale for the Victoria.\textsuperscript{118} They followed the Katherine River for about sixty kilometres and then headed south-west. Eventually they struck a creek which they followed down to

\textsuperscript{118} ‘Trip to the Victoria River’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 28-9-1878.
its junction with the Victoria. The three men had a copy of Gregory’s map and report, and from this point on they more or less followed the route Gregory had blazed over twenty years earlier. Like Gregory, they crossed the headwaters of the Victoria River to Sturt Creek which they followed for at least 100 kilometres, through country they later described as ‘well adapted for either sheep or cattle’, and ‘the best pastoral country we saw during our trip’.

On their return journey they tried to go east to the Powells Creek telegraph station on the Overland Telegraph Line. They rode from Sturt Creek to Hooker Creek and followed it until it disappeared into the desert, but after travelling across a level sandy desert for over seventy kilometres, lack of water and horse feed forced them to head north to the Victoria River. The rest of their return journey was along their outward track and they reached Katherine on August 20th, thirteen weeks after setting out.

In summing up their trip, Sullivan said that they saw ‘several parties of natives’ but had no trouble with them, and that ‘on the whole I was disappointed with the character of the country, an immense deal of it being of little value, that is, for pastoral purposes.’ While this may have been his sincere belief, one has to wonder whether he really was disappointed in much of the country they saw or if he wanted to deflect rival pastoral interests from the area. Whatever the truth of the matter, there is no evidence that either he or McDonald retained any of the land after 1878, and there is no known connection between them and subsequent landholders in the region.

Alexander Forrest’s exploring expedition which crossed the district in 1879 has already been described, and it was not until the following year that another party visited the region.

In July 1880 a party led by Alfred Thomas Woods set out from Springvale look for country

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119 Sullivans name was given to this creek but it is unclear if the creek of this name on the maps today is the same creek they followed. According to their own account the creek they followed joined the Victoria River at a point where it ran east-west, but Sullivans Creek today joins a north-south section of the river.
121 ‘Trip to the Victoria River’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 28-9-1878.
122 ibid.
on behalf of Dr Browne, the owner of Springvale station. One of the expedition members was ‘Greenhide’ Sam Croker who was later to play a significant role in establishing Wave Hill station. Woods’ party travelled at least as far west as the junction of Gregory Creek and the Victoria River, but the best country they found was along Aroona and Price’s Creeks and across to the headwaters of Sullivans and Gregory Creeks, on the divide between the Katherine-Daly system and the Victoria River. Woods named the area Delamere Downs and on his return to ‘civilisation’ leases were taken up and Delamere became the first station to include country within the Victoria River valley.

In September-October 1880 Sam Croker travelled out to the Delamere country again to look for more good land, this time in the company of Alfred Giles, and later another block of 600 square miles was taken up. On this trip they probably went as far as the headwaters of the Fitzmaurice River because in November Croker advertised for the owner of a horse he had found there. With Tom Pearce and Rodney Claude Spencer, Giles visited the area again in early June 1881. Over twenty years later Tom Pearce become the owner of Willeroo, a station which by then had come to incorporate part of the original Delamere.

The next incursion was that of Will Forgan (or Fargoo) and Patrick Ahern. In the middle of 1881 these men set out from Springvale, intending to prospect for gold right across to the

123 A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., p. 153.
125 ‘The Explorer. The Fate of Leichardt (sic)’. Adelaide Observer, 23-10-1880.
126 A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., p. 154.
127 Notes supplied by Mr Vern O’Brien, former Director of the Northern Territory Lands Department, through the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.
128 A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., pp. 156-59.
129 Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia), Inwards Correspondence – 1870-1912. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item A4762; A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., p. 60.
131 A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., pp. 161-64.
132 Notes supplied by Mr Vern O’Brien, former Director of the Northern Territory Lands Department, through the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.
133 C. Clement, Pre-settlement Intrusion into the East Kimberley, East Kimberley Working paper No. 24, Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1988, p. 32.
new stations on the Fitzroy River in West Kimberley. In between lay 1000 kilometres of country that to Europeans was wild and little known. Before they left, Alfred Giles warned them of the roughness of the Kimberley country ‘that baffled Forrest’, and the dangers from the hostile blacks that two men alone would face. In spite of Giles’ warnings, the two men rode west. They left the furthest-out station, Delamere, on August 4th or 5th, and marked trees showed that they made it as far as the central Kimberley, but they were never seen again.

In 1882 Adam Johns, Philip Saunders, J.W. Quinn and a ‘Port Darwin’ Aborigine named Crawford set out from Roebourne in Western Australia on what must surely rank as one of the greatest private horseback expeditions ever undertaken in Australia. Their destination was Darwin, over 2,200 kilometres away and the object of their trip was to prospect for gold and other minerals in the untried vastness of the north-west and north of Western Australia, and in the Northern Territory. After travelling up the long desert coastline north of Roebourne, they picked up more supplies at the ‘Kimberley Pastoral Company’s camp’ on the Fitzroy River. They then turned to the east and more or less followed the route of Forrest’s expedition, prospecting along the way.

They entered the Victoria River region south of the present Mistake Creek homestead and continued east to Stirling Creek, which they followed upstream. After crossing to the head of the Wickham River and following it down to the Victoria, then they headed straight for Katherine. Curiously, when they left Roebourne Saunders and Johns had their Aboriginal assistant Crawford with them, but when Alfred Giles recorded their arrival at Springvale he did not mention that they had a ‘blackboy’.

134 ‘Forgan and his Mate’, Alfred Giles to the editor, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 17-3-1883.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
137 ‘Exploration and Prospecting’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 24-3-1883; Alfred Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, p. 174, records that Adam Johns, Phil Saunders and a man named Alex Grant arrived at Springvale from Fitzroy River with no Aboriginal helpers, but I consider the Saunders-Johns account more reliable.
139 ‘Exploration and Prospecting’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 24-3-1883.
140 Ibid.
141 A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, pp. 174-75).
At the same time that Saunders and Johns were crossing from west to east, a land-seeking expedition led by ‘Stumpy’ Michael Durack was struggling through the Kimberley ranges to the north. This was the first land-seeking expedition to come to the East Kimberley-Victoria River region as a direct result of Forrest’s report. After speaking with Forrest, the Duracks took up large areas sight unseen to safeguard against city-based speculators, and then organised an expedition to the region to determine exactly where the best country lay. One of the expedition members was Tom Kilfoyle, a relation of the Duracks and later the pioneer of Rosewood station.

The party landed their gear and horses in Cambridge Gulf and set off to the west side where they believed Ord River entered. Over the following weeks they battled through rough ranges and crossed several rivers before finally reaching the Ord near its junction with the Negri River. On the way they were threatened by a large group of Aborigines who set fire to the grass, but then retreated without actually attacking. By the time they had examined the Ord River country downstream for 100 kilometres they had lost a number of their horses and their rations were running low, so they returned to the Negri junction and then traveled west as quickly as possible to a rendezvous with a ship at Beagle Bay. The expedition was considered a success, and the Duracks and Kilfoyle later established cattle stations on both sides of the Western Australian-Northern Territory border.

In April 1883 a party led by Billy O’Donnell set out from Delamere station for the Ord River to examine country taken up on paper by the Cambridge Downs Pastoral Association. The expedition probably had the benefit of local knowledge about the best route to take because instead of travelling down Gregory Creek and upstream through the rough Victoria River Gorge, as Gregory and, later, Sullivan and McDonald had done, they

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142 M. Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles*, Corgi Books, Sydney, 1986. I have not been able to locate any other source for this expedition so the summary presented here is based upon this book.


144 An official account of this expedition was published under the heading, ‘An Exploring Expedition’, in *The Argus* of January 5th and 17th, 1884, and unless otherwise stated the following summary comes from this source.
went south by south-west through relatively easy going over basalt downs and hills. They reached the Victoria River more or less opposite the Stockyard Creek junction, crossed over and travelled some distance upstream before turning westward across 'immense open plains and downs as far as the eye could reach.' Continuing to 'Gregory's Stirling Creek', they followed it down for about forty kilometres before turning west across country. A further seventy kilometres brought them to the Negri River which they followed down to the Ord. In all, the expedition spent four months in the Ord River country before returning to Springvale along its outwards track.

Figure 2: Four of the members of O'Donnell's Expedition (National Library)
Map 6: The route of the O'Donnell expedition from Springvale to East Kimberley.
In October 1884 the *Northern Territory Times* reported that the ship ‘Ivy’ had returned to Darwin with R.O. and J.R. O’Grady and party, and seven horses. The men had been on a four-month trip to examine the country between Darwin and Western Australia. They would have either been prospecting or land-seeking, and the fact that they had horses indicates they were examining country away from the immediate coastline or along the river corridors. However, the news report has no detail about exactly where they had been or what they discovered, and I have no information from other sources.

The last expedition to cross the region was that led by Harry Stockdale in 1884 (plate 31). Stockdale had been hired by the Victorian Squatting Company, the Cambridge Downs Pastoral Association, Lawrence and Adams, and Boyd and King, to report on land which each group held in the Kimberley. The expedition landed on the western side of Cambridge Gulf in September and set out on a great loop though the Kimberley ranges. First they travelled west for 150 kilometres, then south to near the headwaters of the Fitzroy River, and finally east to the Ord River.

Their rations ran low long before they reached the Ord, and the entire party began to suffer from dysentery, exhaustion, severe weight loss and physical weakness, their clothes and boots began to fall to pieces, and they were reduced to living on boiled flour and whatever fish or game they could catch. About 100 kilometres west of Ord River two men announced that they wanted to stop and rest, and requested a share of the available rations and a supply of ammunition. The rest of the party tried to convince them to continue but

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145 *Northern Territory Times* & *Gazette*, 11-10-1884.
146 H. Stockdale, *Exploration in the far north west of Australia 1884-5*. Mitchell Library, mss A1580; J.H. Ricketson, *Journal of an expedition to Cambridge Gulf, the North-west of Western Australia, and a ride through the Northern Territory of South Australia, 1884-1885*. Mitchell Library, mss 1783, item 2. Ricketson’s manuscript includes extracts of the diaries of two other expedition members, Pitt and McIlree.
147 J.H. Ricketson, Mitchell Library, mss 1783, item 2, pp. 23-24. The team was made of Henry Ricketson (second in command), George Ashton (described as a 'young Englishman'), Carl Bottmer (blacksmith), Richard Pitt (a representative of the Cambridge Downs Pastoral Association), John McIlree (surveyor) and Patrick Mulcahy (assistant surveyor).
148 'Return of Mr. Stockdale’s Exploring Party', *Northern Territory Times* & *Gazette*, 7-2-1885.
149 J.H. Ricketson, Mitchell Library mss 1783, item 2, pp. 221-25, 228-29.
they were insistent, and so were given three weeks rations and ammunition, and left behind.\textsuperscript{151} They were never seen again.

Further to the east, Stockdale and his second in command, Henry Ricketson (plate 32), rode ahead of the others to try and get rations from the newly established Ord River station. Several days later they reached the Ord, but they did not recognise it because they were expecting a much larger stream. From the diaries of the two men it is clear that they travelled east across what later became Limbunya station, north of Stirling Creek, and entered the Victoria River valley south-west of present-day Mt Sanford. Soon they entered the catchment of Gordon Creek and followed it downstream, eventually stumbling on Victoria River Downs homestead.\textsuperscript{152} The expedition members they had left behind near Ord River later found their way to Wave Hill homestead and arrived at Springvale on March 3\textsuperscript{rd} 1885.\textsuperscript{153}

So, what can be said about the overall impact that these pre-settlement incursions may have had on Victoria River Aborigines? Until 1882 there is no mention of conflict with Aborigines. Saunders and Johns reported several encounters with Aborigines and on one occasion they had to ‘try conclusions with a very large mob, after which they gave no trouble’. They later remarked that, ‘The natives in this high rangy country are very numerous, and from the reception they gave us on several occasions I should say they are very hostile.’\textsuperscript{154} The Durack party was threatened, but no violence eventuated.

Stockdale’s party had two violent encounters with Aborigines. On one occasion two Aboriginal men were severely wounded, probably fatally,\textsuperscript{155} and another was wounded in the leg, and in another incident one man was shot, again probably fatally.\textsuperscript{156} O’Donnell’s account in The Argus describes various peaceful meetings or sightings of Aborigines, but

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{152} Ibid: 272.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 7-3-1885.
\item \textsuperscript{154} C. Swan, cited in Clement and P. Bridge (eds), Kimberley Scenes, 1991, p. 67.
\item \textsuperscript{155} J.H. Ricketson, Mitchell Library mss 1783, item 2, pp. 115-17.
\item \textsuperscript{156} Ibid: 201.
\end{itemize}
makes no mention of any hostile encounters, and the Melbourne Age reported him as saying he ‘had no difficulty with the natives’ who were ‘of a harmless nature.’ However, in a telegram he sent to Darwin when he first arrived at Katherine he said that the expedition encountered hostile Aborigines and were ‘compelled to fire on them in self defence.’ These conflicting reports highlight the probability that official reports of exploring expeditions were sometimes ‘sanitised’, and it is now impossible to determine the truth of the situation.

We can only speculate as to the reliability of the reports of any of the expeditions. A common Aboriginal reaction to encounters with early European explorers was to watch them from a distance, or to run away and then keep out of sight and to watch them from hiding. With the possible exception of the two men from Stockdale’s expedition who stayed behind, none of the white men on any of the expeditions that crossed the Victoria River country was injured or killed by the Aborigines, and this suggests that most of the reports are probably reliable.

Whether friendly or hostile, contact was more likely to occur if an expedition was active for a long time in a relatively limited area, and the Aborigines had time to overcome their fear. The men at Gregory’s main depot camp experienced friendly contact, and the first land-seekers and prospectors apparently had little contact at all, but by the time Saunders and Johns and the Duracks passed through the region in 1882, they were met with hostility. The violent encounters experienced by the Duracks, Saunders and Johns and (apparently) by O’Donnell almost certainly occurred in the East Kimberley district, but wherever they occurred and whatever the reasons for them were, Aborigines throughout the Victoria River district undoubtedly heard about them via the information networks described in Chapter 1. At the very least, the appearance and actions of the prospectors and land-seekers in the district would have contributed to a growing awareness among the Aborigines of the approach of European settlement, and violent encounters anywhere in the wider region.

157 ‘Exploration in the Northern Territory’, The Age, 6-11-1883.
would have made Victoria River Aborigines very wary of the settlers, and more inclined to warfare than a warm welcome.
Chapter 3
THE COMING OF THE CATTLE

In Chapter 1 I described how the first Europeans in the Victoria River country found a landscape dominated by thinly timbered grasslands. Today much of the Victoria River country can still be characterised as thinly-timbered grassland, but there is clear evidence that it is not as open now as it was one hundred or more years ago. Between 1995 and 2002 I compiled over one hundred repeat photo pairs\(^1\) and interviewed many elderly Victoria River residents (or former residents), including cattlemen and cattlewomen, and Aborigines. Together, the repeat photos and the oral testimony document a major increase in the number of trees on the riverine plains throughout the district.\(^2\) There is also evidence that some formerly widespread plant and animal species have severely declined in distribution and overall numbers, and the steep banks of the rivers and creeks that gave so much trouble to the explorers no longer exist. So, what happened to change the environment from what the explorers and early settlers encountered, to what is seen today? Changed fire regimes, feral animal invasions, long-term climatic cycles and even climate change are likely to have played a part, but there can be little doubt that a major factor was the cattle. This chapter describes the process of stocking the land and examines the impact that more than a century of European livestock grazing has had upon the environment.

Bringing cattle to the Victoria River country was part of a much larger process. First, land speculators – identified as such because their names appear and very quickly disappear from the historic record – began taking up options for leases in the district. In the Victoria

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\(^1\) Repeat photography is the rephotographing of the scene in an historic photo by locating as closely as possible the original vantage point. This then enables a comparison to be made between the two images. My study was the first in Australia to use this technique to document environmental change across an entire region and from almost the time of first settlement to the present. It is now recommended by the CRC as a model for similar work elsewhere in the northern savannas (see Savanna Links, issue 29, July-September, 2004, p. 6).

\(^2\) D. Lewis, Slower than the Eye Can See: Environmental change in northern Australia’s cattle lands, Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2002.
River district this began early in 1876 and various other options and leases were taken up before the first settlers arrived with herds of cattle seven years later, in 1883. One of the reasons it took so long for bona fide cattlemen to arrive may have been the cost. Before 1881 pastoral rents were sixpence per square mile for the first seven years of a twenty-five year lease, rising to ten shillings per square mile thereafter. In 1881 the rent after seven years was reduced to two shillings and sixpence per square mile. Before and after the cattle arrived there was a degree of ‘juggling’ of the various blocks taken up, and the boundaries of the stations today often bear little relationship to the boundaries of the stations when they were first stocked.

Delamere was the first station stocked (1881); it straddled the divide between the Victoria River and the Daly River, and most of it was on the Daly River side. The cream of the country south and west of Delamere was stocked a few years later – Wave Hill and Victoria River Downs in 1883, Ord River in 1884, Rosewood in 1885, Auvergne in 1886, and Newry (Keep) in 1888, followed by Bradshaw in January 1894, Waterloo between 1895 and 1900, and Inverway in about 1901. Willeroo was formed to the south of Delamere in

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3 For example, see Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia), Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, items A1447, A1464, A1517, A2956 and A2957.
4 F. Bauer, *Historical geography of white settlement in part of the Northern Territory. Part 2. The Katherine-Darwin region*, CSIRO Division of Land Research & Regional Survey, Divisional Report No. 64/1. Canberra, 1964, footnote on p. 112. P.F. Donovan claims that the regulations were changed in 1874, with the number of head per square mile reduced from three to two and the time allowed for stocking increased to three years (*A Land Full of Possibilities. A History of South Australia's Northern Territory*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1981, pp. 121-22).
10 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, January 1894. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 2261. The Log Book is unique among the historic records of the Victoria River district and is the main source of information on Bradshaw during its formative years. It begins with a general summary of events and highlights, from the founding of the station until June 1899. Then it becomes a record of daily events, continuing until July 13th 1901.
11 The Government Resident’s Report in the *South Australian Parliamentary Papers* (vol. 2, no. 45, 1900, p. 28) and the Timber Creek police journal (12-10-1900) both indicate that Waterloo was stocked in 1900, but Charlie Flinders, an early resident of Wyndham, reckons it was taken up in the mid-1890s (C.
1884, but in a remarkable series of lease forfeitures and boundary adjustments, within twenty years their positions were reversed, with Willeroo being north of Delamere. Large areas along the north coast (Legune, Bullo River) were originally held under grazing permits, later converted to pastoral leases.

Obtaining a lease in the Victoria River district was only the first step in what was a huge undertaking. First, cattle had to be obtained to stock the lease. For most of the early leaseholders this was not a great problem. They were already relatively wealthy, often the owners of stations in the eastern states who could send their own cattle north, or who could afford to purchase cattle elsewhere. Among such men were Dr W.J. Browne, the original owner of Delamere and Newcastle Waters stations, the wealthy Melbourne businessmen and pastoralists, Fisher and Lyons, who owned Victoria River Downs and other Top End properties, and J.A. Macartney, who owned a pastoral empire in Queensland, who stocked Auvergne station. Bluey Buchanan, who first took up Wave Hill, was of much more...
limited means, but he was able to form a partnership with his brother William, a successful New South Wales pastoralist.\textsuperscript{19} The main exception to this cavalcade of the wealthy was the Farquharson brothers who established Inverway station. After they obtained their lease they had to spend several years droving and horse dealing in Queensland before they could afford to buy cattle to stock the station.\textsuperscript{20}

Sometimes the cattle were bought from stations in north Queensland. This saved on droving costs because the distance to drive the cattle was shorter and the drover could hire a team of stockmen and a cook from the same area. The classic example here is the famous cattle drive of 1881-82 when Bluey Buchanan organised the movement of 20,000 head of cattle into the Territory on behalf of Fisher and Lyons.\textsuperscript{21} These were obtained from Norley, Wilmot, Currawilinghi, Richmond Downs, Dalgona and Dougall River stations,\textsuperscript{22} and were destined for Marrakai, Glencoe and Daly River stations in the Adelaide River and Daly River country. Many were later taken from these stations to stock VRD.\textsuperscript{23} Other stock came from much further afield. For instance, Willeroo was stocked with cattle from the owners’ property near Lake George, in New South Wales.\textsuperscript{24}

There were no stores between Burketown and Katherine, a distance of about nine hundred kilometres, so sufficient rations for the men had to be bought and carried with them. There are no records to tell us exactly what these rations were – no doubt the basics were flour, tea, sugar and salt – or to tell us what quantity was required. However, we can gain an idea of the quantity by looking at the amount needed by drover Jack-Dick Skuthorpe in 1906. Skuthorpe had been hired to take cattle from Wave Hill station to Queensland, and because the Wave Hill store had burnt down before he arrived there he arranged for supplies to be sent to him from Katherine. He ordered seven tons.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[20] Leone Biltris, "The Passing of the Pioneers", \textit{Walkabout} May 1st, 1951, p. 44.
\item[23] B. Buchanan, \textit{In the Tracks of Old Bluey}, 1997, p. 86.
\item[24] "Mr. Robert Cowley Cooper" (obituary), \textit{The Pastoral Review}, 15-4-1914, p. 332; Letter from Tom Pearce to Billy Linklater, 27-5-1950. Mitchell Library, mss 955 8-195B.
\end{footnotes}
Map 7: Pastoral leases, government reserves and stock routes in the Victoria River district in 1967. At this time there were no National Parks, military areas or Aboriginal-owned lands and most of the lease boundaries had remained unchanged for decades.

Once the first herd got past Katherine, or perhaps Delamere, someone had to ride ahead to find the best track. At least one of the early drovers had a copy of Gregory’s journal and map, and followed his route for part of the way. This was Tom Cahill, taking cattle to Wave Hill,26 and the existence of a copy of Gregory’s map in the collection of VRD records at the Noel Butlin Archives in Canberra suggests that the early settlers on VRD may have used it to find their way around the district.27 Later drovers benefited from the knowledge of those who preceded them. Bob Button, a drover employed by Bluey Buchanan to take the first

27 Goldsbrough Mort Collection, F246, 2/859/378.
cattle across to stock Ord River station, hired stockman Bill Weldon to guide him on the last stage from VRD.\textsuperscript{28} Weldon, a young man who claimed to have been an active sympathiser with the Kelly gang\textsuperscript{29} had been across to the Ord with the Durack cattle a few months before, and so knew the track.\textsuperscript{30}

When the cattle reached the station where they were to be released, or even before they arrived, someone had to explore enough of the lease to find a good place to take the cattle to, and a good site to build a homestead. The Duracks explored the Ord River country before they brought cattle overland,\textsuperscript{31} and probably had a fair idea where to take their herds, but when their cattle arrived on the Ord, M.J. Durack went ahead thirty miles with a packhorse to select a site for a homestead.\textsuperscript{32} On Wave Hill Sam Croker had built a rough homestead before the first cattle arrived,\textsuperscript{33} and on VRD Croker and Lindsay Crawford were looking for a homestead site shortly before the first cattle arrived there late in 1883.\textsuperscript{34}

The cattle were released in the best area, but they were kept within a ‘cattle boundary’ and not allowed to spread out too far. One reason for this was that until cattle (and horses and mules) become familiar with their new territory they are inclined to stray, or even to return to their old haunts, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away. To prevent this, men had to ‘ride the tracks’ and turn straying cattle back towards the main herd.\textsuperscript{35} A case of cattle probably trying to return ‘home’ happened soon after Wave Hill was stocked, when a number of beasts headed back to the east. With the benefit of showers of rain, Sam Croker and a couple of Aboriginal stockmen tracked them up across a stretch of desert country

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid: 217-230.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid: 267.
\textsuperscript{34} ‘Massacres in the Northern Territory...Paddy Cahill’s List’, \textit{The Register} (Adelaide), 18-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{35} Lindsay Crawford mentioned that ‘It is not the cattle that causes so much wear and tear on horses but keeping the blacks out side the cattle boundaries.’ L. Crawford to H.W.H. Stevens, 8-11-1886. Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd., Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.
probably not crossed on horseback since, and still regarded by whites as a fierce and
dangerous place, rarely visited.\footnote{36}

Another reason to keep the cattle within a particular area was that it was easier to muster
them, and, it was soon discovered, to protect them from attack by Aborigines.\footnote{37} On VRD in
1886 the manager, Lindsay Crawford (plate 33) spent £500 on horses without authority
from head office because, he remarked, ‘It is not the cattle that causes so much wear and
tear on horses but keeping the blacks outside the cattle boundaries’ (see footnote 35). Even
in 1894 and 1895 there were still ‘cattle boundaries’ on VRD.\footnote{38}

In the 1880s, the law decreed that to retain a lease the leaseholder had to stock the land
within three years with two head of cattle per square mile.\footnote{39} It is doubtful that more than
one or two stations ever fulfilled this requirement. For example, allowing for natural
increase amongst cattle brought onto the station during the first year, the 12,000 square
mile Victoria River Downs would have needed a founding herd of at least 12,000 head in
1883 (and probably more) to be able to have 24,000 head by 1889.\footnote{40} In 1889 the
Government Resident reported that VRD had between 13,000 and 14,000 cattle on the
station.\footnote{41} Extensions of time to stock could be applied for but the reality is that compliance
with the law was rarely if ever investigated.\footnote{42} Once the first herd or two reached a station

\footnote{36} G. Buchanan, Packhorse and Waterhole: With The first Overlanders To The Kimberleys, Angus &
Robertson Limited, 1933, pp. 120-121 (Hesperian Press facsimile edition, 1984); ‘Recalling the Past:
899-90; C. Hemphill, letter to the editor, The Adelaide Observer, 4-4-1901.

\footnote{37} G. Buchanan, Packhorse and Waterhole, 1933, pp. 164-65.

\footnote{38} For example, see the Timber Creek police journal, entries for 8-7-1894, 29-11-1895.

\footnote{39} F. Bauer, Historical geography of white settlement in part of the Northern Territory, Part 2. The
Katherine-Darwin region, 1964, footnote on p. 112; P.F. Donovan claims that the regulations were
changed in 1874, with the number of head per square mile reduced from three to two and the time
allowed for stocking increased to three years (A Land Full of Possibilities, 1981, pp. 121-22).

\footnote{40} On the basis of data provided to him, this estimate was given to me by Mr. Ian McBean, a former
stockman and drover, former owner of Innesvale, Coolibah and Bradshaw stations, and now Chairman of
the Top End Branch of the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association.

\footnote{41} H.W.H. Stevens, cited in Government Resident J.L. Parson’s ‘Report on the Northern Territory for Year

\footnote{42} R. Duncan, The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910, Melbourne University Press,
Melbourne, 1967, p. 117.
the leaseholders would declare the stations stocked, and any shortfall in legal requirements would soon be corrected as the foundation herds grew.

No matter what the numbers of cattle were when the stations were declared stocked, only a small portion of each run was occupied by the cattle and large areas that were potentially cattle country were still effectively ‘blackfellow country’. For example, six years after the first cattle arrived on VRD a visitor noted that ‘little really is known of any part of the property except that occupied by the cattle, which is scarcely 1/8th of the whole area, & that eighth not more than one third stocked.’ As the cattle numbers grew, more land was occupied by them, and there was a corresponding reduction in the area of land that Aborigines had to themselves. On VRD it was not until about 1920 that cattle numbers reached the level at which, if efforts to calculate them were remotely accurate, they were to remain for decades. This was nearly forty years after the first cattle arrived, and it is possible that even then numbers were still increasing.

Initially the ‘homesteads’ are unlikely to have been more than rough camps, with a canvas fly or two for shade or rain protection. This was certainly the case on Inverway where the Farquharson brothers lived under canvas for four years until their homestead was built (plate 34). It was probably a similar situation on Rosewood station where Anne Spring, on the Behn River above Cowardys yard, is identified by local Aborigines as the site of the first homestead. The site does not appear to have any of the debris usually associated with other early European sites in the district – fragments of glass and iron, empty cartridge cases, worn-out horseshoes, a stone fireplace, and so on. It may be that a more intensive

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44 By 1921 estimates of cattle numbers on VRD ranged from 119,000 (‘The Men Who Blazed The Track’, Sydney Morning Herald, 21-6-1921) to 170,000 (‘The Northern Territory. Its Pastoral Possibilities’, The Age, 4-10-1921), and similar estimates were made for many decades to come (see D. Lewis, Slower than the Eye Can See, 2002, p. 80; J. Makin, The Big Run, 1992, p. 169.
45 M. Hilgendorf, Northern Territory Days, c1995, p. 35.
46 Personal communication, Doug Struber, manager of Rosewood since 1998.
47 I have documented many of the early (pre-1910) homestead sites in the Victoria River district for the National Trust (see references in bibliography), and all have the type of debris I have described.
search will reveal such remains, but it is just as likely that it was a temporary canvas ‘homestead’.

On Bradshaw a temporary camp was established in May 1894 on the banks of the Victoria River at the base of the ‘Dome’, and all the stores and equipment were landed there. However, they were soon moved back onto a boat to prevent theft by Aborigines. In September a homestead was established on Angalarri Creek at a place known to local Aborigines as Kumallalay, and dubbed ‘Youngsford’ by the settlers. A year later the Norwegian zoologist Knut Dahl visited Bradshaw and described the homestead as ‘an open shed surrounded by some other buildings of still simpler architecture... The station itself, as a going concern, looked pretty miserable. The houses were, to put it mildly, very sketchily built’ (plate 35).

As soon as possible more substantial homesteads were built, mostly from available bush materials. At Ord River, ‘a hut was built of bloodwood saplings, with a greenhide roof, as grass was out of the question...There was plenty of ventilation. When the wind blew it whistled through the cracks in fine style. All the timber for the first Inverway homestead was cut on the property, and because of the hostility of the Aborigines, ‘the work of the three men was hampered by the necessity of always keeping guard. One brother stood guard at all times with the guns loaded while the other two men cut and adzed the timber for their homestead.’ Slab huts with bark roofs were built at Wave Hill (plate 36) while at VRD (Stockyard Creek) in 1891 the buildings were described as a ‘Hipped roof house 30’ x 20’ Iron roof, paper [bark] walls 10 ft verandah...One Building including Beef room,

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48 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 17-5-1894.
50 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 22-9-1894.
52 Grass was out of the question because of the risk of fire.
54 Leonnie Biltris, Walkabout May 1st, 1951, p. 44.
Saddle room, men's room 50' x 12' all paper [bark]. The walls of these buildings were not described but were probably clad with paperbark. Floors were of hard-packed earth or were flagged with flat stones (plate 37).

If homesteads built of timber or clad in bark were not continuously occupied there was a danger that they could be destroyed by fire, either bushfires or fires lit deliberately by Aborigines. This happened at least twice in the early days, first in 1893 at Price's Creek, in the north-east of the district, and again at Wave Hill in 1899 (see Chapter 4). In both instances Aborigines were blamed. A number of very early homesteads and outstations had walls of local stone, which had the advantage of being fireproof, termite-proof, spear-proof and cheap. Some stations quickly progressed to construction with manufactured materials. A new homestead built at Delamere in about 1886 had three rooms and a veranda, sawn timber floors, and was constructed of iron and cypress pine, and at Willeroo there was 'a two roomed galvanised iron house' by the early 1890s.

Supplies often took months to arrive, brought by boat to the Depot Landing on the lower Victoria River (plates 38, 39), or to Wyndham, and then taken on to the various stations.

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56 Personal observation at the site of the Stockyard Creek homestead (see D. Lewis, The Final Muster: A Survey of Previously Undocumented Sites throughout the Victoria River District, Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (N.T.), 2000, site 14, pp. 64-70).
57 A. Giles to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 15-12-1893. Government Resident’s Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912. NTRS 829, item 5889; ‘The Government Resident’s Trip Up Country’, diary of Government Resident Charles Dashwood (his trip began on 27-10-1893 and finished on 15-11-1893), Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia), Inwards Correspondence, NTRS 829, item, 6050.
59 See D. Lewis In Western Wilds: A Survey of Historic Sites in the Western Victoria River District, Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (NT), 1993, volumes 1 and 2, sites 25, 39, 40, 41, and 45; D. Lewis, The Final Master, 2000, site 8.
60 ‘For Sale’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 11-6-188 (advertisement); A. Giles, cited in Kintore (Earl), Despatch from the Earl of Kintore, G.C.M.G., Governor Of South Australia, Reporting Upon His Visit To Port Darwin, And Upon The Affairs Of The Northern Territory Of South Australia. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty, London, July 1891, p. 29.
61 ‘Government Resident’s Trip to the Victoria River’, 10-11-1895 to 25-12-1895 (Government Resident Charles Dashwood). Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6891.
Initially the stores were shifted by bullock and horse wagons (plates 40, 41), or by packhorses. Later the horse and bullock teams were replaced by pack-camels (plates 42, 43) and by donkey teams (plates 44, 45). Because of their isolation and the cost of cartage, the stations needed to be as self-contained as possible. On most of the original large holdings there was a blacksmith’s shop, men’s quarters, kitchen, saddle room and wagon shed. And on most stations supplies came only once or twice a year, so a storeroom was needed for the large amount of food, horseshoes, tools and other goods that arrived.

Early living conditions were rough. Water for domestic use was carried in buckets (with a yoke) from a nearby waterhole or drawn from a well. Furnishings and other goods were often improvised from bush materials. At Ord River the table and bunks were made of bush timber and greenhide, and grass was used for mattresses.62 On one occasion the station had no lamps for a long period, and used ‘cow manure instead of fat which gave a good light…a fat lamp was then considered an amenity, and an oil lamp was a luxury!’63 Salt for salting beef and table use was obtained from a natural salt deposit on the Negri River which ‘was scraped off the rocks by the blacks and often had a lot of small stones in it which one found at times when eating salt beef’ (plate 46).64

On many stations conditions for employees (other than, perhaps, the manager) remained quite rough for decades. For example, Myra Hilgendorf visited many of the homesteads and outstations in the district in 1939. She described Birrindudu outstation as being ‘in a most deplorable condition’ with the buildings consisting of ‘bough shades and iron huts’ (plate 47). There was no stove in the kitchen ‘and apparently no utensils.’65 At Limbunya she found the floor of the main room was stone-flagged and the others made of crushed ant-bed. There was no glass or fly wire on the windows which were instead covered with an iron flap that could be propped open with a pole. The beds were made from ‘logs and

64 Ibid.
65 M. Hilgendorf, Northern Territory Days, c1995, p. 47.
'rawhide' and in cold weather heating was provided by a wood fire in a petrol drum. At Gordon Creek outstation on VRD the first 'homestead' was built in about 1930 of bush timber and paperbark (plate 48).

As well as homesteads and outbuildings, yards had to be built. The method of 'cattle management' that prevailed on the stations during the first eighty years or so of settlement was what is now known as the 'open range system'. As described above, the first cattle were turned loose on the most favourable part of the run but no fences were built and as their numbers increased the cattle spread onto new areas of the station. In the late nineteenth century, cattle could only be branded in yards, but yards were expensive to construct. On most stations only a few yards were built in convenient centralised locations, and cattle were mustered and brought to them. Twelve years after VRD was settled there were only three yards on the place, and many cattle had to be driven seventy kilometres to reach one. Some of the managers complained about the lack of yards and requested permission to construct more. For example, in March 1899 Bob Watson, the manager of VRD, wrote to Goldsbrough Mort and Company saying that,

Insufficient yard accommodation has been a great drawback, necessitating many long drives which wastes much valuable time...With the present [yard] accomoditation [sic] it is impossible to get through the whole heard [sic] once a year...The most economical way to rectify this, at the present time, would be...to erect A branding Yard on Camfield Crk. This being the sentre [sic] of a large mob of cattle.

In spite of the obvious need, the owners of the stations – usually companies and absentee landlords – were reluctant to spend the necessary money, especially during the depression of the 1890s.

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66 Ibid: 32.
70 ‘The Victoria River and the Meat Works’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 20-6-1902.
However, during the 1890s in north-eastern South Australia a system for handling cattle was developed which greatly reduced the need for yards, and this system reached the Victoria River district some time in the early 1900s. This was the ‘open bronco’ method in which cattle were held in a ‘yard’ formed by a number of mounted horsemen, and each beast that needed branding or other treatment was roped from horseback and dragged out of the herd. Before beginning this work a tree was prepared by having one side of a fork or a convenient branch cut off about thirty centimetres from its base to form a ‘hook’. The horseman dragging the beast would ride past the ‘hook’ and place the rope in it, and then keep dragging the animal until it was held tight against the tree and largely immobilised. Men on the ground then leg-roped and threw it, and treated it as required. Later a special ‘bronco’ panel was developed to take the place of a tree branch, and these were built at strategic places in the open or within a yard (plates 49, 50, 51).

One drawback to the bronco technique was that it was labour-intensive. Because there was continuous conflict between the Aborigines and the settlers during the first twenty-odd years of settlement (see Chapter 4), stockmen were either white people or ‘foreign’ Aborigines brought in from distant areas who had no relationships with local Aborigines, and who did not speak or understand the local languages. Whether black or white, these stockmen had to be paid, and wages in this remote and dangerous area were high. However, when ‘black’s camps’ were established in the period 1900-1905 they provided a ready pool of unpaid labour and the reliance on Aborigines from distant places diminished. The ‘blacks camps’ thus provided the necessary labour when the bronco technique was introduced.

Many of the ‘civilised’ local people quickly became proficient at station work and a

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71 This system was developed by H. Compie Trew on Clifton Hills station in the 1890s and by 1910 its use was widespread in western Queensland (A. Marshall, ‘Broncoing!’, Walkabout, February 1st, 1937: 21). Exactly when the system reached the Victoria is unknown. It definitely was in use on VRD by 1919, and almost certainly somewhat earlier (personal communication, John Graham, who was a child and teenager on VRD and whose father, Tom Graham, managed the station from 1919 to 1926).

72 E, Hill, The Territory, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 175.

73 In the Ord River country in 1905 it was reported that wages for station hands were £2 per week whereas in Queensland it was £1 per week (‘A Big Cattle Trip. From Western Australia to Queensland’, The Morning Bulletin, Rockhampton, 29-8-1905).
particular station economy developed which was to last for more than fifty years. The situation at Wave Hill in 1910 was typical:

There were only two white men and about thirty blacks. The natives were real wonderful workers. Both the men and the gins are experts, and throwing and branding went along like clockwork. Amongst the women were three black gins, who were doing the best work I have ever seen on the face of a cattle camp. The gins are the best workers on horse back—far before the boys... The minute you cut a beast out on the edge of the camp there was a gin to take it away from you. One little halfcaste girl about fourteen was a splendid hand at the game. I never saw better work than she was doing... The blacks only work during the branding and mustering, and when the busy season is over they take off their clothes and return to the bush until again wanted.74

The only details that can be added to this description are that Aborigines too old, sick or young to work were provided with subsistence rations,75 and on some stations, when the workers were free to go on walkabout they had to take their clothes back to the station store, to be reissued to them the following year.76

During the first two decades of settlement the stations had difficulty finding markets for their cattle.77 During the 1880s and 1890s small numbers of cattle were sold on the short-lived Kimberley and Pine Creek goldfields,78 a few herds were taken overland around the West Australian coast to the Murchison goldfields,79 and some were exported live to South East Asian countries or to Fremantle,80 but these markets either failed or were too small to absorb more than a fraction of the available cattle. However, events in Queensland finally gave the district an outlet for its cattle.

74 'Station Life', Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 10-6-1910.
79 Ibid: 133-34.
80 Ibid.

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In 1895-96 an epidemic of Redwater fever, also known as tick fever, swept through Queensland, decimating the herds there. Stations lost anything up to 90 per cent of their stock.\(^{81}\) This calamity was followed by a series of dry years leading up to another disaster—the great Queensland drought of 1902.\(^{82}\) When the drought finally broke there was a big demand for cattle to restock the stations and to supply the eastern markets. Prices rose to the point where two Victoria River station owners decided to see if it would be cost-effective to send cattle overland to the Queensland markets. Through 1903 drovers began to converge on Wave Hill and Victoria River Downs, and the first herds left the region early in 1904, crossing the infamous Murranji Track and the immense Barkly Tableland, and moving on into Queensland. The experiment was successful and was the beginning of a great droving tradition that persisted for the next sixty years (plates 52, 53).\(^{83}\)

The growth of the herds quickly outstripped the provision of infrastructure to handle them. In the absence of fencing, and with numerous creeks and frequent stretches of rough country, it was impossible to muster every beast. The cattle quickly became wild and very difficult to handle, and breeding was totally uncontrolled. On VRD, and probably elsewhere, these problems were noticeable as early as 1895 when the manager, Jack Watson, wrote a report on the station and commented on the state of the herd:

one thing against them is their wildness  it is necessary to gallop and gallop hard [after] Every lot of cattle you see & then almost invariably one or more will get away...of all the cattle branded so far ten per cent were from two years of age upwards ... on Camfield creek I got fourteen hundred branders  of this number five hundred were over eighteen months of age with calves at foot  bulls up to five years old  I have shot two hundred and seventeen (217) unbranded bulls that it was useless to brand & among them were brindled, brown, yellow spotted & every objectionable sort of beast.\(^{84}\)

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\(^{82}\) Ibid: 221.


The cattle soon established an annual pattern of movement. When the rains came they spread out across the run, and as the smaller waters dried up they gradually retreated to other waters until, by the end of the dry season, many were forced onto the river frontages. This was not a particular problem while the cattle numbers were small, but once they had built up it meant that, on stations like Victoria River Downs and Wave Hill, anything from 50,000 to 100,000 cattle or more could be concentrated on the river, with obvious implications for damage to the environment.

The very fact of European livestock entering the region meant that changes to the ecology of the region would occur. Early reports make it clear that European animals found some plant species particularly attractive. Gregory’s geologist, James Wilson, noted that the expedition horses were ‘exceedingly fond’ of the ‘reeds’ described in Chapter 1. This fondness of horses for ‘reeds’ (Chionacne) was confirmed by Kieran Kelly who in 1999 led a packhorse expedition retracing part of Gregory’s route. Kelly noted that when his horses found relict patches of this grass they would eat compulsively and could hardly be driven away, and similar grazing behaviour has been reported for cattle. I have examined long stretches of the Victoria River, including specific areas where ‘reeds’ were reported by Stokes and Gregory, and the impenetrable thickets of the early days no longer exist. It appears that intensive grazing by European livestock has wiped out this species in most of its former range.

The same fate has overtaken other plant species. In 1889 a pastoral inspector named Blair reported that in the wet season on VRD ‘herbage & vines grow very prolific, & of these the

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86 D. Lewis, Slower than the Eye Can See, 2002.
89 Personal communication, Kieran Kelly.
90 Personal communication, Darryl Hill, formerly an officer with the Victoria River District Conservation Association.
stock are very fond." The vines would have included a species of melons described by Buchanan in 1884 as being so plentiful in places that,

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 particular species Buchanan saw cannot be identified with certainty, but no species of indigenous melon is now common in the region, and when they are found it would be difficult to fill a bucket with them, let alone a dray.

Elderly Aborigines remember harvesting plants such as ‘kunjalu’, a water plant not yet identified, and ‘kayalarin’, a ‘bush onion’, the latter once so prolific in the northern part of VRD that the Aborigines living there were referred to by their neighbours as ‘kayalarin people’. Extensive field surveys have failed to locate either of these plants in the region where they once grew.

Early accounts make it clear that wildlife was abundant, but they do not enable the full variety of species and their relative numbers or distribution to be assessed. Modern faunal surveys indicate that some mammal and bird species are uncommon or rare in the district today, but Aboriginal memory and Dreamings show that this was not always so for all.

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93 It was probably A. Cucummis, a species whose favoured habitat is black soil country.
94 Tentatively identified as Typhonium lilifolium.
96 In the 1980s Dr Deborah Rose and I made a number of trips into areas where our Aboriginal guides had once harvested this plant, but none could be found.
these species. For example, older Aborigines in the district have shown me Dreaming sites for bandicoots, native cats, ringtail possums and gliding possums, species which they once hunted but which are now extremely rare or extinct in the region. A number of bird species have also declined markedly since European settlement. These include emus and flock pigeons. The latter is a species once seen in untold thousands on the inland plains,99 and senior Bilinara man Anzac Munnganyi told me that Pigeon Hole, a waterhole and outstation on Victoria River Downs, got its name because these pigeons once came to drink there. They are now seen only occasionally and usually in flocks of less than one hundred.

While the cattle had grazing capacities and tastes that differed from the native animals, they also were much heavier and had hard hooves which cut the surface of the ground, leaving it vulnerable to erosion. In 1889 a visitor to VRD noted that,

owing to the steep banks, it is only in odd places & rocky bars that stock can come to drink, the cattle are however gradually making fresh watering places. The numerous creeks have...the same difficulty of stock getting at the water... as in the rivers, steep treacherous banks.100

Thus, within six years of the station being stocked degradation of the riverbanks had begun, and this was when the VRD herd only numbered something like 15,000. By 1896 the herd had increased to an estimated 30,000 and was already said to be out of hand.101 By 1905 it had increased to 56,000102, by 1912 to between 110,000 and 120,000,103 and by 1921 estimates ranged from 119,000104 to 170,000.105 It is clear that by this time the station had

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100 B. Blair to Goldsbrough Mort & Co., 24-10-1889. Goldsbrough Mort & Co: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co, 1886-1892, Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.
103 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 15-3-1912.
104 ‘Central Australia. Cattle and Horse Breeding’, Sydney Morning Herald, 21-6-1921.
105 ‘The Northern Territory. Its Pastoral Possibilities’, The Age, 4-10-1921.
lost count and for decades afterwards there were only ‘guestimates’ that ranged from 70,000 to 140,000 head.

By the 1920s there were several hundred thousand head of cattle in the Victoria River valley and when they congregated at the permanent waters towards the end of each dry season, feed became very scarce for many kilometres out from the riverbanks and the ground was churned to dust. If the season had been a particularly bad one and the rains were late arriving, the situation became dire. In 1914 Wave Hill suffered a severe dry season and lost half its herd and a large number of horses,\textsuperscript{106} and late in October 1936 VRD manager Alf Martin wrote to headquarters advising that, ‘we have been shifting cattle from place to place. We must have about 80,000 head of cattle on the River frontages and there is not a blade of grass for them to eat.’\textsuperscript{107}

The effect these drought-induced concentrations had on the cattle themselves are revealed in a letter Martin wrote early in 1943:

At the latter end of 1942 we had very heavy losses in stock... the cattle would go out chasing a storm and by the time they got back to the rivers they would be done. After a big drink in the river many were too weak to climb the steep banks. Practically every waterhole in the river had dead cattle in it. That is why we wrote...that 20\% should be written off for mortality percentage but am afraid we lost them as the writer had a good ride around the run before forming that estimate.’\textsuperscript{108}

For years VRD alone suffered losses of up to 20,000 head every time there was a bad season. Such seasons occurred with monotonous regularity and similar losses are likely to have occurred on other stations in the district.

\textsuperscript{106} Northern Territory Times \& Gazette, 21-1-1915.
\textsuperscript{107} A. Martin to E. Waugh, 12-10-1936. Bovril Australian Estates Pty. Ltd., Correspondence between Perth Office of Bovril and Alfred Martin, manager/attorney at VRD, 1933-37. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 87/8/274.
When the rains finally came there was widespread erosion (plate 54), and severe gullying occurred along the banks. When a severe flood followed a prolonged dry period the effects could be dramatic. This occurred in the wet season of 1934-35 when Martin reported that there had been:

very big floods in our Rivers and miles of fencing has been washed away but there has been no loss of stock. Am afraid the big waterhole at the Head Station has suffered considerable damage by thousands of tons of the banks and timber falling into the bed. Big land slides caused the banks [to collapse] and trees that were 50 to 60 feet high on the banks are now standing upright in the centre of the stream. A few more floods like this one and we shall have to shift the station back from the River.109

The collapse of the banks was not limited to VRD homestead but extended well up the Wickham River,110 and judging by the state of the river banks today, probably along much of the Victoria as well (plate 55). The big flood of 1935 does not seem to have occurred in the Ord River country, but after a decade of very dry years on both VRD and the Ord there was a terrific flood early in 1937. On Rosewood, owner-manager Jack Kilfoyle remarked that ‘Banks have been washed away, big old trees & great holes swirling out in the creeks. Cowdy Crk is now nearly as big as the Behn [River].’111

In 1955, much the same sequence of events occurred again on VRD when a number of poor wet seasons and prolonged dry seasons was followed by a severe flood:

The Wickham River finally rose to a height of 42 feet and the low ground encircling the Station buildings was under water for 12 hours. As the water subsided very large landslides occurred more or less continuously along the Wickham with the result that a large proportion of the splendid stand of timber which lined the banks has been deposited in the centre of the stream. Permanent and extensive damage has been done to the River.112

109 A. Martin to L. Eichhorn, 25-3-35. Bovril Australian Estates Pty. Ltd. Correspondence between Perth Office of Bovril and Alfred Martin, manager/attorney of VRD. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 87/8/274.
110 C. Schultz, and D. Lewis, Beyond the Big Run: Station Life in Australia’s Last Frontier, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1995, p. 156.
111 Rosewood station rainfall book, held at the station.
In this instance, at least, the collapsing banks appear to have had a major impact on aquatic life. Lexie Simmons (formerly Bates) was living at VRD when the river banks collapsed. She recalled that, ‘during the night, every now and then you would hear a distant roar, as part of the bank of the river caved in.’ 113 Weeks later when the river had almost stopped running, a large congregation of birds was seen upstream near the crossing on the road to Pigeon Hole. Lexie and some other station people investigated and,

could not get near for the stench of rotting fish. The place was alive with kite hawks, crows and even a pair of wedge-tailed eagles, all feasting on the carcasses. About a month later we went back again to see what the birds had left. We could not believe our eyes! The whole crossing was covered with fish bones. Hundreds of fish must have perished there and some must have been monsters. I saw a number of jawbones, of what I presumed must have been old man catfish. Put your fingertips together and make a circle with your arms and you will have some idea of the size of the mouths of the skeletons.114

As the herds grew, so did the number of cleanskin cattle, and wild bulls became a serious problem. In 1929 an ‘agricultural adviser’ wrote that,

With no exception the cattle in the outlying parts of all the large runs are wild and neglected.
There is no chance of segregation – cows and calves, steers and bullocks, bulls, young and old, mingle together and race away to cover at the approach of horsemen.
I spent two weeks with the musterers on Auvergne Station and in a mob of 1000 head gathered after three days (more than that number were too wild to hold and broke away) there were 270 unbranded cattle of all ages ranging from one month to ten years; there were approximately 100 bulls from 2 to 10 years old never before in a yard.115

On VRD, the problem became especially severe and the station was renowned for its prodigious numbers of wild bulls (plate 56). In 1934 there were said to be 1260 branded bulls on the books, but during an inspection ‘thousands of clean skin bulls were seen of all ages and the most mongrel types imaginable. We have it on reliable authority that 20,000

115 F.J.S. Wise, agricultural adviser to Sir Charles Nathan, Perth, 15-8-1929. A494/1, Item 902/1/82, Australian Archives, ACT.
clean skin bulls would be a conservative estimate'.

This situation prevailed for many decades and although hundreds of bulls were shot every year (plate 57), the problem was only brought under control with the advent of helicopters in the 1970s.

In addition to the actual cattle numbers there were huge numbers of feral horses and donkeys. Horses undoubtedly became brumbies at an early period but facts and figures are difficult to locate. Donkeys were being used as draft animals in the East Kimberley from at least 1896, and from about 1917 to 1938 they were being used to haul station supplies from the Victoria River Depot to VRD, Wave Hill and other stations. There are likely to have been occasional escapees from these sources, but during the 1930s motor vehicles began to supplant the wagons (plates 58, 59) and many of the donkeys were turned bush.

Donkeys are remarkably fecund animals, and can increase annually at a rate exceeding twenty per cent. In the freedom of the bush they did exceptionally well. One of the earliest indications that they had reached significant numbers is a Wave Hill police journal entry from November 1946 which states that a ‘Truck load of donkey hides from Ord River...passed en route Darwin.' These were being sent by Vesteys for tanning to see if donkey leather was commercially viable, but it proved to be of poor quality. The wild donkeys continued to breed prodigiously and although for years station staff and professional donkey shooters killed all they could (plate 60), both donkeys and brumbies remain a serious problem to this very day. For most of the period of European settlement

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116 ‘Report by the Northern Territory Pastoral Leases Investigation Committee’, Australian Archives, Darwin, CRS F658, item 12 (Bradshaw).
118 The first mention a donkey team in the Victoria River district comes from the Timber Creek police journal of 8-1-1917.
122 In 2001 there was estimated to be 42,000 wild horses and 103,000 donkeys in the district as a whole (personal communication, Keith Sarfield, Invasive Species Management Officer, Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission).
the huge numbers of feral donkeys and brumbies in the district certainly added enormously to the generally heavy stocking rates on the stations, and undoubtedly intensified the effects of worse than normal dry seasons. The end result of this ‘system’ of land management is that steep banks on the rivers and creeks are now uncommon and livestock can access water within a short distance almost anywhere.

Attempts to decrease dependence on natural waters and increase use of the abundant grasslands away from natural water sources began more than thirty years after the stations were stocked. Bores were first put down on Wave Hill in 1915123 and on VRD in 1918 (plate 61),124 but their numbers were limited and they were usually equipped with windmills which sometimes ceased to work at critical times through lack of wind. Gordon Buchanan wrote in 1936 that VRD had,

only eight bores on thirteen thousand square miles of country all of which are hopelessly useless to water any quantity of stock, because they are neither equipped with storage tanks nor engines and solely depend on the windmill. The neighbouring company [Wave Hill] fares a little better on this point. They have a few bores, equipped with storage tanks and engines but far from being adequate for their requirements.

It is safe to say that the Bovril Company lose from ten to fifteen thousand head of cattle yearly for the need of bores and the necessary equipment to give them a drink.125

Fencing remained extremely limited and the open range system of running cattle continued for decades. Gerry Ash, a stockman who worked on VRD in the early 1950s described VRD as then possessing ‘the largest uncontrolled herd in the world’126 and on most other Victoria River district cattle stations the situation was little different.

The shortcomings of the open range system were probably known from experiences in Queensland well before the Victoria River country was stocked. They were certainly

123 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 14-5-1914, 13-6-1914, 13-5-1915.
126 Interviewed at Derby, September 2000.
known to some cattlemen by 1928 because in that year a correspondent signing himself 'Culkah' wrote to the _Pastoralist's Review_ about Victoria River Downs:

Victoria River Downs Station (Bovril Estates) is a huge area, including some very fair cattle country. Here, too, not much has been done to make a systematic working proposition of cattle. The long length of frontage does its best, which in any dry year end means loss, while better grassed, badly watered back country lies idle. As a result cattle get a spread on and go brumby... A tremendous lot of the country on and adjacent to the Victoria River is broken by honey-combed limestone out from creek frontages, and a big percentage of the natural grass is not a drought resister. Still droughts, such as the Cooper heads know, do not occur in that part of the world, and the increase of cattle in a run of good seasons is remarkable. The losses sustained over a brief dry period can be likewise so. This, I reckon, is chiefly for want of better distribution to prevent heavy frontage stocking and consequent starvation. One must remember these frontages have had a good many doings during the years since Fisher and Lyons held the Victoria, and Buchanan owned Wave Hill [1880s–early 1890s]. Also that out there the frontage country is really the least able to stand stocking closely.  

By 1945 there was scientific recognition of the shortcomings of the open range system, yet little was done to change it until the 1990s.

A number of reasons can be suggested as to why the open range system persisted for so long. Establishing the big stations required considerable capital outlay, beyond the means of most 'small' cattlemen. Capital was also required to sustain the enterprise while the herds grew and markets were developed. As a result, many Victoria River District stations either were originally taken up by large companies or wealthy absentee-owners, or soon fell into their hands. Once the stations were stocked and basic infrastructure in place, the operation of the open range system involved relatively small ongoing costs. Vast areas could be leased for very low rents and when hostilities between the Aborigines and the

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128 W.H. Maze, 'Settlement in the East Kimberleys, Western Australia', _The Australian Geographer_, vol. 5, no. 1, June 1945, pp. 1-16. Maze's observations were directly applicable over much of the Victoria River country, but his report had no impact in either the Ord or the Victoria and for years things went along more or less as before. For example, during a drought in 1961 the VRD manager reported that around the Pigeon Hole outstation the cattle, '...struggled through on surface water. Frontage eaten out. Far too many cattle on river, nowhere to move the cattle to. All river frontage for miles eroded.' (Station report by George Lewis, 1960. Hooker Pastoral Company Pty. Ltd. Records. Station Reports, 1959-1968. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 119/15).
129 D. Lewis, _Slower than the Eye Can See_, 2002.
cattlemen subsided the Aborigines provided a large and unpaid workforce for the stations. In spite of the recurrent losses of thousands of head of cattle at the end of each dry season, and the obvious damage the uncontrolled herds were inflicting on the land, the owners of most of the stations were content to maximise the profits from their investment while the very basis of these profits, the land itself, was being washed and blown away.

There is one change to the Victoria River environment that cannot readily be attributed to the impact of European livestock, although they may have played a part. In 2002 I published an environmental history of the district, and one of my findings was that tree numbers in riverine areas had increased significantly since European settlement. In many areas of Australia similar increases in the number of trees and amount of scrub has been attributed to the cessation of Aboriginal burning. In the Victoria River country Aboriginal burning practices were disrupted within a few decades of settlement, yet repeat photography suggests the increase in tree density occurred largely or solely in the post-war period. There are a number of factors which might have initiated this change, including a reduction in burning by European pastoralists, increased atmospheric carbon dioxide, global warming, and increased rainfall since the early 1970s, but the exact cause remains unknown at this time and requires further scientific study.

To summarise the coming of the cattle, the best lands for cattle grazing were also the richest areas for Aboriginal traditional foods. The cattle quickly impacted on these areas, selectively eating some plants and trampling others, disturbing native fauna, and degrading the banks of the rivers and springs. The pastoralists used their horses and guns to stop Aborigines burning the country, and to force them out of the good cattle lands and into the rough ranges (see Chapter 4). But even if the settlers had never resorted to violence, the open range system of cattle management proved a disaster for the environment and would have made it difficult or impossible for the Aborigines to continue living off the land as of old. For the Aborigines the arrival of the settlers initiated a period of tremendous

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130 Ibid.
dislocation and lawlessness, unprecedented in all the thousands of years that they and their ancestors had lived in the region. It was the beginning of the end for many age-old patterns of Aboriginal life and indeed for many of the Aborigines themselves, but as will be seen, they did not go quietly.
Chapter 4

‘UNQUIET TIMES’

When the first settlers entered the Victoria River region they found a cattleman’s paradise of wide Mitchell grass plains, abundantly watered with large waterholes in the major rivers and creeks, numerous springs and generally reliable monsoon rains. A paradise for cattlemen it may have been, but it was also a paradise for the Aboriginal people who had lived there for thousands of years. Each side came to see the other as the ‘serpent’ in the garden that had to be banished; ultimately both sides lost – with the coming of the cattle the paradise was destroyed for both.

Within a year of the first cattle reaching the Victoria River in 1883, ‘intelligence’ reached the Government Resident, John Langdon Parsons, that the settlers on the Victoria River and elsewhere on the Northern Territory frontier were having serious problems with the Aborigines. There can be little doubt that at the same time Aborigines throughout the Victoria River district and beyond were receiving intelligence of serious problems with the whites.

At the end of 1884 Parsons wrote a report on the situation in the Territory providing a clear picture of the dilemma faced by Aborigines and settlers alike, and expressing his concerns for the future – concerns that were to prove horrifyingly prophetic:

I fear unquiet times may be expected in connection with the native tribes. The blacks are beginning to realise that the white man, with his herds, and his fences, and his preservation of water, is interfering with what they properly enough, from their point of view, regard as their natural rights...
At the Katherine, Elsey, and Newcastle Waters, difficulties have arisen in connection with the blacks and cattle. Mr Lindsay Crawford states that on the Victoria the blacks are daring and defiant; Mr Creaghe states that at the Limmen River they are spearing his cattle, and that he must take measures to prevent recurrence; Mr Hay states much
the same condition of things as existing on the Roper, where one or two of the natives have firearms.¹

Parsons included a succinct summary of the reasons for conflict between settlers and Aborigines, and pointed out that through the impact of cattle the Aborigines’ food supply was damaged and rendered uncertain, and that the settlers prevented them from moving amongst the cattle or using their age-old land-use method of burning the country:

They can no longer, as they could a few years ago, travel from one lagoon or billabong to another, and be certain that on arrival there would be flocks of wild fowl to be snared. Nor can they, as of old, when they desired a repast of snakes, iguanas, or other reptiles, set fire to the first piece of well-grassed country they encounter. The stockholder uses the billabong for his cattle, and wild fowl are scared away; he wants the grass for his cattle and very vigorously lets the blackfellow understand that it is at their peril that they put the firestick to it. Naturally out of these conditions conflict arises and will continue. The natives will resist the intrusion of the whites and regard themselves as robbed of their inheritance; they will set the grass alight when they are so minded, and, if hungry or by way of reprisal, they will spear cattle when they think they are out of range of the rifle.

If nothing else, Parson’s report shows that some of the white authorities, at least, were aware of the dilemma that settlement posed. Parsons himself could offer no real solution, and could only state the obvious: ‘That settlement must and will go on is certain – that outrages will be committed by both sides is probable’, but, he added, ‘even those that do not claim to be philanthropists are not satisfied with the contemplation that the blacks are to be improved off the face of the earth.’² This then was the situation that the settlers and Aborigines in the Victoria River valley faced as the first cattle herds moved west of the telegraph line. It did not take long for the Resident’s worst fears to be realised.

While Lindsay Crawford and Sam Croker were riding along the Victoria River looking for a homestead site in 1883, before there were any homesteads or cattle in the district, they were met with a shower of spears.³ The Duracks were attacked by a large group of

2 Ibid.
3 ‘Massacres in the Northern ‘Territory’, Paddy Cahill’s List’, The South Australian Register, 18-12-1905.
Aborigines as they arrived on the Ord River with their cattle, in August or September 1885, and Battle Creek, a large tributary of the Victoria River which runs across the northeastern part of VRD, is said to have been named after a fight there between Aborigines and Tom Kilfoyle when he was bringing the first cattle across to stock Rosewood in 1885.

The reception the cattlemen received is in stark contrast to that experienced by Gregory’s men on the lower Victoria River, where the Aborigines at first remained hidden, but eventually made sustained friendly contact (see Chapter 2). The question must therefore be asked, why did this change take place? Why didn’t the Aborigines treat the settlers as they had the men at Gregory’s main depot camp? There are two related circumstances which may offer an explanation. One is that for at least a decade before the settlers arrived, Aborigines were receiving information about them via traditional trade and communication networks (see Chapter 1).

The significant role that traditional trade and communication networks played in frontier race relations was first revealed by Henry Reynolds in 1978 in a paper which examined how Aborigines responded to the coming of the white man in Queensland. Later he expanded this study to include data from elsewhere in Australia, a major work entitled The Other Side of the Frontier. These ground-breaking studies revealed a wide variety of responses to first contact with Europeans, and showed how these responses were modified and evolved as the realities of white settlement became apparent. Many of these responses were repeated as the frontier reached new areas, including, as will be seen, in the Victoria River district.

7 H. Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier, History Department, James Cook University, Townsville, 1981, chapter 1.
Reynolds presented evidence that by means of indigenous networks, items of European manufacture including steel axes, pieces of iron and glass, and tobacco reached Aborigines far beyond the frontier. In addition, people received an amazing amount of reliable information about Europeans – their behaviour and possessions, weapons, animals, the ecological impact of their livestock, and even massacres committed by them. Reynolds suggested that the information received ‘was probably a vital influence on Aboriginal behaviour’ towards the Europeans’, and that ‘White-Aboriginal relations did not begin anew in every district despite the pioneers’ widespread perception about entering an untouched wilderness.’ Instead, he argued, ‘Aborigines responded to the newcomers armed with knowledge and expectations about them.’ There can be little doubt that this was the situation when the first settlers arrived in the Victoria River district.

Traditional trade and communication networks existed, and still exist, in the Victoria River district, linking that district to all neighbouring regions and to groups far beyond. I described these networks and also the existence of long distance travel for purposes of trade and ceremony in Chapter 1, and I believe that not only did these networks inform Aborigines about white culture for a decade or more before the settlers arrived, but also that they are an important key to understanding the history of black-white relations during the first twenty years or so of settlement.

In the Victoria River district there is no clear-cut evidence of European material items entering the region before European settlement there. With the possible exception of the words ‘no good’ and ‘tobac’ (as discussed in Chapter 2), the Aborigines encountered by Gregory’s expedition appeared to have had no knowledge of Europeans and no European goods were reported to have been seen. South-west of the Victoria River district in 1873, explorer P.E. Warburton found an iron axe in an abandoned Aboriginal camp. The most

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likely source for this axe was from the newly constructed overland telegraph line, but the route it took to get to where it was found many hundreds of kilometres away is unknown.

In Chapter 2 I provided information about twelve European expeditions that entered the Victoria River district between explorer Gregory's departure in 1856 and the arrival of the first settlers in 1883. Most had little or nothing to say about Aborigines; none reported seeing any European goods in their possession and only one heard Aborigines use English words. These were men encountered by Sullivan and McDonald on Gregory Creek in 1878 who cried out 'whitefellow Jummy', but they had probably learnt these words from Europeans on the Overland Telegraph Line.

The expeditions up to and including 1881 reported only neutral or friendly contact with Aborigines, and this conforms to a pattern noticed elsewhere on the frontier. As Reynolds remarked, 'As a general rule clans did not react immediately to European trespass...Indeed the history of inland exploration indicates that local groups tolerated the passage of European expeditions provided they behaved with circumspection.' However, by 1882 things had changed. Saunders and Johns reported violent encounters and the Duracks were threatened (see Chapter 2). Perhaps one of the expeditions of the previous few years had trouble with Aborigines that they did not report, or perhaps they were not sufficiently circumspect with regard to Aboriginal women. In 1893 it was reported that 'a half-caste youth, aged about 20, has been found among the Osmond tribe' on Ord River station. It was suggested that he was a 'relic' of the Leichhardt expedition of 1848, but given his estimated age this hardly seems likely, and unless he was really only seventeen or younger, it does seem likely that his father would have been a member of one of the expeditions of the period 1879-1881. Whatever may have occurred and wherever it occurred, news of the event would have spread throughout the Victoria River region.

11 According to the South Australian Chronicle (13-9-1873), when the overland telegraph line was being built Aborigines in the vicinity soon possessed 'many tomahawks belonging to the Overland Telegraph'.
13 Adelaide Advertiser, 28-11-1893.