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A Wild History

The making of Victoria River Pastoral Society

Darrell Lewis

December 2004

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

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

Signature: [Signature]

Date: [Date]
This thesis examines the formation of settler society in the Victoria River district of the Northern Territory. It is a fine-grained study of individuals, their stories and their actions, many aspects of which have not been addressed or examined as closely elsewhere in Australia. Within the matrix of this story are characters whose lives give flesh and blood to many of the key icons of European mythology – the brave explorers, the noble pioneers, the ‘wild blacks’, the wild bush and ‘the battler’. Beginning with the experiences of the European explorers and continuing through the period when the big stations were formed and on to the time of the ‘small men’ – cattle duffers, and others with more legitimate aims – the thesis looks closely at the process of settlement. It focuses on the interaction of the whites with the Aborigines, with each other and with the environment, showing how these and other factors laid the foundations of a unique frontier society.
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This thesis is the end result of a lifetime of interest in Australian history, and nearly thirty years research into Victoria River district history. A great many people have contributed in some way, directly or indirectly, and it is difficult to remember them all. Foremost among them must be my wife, Dr Deborah Rose, who has assisted, guided and advised me as only a life partner and gifted academic can. My debt to Debbie is immeasurable.

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the 1930s-1950s period; Reg Durack, former ringer on Auvergne and Argyle, and later the owner of Bullita, Kildurk and Spirit Hill stations; Gerry Ash, former ringer on VRD and Wave Hill, and a man who in 1952 took on the authorities in order to marry the Aboriginal woman of his choice; and Buck Buchester, former stockman, a great horseman and bronco-man, a man who got around the miscegenation laws by legally marrying the Aboriginal woman of his choice, and a resident of the Victoria River district for over fifty years.

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IMPERIAL-METRIC CONVERSION

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

The only other conversions of relevance to this thesis are:

One mile = 1.6 kilometres
One square mile = 2.6 square kilometres
One ton = 1061 kilograms
The Victoria River country of North Australia is almost mythic in its wild beauty, the glamour of horsemen and cattle, the violence and danger of frontier times, and the sheer size and remoteness of stations such as Bluey Buchanan's Wave Hill, Captain Joe's Bradshaw, and Victoria River Downs – VRD or 'The Big Run'. Located between two iconic regions of Australia – the Kimberley to the west and the Gulf Country to the east – it is an immense and complex tract of country, at times sweeping and majestic, at times rugged and grand. The Victoria River itself, along with the Ord, rises in the arid sand plains of the northern Tanami desert and winds northward through increasingly well-watered savanna grasslands and range country, to the estuarine reaches where the highest and most rugged mountains predominate. Mesas and flat-topped ranges of broken sandstone and limestone border much of the Victoria catchment or cut haphazardly across the valley floor through a mosaic of basalt and limestone plains. The region has a wide variety of floristic communities: on part of the high-rainfall coastal fringe there are wetland areas, and 'jungles' line some sections of the rivers and waterholes. Further inland open savanna predominates, but there are patches and swathes of country known locally as 'desert' – spinifex-covered hills, and arid scrub and woodlands. Cliffs and gorges are common, and extensive Mitchell grass downs have provided the foundation for great cattle empires (see plates 1 to 7).

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

Maps 1 & 2: The Victoria River district, Northern Territory.
Plate 1: A big mesa and cliff-lined ranges on Coolibah station, lower Victoria River (Lewis collection).

Plate 2: The estuarine reach of the lower Victoria River with the Yambarran Range in the background (Lewis collection).
Plate 3: Boab and big sky, Bradshaw station, northern Victoria River district (Lewis collection).

Plate 4: Rolling downs and Mitchell grass country in the central Victoria River district (Lewis collection).
Plate 5: A typical example of the big gorges found in the sandstone country of the Victoria River region. Stokes range north of VRD (Lewis collection).

Plate 6: Unusual rock formations are common in the region. This is Gregory’s Remarkable Pillar in the central part of VRD (Lewis collection).
Plate 7: Waterhole on the upper Wickham River in the centre of the district (Lewis collection).
Map 2 shows the Victoria River valley which takes up the greater part of the Victoria River district. Officially, the district extends beyond the actual valley though the precise boundaries vary according to context. Only the Northern Territory-Western Australian border remains constant, but in many ways for the inhabitants of the region it exists only as a line on paper. In fact, almost all the boundaries in whatever context are administrative and thus arbitrary. Topographically and biologically the district is part of the Kimberley, and some of the Aboriginal language areas and cattle stations overlap the state border. Stockmen, criminals and some of the early police patrols ranged from one district to another. As a result, in my research I have taken a quite expansive view of the district, following up characters and stories in what might be termed the ‘Greater Victoria River District’. At its greatest extremes, for me this includes the country between Wyndham, Halls Creek, Tanami, Newcastle Waters, Katherine, Daly River police station and Port Keats. However, in this thesis my focus is generally on a more limited and conventional view of the district, confined within the Northern Territory and not extending beyond Bradshaw station in the north, Wave Hill station in the south and Delamere station in the east.

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

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

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

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

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

² This is my memory and perception of an attitude that existed in Wagga as I grew up. I have since learnt
that a similar attitude was first noted by C.E.W. Bean in the early 1900s (C.E.W. Bean, 1911, cited in R.
In parts of the Northern Territory white men were still being speared in the 1930s...there are places in the outback where whites have not been for fifty or sixty years...the Aborigines lived off the land and were the best trackers in the world.3

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

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

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

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3 These statements are, of course, based on memory, rather than being the exact words my father spoke.
neighbouring Tanami Desert and East Kimberley. It was my first introduction to an amazing stretch of country that I have since come to know intimately.

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

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

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4 This phrase is on the headstone of Tudor Shadforth at the old Ord River station cemetery.
5 In the Victoria River district, ‘devil-devil’ or ‘debil-debil’ country is a term used to refer to areas covered with large tussocks, thirty centimetres or more in height and much the same in width, separated from each other by gaps of fifteen to thirty centimetres. Often there are also holes extending below the nominal ‘surface’. Such country is extremely dangerous for horsemen, and terribly difficult and slow to drive a motor vehicle over. From personal experience I know that in extreme cases it is all but impossible to drive over, even in low gear in four-wheel drive. The term is in use elsewhere in Australia with respect to similar landforms (see the *Australian National Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 193-194, 198; for a detailed description of their formation see H. Basedow, Physical Geography and Geology of the Victoria River District, Northern Territory of Australia, *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch*, session 1914-15, vol. 16, pp. 147-217).
In some instances the feeling was (and is) derived from stories accessible in print; no matter that comparatively little of the history of the region had been written and much of what has been written is either inaccurate or generalised, or both. In other instances the basis of this feeling was almost certainly (limited) local knowledge, transmitted from person to person since the early days. To give just two examples, Charlie Schultz, owner of Humbert River station from 1928 to 1971, told me he had heard from the old-timers that the police shot many Aborigines in the Humbert River ranges after the spearing of ‘Brigalow Bill’ Ward (see chapter 9). Similarly, a former manager of Auvergne station told me he had heard that the bones of many Aborigines shot by police were scattered across the Razorback Mountain (plate 19).

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

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

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

8 While the historical basis of both stories, and of others, can be found in the documentary record, it is now highly unlikely that any Aboriginal bones from a police shooting are still to be found on Razorback Mountain (Auvergne station).
Little did I then realise that one day I would write the more detailed history of the region that I was hungering for.

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

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

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

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

10 Apart from a failed attempt at Camden Harbour in 1863 (C. Richards, There Were Three Ships: the story of the Camden Harbour expedition, 1864-65, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1990), settlement in the west Kimberley began late in 1879 with the arrival of George Brockman and 400 sheep on the Fitzroy River (M. Durack, Kings in Grass Castles, p. 229).
the region. There have only ever been one or two mines in the district,\textsuperscript{11} too small and too short-lived to attract a large population and lead to a town being established (plate 20). No descendants of the original pioneers live in the region today and only a few families in the district have roots that extend as far back as the 1950s. Very few of the older locals were born or grew up in the district and there has always been a relatively high turnover of cattle station staff.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During our time at Yarralin the Aborigines told us many stories of the early days. Some of the oldest people who taught us had grown to adulthood in the bush, with two men being born circa 1910. They thus had lived through the greater part of the period of white settlement and had been told about earlier events by their parents and older relations – people who had seen the white settlers come and had fought against them. Almost all of our original teachers have since died, taking their wealth of knowledge with them and breaking the direct living link to the early days of the region. Eventually Debbie and I began work on a history of the region, to be told from an Aboriginal perspective. With our Aboriginal teachers as guides we visited many historic sites, and I began to seek out historical documents in the Northern Territory Archives and elsewhere. This research culminated in Debbie’s award-winning book, *Hidden Histories*, published in 1991.\(^\text{18}\) As well as field trips into remote corners of the district, I began the first of a series of long-distance solo bushwalks through country inaccessible to motor vehicles, the first being across the rugged Stokes Range, north of Jasper Gorge, and others into the headwaters of the Wickham and East Baines Rivers and into Bilamatjaru, the great Gordon Creek sandstone massif on VRD.

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

\(^{18}\) *Hidden Histories* was published by Aboriginal Studies Press in 1991 and was awarded the Stanner Prize for the ‘Best Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1992-93.’

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


\(^{21}\) Lewis, D. *The Boab Belt: A Survey of Historic Sites in the North-Central Victoria River District.* Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (NT), 1996. This is a survey of historic sites on Bradshaw, Coolibah, Fitzroy, Bullita, northern Victoria River Downs and northern Humbert River.
and *The Final Muster*. All the cross-cultural, site recording, writing and bush skills I had developed during my archaeological career were now directed towards my historic site surveys and report writing. I have also since been employed on social history projects by the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, the Timber Creek Community Government Council, and the Northern Land Council.

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

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

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

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

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

25 I have produced site maps and Aboriginal histories for the Yingawunari – Top Springs land claim and the Jasper Gorge – Kidman Springs land claim, and Aboriginal histories for native title claims over the Bradshaw Field Training Area (formerly Bradshaw station) and the Timber Creek town area. All this material is now held by the Northern Land Council.
across to Bradshaw homestead, and a 110 kilometre wet season walk from the lower Fitzmaurice to Bradshaw homestead.

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

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

26 C. Schultz and D. Lewis, Beyond the Big Run, 1995.
During his years in the Victoria River district Charlie amassed an extensive photo collection and various personal and family papers, all of which I was able to copy. In the years since meeting him I have tracked down many other former Victoria River district residents (or their descendants) and in many instances they have had collections of photographs or documents that I was able to copy. This freelance work has led to publication of the memoirs of an early Northern Territory policeman,27 and made it possible to publish a photographic history of the region.28 In the fourteen years since I copied Charlie Schultz’s collection I have copied over 5,000 early photographs from the Victoria-Ord region.

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

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

29 D. Lewis, Slower that the Eye Can See: Environmental change in northern Australia’s cattle lands, Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2002.
To my knowledge there are few comparable studies elsewhere in Australia where a researcher has been able combine a wide knowledge of the topography and environment of an area, long-term relationships with local Aboriginal and white people (and thus a large body of oral history), and the amount and range of photographs and written material I have been able to gather. One that comes close is the study of frontier relations in the Gulf Country, written by Tony Roberts and currently in press. His study focuses specifically on conflict between blacks and whites, whereas mine is more concerned with themes and processes of social relations on the Victoria River frontier. While Tony has not gathered an equivalent collection of early photographs, he has spent several decades working in the Gulf Country collecting oral history from Aborigines and whites, and has compiled an impressive amount of archival material. As might be expected, there are many similarities between the Gulf Country and the Victoria River region, but there are also important differences. European incursions into the Gulf country began earlier than on the Victoria River, there were more of them, and there appears to have been much more violence, although this might well be a factor of better documentation in the Gulf area.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

32 The term ‘nomad tribe’ was coined by Russell Ward to describe the highly mobile outback workers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (R. Ward, The Australian Legend, 1958).
Recapturing the stories has only become possible through more than thirty years of gathering together fragments from diverse sources, often preserved by chance and circumstance: documents and photographs in public and private archives, both here and overseas; oral traditions of both Aborigines and whites; carvings on boab trees, graffiti on stock route water tanks, and field trips to the places where events occurred. The result is, in effect, the reinvigoration of the original oral tradition. Analysis of these sources shows how a frontier is not a firm line in time or space, but rather, a shifting historical phenomenon, and different kinds of evidence travel within and beyond it at different rates.

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

Chapter 2 looks at the long period before European settlement during which Aboriginal people had increasingly frequent direct and indirect contact with outsiders, primarily with Europeans but possibly also with Asians. At one point there was a short but remarkable period of friendly relations which pointed to a possibility for the future. Unfortunately, this did not come to pass. After the explorers, Aboriginal contact with Europeans became more frequent, and knowledge gained through direct experience almost certainly was supplemented by information coming into the district along traditional information networks. Consequently, before the settlers arrived on the Victoria the Aborigines possessed much greater knowledge of Europeans than had previously been supposed. I suggest that this growing knowledge of whites laid the foundation for the Aboriginal response to the settlers when they finally arrived.
The second set of chapters (3 to 7) examines themes and processes of settlement, focusing on the establishment of enduring social relations and environmental processes. Within this set of chapters, Aboriginal warfare, resistance, and subsequent accommodation to white settlement is explored in detail. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are sub-sets to Chapter 4 (‘Unquiet Times’) – case studies of particular aspects of the Victoria River frontier.

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

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

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are quite detailed studies of processes addressed at a more general level in Chapter 4. Each of them is iconic in some way, both regionally and nationally: ‘Jasper Gorge’, examines a place of fear and conflict; ‘Captain Joe’s Bradshaw’ deals with a ‘noble pioneer’ and the violence inherent in the development of a station; and ‘The Wild Wardaman Warriors’ is the story of one particular Aboriginal group’s determined resistance to the settlers. Together they reveal the distinctive character of both the terrain and early history of the Victoria River district. None of these stories has been dealt with so comprehensively before, probably because no other writer has had access to the range of
The third set of chapters (8 to 10) examines processes and themes that were briefly and vibrantly part of the life of the district, and highlights the role of the dreamers, the duffers and the battlers. Chapter 8 deals with the most spectacular failure of pastoral enterprise in the Victoria River country and a significant turning point in the history of the district – the attempt to establish sheep stations in the region. It is a story of southern dreams inappropriately imposed on a northern landscape, and reveals the disjunction between white settlers’ desires and the realities of the northern climate and environment.

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

Finally, Chapter 10 portrays a type of settler different from the cattle duffers – battlers who, at least in most cases, had more legitimate aims. It is primarily concerned with three men, a father and his two sons – true ‘battlers’ who sought to build a life for themselves in the face of overwhelming odds. When these men first appeared in the district, Victoria River pastoral society had already taken the form it would retain for at least another fifty years,
and they faced opposition from two great powers. One was the multi-national Vesteys Company, owner of a vast amount of country in the Victoria River and Kimberley districts, and the other was the Western Australian government, based more than two thousand kilometres away in Perth. In their story we are once again given a poignant glimpse of a different Australia that might have been, but which never came to pass.

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

I end this thesis with an epilogue in which I outline various changes that took place throughout the twentieth century, and I examine aspects of the founding society that still existed when I first went to the region in 1971. Some of these aspects continued long after I first arrived there, and in spite of many changes during the past twenty years, some aspects continue until the present time.
Chapter 1

THE VICTORIA RIVER – LAND AND PEOPLE

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

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

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

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

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4 Ngarinman elder Bobby Wititpuru told me that ‘Ballyangle’ is the traditional name of a billabong at the foot of this range. Until the 1930s the name was applied to the entire range and the Aborigines who lived there were sometimes referred to as the ‘Ballyangle blacks’ (e.g. see E. Hill, The Territory, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 244). It was renamed the Pinkerton Range by the Surveyor General of the Northern Territory, W. Easton (personal communication, Vern O’Brien).
5 Amanbidji station, formerly known as Kildurk, was part of Auvergne station until 1949 or 1950.
the Whirlwind Plains, as well as swathes of scrubby ‘spewy’ ground\textsuperscript{6} and patches of ‘devil devil’ country.

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

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

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

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


\textsuperscript{9} T. Ronan, \textit{Once There was a Bagman}, Cassell Australia Ltd., Melbourne, 1966, p. 227. Creeks on the western side of the West Baines headwaters rise in basalt country on Rosewood and Waterloo stations.
immense Victoria River Downs, as well as of smaller stations such as Killarney, Humbert River and Limbunya, and to a lesser degree, Mistake Creek.

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{10} See D. Lewis, \textit{A Shared History: Aborigines and White Australians in the Victoria River District, Northern Territory}. Published by Create-A-Card, Darwin, on behalf of the Timber Creek Community Government Council, 1997.
The regional population was divided into at least thirteen different language-groups or ‘tribes’ (see maps 3 and 4). Those whose traditional lands lie largely or wholly within the bounds of the Victoria River valley are the Gurindji, Bilinara, Karangpurr, Ngaliwurru, Nungali, the eastern, western and Wolayi (‘sandstone’) Ngarinman, the Jaminjung and Kadjerong.

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

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

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12 F. Merlan places the north-eastern boundary of the Wardaman in the vicinity of the Scott Creek-Katherine River junction, about sixty kilometres from Katherine (A Grammar of Wardaman: A Language of the Northern Territory of Australia, Mouton de Gruyter, New York, 1994, p. 7).
13 Personal communication Jimmy Manngayarri with whom I mapped much of Malngin country including the eastern boundary between the Malngin and the Bilinara. Although it is largely within the Ord River catchment it is wholly within the Northern Territory.
15 D. Rose, Dingo Makes Us Human, p. 54-55.
Map 3: Language areas or 'tribes' in the Victoria River district. I have used stippled lines because the boundaries are not 'exact' in the way that Europeans think of boundaries.
Map 4: Victoria River ‘tribal’ areas in relation to pastoral leases as they were c1990.
Like Aborigines elsewhere in Australia, Victoria River district people were hunter-gatherers (plates 24-26). Based on numerous studies in Australia and overseas, scholars estimate that the typical size of self-identifying hunter-gatherer groups was at least 500 and possibly as high as 1,500. If these estimates are applied to the entire Victoria River district the Aboriginal population was somewhere between 5,500 and 16,500 people. Victoria River Downs alone probably supported between 1,400 and 4,200 Aborigines.

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

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

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

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18 D. Rose, Dingo Makes us Human, p. 7.
Ngarinman identity and play down their connection to the ‘murdering’ Mudburra.\textsuperscript{19} Similar dissociation probably sometimes occurred when early police questioned Aborigines about the murder of a European, or other crimes. Multiple identities also meant that if food resources ran low or there was a looming danger in one language area, individuals or groups with appropriate affiliations could move to another. This flexible identity has led to problems in accepting the reliability of historic records where a particular ‘tribal’ identity is attributed to Aborigines involved in an event at a particular place.

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid: 153-64.
\textsuperscript{20} See D. Lewis, "They Meet Up At Bilinara", 1990; D. Lewis and D. Rose, The Shape Of The Dreaming, 1988.
The Norwegian zoologist and explorer Knut Dahl also mentioned such long-distance travel. While visiting the lower Victoria River in 1895 he met a 'myall' Aboriginal man who had visited Pine Creek, apparently out of curiosity to see the whites. When people made these long trips they were likely to meet other people who had travelled a similar distance from a different direction, so there were 'chains of connection' across most of the continent, and people received goods and information from regions far beyond their maximum range of travel. Baler shell ornaments originating on the Kimberley coast were worn in the Victoria River district and are known to have reached South Australia. Boomerangs from the Newcastle Waters area reached the Victoria and many were passed northwards to the Daly River region. In return the Daly River people sent bamboo spears south, some of which were passed on to Newcastle Waters and beyond. As well as material items, songs, dances and stories flowed along these networks. This long-distance travel and information flow from much greater distances has implications for understanding the reaction of Aborigines to the settlers when they eventually arrived in the Victoria River district (see Chapter 6).

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

22 ‘Myall’ was the term applied to Aborigines who maintained a traditional and independent life in the bush, and who were ignorant of European ways.
26 Personal observation.
27 D.J. Mulvaney, in N. Peterson (ed.) *Tribes And Boundaries In Australia*, pp. 72-94.
this day) central to virtually every aspect of daily life, and to every life passage. Birth, initiations, dispute resolutions, and funerals all require fire and smoke. Rights to use fire in particular contexts is allocated among kin and defended in the same way that rights to songs, designs, and other forms of knowledge are defended.28

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

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

28 Personal communication, Dr Deborah Rose.
tens of thousands to one.\textsuperscript{30} As elsewhere in Australia, the fires lit by these people kept fuel loads low, and produced a mosaic effect of burnt, unburnt and regenerating areas.

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

* for hunting
* for defence or attack
* for land management
* for cooking
* for boiling water, using stones heated in a campfire\textsuperscript{32}
* for warmth
* for light
* in ceremony (mortuary and other rituals)
* burning down trees for firewood
* removing grass and vermin from an area prior to camping
* healing — to create warmth and steam, using medicinal plants (also gender restricted rituals)
* to make the ashes used with ‘bush tobacco’
* as part of the process of leaching toxins out of certain foods to make them edible
* to extract resin from spinifex
* to drive away dangerous supernatural beings
* to erase the physical traces of life so that the spirits of dead people will not want to return
* for hardening the points of spears and digging stick
* to anneal stone to make it better for working into spearheads and other tools
* to alter the chemical structure of haematite, transforming yellow ochre to red ochre.
* communication — signalling the presence of people in an area.\textsuperscript{33}


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

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

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

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

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33 This list of reasons for burning was provided by Anthropologist Dr Deborah Rose, and is reproduced in D. Lewis, Slower than the Eye Can See: Environmental change in northern Australia’s cattle lands, Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2002, p. 52.
34 Ibid.
over it.\textsuperscript{35} Similarly, in the area around present-day Fitzroy station he described ‘a fine plain...lightly and picturesquely timbered with the white gum.’\textsuperscript{36}

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid: 81.
\textsuperscript{38} J. Wilson, ‘Notes on the Physical Geography of North-West Australia’. \textit{Journal of the Geographical Society of London}, vol. 28, 1858, p. 141.
Buchanan also took the first cattle to stock Ord River Station in 1884, and provided comments on that area: ‘Mr. Buchanan...reports the country to be very good, basaltic and limestone plains with bald hills, well watered with creeks and springs, timber rather scarce, and herbage chiefly Mitchell grass.’  

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

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

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

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

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
44 Ibid: 64.
These ‘reeds’ were found at various other places during the rest of their foot explorations, and fifteen years later Gregory’s expedition, too, encountered dense riparian vegetation, including ‘reeds’, presumably the same species that Stokes saw. James Wilson mentioned ‘extensive beds of reeds growing along the rivers’, and on April 27th 1856 Gregory himself noted that his party,

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

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

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

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46 J.S. Wilson, 1858, p. 145.
49 Personal communication, K. Kelly, author of *Hard Country Hard Men: In the Footsteps of Gregory*, (Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 2000); Personal communication, Darryl Hill, former field officer with the Victoria River District Conservation Association.
50 J.L. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia*, vol. 2, p. 72. See also page 87.
52 Timber Creek police journal, 28-7-1894. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.
‘cattle killers’, most of whom ‘escaped in the tropical growth’ while others ‘were protected by an impenetrable phalanx of reeds’.\textsuperscript{53}

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’\textsuperscript{54} – 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. 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. However, it is known that about 300, and possibly more than 1000 years ago, ‘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,\(^6\) some specimens fourteen to seventeen metres high and 1.6 metres in
diameter,\(^7\) a size that suggests considerable age. Tamarinds are known markers of Macassan
campsites\(^8\) 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.\(^9\) 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\(^10\) 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'.\(^{11}\) 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,\(^{12}\) very similar in style to the way that some Macassar men wore their beards.\(^{13}\) 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.\(^{14}\) 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.

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\(^{11}\) W.H. Willshire, *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’, *Adelaide Register*, 23-12-1905.).


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.

![Inscription on a Fitzmaurice River boab: 'Casabila 1814'.](image)

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 Victoria River Aborigines experienced 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.

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' 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.' 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. 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. 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.\textsuperscript{34}

Being a sailing ship, the \textit{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).\textsuperscript{35} The \textit{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\textsuperscript{36} 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 and beyond, 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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} A.C. Gregory. \textit{‘North Australian Expedition’}, 1981.
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 accounts.

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 that 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.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.51 George Windsor-Earl, the official linguist and draughtsman at Port Essington,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.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'.54 This was about 200 kilometres from Port Essington, and apparently these words used so often by the whites

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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’.

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’. 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, 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 ‘cooed’ 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.

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 I: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 solacing [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.\textsuperscript{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.'\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{66}

The men in this group were fascinated with the physical appearance of the Europeans and in a manner strangely reminiscent of late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid: entry for 2-2-1856.
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 2nd 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.’

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68 Ibid: entry for 3-2-1856.
69 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 2nd 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. 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 11th 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. 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. According to Wilson these men,

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.

70 Ibid: entry for 3-3-1856.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
Since then he has been met with several times and has been to the camp, but always with expressions of good feeling.\textsuperscript{73}

From this time it is clear that relations between the Europeans and the Aborigines improved rapidly. On March 28\textsuperscript{th} 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.’\textsuperscript{74} 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 any 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.\textsuperscript{75}

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.’\textsuperscript{76} 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 13\textsuperscript{th}) 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\textsuperscript{77}, to most of which they gave names.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} J.S. Wilson and J.R. Elsey, entry for 28-3-1856. Mitchell Library, Z C 411-1 (microfilm copy CY 6Cl). 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.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid: entry for 29-3-1856.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid: entry for 30-3-1856.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{78} J.S. Wilson and J.R. Elsey, entry for 13-4-1856. Mitchell Library, Z C 411-1 (microfilm copy CY 6Cl).
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,\(^{83}\) 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,\(^{84}\) 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:

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\text{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 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.}^{85}
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The camp journal kept by Wilson and Elsey was discontinued shortly after Gregory’s return on May 9\(^{th}\) 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.’\(^{86}\) It was probably on this occasion that Thomas Baines made the sketches of Aborigines at the depot camp that are in his collection.\(^{87}\)

One of the last encounters nearly ended badly. On June 4\(^{th}\) 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\(^{88}\) and based on the descriptions of those involved the incident was later recorded in a sketch by Thomas Baines.\(^{89}\)

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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’ of Europeans. 92 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

90 T. Baines, Journal of the Detachment of the North Australian Expedition left by Mr Gregory at the Main Camp Victoria River 1856, entry for 19-7-1856. Mitchell Library C408.
93 Ibid.
made from at least March 1876, and by the time Forrest arrived large areas had been taken up on paper 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.

Second, at Murrani waterhole, on the fringe of the Victoria River district, there was once a tree marked ‘JS 78’. Officially this waterhole was first discovered by Nat Buchanan when he opened up the Murrani Track in 1886, 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. Skuthorpe’s claim was scoffed at by others who claimed a man named Scanlan had marked the tree during a trip he had made to the Victoria River country. Whoever it may have been, someone was at Murrani 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-

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 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).
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

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. 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).

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. 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. This site turned out to be ill-chosen and was abandoned at the end of 1866.

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, 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:

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

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105 Message carved on a boab at the Depot Camp.
109 Among other exploits, Cadell was the first man to take a steam ship up the Darling River.
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.

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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.
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.\textsuperscript{119} The three men had a copy of Gregory’s map and report,\textsuperscript{120} 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’.\textsuperscript{121}

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 20\textsuperscript{th}, 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.’\textsuperscript{122} 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

\textsuperscript{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.


\textsuperscript{121} ‘Trip to the Victoria River’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 28-9-1878.

\textsuperscript{122} ibid.
on behalf of Dr Browne, the owner of Springvale station.\footnote{A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., p. 153.} One of the expedition members was ‘Greenhide’ Sam Croker who was later to play a significant role in establishing Wave Hill station.\footnote{D. Lewis, entry on Samuel Croker in D. Carment and H. Wilson, (eds), \textit{Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography}, vol. 3. Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1996, pp. 58-61.} Woods’ party travelled at least as far west as the junction of Gregory Creek and the Victoria River,\footnote{‘The Explorer. The Fate of Leichhardt (sic)’. \textit{Adelaide Observer}, 23-10-1880.} but the best country they found was along Aruna 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\footnote{A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., p. 154.} and on his return to ‘civilisation’ leases were taken up and Delamere became the first station to include country within the Victoria River valley.\footnote{Notes supplied by Mr Vern O’Brien, former Director of the Northern Territory Lands Department, through the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.}

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,\footnote{A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., pp. 156-59.} and later another block of 600 square miles was taken up.\footnote{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.} 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.\footnote{‘Found’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 20-11-1880 (advertisement).} With Tom Pearce and Rodney Claude Spencer, Giles visited the area again in early June 1881.\footnote{A. Giles, State Library of South Australia, V 1082, nd., pp. 161-64.} Over twenty years later Tom Pearce became the owner of Willeroo, a station which by then had come to incorporate part of the original Delamere.\footnote{Notes supplied by Mr Vern O’Brien, former Director of the Northern Territory Lands Department, through the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.}

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

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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.\textsuperscript{142} One of the expedition members was Tom Kilfoyle, a relation of the Duracks and later the pioneer of Rosewood station.\textsuperscript{143}

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.\textsuperscript{144} 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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\textsuperscript{142} M. Durack, \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{143} G. Byrne, \textit{Tom & Jack: A Frontier Story}, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, p.19.

\textsuperscript{144} An official account of this expedition was published under the heading, ‘An Exploring Expedition’, in \textit{The Argus} of January 5\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th}, 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.\textsuperscript{145} 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).\textsuperscript{146} 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.\textsuperscript{147} 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.\textsuperscript{148}

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.\textsuperscript{149} 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.\textsuperscript{150} The rest of the party tried to convince them to continue but

\textsuperscript{145} *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 11-10-1884.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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).

\textsuperscript{148} ‘Return of Mr. Stockdale’s Exploring Party’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 7-2-1885.

\textsuperscript{149} J.H. Ricketson, Mitchell Library mss 1783, item 2, pp. 221-25, 228-29.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid: 229-30.
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 \textit{The Argus} describes various peaceful meetings or sightings of Aborigines, but

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid: 272.
\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 7-3-1885.
\textsuperscript{155} J.H. Ricketson, Mitchell Library mss 1783, item 2, pp. 115-17.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid: 201.
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.’\textsuperscript{157} 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.’\textsuperscript{158} 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

\textsuperscript{157} ‘Exploration in the Northern Territory’, \textit{The Age}, 6-11-1883.
\textsuperscript{158} ‘Latest Telegrams. Return of the Kimberley Exploration Party’. \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 28-3-1885.
would have made Victoria River Aborigines very wary of the settlers, and more inclined to warfare than a warm welcome.
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 cattlwomen, 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

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, owner of a pastoral empire in Queensland, who stocked Auvergne station. Bluey Buchanan, who first took up Wave Hill, was of much more

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Flinders, *45 years in the great nor-west of Western Australia*, unpublished typescript, 1933. A copy of this document is located at the NARU Library in Darwin. It is divided into different sections, most of which are called chapters, and each of which begins as page 1. The information about Waterloo is on page 2 of a section headed 'Why Give Our North Away?' While the broad outlines of what Flinders says are accurate, many of the details he provides are unreliable.

There are several different claims about when Inverway was taken up and when it was stocked (L. Biltris, 'The Passing of the Pioneers', *Walkabout*, May 1951, 44; M. Hilgendorf, *Northern Territory Days*, Northern Territory Historical Society, Darwin, 1995, p. 35; R. Reynolds, ‘Recalling the Past. The Brothers Farquharson’, *The Pastoral Review*, 194-1965). However, the facts appear to be that the station was taken up in the late 1890s or 1900, and was stocked in late 1901 or early 1902 (‘Notes of Annual Inspecting Journey of Overland Telegraph Line, from Port Darwin to Attack Creek’, J.A.G. Little, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 30-8-1901; Timber Creek police journal, 16-10-1901, Northern Territory Archives, F302. ‘Notes from the Victoria River’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 29-8-1885.

Summary of Northern Territory Lands Department records on Willeroo, Delamere and related leases, provided by Vern O’Brien, January 2004.

An article in *Hoofs &Horns* magazine for August 1959 (p. 46) announced the ballot for the Bullo River block and said it was 'an old Grazing Licence formerly held by Connor, Doherty and Durack'. According to Flo Martin, Legune was first gazetted in about 1905 and initially the land was held under grazing licenses (F. Martin, *Three Families Outback in Australia’s Tropic North*, Privately published, Geralton, 1980, p. 29). Records in the Northern Territory Archives (F199, PP 114, 1914) indicate that an area of 706 square miles was taken up under Pastoral Permit on April 21st 1903 by I.S. Emanuel, Sydney Kidman and Alexander Reith Troup.


limited means, but he was able to form a partnership with his brother William, a successful New South Wales pastoralist. 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.

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. These were obtained from Norley, Wilmot, Currawilinghi, Richmond Downs, Dalgonaally and Dougall River stations, 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. 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.

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.

20 Leone Biltris, ‘The Passing of the Pioneers’, Walkabout May 1st, 1951, p. 44.
21 B. Buchanan, In the Tracks of Old Bluey, 1997, p. 69.
23 B. Buchanan, In the Tracks of Old Bluey, 1997, p. 86.
24 ‘Mr. Robert Cowley Cooper’ (obituary), The Pastoral Revfr:w, 15-4-1914, p. 332; Letter from Tom Pearce to Billy Linklater, 27-5-1950. Mitchell Library, mss 955 8-195B.
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, 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. Later drovers benefited from the knowledge of those who preceded them. Bob Button, a drover employed by Bluey Buchanan to take the first

27 Goldsborough 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

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\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. Goldsbrough 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.
\end{flushright}
probably not crossed on horseback since, and still regarded by whites as a fierce and
dangerous place, rarely visited.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.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.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.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 1889.40 In 1889 the
Government Resident reported that VRD had between 13,000 and 14,000 cattle on the
station.41 Extensions of time to stock could be applied for but the reality is that compliance
with the law was rarely if ever investigated.42 Once the first herd or two reached a station

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.
37 G. Buchanan, Packhorse and Waterhole, 1933, pp. 164-65.
38 For example, see the Timber Creek police journal, entries for 8-7-1894, 29-11-1895.
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).
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.
41 H.W.H. Stevens, cited in Government Resident J.L. Parson’s ‘Report on the Northern Territory for Year
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 1/8 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.\(^{48}\) However, they were soon moved back onto a boat to prevent theft by Aborigines.\(^{49}\) In September a homestead was established on Angalarri Creek at a place known to local Aborigines as Kumallalay, and dubbed ‘Youngsford’ by the settlers.\(^{50}\) 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).\(^{51}\)

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’\(^{52}\)...There was plenty of ventilation. When the wind blew it whistled through the cracks in fine style.\(^{53}\) 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.’\(^{54}\) 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 Muster, 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. 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!’ 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).

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.’ 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.\(^1\) 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.\(^2\) Whether black or white, these stockmen had to be paid, and wages in this remote and dangerous area were high.\(^3\) 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

\(^{71}\) 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 1\(^{st}\), 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.
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.\textsuperscript{91} 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.\textsuperscript{92}

The particular species Buchanan saw cannot be identified with certainty,\textsuperscript{93} 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’,\textsuperscript{94} 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’.\textsuperscript{95} Extensive field surveys have failed to locate either of these plants in the region where they once grew.\textsuperscript{96}

Early accounts make it clear that wildlife was abundant,\textsuperscript{97} 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,\textsuperscript{98} but Aboriginal memory and Dreamings show that this was not always so for all

\textsuperscript{91} B. Blair to Goldsborough Mort & Co., 24-10-1889. Goldsborough Mort & Co: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co, 1886-1892, Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.
\textsuperscript{93} It was probably \textit{A. Cucummis}, a species whose favoured habitat is black soil country.
\textsuperscript{94} Tentatively identified as \textit{Typhonium lilifolium}.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{97} For example, see J.L. Stokes. \textit{Discoveries in Australia...During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle in the years 1837-43}. Facsimile edition, State Library of South Australia, 1969 vol. 2, pp. 53, 61, 62. (originally published by T & W Boone, London, 1846).
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, 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.

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. By 1905 it had increased to 56,000, by 1912 to between 110,000 and 120,000, and by 1921 estimates ranged from 119,000 to 170,000. It is clear that by this time the station had
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, 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.’

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.

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.

106 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 21-1-1915.
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 swirled 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.’ 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.

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.

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'.\textsuperscript{116} 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,\textsuperscript{117} 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.\textsuperscript{118} 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.\textsuperscript{119} 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.’\textsuperscript{120} These were being sent by Vestes for tanning to see if donkey leather was commercially viable, but it proved to be of poor quality.\textsuperscript{121} 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.\textsuperscript{122} For most of the period of European settlement

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} ‘Report by the Northern Territory Pastoral Leases Investigation Committee’, Australian Archives, Darwin, CRS F658, item 12 (Bradshaw).
\item \textsuperscript{118} The first mention a donkey team in the Victoria River district comes from the Timber Creek police journal of 8-1-1917.
\item \textsuperscript{119} B. Walsh, \textit{Feral Animals}, \textit{Northern Grassy Landscapes Conference 29-31 August 2000 Katherine NT: Conference Proceedings}, Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2000, pp. 73-76.
\item \textsuperscript{120} \textit{Wave Hill police journal}, 11-11-1946. Northern Territory Archives, F292.
\item \textsuperscript{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).
\end{itemize}
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 [1880s–early 1890s]. Also that out there the frontage country is really the least able to stand stocking closely.\(^\text{127}\)

By 1945 there was scientific recognition of the shortcomings of the open range system,\(^\text{128}\) yet little was done to change it until the 1990s.\(^\text{129}\)

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


\(^{128}\) 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).


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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 Creagh 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,\textsuperscript{11} 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.'\textsuperscript{12} 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.\textsuperscript{13} 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.

\textsuperscript{11} According to the \textit{South Australian Chronicle} (13-9-1873), when the overland telegraph line was being built Aborigines in the vicinity in the vicinity soon possessed 'many tomahawks belonging to the Overland Telegraph'.

\textsuperscript{12} H. Reynolds, \textit{The Other Side of the Frontier}, 1981, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Adelaide Advertiser}, 28-11-1893.
The overland telegraph line was constructed in 1870–72, with teams of men and supply wagons moving up and down the line east of the Victoria River.14 Some of the men building the telegraph line discovered gold in the Pine Creek area which led to a gold rush there, and mineral discoveries in other parts of the Top End quickly followed. From 1872 onwards there was an influx into the ‘Top End’ of hundreds of whites and thousands of Chinese, and a great many small mines were established.15 There was a small but constant traffic of Europeans up and down the line and by 1879 cattle stations had been established on the Adelaide River (Glencoe)16 and at Katherine (Springvale).17 There were occasional conflicts along the line, including several attacks on Europeans in the Newcastle Waters area in 1872,18 the killing of Henning at the Howley in 1873,19 and the killing early in 1878 of a teamster named Ellis on the headwaters of the Douglas River, north-west of Pine Creek.20 In the latter case a party of police and volunteers caught up with the alleged offenders near the Daly River and seventeen were shot.21 It is extremely likely that news of this massacre, and probably news of the other conflicts, would have reached the Victoria River tribes.

The other circumstance which may explain the change from friendliness to hostility is the direct experience Aborigines had of Europeans, gained by travelling out of the Victoria River country into areas where Europeans were already established, and observing and interacting with them. After completion of the line Europeans were permanently based in

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17 P. Forrest, Springvale’s Story and Early Years at the Katherine, Murranji Press, Darwin, 1985.
20 The location was ‘Granite Crossing’ and the precise location was provided by the Office of the Placenames Committee in Darwin.
21 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 2-2-1878; Telegram from Government Resident Edward Price to the Minister of Education, 26-1-1878. State Records of South Australia, Northern Territory “Department” Incoming Correspondence (Outgoing Correspondence), 87/1878.
repeater stations at regular intervals, including at Katherine River, Elsey Creek, Daly Waters and Powells Creek.\textsuperscript{22} and Aborigines living on the eastern side of the Victoria River valley were only a 'spears' throw' away. In fact, the territories of two tribes – the Mudburra and the Wardaman – extend from within the Victoria River catchment to within fifty kilometres of the telegraph line.\textsuperscript{23}

Wardaman and Mudburra Aborigines, and probably people from other eastern and north-eastern Victoria River groups, almost certainly had travelled to the line and seen the white men for themselves. Aborigines living further west may not have actually been to the line, but would have heard the stories of those who had. There can be little doubt that the experience small groups of Aborigines had with Europeans – either in the Victoria River district, the East Kimberley, or in the settled areas along the telegraph line – was rapidly communicated to their neighbours and beyond.

While there is virtually no direct evidence in the historical record, it is inconceivable that European material goods did not precede actual European settlement in the region, or that the Aborigines did not know about the white man’s guns and other goods, their livestock, and (from an Aboriginal point of view) their unpredictability and lawlessness. The settlers undoubtedly arrived with pre-conceived ideas about Aborigines and expected that they would become a ‘problem’. The Aborigines probably held a similar general view about the whites, but at a more specific level they probably knew more about the settlers than the settlers knew about them, and much of what they had learnt apparently did not inspire them to welcome the newcomers.

Shortly after the settlers arrived there were almost certainly violent clashes that we know nothing about, clashes which undoubtedly gave the Aborigines first-hand experience of the power of the gun. Threatening behaviour and possibly conflict with Aborigines is implied

\textsuperscript{22} J. Nesdale (ed.), \textit{The Shackle}, 1975.
in a letter Lindsay Crawford sent to the Government Resident about a year after VRD was established. In this letter Crawford commented that, 'Natives are numerous on Victoria and Ord, and are very treacherous; a very fine race, and very independent.'

Previous conflict is also implicit in the reaction of Aborigines met by the starving landseekers, Harry Stockdale and Henry Ricketson as they travelled across Victoria River Downs in December 1884 (see Chapter 2). By chance, the two men rode along Gordon Creek which runs through 'Bilimatjaru', a great 'sandstone sea' and an area which was to become a major refuge area for Aborigines for many years (see plates 62, 63). Ricketson observed that 'the blacks are in large tribes about here,' and that they 'seemed very frightened of us.' Twice the two men tried to parley with groups they met, but 'in both cases they were so frightened of us that they ran clean out of sight...[and]...were tumbling over each other in their haste to get away.' This was less than fifteen months after VRD and Wave Hill were formed.

Initially, at least, Aborigines probably did not realise that the settlers had come to stay, and would gradually take over all their country – they knew the whites had 'camps' at one or two places, but the rest of the country was theirs to use as of old. They probably came into contact and conflict with the settlers by accident in the course of their traditional hunting and gathering activities, or while travelling to and from or attending ceremonial gatherings. They soon learnt that such contact could be extremely dangerous and that they had to be able to get into rough country to escape armed horsemen. Most groups had areas of rough country within their territory to which they could flee; those few who did not were at a great disadvantage and highly vulnerable. An extreme case was the Karangpurr who

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25 James Henry 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, p. 263.
26 Ibid.
28 The key role topography played in the period of conflict following settlement was noted in the nineteenth century by Curr, cited in H. Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier, 1981, p. 50.
inhabited the plains and rolling downs in the north-eastern part of VRD\textsuperscript{29} (see maps 3, 4). The early overland track from Katherine to Western Australia passed through the middle of their country. The fight Tom Kilfoyle and his men are said to have had with Aborigines on Battle Creek was in Karangpurru country, and during 1886 the track was used by hundreds of miners heading for the Kimberley goldfield.

Many of the overlanding miners were of very bad character – ‘the scum of the back blocks’ – and extremely brutal towards Aborigines.\textsuperscript{30} Justice Charles Dashwood, the Government Resident between 1892 and 1905,\textsuperscript{31} spoke to a number of the early Northern Territory pioneers, including Jack Watson (see Chapter 5) and the famous buffalo hunter, Paddy Cahill.\textsuperscript{32} The stories they told Dashwood about events along the overland track to the Kimberley led him to claim that the Aborigines along the route had been ‘shot like crows’.\textsuperscript{33} The first policeman in the Victoria River district recorded the names and locations of the various tribes whose country lay within or extended onto VRD,\textsuperscript{34} and the locations he gave for them conform in broad terms with the boundaries recognised by local Aborigines today,\textsuperscript{35} but he did not mention the Karangpurru and he never had cause to patrol in their country. It appears that by the time he arrived in May 1894 this language group had already been decimated.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{29} D. Rose and D. Lewis, Kidman Springs-Jasper Gorge Land Claim, Northern Land Council, Darwin, 1986, Figures 7-12, and associated land claim sites map.
\textsuperscript{31} P. Elder, entry on Charles Dashwood in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, vol. 1, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1990, pp. 75-78.
\textsuperscript{33} ‘Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines Bill, 1899: Minutes of Evidence and Appendices’, South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 2, no. 77, 1899, C. Dashwood’s answer to question 516.
Whatever may have happened during the first few years of settlement, by 1889 the ‘wild blacks’ were ‘in large numbers among the ranges in the Sandstone Country’.\footnote{B. Blair to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 24-10-1889. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.} There are many patches of rough terrain scattered across the region, some large and some small, but among the greatest are the Yambarran Range, the Pinkerton (Ballyangle) Range, the Pumuntu sandstone on the headwaters of the West Baines River, the Stokes Range north of VRD and west of Delamere station, and the Gordon Creek sandstone. The latter area, located in the central-west part of Victoria River Downs, was described in 1895 as consisting of,

enormous columns of sandstone cleft and piled one on the other, gullies, Gorges, tunnels, and caves, comprise hundreds of square miles of sandstone country where it would be impossible for even 20 Trackers to get a passing glimpse of blacks running about in it.\footnote{Timber Creek police journal, 17-4-1895. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.}

One observer noted that the blacks came out of the ranges to ‘kill down on the good flats & take the meat into the sandstone ranges to cook it’,\footnote{Ibid: 15-8-1894.} while another complained that the blacks were ‘most troublesome, particularly in setting fire to the grass, which in the months from June to October burns both night & day.’\footnote{B. Blair to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 24-10-1889, Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.} Walter Rees, a stockman on VRD from 1887 to about 1897,\footnote{Rees was interviewed in 1950 by Helen West (nee Healy). Helen wrote various details in a notebook and she gave me this notebook in the 1990s; W.A. Rees to A. Martin, 12-7-1945. This is a letter in which Rees provides details of his time on VRD. It is unprovenanced; I was given a copy of the document by an amateur historian about twenty years ago.} could see that the Aborigines were ‘losing more of their game-producing country as the settlers stock the land, and have to be content with the roughest of the country, where they obtain but a poor living.’\footnote{W. Rees, cited in W.H. Willshire, \textit{Land of the Dawning}, 1896, p. 99.} The Aborigines were anything but content, and the blocks and patches of ‘roughest country’ became natural fortresses from

which they planned and executed attacks against the settlers. They speared livestock, stole the white man's goods and attacked them whenever they could.

The stealing of European goods by Aborigines began almost as soon as Europeans arrived in the district. Gregory's expedition suffered occasional thefts or attempted thefts, in one instance almost leading to serious violence (see Chapter 2). The arrival of the settlers greatly increased the amount and variety of European goods, and the opportunities for Aborigines to steal them, and they quickly came to appreciate tobacco, iron axes, wire, billycans, cloth, sugar, flour, tea and other items. In the Aboriginal camps on Gordon Creek in 1884, Ricketson and Stockdale noted billycans made from discarded food tins. A decade later the Government Geologist passed through the district and remarked that,

Since the Kimberley rush the iron age has begun amongst them, portions of the springs of drays and other iron or steel fragments, manufactured into tomahawks, &c., replacing diorite and other stone weapons and implements. The tips of spears also are often made of telegraph or fencing wire in place of flint and quartzite, and glass is frequently used by them for the same purpose.44

Theft of goods was a major problem for the settlers for many years and in some instances led to violent encounters or other severe consequences. The first Aboriginal man shot at Wave Hill was one of a group that had raided the homestead camp and stolen a bucket.45 The Aborigines had a habit of cutting wire from fences to use as prongs on spears, and this led some station owners to leave small coils of wire for them here and there along the fence lines. However, the Aborigines ignored these and continued to cut wire from the fences themselves.46 This was seen by some as proof of Aboriginal stupidity but is more likely to be evidence of them deliberately antagonising the whites, or a form of economic warfare.47

43 An early example of this problem was highlighted in the South Australian Chronicle which reported on September 13th, 1873, that Aborigines 'possess many tomahawks belonging to the Overland Telegraph'.
45 G. Buchanan, Packhorse and Waterhole: With the First Overlanders to the Kimberleys, Angus & Robertson Limited, Sydney, 1933, pp. 71-72, 164-65.
46 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 6-12-1895.
After the initial resistance to the settlers when they first appeared in the region, there was a relatively peaceful interlude of several years, a pattern that has been noted elsewhere in the north. However, in 1886 there was a dramatic upsurge in attacks against the settlers. In April 1886 William Jackson, a bullock driver employed to carry stores from the Victoria River Depot to VRD, was struck in the neck with a stone-headed spear. The spear went ‘right through the base of the tongue and out at the other side’, and nearly severed his windpipe, but amazingly he survived the wound. This attack occurred east of Jasper Gorge, and led to the naming of a watercourse in the area as Surprise Creek.

At the end of May a white station hand and his Aboriginal assistant were speared and wounded on Willeroo (see Chapter 7), and in June there were several attacks on a team building a road through Jasper Gorge (see Chapter 5). Early in August a man known as ‘Spanish Charley’ (Charles Antonio) was attacked on the Victoria River near the Depot. Charley was employed as a caretaker for goods unloaded at the Depot, and had been on friendly terms with local Aborigines. On this occasion he rowed his dinghy across the river to speak with some Aborigines, but before he could land a number of spears were thrown at him. Fortunately for him he was unhurt, though one spear hit his boat.

In September Matt Cahill, a brother of Paddy Cahill, and a Melbourne man named Fred Williams were travelling to the Kimberley goldfield with Fox’s teams. They camped on the upper reaches of Gregory Creek and while fishing in a nearby waterhole were surprised by the blacks. Cahill was wounded in the back but Williams was speared through the neck and died instantly, and became the first white man killed on the Victoria River frontier. A

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50 *The North Australian*, 9-7-1886.
51 W.A. Rees to A. Martin, 12-7-1945.
52 *The North Australian*, 4-6-1886.
54 *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-7-1886.
57 Ibid: 2-10-1886.

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few months later ‘Big Johnny’ Durack was murdered on Rosewood station and when a
party led by the police went out to bury the body they found that it had been ‘jobbed full of
spear holes, quite 80 or 90 holes having been made’, a circumstance which suggests
extreme fear and/or hatred on the part of the Aborigines.

The events of 1886 beg the question: After nearly three years with virtually no reported
attacks, and certainly no severe woundings or killings of whites, why were there were so
many attacks across the region in 1886? Was it merely coincidence, or was it part of a
deliberate and coordinated campaign against the whites? While this is impossible to answer
with certainty, as explained above, Aboriginal groups across the region were not isolated
from each other. News travelled from group to group very quickly and there were regular
ceremonial gatherings when various issues could be discussed. The appearance of the
cattlemen and overlanders, and their behaviour towards the Aborigines, undoubtedly would
have been the foremost topic at such gatherings. Rather than being mere coincidence it is
likely that a collective decision had been made to try and drive the whites away, that the
Aborigines were not merely reactive, but took the fight to the whites in an organised way.
Examples of such collective decisions are known from other frontier areas, with Reynolds
citing an example from Queensland where a gathering of over a dozen tribes discussed the
poisoning of fifty or so Aborigines, became very angry, and swore to have vengeance.

The attacks and killings in the Victoria River country and elsewhere in 1886 prompted
Government Resident J.L. Parsons to address the issue in his annual report on the Northern
Territory:

In the northern part of the Northern Territory we may be said to be upon the racial
frontier, and the question as to which race is to predominate is one full of interest...
The river natives particularly are warriors, tall, stalwart, cunning, and with a rooted
hatred of the white man. Fear, indeed, is the only protection of the white man's life.
The lives of stockmen, boundary riders, and travelling overlanders would not be
worth much, and station stores would not be safe from pillage, if the natives were not

58 ‘Murder of John Durack by natives at Kimberley’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 11-12-1886.
The settlers did their best to ‘convince’ the Aborigines. After the spearing of teamster Jackson it was reported that the offenders, ‘were followed up with the aid of some blacks from Palmerston, and severely punished’, and following the murder of ‘Big Johnny’ Durack the Wyndham police and ‘a party of sixteen men (some volunteers) had started out for the purpose of settling accounts with the natives.’62 I have not found any official or other contemporary account of this punitive expedition, but according to a later source the name of Waterloo station derives from what local bushmen called ‘the Aborigine’s Waterloo’, a reference to the ‘unrestrained slaughter’ of local Aborigines after this spearing.63

After 1886 things seem to have quietened down for a few years. Several different tribes had probably been ‘hammered’ by punitive expeditions and others are likely to have suffered to some degree at the hands of the miners heading for the Kimberley. If, as seems likely, there were fights where considerable numbers of Aborigines were shot, this would have been something completely outside their experience, and against their ideas of what was justifiable in warfare. Evidence from elsewhere indicates that Aborigines expected an eye for an eye, but when Europeans retaliated with massive killings they were shocked and had to readjust their thinking on such matters.64 There may have been a lessening or pause in the Aborigines’ resistance while they came to terms with what had happened, and considered what to do.

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63 J. Pollard, J. The Horse Tamer: The Story of Lance Skuthorpe, Pollard Publishing Company, Woolstoncraft (NSW), 1970, p. 30. Lance Skuthorpe’s uncle Amos was owner of Waterloo from roughly 1908 to 1916, and was in the Victoria River district for some time earlier. The same event is referred to in two other sources, one of which claims that a fight occurred between the white party and about 100 Aborigines (M. Terry, Notebook 14. ‘No. 1, Port Hedland-Melbourne, 1928’, C62, Tuesday October 30th 1928, S.A. Museum Archives; D. Moore, Memoirs, Battye Library, Ace 3829A MN 1237).
There were no reports of attacks or murders by Aborigines during the next two years, though in 1887 the Goldsbrough Mort agent in Darwin, H.W.H. Stevens, reported that, 'The Blacks have been very troublesome both on the River & the Depot road. They are a bad lot and require constant watching on all parts of the run'. However, the killing of whites began again in 1889. Tom Hardy, the overseer on Auvergne, was one settler who tried to make friends with the Aborigines. Nevertheless, near the homestead in September he was speared in the right breast. He barricaded himself in the hut and held off the blacks by shooting through cracks in the walls. Three days later the station musterers returned and broke the siege, and although Hardy believed he would survive his wounds and begged for a boat to be sent to take him to Darwin, his mates considered it hopeless. No boat came and Hardy died ten days after being speared (see plate 64). In 1890 a traveller named William Manton was killed on the West Baines River, and an Aboriginal named Bob, 'The best & most valuable native we ever had on the runs', was speared only ten miles from VRD homestead. According to the *Northern Territory Times*,

The recent murder of Mr. Crawford's blackboy Bob was most cruelly perpetrated. He, in company with two other station natives, were out after horses, and when going through a ravine, with Bob in the lead, a spear was thrown from above which entered behind the shoulder and went through his body, the point coming out in front below the abdomen. Bob pluckily pulled the spear out and walked back to the other boys, and shortly afterwards died.

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66 'Outrage by Blacks at the Victoria River', *The North Australian*, 5-10-1889; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-11-1889; H.W.H. Stevens to Government Resident J.L. Parsons, 1-10-1889. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 1077.


69 'Murder of a Blackfellow', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-3-1891.

70 Ibid: 3-4-1891. 'Bob' was probably a 'blackboy' listed on a paysheet for May 1891 as 'Bob Herbert' (Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archive, Australian National University, 2/876/22). Because it was common for Aborigines to be given the name of the station or district where they came from, Bob may have come from the Herbert River district in Queensland.
Once again there were attempts to retaliate. Two troopers were sent from Darwin to try and arrest the Aborigines who speared Hardy, but the offenders had retreated into the mountain wall of the Pinkerton Range and could not be followed up.\(^{71}\) Mounted Constables Brooks and Holdaway searched for Manton's killers, but apparently were unsuccessful,\(^{72}\) and the Aborigines who speared Bob were followed 'some 60 miles into some large gorges', but escaped.\(^{73}\) The *Northern Territory Times* was of the opinion that, 'It is becoming more evident every day that the blacks of the Victoria River require a very severe lesson to keep them in check', and seemed to be advocating retaliation by the settlers by adding that, 'the isolated situation of the locality is dead against any salutary work being done under police superintendence.'\(^{74}\)

Throughout the district the danger of attack by Aborigines was such that it required unusual precautions to be taken. At Willeroo a two and a half metre high roofless 'fort' was constructed from basalt rocks 'as a harbour of refuge from the attacks of natives (plate 65).\(^{75}\) Several other early homesteads had walls constructed partly or completely of stone (plates 66, 67)\(^{76}\) and one was later described as 'a little fortress of stone and ant-bed' (plate 68).\(^{77}\) VRD homestead did not have stone walls but instead relied upon guns and a unique 'early warning system'. When Ricketson and Stockdale emerged from the Gordon Creek sandstone they continued following Gordon Creek and came upon VRD homestead, which

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\(^{71}\) Inspector P. Foelsche to Government Resident J. Parsons, 3-10-1889. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia), Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 1085; ‘The Victoria River Outrage’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-11-1889.

\(^{72}\) ‘The Victoria River Outrage’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-11-1889.


\(^{74}\) ‘The Victoria River Outrage’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-3-1891.

\(^{75}\) ‘Government Resident’s trip to the Victoria River’ (Diary of Charles Dashwood, entry for 14-12-1895). Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6891.


\(^{77}\) E. Hill, *The Territory*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 399.
not 78 a

scene:

As we neared the place, two chinamen and a lot of blacks came out to look at us...and a perfect army of dogs announced our arrival... The blacks employed on the station carry revolvers the same as the whites. They have a large number of dogs who remain quite passive during the heat of the day, but as soon as the nightfall sets in they are as active as Kittens, and bark, howl and fight all night long.79

At Ord River it seems even the toilet was built with the possibility of Aboriginal attack in mind. It was set on a small rise and surrounded by four foot high corrugated iron walls with an unobstructed 360° view. A woman visiting the station in the 1930s remarked that it had been ‘built to the specifications of the pioneer manager. At the time there was conflict between the blacks and the whites and he obviously didn’t want to be speared with his trousers down’.80

In 1905 Alfred Searcy, formerly a Customs Officer based in Darwin and later author of several books on the Territory,81 recalled how when VRD was first taken up all the staff were armed and ‘no man was allowed to go out alone... At least two men had to be in company, and the amount of money spent in ammunition was pretty considerable.’82 And of course, if there was a possibility of attack during the night travellers sometimes resorted to setting up their mosquito nets and sneaking away after dark to sleep in a patch of scrub or in long grass.83 By this subterfuge the net might be speared but the traveller would be safe.

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78 Ricketson’s account, early maps and other records show that the first homestead was located on Gordon Creek, but within a few years a new homestead had been established on Stockyard Creek. The original homestead then became an outstation and was probably later dismantled and shifted. In 1890 the Stockyard Creek homestead was superseded by a new homestead on the Wickham River where the current homestead is located today. Stockyard Creek then became an outstation but was soon abandoned.

79 H. Ricketson, pp. 270-75, Mitchell Library, Mss 1783, Item 2, CYY Reel 2229, map, p. 320.


82 ‘A Treacherous Tribe. Interview with Mr. Searcy’, The Register [Adelaide], 18-12-1905.

83 For example, see M. Mallison, 'Adventures on the Murranji Track: Droving and Spear-throwing'. Based on an interview with Billy Linklater (alias Billy Miller). Sydney Morning Herald, 27-6-1942.
For some whites, having to deal with hostile Aborigines placed a great strain on their nerves. In 1890 or 1891 Auvergne station was being managed by Barney Flynn. When M.P. Durack visited the station Flynn confided in him ‘a number of extraordinary hallucinations’, among which was that every night the homestead was surrounded by wild blacks and that he was doomed to die by a spear. Durack described how, ‘About midnight, when all were asleep, he [Flynn] leaped from his bunk and yelling like a maniac ran into the yard where he discharged the contents of his revolver. A most nerve wracking experience.’ Flynn eventually left Auvergne because of his nerves and the bad reputation of the place as regards attacks by blacks. He went buffalo shooting on Melville Island with Joe Cooper, and in spite of the fact that several times he was nearly speared there, he apparently found the Melville Island Aborigines tame by comparison with the Auvergne blacks. Eventually he succumbed to snakebite.

Another who suffered psychological problems was Hugh Young, a stockman and sometime manager on Bradshaw station for a decade after it was founded. According to old Territory identity Tom Pearce, Young was involved in the massacre and burning of Aborigines on Bradshaw. As the bodies were burning the heat caused one to contract and ‘sit up’ in the flames, and Young was so unnerved that he took to drink and was never the same again.

It is clear that by the beginning of the 1890s the Aborigines had a well developed strategy for dealing with the whites and were wreaking havoc on cattle and horses. In 1891 the Northern Territory Times reported that on Wave Hill station the Aborigines were killing an

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84 M. Durack, Kings in Grass Castles, 1986, p. 333; Flynn’s Christian name appears to have been James, but he was also known as Barney (W. Linklater and L. Tapp, Gather No Moss, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1997, p. 50 (first published by the Macmillan Company, 1968).
86 Ibid.
87 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 7-6-1895; ‘Spearing of J. Cooper on Melville Island’, 28-6-1895; ‘As Other See Us’, 20-1-1899; ‘In the Northern Territory Buffalo Country’, 24-2-1899; See also A. Briggs, entry on Joe Cooper in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, vol. 1, 1990, pp. 61-62.
89 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entries for January 1894 and 5-7-1900, (and throughout). Northern Territory Archives, Darwin, NTRS 2261.

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average of a beast a day for ‘tucker’, and in the previous year or so had slaughtered some valuable mares and ‘a high-priced stallion which it would be extremely difficult to replace.’

91 The Times went on to say that,

The boldness of the [Wave Hill] blacks is extraordinary, and their plans are so well matured that, although the station hands keep careful watch, they find it impossible to surprise the marauders, who, if pressed closely, make into the limestone country, where horses cannot travel.92

A similar situation existed on other stations in the region. By 1892 on VRD hostilities were reaching a crisis point, and there were fears that the constant Aboriginal attacks and harassment could make the station unworkable (indeed, within a few years Willeroo station was abandoned for precisely this reason; see Chapter 7). Lindsay Crawford described the situation on VRD in a letter to H.W.H. Stevens:

As the niggers are fast becoming mixed with half civilized ones from the inside districts, they are more & more cunning & treacherous, & will go on getting worse until it will be impossible to travel on the runs. At the present time no man’s life is safe. I have now 4 extra men on, on this account, I cannot even allow the Teamster to take rations about without sending men with him. I have also had to build a hut at the site of the old Gordon Creek Station & am putting two of these men there, to try to stop the wholesale slaughter of our Cattle. They are Killing a great number, and two or three days ago after our chasing them, they came on to the 5 mile plain & Killed a Cow on the main road. In fact the blacks are too many for us. They have lookouts posted on the hill tops & Keep up a system of signalizing from one to the other, & if we try to get near them they are off into the Sandstone.93

These examples mirror the situation that often developed on the frontier in other parts of Australia. Reynolds quotes a Tasmanian settler who remarked in 1831 that the Aborigines there, ‘now conduct their attacks with a surprising organisation, and with unexampled cunning, such indeed is their local information and quickness of perception, that all endeavours on the part of the whites to cope with them are unavailing.’94

91 ‘Victoria River Blacks’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 3-4-1891.
92 Ibid.
93 H.W.H. Stevens to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, citing letter from Lindsay Crawford, 30-12-1892. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5151.
Requests for police protection in the Victoria River district and elsewhere began in the immediate aftermath of the Daly River ‘Coppermine massacre’ of September 1884 in which four European miners were killed by Aborigines. Representations were made to the South Australian Government for a detachment of native police on a similar footing to the Queensland police to be stationed on the Macarthur River, at the head of the Roper River at Elsey Creek, and on the Victoria River. As a result, a force of six native police was recruited in northern South Australia and Central Australia, and stationed first at Pine Creek (February 1885), then at Elsey and lastly on the Roper River. The troupe was disbanded in 1886 and two of the trackers were sent to the newly established Borroloola police station, but no police were sent to the Victoria River and the Government Resident commented that ‘no number of trackers or of police that could be organised can prevent outrages over the immense area of country which is now being stocked.’

The men who made the 1884 request were not based in or strongly connected with the Victoria River district. In contrast, many of those who were so connected were wary of a police presence being established at all. For instance, after a series of attacks on VRD stockmen in 1891, H.W.H. Stevens wrote to the owners of VRD suggesting the formation of a Queensland-style native police, but only if certain conditions were met:

The only possible means of getting rid of them would be by inaugurating a party of Black Trackers under the management of the Police...The Government here have offered to station a Police Trooper on the run, but by himself, he would be a constant source of annoyance & of no use in any way, as the mere fact of his being there, would interfere with the present System of dealing with the blacks, which is the only

95 ‘The Daly River Murders’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 13-9-1884.
96 ‘Native Outrages’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 13-9-1884.
97 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 10-1-1885.
98 ‘News and Notes’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 17-1-1885.
99 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 18-4-1885.
System of being able to protect the property entrusted to the Charge of the Station hands.102

The 'system' of 'dealing with the blacks' certainly included ensuring that all station hands were armed and never went out alone, as Searcy noted. It probably also involved the Aborigines being fired upon whenever they were seen and occasional surprise attacks on them. An Aboriginal tradition from VRD tells of a large group of men at a ceremonial gathering who were surrounded and attacked at night, with many being shot.103 A boab tree on the East Baines River provides the only known documentation for an apparent massacre in that area. Carved on the tree are names and dates from the 1890s, and the words 'Retribution Camp'.

In the short term nothing came of Steven's idea,105 but pressure was building. In March 1892 the Northern Territory Times returned to the theme of police protection for the Victoria River country:

In the Victoria River district – a district famous for troublesome blacks...there has never been a police camp, the nearest station being the Katherine, several hundred miles away, where one trooper is stationed. In the event of an outrage the consequence is inevitable. We complain that the settlers in isolated parts take the law into their own hands to avenge murders committed by natives. Yet by our very callousness in refusing them the protection they require we support them in their summary method of "getting equal." When the state declines to defend you, the only resource left is to defend yourself.106

103 Personal communication, Big Mick Kangkinang. A similar event is said to have happened on Auvergne station (personal communication, Bobby Wititpuru). See D. Rose, Hidden Histories, 1991, pp. 95-96.
104 The inscription on the 'Retribution Camp' boab, located on Retribution Creek, Auvergne station (see Appendix A).
105 'Murder of a Blackfellow', Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 6-3-1891.
106 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 15-10-1892.
When Syd Scott, the manager of Willeroo, was killed by Aborigines in October 1892 (see Chapter 7) the *Northern Territory Times* again addressed the problem and voiced the 'general opinion' of the settlers that, 'authority should be given to volunteers to follow the murderers for the purpose of bringing them to justice.'  It was probably the spearing of Scott that prompted H.W.H. Stevens to write to Goldsborough Mort again about the need for a police presence, but with a warning that it would require, 'very stringent measures to be taken to do any good at all.'  He pointed out that as the situation stood, 'the settler is worse than helpless, as he is entirely without any Kind of protection from the Government & is hardly allowed the Exercise of his discretion even when his own life is in daily jeopardy.' Stevens suggested that an arrangement be sought,

to place not less than two good Mounted Troopers and six Black Trackers on the Victoria River country for a period of say six months, during which there would be ample time to get hold of some of the worst characters amongst the Blacks, some of whom are Known to the station hands.

Still nothing eventuated. In 1893 the Prices Creek homestead and yards were burnt by Aborigines, and reports came in that on 'Buchanan Downs' (Wave Hill) and Argyle the 'natives have been killing cattle with a vengeance. On one occasion lately some natives were surprised roasting a bullock, and it was seen that each one of them was proprietor of a cow’s tail, which was being used to keep the mosquitoes on the wing.' This report went on to say that, 'The blacks are fast creating a reign of terror out west, and nothing but a firm hand and plenty of it will do the slightest good.'  On the western side of the district Constable Collins, a Western Australian trooper, was speared during a raid on an Aboriginal camp on the eastern side of Rosewood in September 1893. As soon as Collins

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107 Ibid: 11-3-1892.
108 H.W.H. Stevens to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 30-12-1892: Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5151.
109 Ibid.
111 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 3-2-1893.
was hit the men with him opened fire on the Aborigines and shot twenty-three dead before the battle was over.\footnote{112 Constable A. Lucanus to Sub-Inspector Drewry, 7-10-1893. Wyndham Occurrence Book, ACC 741/1, Battye Library.} How many got away and died later or were maimed for life is unknown, and remarkably, the police were not satisfied with the number killed because there was a follow-up ‘punitive expedition’.\footnote{113 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 10-11-1893.}

The main objection the government had to establishing a police station on the Victoria was expense, but this obstacle was finally overcome in February 1894 when Goldsborough Mort offered to ‘find quarters, meat and paddocking free, Rations at cost price and to make a gift to the department of 15 suitable horses for the work’.\footnote{114 Government Resident’s [Charles Dashwood] notes of interview with H.W.H. Stevens, 26-2-1894. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6004.} This proposal was strongly supported by Inspector Paul Foelsche and as a result, in May 1894 Mounted Constable W.H. Willshire arrived on VRD and moved into a hut on Gordon Creek, sixty kilometres south of VRD homestead.\footnote{115 Timber Creek police journal, 14-5-1894. This hut was on the site of the homestead that Stockdale and Ricketson came to by chance at the beginning of 1885 (see Chapter 3). Within a few years of their visit the homestead was shifted to Stockyard Creek, and then shifted again to its present location in the Wickham River in 1889.}

I will discuss Constable Willshire in greater depth in Chapter 5 (Jasper Gorge). At this point it is sufficient to note that he is today the most notorious policeman in Northern Territory (and possibly Australian) history. He was based in Central Australia in the 1880s, a time of severe conflict there between the Aborigines and settlers, and in 1891 he was charged with the murder of a number of Aborigines. In spite of strong evidence against him he was found not guilty (plate 69). He did not return to Central Australia, but after several short-term postings elsewhere he was sent to another region where severe problems with Aborigines existed – the Victoria River district.\footnote{116 R. Kimber, entry on W.H. Willshire in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1990, vol. 1, pp. 317-320.}
Willshire was at Gordon Creek for only sixteen months and spent most of his time patrolling between the Victoria River Depot and Wave Hill, and especially in and around the sandstone country on Gordon Creek, the country of the Bilinara Aborigines. He did not patrol west of Wave Hill, VRD or Auvergne and consequently the western parts of the district remained effectively without a police presence. In his police journal entries Willshire rarely mentions firing a shot for any reason, and in most cases when he came across Aborigines in the bush he claims they were friendly, or that they saw him coming and fled. It would appear that after the traumatic experience of being tried for murder he was extraordinarily careful to avoid providing evidence that might lead to a similar experience in future. However, while he was on VRD he wrote a book in which he describes five violent encounters with groups of Aborigines. Willshire provides dates for some of these encounters and it is possible to compare them with his official journal entries.

For example, in his book he describes a patrol in June 1894 during which he came upon an Aboriginal camp on the upper Wickham River, and the next day another one on Black Gin Creek, at the southern end of VRD. According to Willshire the people in the first camp fled into tropical growth at his approach, but on Black Gin Creek the Aborigines were:

\begin{quote}
camped amongst rocks of enormous magnitude and long dry grass...they scattered in all directions, setting fire to the grass on each side of us, throwing occasional spears, and yelling at us. It’s no use mincing matters – the Martini-Henry carbines at this critical moment were talking English in the silent majesty of those great eternal rocks.\end{quote}

In the equivalent journal entry there is absolutely no hint of a fight occurring. Willshire states that when he found the camp on the upper Wickham the Aborigines, ‘soon cleared out when they espied us’, and after destroying a heap of spears he ‘went on day after day on the tracks of other cattle Killers on the sandstone ridges,’ but eventually returned to his station, apparently without making further contact.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[117] Timber Creek police journal, 18-7-1895.
  \item[118] Ibid: 26-6-1894, 3-12-1894, 17-4-1895.
  \item[120] Ibid: 40-41.
  \item[121] Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1894.
\end{itemize}
The question is, which version is correct? Was Willshire being honest in his journal and spinning yarns in his book, or vice versa? There are three points to consider. One is that when he arrived on VRD he found himself in a situation of great hostility between the Aborigines and the settlers, and his job required that he deliberately follow up and attempt to arrest Aborigines accused of wrongdoing. In such circumstances it would be difficult indeed to avoid violent conflict. The second is that Victoria River Aboriginal oral history speaks of the first policeman shooting people in the same general areas where fights with Aborigines are documented in Willshire's book.\textsuperscript{122} The third is that when Willshire was stationed at Gordon Creek there was a sizeable Aboriginal population in Bilinara country, but for decades after he left the Bilinara were numerically one of the weakest tribes in the entire Victoria River district.\textsuperscript{123} It thus seems likely that the journal was deliberately incomplete and that the book is a more reliable account of his actions. If the 'admissions' in his book caused questions to be raised he could always have declared that these parts were fiction. Indeed, he may even have written it with the idea in mind that it would upset the same people who had previously caused him to be taken to court.

In 1894 Lindsay Crawford claimed that during the first ten years of settlement on VRD there had been 'constant attacks and reprisals', and that there had been 'no communication with the natives at all, except with the rifle. They have never been allowed near this station or the outstations, being too treacherous and warlike.'\textsuperscript{124} However, there is evidence that on VRD and elsewhere in the district there had also been some 'friendly' contact by this time. There is even an intriguing possibility that such contact may have begun within a year and a half of settlement. When Ricketson and Stockdale were passing through the Gordon Creek sandstone in December 1885, they captured several Aboriginal women. The two men tried

\textsuperscript{122} In the 1980s old Aborigines I spoke with named a number of places in the Gordon Creek sandstone (Bilinara country) and on the upper Wickham River (Ngarinman country) where they said the police had shot people.
\textsuperscript{123} D. Rose, Hidden Histories, 1991, p. 117.
to learn from these women if there were any Europeans in the area, and when their attempts
to communicate in English failed Ricketson related how,

Stockdale got off his horse and walked on all fours, and sticking two of his fingers on
top of his head he bellowed like a cow. They seemed to understand this and they all
laughed... We were just getting tired of interrogating them, when one gin called out
“whitefellow” and grinned... Stockdale said “Which way whitefellow?” She answered
“That way” pointing with a wommerah down the creek the way we were going.\textsuperscript{125}

Stockdale himself was not so sure that the woman did speak words of English.\textsuperscript{126} If
Ricketson was correct it is, of course, impossible to know whether the woman had learned
the words from the settlers on VRD or if she had learned them via the networks described
in Chapter 1. It should be noted, however, that on Australian frontiers it was common for
Aborigines to send in women to make first contact with the settlers, just as it was common
for young Aboriginal women to be abducted and held against their will by white men, or by
the white man’s ‘tame’ blacks.\textsuperscript{127}

Stevens’ claim in 1892 that some of the worst characters amongst the Aborigines were
known to the station hands suggests that, at the very least, they were physically
recognisable. However, there is a strong possibility that these ‘worst characters’ had been
identified by local Aborigines working for the whites and were known by name. Soon after
Mounted Constable Willshire arrived on VRD he began to bring Aboriginal women to his
Gordon Creek station and eventually he had eleven women there.\textsuperscript{128} He also had sufficient
numbers of ‘old and infirm’ Aborigines at or near his station – possibly elderly husbands or
other relations of the women Willshire had brought in – to prompt him to write to the
Government Resident (via Inspector Foelsche) asking for ‘20 blankets and 20 bags of flour’
to be sent for them with his next loading. Providing such rations, he said, ‘would help me to

\textsuperscript{125} H. Ricketson, entry for 1-1-1885. Mitchell Library, Mss 1783, Item 1.
\textsuperscript{126} H. Stockdale, nd. Exploration in the far north-west of Australia, 1884-85. Mitchell Library, MLA 1580,
CY reel 2112, entry for December 31st, 1884.
\textsuperscript{127} H. Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier, 1981, pp. 57-58, 140-141; see Sullivan, Patrick All free man
now: culture, community and politics in the Kimberley region, north-western Australia, Aboriginal
control them, and their young men cattle Killers.' Willshire began to obtain intelligence from these people and it was probably one or more of these who helped him communicate with a large number of Aboriginal men, women and children who came to the station in June 1895. From this time on local Aboriginal placenames and the names of Aboriginal offenders began to appear in the police journal.

By 1895 Aborigines in Jasper Gorge knew the name of the teamster Mulligan and by 1896 Wardaman people were able to swear very well (see Chapter 7). Certainly by early 1895 a number of local Aborigines were working for station whites. In March of that year three Aborigines employed on VRD cleared into the bush with firearms and Willshire wrote that, 'The three of them belong to this country, and will no doubt join the cattle killers and shoot beasts for them.' In April 1895 Norwegian Zoologist Knut Dahl visited the Victoria River Depot and tried unsuccessfully to make contact with 'an old woman, who had once worked on Victoria River Downs', and in May 1895 the contract teamsters taking stores from the Depot to VRD had three Queensland Aboriginal men working for them, one of whom had an Aboriginal wife from Wave Hill.

Just how these Aborigines came to work for the whites is unknown. Some may have come in of their own accord, out of curiosity or to escape the constraints of their own society.

129 W.H. Willshire to Inspector Paul Foelsche, 2-10-1894. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F829, item 7210.
130 Timber Creek police journal, 6-6-1895, 25-6-1895. Of interest here is the story VRD Aborigines tell of the policeman at Gordon Creek sending out a woman to bring the bush blacks in, and then either giving them poisoned food or chaining them up and shooting them (P. Read and J. Read, Long Time, Olden Time, Institute for Aboriginal Development Publications, Alice Springs, 1991, pp. 57-60; D. Rose, Hidden Histories, 1991, pp. 37-39).
131 Timber Creek police journal, 25-6-1895, 26-6-1895.
133 Timber Creek police journal, 18-3-1895.
135 Inspector Paul Foelsche to F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the NT, 14-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539.
136 For discussions of the various reasons for Aborigines 'coming in' in various parts of Australia see H. Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier, 1981, pp. 93, 105-107; R. Baker, 'Coming in? The Yanyuwa as a case study in the Geography of Contact History', Aboriginal History, 1990, vol. 14, pt.1; P. Read and J.
but in some cases cooperation may have been coerced. The abduction of Aboriginal boys and girls was a widespread practice on the early Queensland and Northern Territory frontiers. Referring to Aboriginal children working for her pioneer ancestors in the East Kimberley region, Mary Durack commented, 'How they got hold of them was nobody's business'; the Wyndham Police Occurrence Book shows that one of them was picked up during a police raid on an Aboriginal camp on ‘Durack’s station’ (possibly Argyle) in July 1888. The only reference I have found to children being ‘picked up’ in the Victoria River district comes from Willshire’s book, *Land of the Dawning*. In June 1895 Willshire describes the appearance of a large number of Aboriginal men, women and children at the Gordon Creek police station and he claims that, ‘They gave me three little boys, ages respectively nine, ten, and eleven, also one girl of eleven, who soon got fat at my camp. There are now fourteen children here’. We may accept that Willshire was ‘given’ the children on this occasion, but how did he come by the other ten already at the station? One can’t help but wonder if they were survivors of one the ‘encounters’ with the bush blacks that he describes elsewhere in the book.

At many different times and places on the frontier young Aboriginal women were enticed or kidnapped to assist in stock or domestic work and to be sexual partners. Old Tim Yilngayarri, a Victoria River Downs man, told me how ‘that first one policeman’ would kill all Aborigines he came across except young women with ‘big ngapalu’ (large breasts) who he would take back to the police station. At the very least, Willshire would entice young women to come with him to the police station, or allow his trackers to do so – at one stage he claimed to have ‘about a dozen’ women at his station — but placenames such as 'Kitty's

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139 Wyndham Police Occurrence Book, entry for 25-7-1888. ACC 741/1, Battye Library.


Coerced or voluntary, once local Aborigines began to work for the whites, it was the beginning of the end for what had until then been a uniform resistance. Initially, at least, those who changed sides were treated as renegades by their own people. Two of the VRD employees who ran away with guns in June 1895 were killed by bush Aborigines because, ‘they had in the past taken a prominent part with whitefellows in tracking up their countrymen.’ This was learnt by Willshire from one of the women who had come to the station a few weeks earlier, and as more Aborigines came in the whites gained more information about the bush blacks – the names of trouble-makers, their whereabouts, the location and timing of ceremonial gatherings – and some of them could act as guides and trackers to help the whites locate wanted individuals or groups.

In spite of the police presence at VRD attacks and killings continued. At the Depot landing in 1894 men guarding the stores had to barricade themselves behind bags of flour and keep up rifle fire all night. Captain Joe Bradshaw was ambushed near the Gregory Creek junction in May 1894 and his ‘boy’, Nym, was fatally speared (see Chapter 8), and in May 1895 Teamsters Mulligan and Ligar were severely wounded and besieged at their wagons in Jasper Gorge (see Chapter 5). On another occasion Aborigines decoyed some white men away from a building they were erecting and while they were gone other Aborigines stole pieces of thick iron from gates to make into tomahawks.

In June 1895 Joe Bradshaw and two others wrote to the Government Resident Dashwood urgently requesting extra police and trackers for the Victoria River area and during a

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144 Timber Creek police journal, 25-11-95; 18-1-96 and 5/6-1-96.
147 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 29-5-1894.
148 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 6-12-1895.
149 Joe Bradshaw (per Aeneas Gunn), H.W.H. Stevens and P Allen, to Secretary to Government Resident, 10-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, [item number lost]
South Australian Government inquiry Bradshaw suggested that if additional police protection could not be provided, known Aboriginal troublemakers should be outlawed. Inspector Foelsche agreed with the desirability for additional police but stated that none could be sent because of the expense and lack of appropriate personnel.

In 1896 Patrick O’Neil, alias ‘Paddy the Lasher’, was speared on VRD south of Pigeon Hole, and in the same year Victoria River Downs was almost burnt out by the Aborigines. An attack on E. Johnson at Dead Finish Creek (Delamere station) in May 1896 was followed by a call for a police patrol to be established in that particular area, but nothing was done (see Chapter 7). Auvergne homestead was attacked on the night of January 10th 1897 when two stone-headed spears were thrown at Ah Fat, the Chinese cook. One spear ‘went through a galvanised iron bugget [sic] & also through the iron wall of the Kitchen. This cause [sic] a noise & the blacks went into water & crossed the river & cleared out’. Mounted Constable O’Keefe and his trackers tried to follow the attackers but could not cross the flooded West Baines River, and O’Keefe remarked that, ‘There is a large Mountain close to west baines [the Pinkerton Range] & this is a great home for the Natives as it is impassable for man or horse only at the north end about twelve miles from the Station.’

In April 1898 the police station at Gordon Creek was closed and a new station opened at Timber Creek. The Timber Creek station was bounded on two sides by precipitous ranges up to 200 metres high, and almost from the day it was established the station was under

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150 Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices. Government Printer, Adelaide, 1895, J. Bradshaw’s answers to questions 3774 and 3356.
151 Inspector P. Foelsche to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 11-6-1895, in response to Bradshaw’s letter of 10-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539.
152 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 18-9-1896.
154 Timber Creek police journal, 27-5-1896.
155 ‘Aboriginal Marauders’, F. Burdett to the editor, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 3-7-1896.
156 Timber Creek police journal, 18-1-1897.
158 Ibid: 5-4-1898.
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surveillance by Aborigines. For the next eight years the police journal has regular reports of ‘blacks on the mountain’, or similar.

At the end of the 1890s attacks against the settlers intensified. At the beginning of 1899 at Wave Hill they ‘made a most determined assault’ on Tom Cahill and his mustering team. While the musterers were camped for dinner (midday) close to the area where ‘Paddy the Lasher’ had been speared two years before, the attackers crept up unobserved and threw a shower of spears amongst them. Cahill and his men ‘quickly rose to a fighting attitude, on seeing which the blacks beat a retreat.’ Later that year Wave Hill homestead was ‘burnt to the ground by the natives. The niggers put a fire-stick to the building to windward while the men were away mustering, and the place was quickly demolished.’ On Wave Hill, VRD, Bradshaw and Ord River, Aborigines were said to be killing cattle wholesale.

In February 1900 a lone traveller named Stanley was believed killed near Campbell Spring on Limbunya. His body was never found so his murder could not be confirmed, but at the time no one had any doubt, and in 1989 Old Jimmy Manngayari took me to a site near Campbell Spring where he said a white man had been killed and his body hidden in a hollow tree. A man named Tom Walton was speared in the thigh on Bradshaw in March 1900, and in October a herd of 500 cattle being taken through Jasper Gorge by Drover Stevenson was attacked by a mob of over one hundred Aborigines. A number of bullocks were killed or injured in the ensuing rush, and the Aborigines let it be known that they planned further attacks (see Chapter 5).

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159 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 20-1-1899.
162 Timber Creek police journal, 25-3-1900, 19-10-1900, 20-10-1900.
163 Personal communication, Jimmy Manngayari, 1989.
164 ‘Trouble With The Victoria River Natives’, F.D. Holland to the editor, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 7-12-1900.
Attacks were particularly frequent in the Willeroo-Delamere area (see Chapter 7). Between December 1899 and May 1900 several drovers were attacked there. Most escaped without injury but the last, Drover Mork, was speared in the thigh (see Chapter 7). After this attack, Inspector Foelsche advised the Government Resident that it would be of no use sending police out from Timber Creek or Katherine as it ‘takes some days from each station to get to “Willeroo”...and the Natives would know that the police are coming before they could get there, and clear out into the Ranges and return as soon as the police leave again.’ He suggested that police should be stationed at Willeroo but warned that this would be very expensive as it would need at least two constables with three or four trackers and twelve horses, ‘for almost constant patrolling that district is in my opinion the only means of affording more security to the travelling public in that county.’

Nothing was done and problems in the Willeroo-Delamere region continued. Travellers and drovers were attacked, horses speared, and camps robbed of rations and firearms. Towards the end of October 1900 a lone traveller was attacked several times. He was badly wounded and abandoned his packhorses which were then killed. His pack-bags with all his worldly possessions were looted and destroyed, but he got away with his life.

This last attack was the final straw for many Territory people. Within days of news of the attack reaching Darwin, residents petitioned the Government Resident to outlaw the offending Aborigines and offered to assist the police in arresting them. Their request was never granted, but the increasing frequency of attacks on travellers along the road from Katherine to Western Australia finally prompted the authorities to take action. In mid-October 1900, Inspector Foelsche wrote to the Government Resident advising that he could at last send an extra Mounted Constable and two trackers to assist Mounted Constable

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166 Timber Creek police journal, 9-6-1900.
167 Inspector Paul Foelsche to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 20-6-1900, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item, 9722.
168 Ibid.
169 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 9-11-1900.
170 Petition presented to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 13-11-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item, 10088.
O'Keefe at Timber Creek. His initial suggestions was that the extra constable could be stationed at 'Willerow,' but this never eventuated. Foelsche also asked the Government Resident for permission to arm the trackers with carbines rather than revolvers as,

revolvers are not sufficient for effection [sic] protection to them where...the natives are Known to be treacherous and it is a well Known fact the Natives have no fear of revolvers and the trackers Know this but with a Carbine in their hands they are more Couragions [sic] and the natives Know the effect of them and are not so defiant.' 

Mounted Constable Thompson joined O'Keefe at Timber Creek in December 1900 and over the next three years he or O'Keefe followed their instructions to carry out patrols,

between Willeroo and Victoria River and particularly around Sullivan's and Gregory's Creek junctions with Victoria River, and at Jasper Gorge. Patrol should roam the area in question and also escort any travellers, drovers etc through the dangerous places.

On one patrol in August 1901 O'Keefe located a large camp of blacks on Sullivans Creek. He and his trackers,

rounded some of the lubras up and told them who we were and then told them the blackfellows not to growl at whitemen and not to kill their horses & cattle and we would not growl at them. The natives knew who we were and where we came from and said blackfellow sulky fellow also wild fellow. None of the lubras could speak English. Tracker Billy could speak to them...

171 Inspector Paul Foelsche to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 13-10-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 10033.
172 Ibid.
173 Inspector Paul Foelsche to Mounted Constable E. O'Keefe, 28-11-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 10033.
174 Report on patrol by M.C. O'Keefe, 27-7-1901. This meeting took place on August 5th 1901. Notes taken from the Timber Creek police letter book, written by an unidentified policeman and now housed at the Northern Territory archives (Letter Book, 1911-1925, NTRS 2223). In part, this set of notes overlaps with a photocopy of the Timber Creek police letter book held at the Berrimah police station in Darwin. However, the letter book at Berrimah only covers the period 1894 to 1910, whereas these copies continue to 1925. The copies thus cover a period when there are no surviving original Timber Creek police documents (1919-1923), and a period when there are no surviving Timber Creek police letters (1912-1923). In instances where the copies and the original records co-exist, the copied notes are reliable, but whoever made the copies occasionally made his own comments and connections, and in at least one instance he is mistaken.
If the police journals are any guide, apart from this encounter there seems to have been virtually no contact between the police and the Aborigines, and in spite of the increased police presence, harassment of white people and attacks against them continued as before. In August 1902 another traveller had a skirmish with Aborigines near Delamere. He got away unharmed, but a few days later a German traveller disappeared in the same area, presumed murdered,175 and two men who had taken up the old Willeroo run abandoned the lease almost immediately because of harassment by Aborigines (see Chapter 7).176 Late in 1903 Aborigines came to the camp of a traveller on Gregory Creek and demanded tobacco, and later they followed him, but no other incidents occurred.177

Then, almost overnight and across most of the region, the violent attacks against Europeans slowed to a trickle. This is not to say that all resistance to Europeans ceased. As Reynolds noted, ‘Black resistance did not conclude when the last stockman was speared’,178 and activities such as cattle spearing and theft of European property continued for decades, but across the region Aborigines seem to have made a decision to no longer try to kill Europeans. There were other Europeans killed or attacked over the following thirty years, but these were widely separated in time, and most were of lone white men on the fringes of, or within, the last great refuge areas.

So why did this change occur? There is little to suggest that it was the special patrols alone that were the cause. There is nothing to suggest that they had any physical impact on Aborigines, and even if they did, it would only have applied to Willeroo, Delamere and the northern part of Victoria River Downs, because the special patrols did not extend to other parts of the district. Rather, it appears to have been the coalescing of a number of factors,

175 'Supposed Outrage by Blacks', Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 5-9-1902; Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 24-10-1902.
176 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 21-9-1900.
177 Notes taken from the Timber Creek police letter book entry of 9-8-1903, written by an unidentified policeman. Letter Book, 1911-1925, NTRS 2223, Northern Territory Archives; Note: the Timber Creek police journal entry of 21-10-1903 says this incident occurred on the head of the Little Gregory Creek.
one of the most important of which was the establishment of ‘blacks’ camps’ at station homesteads and outstations across the region.

The first clear indication that local Aborigines were visiting station homesteads of their own free will appears in 1892 when a group of bush Aborigines camped near Willeroo homestead the night before Scott was killed (see Chapter 7). Next is the statement of Mounted Constable O’Keefe who mentioned in 1895 that he ‘heard that there was a tribe of nigars [sic] at Wave Hill Station.’\textsuperscript{179} While these Aborigines were camping near the homesteads with the tacit approval of the whites, there is no evidence they stayed there permanently.

At the end of 1898 the \textit{Northern Territory Times} reported that some stations were allowing bush blacks to camp near the homesteads, but the only station mentioned by name was Argyle, in the East Kimberley (plate 70).\textsuperscript{180} However, by the early 1900s most stations in the Victoria River district had adopted a policy of allowing or perhaps forcing the ‘bush blacks’ to come in to the homesteads and outstations. Bradshaw had a ‘myall’ camp by June 1900, and possibly a year earlier.\textsuperscript{181} VRD had the ‘Wickham blacks’ in a station camp by October 1900\textsuperscript{182} but the manager, Jim Ronan, complained to the Timber Creek police that he ‘can’t feed all blacks in country’. He also reported that ‘the blacks have driven off all cattle on lower Victoria on to the Katherine Crossing’ and remarked that he would ‘have to deal with blacks himself if police won’t.’\textsuperscript{183} Wave Hill also had a camp by 1901,\textsuperscript{184} and Ord River had one by 1905 (plates 71, 72).\textsuperscript{185}

\textsuperscript{179} Timber Creek police journal, 9-12-1895.
\textsuperscript{180} ‘Wyndham’, \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 9-12-1898.
\textsuperscript{181} Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entries for 7-6-1899 and 28-6-1900.
\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 11-10-1901.
\textsuperscript{183} D.J. Ronan to Mounted Constable O’Keefe, 25-1-1901. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin; Timber Creek police journal, 14-11-1900.
\textsuperscript{184} Mounted Constable E. O’Keefe to Inspector Paul Foelsche, 9-3-1901. Timber Creek police letter book, copy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin.
\textsuperscript{185} G. Bolton, \textit{A Survey of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to the Present}, unpublished Masters thesis, University of Western Australia, 1953, p. 124.
The camp at Ord River was established 'with an element of coercion' when the manager and his men rode around the station and mustered the bush people back to the homestead, but in most cases there is no contemporary documentation as to how these camps came into being. However, Aboriginal oral tradition on Victoria River Downs, Willeroo and Delamere suggests that local people who had previously joined the whites were eventually sent out to tell the rest to 'come in'.

Wherever the first station camp appeared, news of its existence and the experience of those living in it would have circulated among Aborigines throughout the region, and no doubt they would have discussed the 'pros and cons' of 'coming in'. Some of these 'pros and cons', from a European perspective, were outlined in 1905 by an 'old stockman' writing under the pen name of 'Magenta Joe':

Some managers make it a point to keeping the blacks out all together. But it takes a lot of trouble to watch the niggers, and at the same time to also watch the cattle and keep them out of harms way.

Other managers try and gather the blacks into a camp, close to the head station, and kill an old lumpy or worthless beast for them now and then; and I think, myself, that this is the best way. I think they do not do so much damage if the niggers are got in. The old niggers and old lubras will very often tell what is going on in the camp; and the station boys also mingle with them and learn what is going on from some of the others. Blacks are greatly divided amongst themselves, and will very often put one another away. But if they are very numerous, and a small portion of the tribe can only be got in, then I am of the opinion that it is just as well to keep them out altogether, because there is always a secret communication with the outside camps, telling them the whereabouts of the station hands.

Other advantages for the settlers included making it safer for white men to travel through or work in the district, and providing a ready pool of cheap labour for the station. During a visit to VRD in 1905, only a few years after a station camp was established there, the South

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186 Ibid; J.A. Davis to Copley and Co., Perth, 1905 (probably October). Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 14787.


188 'Some Pastoral Notes and Comments from an Old Stockman’s Point of View', by 'Magenta Joe'. Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 27-10-1905. 'Magenta Joe' was John Dunn who died of fever in the Palmerston hospital in December 1909 (Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 13-12-1907).
Australian Governor, George Le Hunte, 'saw some fine healthy looking aborigines' in a camp near the homestead, and noted that 'Mr. Townshend, who employs several of the boys to look after cattle, spoke very well of them.'

On the basis of his Australia-wide study, Reynolds listed the pros and cons for Aborigines of coming in or staying out. He noted that dwindling indigenous food supplies made it increasingly difficult for clans to live in isolation from the Europeans. In some areas people died from starvation, and if they continued to attack Europeans, spear their livestock or steal their goods, they could be certain of retaliation. Added to this was the possibility that fighting between settlers and Aborigines may have increased the amount of fighting between rival clans. Reynolds concluded that 'life in the bush became increasingly hazardous and eventually “staying out” became the greater of the two evils.'

Most of these factors applied in the Victoria River country. Certainly Aborigines were being confined to ever smaller areas of rough, resource-poor country. The sandstone and limestone ranges and 'back country' were never resource-rich, and as more and more people were forced into ever smaller areas, these areas may have been eaten out. At the same time the white men were gaining control of more and more country, so foraging in resource-rich lowlands, spearing cattle and horses, and using waterholes where cattle were concentrated increasingly exposed Aborigines to dangerous encounters with the whites.

Even if Aborigines took the risk of hunting and gathering in the lowlands, it is likely that, year by year, traditional foods in these areas were becoming scarcer. By the early 1900s cattle had reached significant numbers, with VRD and Wave Hill both estimated to have 60,000 head by 1906. The environmental impact of such cattle numbers was greatly increased in years when the wet season rains came late, especially if the previous wet had

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189 'Northern Territory. No. 4 – The Governor’s Report', _Adelaide Observer_, 4-11-1910.
190 H. Reynolds, _The Other Side of the Frontier_, 1981, pp. 92-93.
191 Ibid: 60.
192 Ibid.
193 Timber Creek police letter book, 31-12-1906. Photocopy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin.
been poor. 1898 was very dry throughout the district;\textsuperscript{194} on VRD it was ‘the driest [sic] Known...for 12 years. Eleven months elapsed without a downpour.’\textsuperscript{195} On VRD and Wave Hill, 1900 was reported to have been the worst season ‘for a number of years’,\textsuperscript{196} and 1902 was much the same.\textsuperscript{197} The wet season of 1904-05 was poor and it was ten months before rain fell again.\textsuperscript{198} 1906 was yet another poor year and cattle were reported to be dying ‘because of their massing on water frontages beyond their carrying capacity in the matter of feed.’\textsuperscript{199} It seems likely that this series of dry years exacerbating the other ecological and social factors may have been an important factor in the decision to start coming in.

In addition, the dangers of living in the refuge areas suddenly increased in the early 1900s as white men began to apply for annual pastoral permits over small pieces of land, left over when the original big stations rationalised their lease boundaries to include only the best land (see Chapter 9). Most of these blocks were on the edges of or within the ‘sandstone fortresses’ of the Aborigines, and the white men who owned them ranged throughout the back country seeking cleanskin cattle, places where they might brand them in secret, and routes by which they could move them to other areas. Consequently they were active in the very areas where, until then, the wild blacks had been able to live in relative peace and safety. Once the option of life in a station camp appeared, the possibility of accessing desired European goods – iron axes, billycans, cloth, sugar, flour, tea, and particularly tobacco – without the risk of violence, was another strong incentive to come in.\textsuperscript{200}

\textsuperscript{199} Timber Creek police letter book, 31-12-1906. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
As 'Magenta Joe' pointed out, the Aborigines were 'greatly divided amongst themselves', so the aggregation of large numbers of Aborigines in station camps made it far easier for both station people and the police to gain information on the identity and whereabouts of law-breakers. Potentially, this was an advantage for the Aborigines – instead of offenders being unknown and large groups being 'punished' for a crime they may well have had nothing to do with, they became named individuals whom the police could seek out and bring to European justice.

In spite of many advantages for the settlers, Mounted Constable O'Keefe was not impressed with the appearance of these camps:

some of the owners will expect us to be continually hunting the blacks of [sic] their stations, yet they allow these so called scoundrels to camp within a few hundred yards of their stations, the blacks get acquainted with the boys, & know all the movements of all hands, & if they are not kept well supplied with food, the consequence is they go and kill a beast on their own account. 201

While O'Keefe may have been leery of the policy of establishing station camps – his own policy was 'to keep the creatures out bush' 202 – he nevertheless took advantage of the new VRD camp to obtain trackers after his previous trackers cleared out. 203

The most compelling argument that it was the station camps which led to the decline in violent resistance against the whites comes from Timber Creek. As soon as the Timber Creek police station was established in April 1898, Aborigines began to keep the place under surveillance, and for years there were regular entries in the journal about Aborigines calling out from or being seen on the nearby mountains, or their fires being noticed there.

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201 Mounted Constable E. O'Keefe to Inspector Paul Foelsche, 9-3-1901. Timber Creek police letter book, copy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin. Note: because the copy has the bottom line or so of each page missing, it is sometimes impossible to be certain of the date. It may be that the date cited here is inaccurate, but related correspondence indicates that it is very near to correct.

202 Timber Creek police journal, 29-6-1907.

Sometimes the Aborigines prowled around the station after dark, they occasionally threw spears at the trackers, and once or twice they threatened to kill all station personnel. When they saw the white police leave they sometimes would call out to the tracker who remained behind, asking for tobacco or for information, or they would try to get the tracker to join them. At different times they came down to the foot of the mountains and walked around on the creek flats, but if the police went after them they escaped back up the mountains, and the best the police could do was to fire shots in their direction and ‘disperse’ them, and order them to leave. Over the eight years 1898 to 1905 there are almost seventy references in the police journal to bush Aborigines in the vicinity of Timber Creek, and groups of Aborigines were ‘dispersed’ at least ten times. On one memorable occasion a lone Aboriginal came close to the station and Mounted Constable O’Keefe ‘dispersed him’.

An even more memorable incident occurred on February 16th 1903 when Mounted Constable Gordon reported that,

a large mob of blacks made their appearance on the side of the mountain near the Station, told them to go away they refused saying that this was their country and they were going to camp on the creek. Told them that if they came near here again they would be shot, still refusing to go fired shot from carbine in the air. This didn't seem to concern them much as they walked away slowly up the creek.

The Timber Creek station was established by Mounted Constable O’Keefe and he remained in charge there until late April or early May, 1905. O’Keefe had a very ‘hard’ attitude towards the bush blacks, and maintained a policy of keeping them ‘out bush’. Within a year or so of O’Keefe’s departure the new officer in charge allowed a camp to be formed near

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Ibid: entries for 24-4-1898, 27-4-1898, 28-4-1898, 29-4-1898, 30-4-1898, 31-7-1898, 13-9-1898, 20-9-1898, 4-5-1899, 5-5-1899, 26-5-1899, 4-9-1899, 5-9-1899, 6-9-1899, 7-9-1899, 12-9-1899, 13-9-1899, 23-9-1899, 10-10-1899, 14-10-1899, 15-10-1899, 12-12-1899, 14-12-1899, 15-12-1899, 26-1-1900, 2-2-1900, 9-3-1900, 6-6-1900, 16-6-1900, 17-11-1900, 18-11-1900, 7-12-1900, 14-5-1901, 15-5-1901, 4-6-1901, 10-6-1901, 20-6-1901, 6-8-1901, 4-1-1902, 12-4-1902, 13-4-1902, 26-4-1902, 6-6-1902, 11-8-1902, 30-12-1902, 11-2-1903, 16-2-1903, 17-2-1903, 5-3-1903, 18-4-1903, 14-5-1903, 19-9-1903, 8-9-1903, 26-9-1903, 25-10-1903, 8-2-1904, 21-4-1904, 18-7-1904, 28-10-1904, 4-1-1905, 24-1-1905, 26-1-1905, 28-1-1905, 4-3-1905, 8-3-1905, 5-5-1905 and 18-4-1906. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.

‘Dispersals’ are mentioned in the Timber Creek police journal, on 29-4-1898, 13-9-1898, 20-9-1898, 13-9-1899, 14-10-1899, 15-12-1899, 9-3-1900, 15-5-1901, 6-6-1902 and 16-2-1903.

Timber Creek police journal, 9-3-1900.


No. IV. The Governor’s Report, Adelaide Observer, 4-11-1905.

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It is clear that as soon as the bush people had the option of camping alongside the white men at Timber Creek they took it, even though these particular white men were police, and journal entries about ‘blacks on the mountain’ abruptly ceased.

Whatever the reasons may have been, the fact that many Aborigines did come in indicates that, for them, being in the station camps was a better option than staying in the bush – Reynolds’ ‘lesser of two evils’. Of course, while ‘blacks’ camps’ appeared on most stations within a matter of a few years, not all Aborigines came in at once. There were ‘bush’ Aborigines in some of the old refuge areas for some decades after the camps were formed.

The killers of Alex McDonald on Auvergne in 1918 came down out of the vast and rugged Pinkerton Range. The Aborigines who speared Brigalow Bill Ward at Humbert River in 1910 and Jim Crisp in 1919 came out of the Stokes Range sandstone country.

Some people stayed out for life while others moved back and forth between the two modes of life. In 1927 ‘about 30 myall natives’ came in for the first time to Wave Hill station (plates 73, 74) and in 1933 another group came in to Timber Creek. In the latter case it was not stated exactly how many arrived or exactly where they came from, but both examples show that the movement of people from the bush to white centres was continuing to this time.

Possibly the last region where wild blacks held sway was the Fitzmaurice River basin, a vast area of rough country bounded on the south by the towering Yambarran Range. Even as late as 1940 the Timber Creek policeman, Tas Fitzer, ‘strongly advised’ a prospector not

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209 Timber Creek police journal, 30-5-1906. On this date the police reported ‘A mob of 40 blacks with their King now camped near station’.
211 Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1910.
213 C. Schultz and D. Lewis, Beyond the Big Run: Station Life on Australia’s Last Frontier, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1995, p. 69.
to go to the Fitzmaurice 'as the blacks in those parts were not to [sic] friendly'\textsuperscript{217} The Fitzmaurice was part of the area where the last Aboriginal 'outlaws', 'Nemarluk' and others, reigned until the early 1930s, and where the last white men killed by bush Aborigines were murdered in 1932\textsuperscript{218} but that is another story.

\textsuperscript{217} Timber Creek police journal, 18-10-1940.
\textsuperscript{218} 'Murder of Prospectors', \textit{Adelaide Advertiser}, 29-5-1934; 'Alleged Murder of Two Prospectors', \textit{Northern Standard}, 16-1-1934.
Chapter 5

JASPER GORGE

For a region that is part of Australian folklore, the Victoria River district has very few places that have become the focus of popular interest and imagination. This is probably due to the paucity of written material on the region’s history and the poor transmission of local knowledge among the white inhabitants that I described in the Introduction, and the fact that most of the places which have the potential to become the focus of popular interest are ‘locked up’ on cattle stations, and either known and accessible only to a few station people or not known at all. The marked boabs at Gregory’s main base camp are reasonably well known, the more so because since 1963 they have been part of a National Park and accessible to the public,¹ but the place with the most intense concentration of European stories and legends, myths and misinformation, is Jasper Gorge, located on road between Timber Creek and Victoria River Downs. In this chapter I focus on the gorge as a particular iconic place and draw out the connections between the whites and their settlements as revealed in a major wide-ranging story.

The gorge is a dramatic and beautiful cliff-lined pass that runs for about fifteen kilometres through the precipitous, flat-topped Stokes Range. It is a complex place, certainly not a straight-sided gorge with a flat floor and sides of uniform height. It takes broad sweeping curves back and forth, in some places widening, in others narrowing. Winding through it is Jasper Creek, here running through the middle of wide flats, there cutting into the rocky slopes below the cliffs so that, until the modern road was cut and bridges built, people travelling the gorge had to cross the creek six or seven times and in time of flood it was difficult or impossible to get through (plate 75).

¹ NT Portion 554 of five acres was declared a National Park to be known as Gregory’s Tree National Park (Reserve No. 1103) on 20-6-1963. Commonwealth Gazette, No. 55. In 1979 it was renamed the Gregory’s Tree Historical Reserve (NTG G38 21-9-1979), and in 1995 it was declared a Heritage Place (NTG, 22-2-1995). Information courtesy Stuart Duncan, Office of Placenames Committee, Darwin.
Extending off the main gorge are side pockets and one or two long valleys cut by tributary streams, all of them cliff-lined. At the western end the floor of the gorge is up to two kilometres wide and the slopes forming the sides are steep, rocky and high, and capped with low cliffs. Moving eastwards, the cliffs become higher and the slopes below them correspondingly lower, and the gorge becomes narrower and rougher until at the eastern end it is less than 200 metres wide (plate 76). At its narrowest point most of the width is taken up by a long and deep waterhole, bounded on the north side by a cliff that rises straight up from the water and makes it impossible to travel along that side, even in the dry season. On the opposite side there is a narrow flat bounded by a steep rocky slope rising to a cliff that looms overhead. Until at least the early 1930s there was a giant boulder on this flat with barely enough space for a wagon to pass around it (plate 77).  

The gorge is a place of hard reality – rocky slopes and cliffs, big waterholes, dense spinifex – and a place of legend and mythology for both blacks and whites. For Aborigines the gorge was created at the beginning of the world when the great travelling Dreaming, Walujapi, the Black-headed python, slid across the Stokes Range, her body pushing up the curving sides of the gorge as she passed. As she created the gorge she interacted with other Dreamings – Mulukurr the ‘devil dog’, Kaya the ‘devil’, Wurlifyingki the red ant, and others. All of these Dreamings are still present in the gorge and some can actually be seen as rock paintings, or as natural features such as boulders, or hollows and marks on a cliff face. One Dreaming has been destroyed since the coming of the whites. The great boulder that nearly blocked the way through the narrow part of the gorge was Wanujunki, a Turtle and Echidna Dreaming; it was eventually blown up to widen the road. And of course, the

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2 This obstacle was mentioned by the Government Resident in his report on his trip to the Victoria River in 1895 (entry for 24-11-1895; Government Resident of the Northern Territory [South Australia] – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6891) and can be seen in a number of early photographs. It was still there when Ted Morey was a policeman in the district in 1932, and he describes how Burt Drew’s donkey teams got past without mishap (E. Morey, ‘The Donkey Man’, Northern Territory Newsletter, February issue, 1977, p. 12).


5 This appears to have been done by Burt Drew in 1931. Bovril Australian Estates Ltd., Victoria River Downs Ledgers, 1909-1944, ledger 4. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 42/1511-4.
fish, turtles and crocodiles in the permanent waterholes, and the ‘sugarbag’, wallabies, echidnas and other resources were, and still are, a great attraction for local Aborigines.

For white people Jasper Gorge also has many meanings. Most appreciate its wild beauty and many have heard or read that it was a place of conflict between Aborigines and the early settlers. It was here where Aborigines attacked and besieged teamsters and killed ‘many men’, where they rolled boulders down upon passing herds of cattle, where Aboriginal skulls with bullet holes had been found, and where, according to a man I met in the Timber Creek pub in 1971, ‘Until the 1950s you could demand a police escort when travelling through Jasper Gorge'. Even the dimensions of the gorge itself have at times taken on exaggerated proportions, with one account describing the cliffs as 900 feet high and another saying nearly 1000 feet (330 metres). In reality they are rarely more than fifty metres and often much less.

Most whites have only limited knowledge of what occurred there. One particular story has appeared in various accounts over the years and is fairly well known – the spearing of teamsters Mulligan and Ligar, but few whites possess more than the broad outlines of the event or know the exact location where it occurred. There are faint ‘echoes’ of other stories and yet others that have long been forgotten. So what is the historical reality of the gorge? What is left when the myths and misinformation are stripped away and the facts reassembled? This chapter seeks to provide answers to these questions, to reveal the ‘hidden history’ of Jasper Gorge.

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8 The same claim was made by Keith Willey in his book, *Eaters of the Lotus*, 1964, p. 33.
10 D. Magoffin, *From Ringer to Radio*, privately published, Brisbane, nd, p. 108. Dave Magoffin came to VRD as a young man early in 1938 and left in August 1940. He later became a well-known radio broadcaster.
The first white men to visit the gorge were members of Gregory’s expedition. On his second trip inland Gregory ascended the Stokes Range north-west of the entrance of the gorge, and then headed east across the stony sandstone plateau. The following day he found a creek trending to the south which he followed to where it plunged over a precipice into a narrow cliff-lined valley. After a difficult descent Gregory followed the valley four kilometres to where it joined another, much larger cliff-lined valley. Here he struck a wide flooded stream, so he turned east and followed it down. After about seven kilometres his progress was stopped by the cliff-face that rises from the waterhole in the narrow part of the gorge. He went back upstream and managed to get his men and horses to the other side of creek, and this time was able to travel right through the gorge and out onto a large open plain where he camped beside a huge boab tree. Nearby there was a range of hills which Gregory had previously named the Jasper Range, and later the settlers applied this name to the gorge and the creek that flows through it. It’s a fitting name; at sunrise and sunset the cliffs lining the gorge turn blood red.

After negotiating the gorge, Gregory travelled to the headwaters of the Victoria River and beyond, to the termination of Sturt Creek in the salty expanse of Lake Gregory. On his return he chose once again to traverse the great Victoria River Gorge, rather than use the shorter and easier Jasper Gorge. From this it would seem that Gregory did not realise Jasper Gorge had an opening to the west and formed a natural pass through the Stokes Range.

The first European to travel all the way through Jasper Gorge was the VRD manager, Lindsay Crawford. In July 1884 Crawford set out from VRD homestead to meet the first boats bringing stores up the Victoria River, and to find a suitable road for bringing these supplies back to the station. There is a high probability that he had a copy of Gregory’s map and knew that there were two possible routes to choose from, ‘one where the Victoria

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13 There is an early copy of Gregory’s map in the collection of Victoria River Downs records held at the Noel Butlin Archives, Canberra (Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd., F246, 2/859/375).
runs through a gorge thirty-five miles long and an average of half a mile wide, with very high sandstone cliffs, and the other where Jasper Creek runs through.14

Donald Swan and Bob Button, stockmen who were with the first cattle to Ord River, passed through the gorge in 1885 on their way to the Depot for rations. ‘All at once we got the fright of our lives, for blacks suddenly appeared along the cliff tops, Hollering. “Good Day! Good Day!”’15 Swan and Button were surprised at their knowledge of English words, and decided they must have learnt them at Daly River where settlement had commenced earlier. However, the extraordinary ability of ‘wild’ Aborigines to mimic English words spoken to them has often been noted16 and it is more likely they had heard the words ‘good day’ shouted out by other white men travelling through the gorge.

Four years later B. Blair, a pastoral inspector for Goldsbrough Mort, wrote a report on VRD and provided a more expansive description of the gorge than Crawford:

To the north of Jasper Creek right along the boundary of the Coys property, are a series of high sandstone ranges reaching right to the Victoria river [sic] in fact this river flows through a gorge among these ranges for a long distance, horses can be ridden only with difficulty along the frontage, and there is only one other known pass through these ranges to the lower Victoria river, & that is by following up Jasper Creek, it is up this creek the road is formed to the depot on the river, where the Boats come with the stores. …[Jasper Gorge] is extremely rough for 6 miles by crossing & recrossing the creek there is just sufficient room between precipitous walls of red sandstone for a road to be forced through, since first opened a very considerable amount of work has been done in removing boulders from the creek & other places, both powder & dynamite having been used and as the wild blacks are here very numerous, it was no easy task to get men to work17

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Some of the road work referred to had been carried out under contract by Charles Gore in mid-1886. The principal work was done in Jasper Gorge and it was there that Gore and his team endured a series of violent encounters with Aborigines. The experiences of Gore and his men are one of the great ‘lost stories’ of Jasper Gorge and therefore worth recounting in some detail. Except where otherwise stated, the following account is based on an article written by Gore and published in the *Adelaide Observer* in 1896.\textsuperscript{18}

With four Chinese and a Frenchman as assistants, Gore arrived at the Victoria River Depot at the end of May and was immediately informed ‘that we need not be at all afraid that we should find the road-making contract a dull piece of work, for the natives on the route would make it lively enough.’ Some days later Gore met two teamsters coming from VRD who warned him there were large numbers of blacks at the gorge who had ‘given [them] a taste of their quality by firing a few shots at them.’

Eventually Gore’s team reached the gorge and immediately ‘noticed several fires spring up on either side, denoting the undoubted presence of a considerable number of blacks’. That night two of their horses were wounded with spears and in the morning the tracks of many Aborigines were seen. Later that day Gore was suddenly surrounded by Aborigines who ‘came from all directions, yelling and shaking their spears.’ As he fled back to his camp he fired shots from his rifle to keep the blacks at a distance, and was ‘uncomfortably astonished’\textsuperscript{19} when several shots were fired back at him. He later learned that one of the teamsters had lost two revolvers on the road, and evidently these had been found by Aborigines who knew how to use them.

Back in camp Gore and his men constructed a ‘spearproof break’\textsuperscript{20} and decided to suspend work until the VRD teams arrived from the Depot. When the first of the teamsters arrived he said it was too dangerous to remain where they were and instead hurried on through the gorge. Gore sent a message with him to Victoria River Downs and remained holed up in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[19] *The North Australian*, 9-7-1886.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
camp waiting for reinforcements. For several days they were harassed by the Aborigines night and day:

From time to time they got bolder and tried to get within spear range, and then a leaden messenger had to be sent in their direction as a warning. They, however, kept dodging from shelter to shelter amongst the tree trunks and rocks and laughing and yelling in defiance.21

At about 3 am on the third night Aborigines attacked the camp, but Gore and his men were awake and a volley of shots scattered the tribesmen. This was enough for the contractors and the next day they attempted to get through the gorge. They had no trouble until they approached the narrow part of the gorge at the eastern end, and then came the most dramatic part of their ‘adventure’:

all of a sudden within fifty yards of us fires sprang up amongst the tall grass and undergrowth right across the gully and hundreds of natives presented themselves, yelling and brandishing their woomerahs and spears. I had just time to turn back on our track with the team to escape the fire. The horses and dray were started into a canter over the rough ground strewn with boulders, the dray swaying and falling so that I could hardly keep my hold of the reins, and what with the blacks yelling, “Frenchy” and the Chinese shooting, and the dogs barking, I made sure it was all up with us; but somehow we managed to get back to the open again clear of all trees and rocks, and pulled up on a flat...where we made another camp’.22

Although safe enough for the time being, this was not the end of Gore’s troubles. Soon afterwards the second VRD teamster arrived and they decided to travel through the gorge together the next day. Because of the roughness of the track the party only made it half way before darkness fell, and that night they were shot at once more. The next day they were joined by Lindsay Crawford who was on his way to VRD, and all hands made it through to open country east of the gorge where Gore formed a new base camp. Crawford then went on to his station and a few days later sent back two armed and mounted station hands, one white and one black, and three dogs to act as bodyguards for the road builders.

21 Ibid.  
22 Ibid.
For some weeks Gore and his men were able to work in peace while the armed horsemen kept the blacks away. Occasionally the crack of a rifle was heard in the distance but, says Gore, the horsemen were keeping the camp well supplied with game so he never enquired the reason for the shooting. Dynamite was being used to remove large boulders and the regular explosions that echoed for miles through the gorge caused loose rocks to fall, which probably also helped keep the Aborigines away.

Towards the end of the work the Aborigines struck again, this time attacking the Chinese while Gore and the Frenchman were some distance away. The two men heard an uproar and rushed back in time to see ‘the last of the Chinese in full cry disappearing in the timber, and the faces of the bluff swarming with blacks’. Some of the Aborigines were already heading towards the dray, but, ‘As soon, however, as they saw us they bolted back, one or two of them “rather sick” I think.’ The Chinese managed to escape unharmed and returned later under escort of the patrol. Soon afterwards the job was finished and Gore and his men returned to Darwin.

In spite of Gore’s improvements, the road through the gorge remained rough and difficult, and added significantly to the cost of cartage to VRD. In 1891 Lindsay Crawford gave an example of the high cost of running Victoria River Downs, explaining that cartage of stores was £20 per ton and that,

This is due to the difficulties in hauling through the Jasper gorge a distance of 10 miles where the Contractor's plant is annually Knocked to pieces in getting over the big boulders, which only dynamite will ever remove. This year alone I have taken out £200 worth of Timber & iron on a/c of the Contractor, which he will have to repair his wagons with during the wet.23

In fact, the road conditions were so severe that some time before 1896 teamster John Mulligan had three sets of extra strong wagon wheels sent over from Queensland.24 And

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conditions remained severe for years; in 1899 a ‘ponderous wagon’ capable of carrying ten tons and built ‘on special lines’ was shipped to Darwin, bound for VRD. 25

After the attacks on Gore and his team Aborigines continued their harassing tactics. In 1887 it was reported that ‘The Blacks have been very troublesome both on the Run & on the Depot road. They are a bad lot and require constant watching’. 26 A visitor to the Depot in 1889 remarked that ‘Messrs. Crawford and Mulligan’s teams were camped right on the banks... It was thought that the blacks would give some trouble this year, especially at Jasper Creek Gorge’. 27 It was even suggested that the passage of the teams through the gorge was what attracted Aborigines there. In 1889 Alfred Searcy noted that Jasper Gorge was ‘a favourite place for the blacks to meet and interfere with the teams’ 28 and in 1891 H.W.H. Stevens thought that if the stores could be brought in ‘overland’, that is, by wagon from Katherine, the ‘blacks would soon shift their ground’. 29 The fact that the road passed through one of the ‘sandstone fortresses’ that the Aborigines had been forced into certainly gave them opportunity to harass or attack the Europeans and if necessary to escape quickly, and Gore’s description of the Aborigines attacking him ‘laughing and yelling’ suggests that they found doing so highly entertaining.

Lindsay Crawford reported to Goldsbrough Mort in 1891 that he had ‘searched through the ranges on all sides but have failed to find any better way of getting on to the Downs Country’ and added that it was not only the rough road that caused the teamsters problems:

As a further example of the difficulties of teamstering in a new country I would mention that whilst travelling up through this gorge the other day, the blacks during the night drove away one of our saddle horses, (a fine creamy gelding bred on the run,) and all that we found the next day was the head & neck, Some 20 broken spears, & the hobbles. The blacks had literally hacked the horse to pieces & got away with

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25 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 7-4-1899.
27 ‘A Trip to the Victoria River’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 4-5-1889.
28 Ibid.
him into the ranges, where it is next to impossible for a white man to follow them up, even on foot: The Contractor on this road therefore runs continual risk.  

From the point of view of the settlers the Aborigines’ style of attack was puzzling. Alfred Searcy commented that,

The gorge is several miles in length, and from its peculiar formation the blacks, if they had any sense, would be masters of the situation, and could annihilate travellers by rolling rocks down the sides of the steep gorge. Fortunately for travellers the natives have not grasped the strategical strength of the position.

Others since Searcy have made the same observation, or claimed that the Aborigines did roll boulders down, but no account of such action has yet come to light.

In 1895 there occurred the most famous event in the history of Jasper Gorge, the attack on teamsters John Mulligan and George Ligar. This story has been kept alive in the public mind over the years in brief and often inaccurate accounts by various writers. A wonderfully succinct version was written by Jack Watson who was closely involved in events after the attack (see plates 78, 79). Watson had taken over as manager of VRD from Lindsay Crawford in 1894, and in a classic of brevity, he described the attack in his report to Goldsborough Mort for the months of May, June and July 1895:

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31 Copy of Mr. John Watson’s Station Reports for May, June, July, 1895. Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd.: General Letters Papers of Head Office, Melbourne, 1874-1901. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/176/130d.
On 14th of this month [May] the Blacks were invited to a picnic in a place called the Gorge, by Mulligan; As they did not think he treated them with sufficient liberality, they speared him and his men and chased them away from the waggons and took what they wanted, which was much. 35

There was, of course, much more to the story than this, and it involves an amazing cast of North Australian frontier characters – the teamsters themselves, the infamous Mounted Constable Willshire, ‘The Gulf Hero’ Jack Watson, and ‘Long Jim’ Ledgerwood.

John Mulligan had been carting stores from the Depot to VRD since 1886. 36 According to one source he was the first to take wagons across the Murranji Track 37 which was only opened in 1886, 38 so he may have arrived on VRD in that year, possibly after coming across from Queensland. As well as carting the annual loading to VRD it was Mulligan who carried the wool clip from the station to the Depot (plate 80), 39 and when the sheep were sold to Bradshaw in 1894 and shorn at the head of Gregory Creek while en route, he also transported this wool to the Depot (see Chapter 8). 40 However, most of the time there was little call for Mulligan’s services in the Victoria River area, and to keep him and his ‘mate’ [probably Ligar] in the district, VRD employed them as station hands. 41

George H. Ligar was a New Zealander who is said to have been, ‘a lieutenant in the Hussars and...a great elocutionist, full of Shakespeare’. 42 He is also said to have fought in ‘the New

37 W.A. Rees to the Editor, Walkabout, June issue, 1950, p. 8.
38 G. Buchanan, Packhorse and Waterhole, 1933, p. 121.
40 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 2-6-1894. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 2261.
Zealand War' and suffered a severe head injury.\textsuperscript{43} This injury may have contributed to an ongoing problem, which was 'lifting his little finger', and this sometimes led to eccentric behaviour. On one occasion 'one of his fingers offended him, so he shot the top of [sic] it with his revolver'\textsuperscript{44} – perhaps it was the little one. Whether Mulligan also was an alcoholic is unknown, but the chances are high that on occasion he too enjoyed 'lifting his little finger'.

Ligar's drinking probably also accounts for his colourful career in the Northern Territory. In 1872 he was sworn in as a Northern Territory trooper. According to Gordon Buchanan, who came to the district in 1883 and almost certainly knew Ligar, on one occasion he (Ligar) arrested a Chinese man for theft. On his way back to the police station Ligar stopped at a hotel for a drink and left the prisoner handcuffed and sitting on a horse, but when he came back outside the prisoner had cleared out. Undeterred, he arrested the nearest 'Chinaman' as a substitute and the innocent man was later convicted of the crime.\textsuperscript{45} Ligar's police career came to an end when he was dismissed for drunkenness.\textsuperscript{46}

At various times he was convicted of being drunk and disorderly, and charged with petty theft (and acquitted). At the end of 1879 he was charged with arson, convicted and jailed for three years with hard labour.\textsuperscript{47} His sentence was shortened by eighteen months after a petition was presented to the Government Resident requesting Ligar's release.\textsuperscript{48} As well as policing and teamstering, at other times he worked as a boundary rider,\textsuperscript{49} a fencer,\textsuperscript{50} and a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} A. Searcy, \textit{In Australian Tropics}, 1909, p. 205.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{45} G. Buchanan, \textit{Packhorse and Waterhole}, 1933, pp. 153-54.
\item \textsuperscript{47} \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 27-12-1879.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Telegram from the Minister for Education to the Government Resident 16-7-1880, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, items A4098; Telegram from the Minister for Education to the Government Resident, 20-8-1880, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item A4136.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Gordon Creek police journal, 16-1-1895. Northern Territory Archives, F302. The Gordon Creek police station was the forerunner to the Timber Creek police station, and the journals from both are held in the Northern Territory Archives under the one reference listing.
\item \textsuperscript{50} K. Dahl, \textit{In Savage Australia}, 1926, pp. 188-89.
\end{itemize}
stockman,\textsuperscript{51} including a stint at the notoriously dangerous Florida station in Arnhem Land where he would have worked under Jack Watson.\textsuperscript{52}

James Logan Ledgerwood was born in Scotland in 1850.\textsuperscript{53} He worked variously as a drover, prospector, stockman and station manager, including the management of Valley of the Springs station in the Queensland Gulf country where in 1893 he was attacked by Aborigines and suffered a minor spear wound in the back.\textsuperscript{54} He was head stockman on Victoria River Downs in 1895 and became closely associated with Mounted Constable Willshire, supporting Willshire in his dealings with the VRD manager, Jack Watson. Willshire was clearly very impressed by Ledgerwood. He described him as a ‘good all-round bushman...who stands 6 feet 4 inches, and weighs 14 stone.’ He went on to say that Ledgerwood was a great rough rider, boxer, sprinter, horse breaker and drover, and ‘a brave man [and] a good-natured, agreeable companion’ who had worked on Narrulko, Springfield, Lake Nash, Yanga Lake, Mount Howard, Durham Downs, Hodgson Downs and other places.\textsuperscript{55}

Jack Watson was born in Melbourne in March, 1852.\textsuperscript{56} He grew up there and was educated at Melbourne Grammar.\textsuperscript{57} He first appeared in northern Australia in 1883 as manager of Lawn Hill station.\textsuperscript{58} Later he was manager of Florida station in Arnhem Land\textsuperscript{59} and Auvergne station in the Victoria River country.\textsuperscript{60} Because of his wild exploits in the Gulf

\textsuperscript{51} W.H. Willshire, \textit{Land of the Dawning}, 1896, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{52} ‘Old Time Memories. The Lepers of Arnhem Land and Sketches’, \textit{The Northern Standard}, 6-7-1934; in the 1891 Census he described himself as a stockman, living at Florida station (1891 census details on microfiche, produced by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society).
\textsuperscript{53} 1891 census details on microfiche, produced by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society.
\textsuperscript{56} Watson family bible, held by Watson’s grandniece, Mrs Jan Cruickshank.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{The Graziers’ Review}, 16-1-1926: 1296.
\textsuperscript{58} Personal communication, Tony Roberts, author of \textit{Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900}. In press, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.
\textsuperscript{60} Letter from Jack Watson to his brother Ned in San Francisco, 20-7-91, Watson family papers; \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 3-4-1896.
region, Watson became known as 'The Gulf Hero', a nick-name probably applied in sarcasm by those who thought he was either a lunatic or a terrific show-off. On VRD Mounted Constable Willshire derided Watson for wearing a football jersey and a pair of Mexican spurs (see plate 81). Yet there were those who thought highly of him and one of his contemporaries described him as 'a wild reckless fellow [who] would charge hell with a bucket of water. A splendid athlete and boxer, and a terror on the blacks. He stood six feet one inch, and most men were careful not to cross the “Gulf Hero”.'

Many of the stories about Watson remark on his harsh treatment of the wild blacks. He had shockingly cruel methods of killing or maiming them, and collected their ears or skulls as trophies. When a ‘boy’ of his named Pompey ran away from him and was murdered by bush Aborigines, he asked the police to bring in his skull because he wanted to use it as a spittoon. In his book, ‘In Australian Tropics’ Alfred Searcy tells of a man who, boasted to me that he never carried a revolver. He said he did all the punishment he wanted with a stock-whip and a wire-cracker. ‘When I want to be particularly severe,’ he remarked, ‘I cut the top off a sapling and sharpen the remaining stump, bend it down, and drive it through the palms of both hands of the nigger.’ That seemed awfully brutal to me, but that man assured me on his oath that he did it. I wonder whether the cruelty he practiced ever came back to him in his struggle for life in the river—he was drowned in the Katherine.

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62 W.H. Willshire, 1896. *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 76. A letter held by the Watson family shows that in 1891 Jack Watson asked his brother in San Francisco to get him the largest Mexican spurs he could find. It is clear from Willshire’s description that Jack obtained the spurs he asked for, but their present whereabouts is unknown.
65 W.H. Willshire to Professor E. Stirling, 4-12-1896. South Australian Museum, AD43.
67 The ‘cracker’ of a whip is a strip of leather at the end which is the fastest moving part when the whip is cracked. It moves faster than the speed of sound (340 metres per second) and the ‘crack’ of the whip is the sonic ‘boom’ created when the sound barrier is broken. At the speed of sound a piece of wire would slice through flesh like a razor.
68 Ibid.
Searcy does not name the storyteller, but various details of the story fit with what is known about Watson from other sources, particularly that he never carried a revolver and that he drowned in the Katherine River. In March 1895 Watson took over management of Victoria River Downs, and it was there that he made the acquaintance of Mounted Constable Willshire.

William Henry Willshire is infamous as the trooper who was charged with massacring Aborigines in Central Australia in the 1880s. He was acquitted of the charge, but few today believe he was innocent. After his trial he was not sent back to the Centre, but after several short postings in South Australia was instead sent to Victoria River Downs where hostile Aborigines were causing many problems for the settlers. Willshire's superiors knew what his record was in Central Australia and they knew that a state of extreme hostility prevailed in the Victoria River district. It is difficult to believe that his posting there was anything but deliberate.

There can be little doubt that Willshire was a brave and accomplished bushman, but at least one of his contemporaries (a fellow policeman), thought that he was mentally unstable, and he may have been the type of man who would 'crack' when threatened. Early in 1895 four 'civilised' Aboriginal men took firearms and cleared into the bush on VRD, and local whites, including Willshire, were afraid that these renegades would organise the wild blacks and try and drive the whites out. In the face of this threat Willshire wrote a journal entry on March 21st which displays a strange mix of bravado and fear:

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69 ‘Drowning at the Katherine’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 3-4-1896; ‘The Drowning of Mr. J. Watson’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 10-4-1896.
70 J. Watson to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 5-12-95, Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Board Papers, 1893-1927, Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, 2/124/1659; Timber Creek police journal, 24-2-1895. Northern Territory Archives, F302.
this is a rough place with treachery all around you & when blackboys belonging to the country turn out with firearms, matters are getting tropical. I must go out tomorrow & look them up & promise you I will do my duty to the very last out in the open. I am not afraid of any blackfellow with firearms but their treachery lurks beneath so many guises such as long grass, behind rocks, in creeks, and up high in gorges.  

Willshire and Watson grew to hate each other. Among various complaints, Watson accused Willshire of ‘cohabiting with a child of the tribe about fourteen years of age or less she now has a child by him.’ In turn, Willshire accused Watson of bad management, saying that,

Since Watson came on the run the whole place has been in a state of fermentation, what blackboys and lubras Mr Crawford left behind have all run away since. Watson has such a bad name amongst blacks that they are frightened to remain, nearly every white man has left, and the three that are here now will leave as soon as Watson returns. there [sic] will not be a single person left who knows the run.

And if this was not bad enough, Willshire claimed that ‘even the cattle seemed disgusted with him’! As will be seen, the antipathy between the two men spilled over into the dramatic events at Jasper Gorge.

W H W

The story of the attack on Mulligan and Ligar may be said to begin on April 26th 1895 when Mounted Constable Willshire left VRD for the Depot ‘to send mail and to see Mulligan through the Gorge.’ Loaded wagons are slow-moving and cumbersome at the best of times, and all the more so on a rough track in the narrow confines of a place like

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74 Gordon Creek police journal, 21-3-1895.
76 Gordon Creek police journal, entry for 18-3-1895, see also entry for 8-7-1895.
78 Willshire’s initials, carved on Gregory’s boab. In his book Land of the Dawning, Willshire mentions visiting the boab and also that he carved his initials into a rock on top of an isolated hill on the upper Wickham River. I have searched for this hill but not yet located it. However, in 1975 I did find Willshire’s initials cut into Chambers Pillar, in Central Australia.
79 Gordon Creek police journal, 26-4-1895.
Jasper Gorge. Because of this, in the gorge the wagons were vulnerable to attack by Aborigines and clearly Willshire considered the threat sufficient for him to provide a police escort, and he had done this from the time he was first stationed in the district.\textsuperscript{80}

Willshire arrived at the Depot on April 28\textsuperscript{th} but found that Mulligan could not shift his wagons because two inches (50 mm) of rain had recently fallen, so he returned to Gordon Creek.\textsuperscript{81} Some time after Willshire left, Mulligan wrote a letter to him reporting that one of his ‘boys’, Billy, and Billy’s ‘lubra’, went out horse hunting (apparently at or near the Depot) and never returned, and he asked Willshire to look for them. Mulligan was afraid that Billy had been murdered by the wild blacks or else had cleared out to his own country on the Barkly Tableland.\textsuperscript{82} It is clear that after Mulligan sent the letter Billy returned because he was with the teamsters on the night the attack took place.

With two wagons, each loaded with four and a half tons of rations and other goods bound for VRD, Mulligan and Ligar arrived at TK camp late in the day of May 14\textsuperscript{th}, 1895.\textsuperscript{83} TK Camp is a wide flat at the western end of the gorge. It is bounded on the south side by Jasper Creek and on the east side by TK Creek which flows out of the small valley that Gregory had followed down from the plateau top forty years earlier (plate 82).\textsuperscript{84} The camp was named for the initials of Tom Kilfoyle, pioneer of Rosewood station and one of the Durack clan, which he had carved on a boab tree there.\textsuperscript{85} At the junction of Jasper and TK Creeks there is a deep, narrow waterhole, and the flat is the last good camp before the gorge narrows down considerably and the numerous creek crossings begin. From TK the slow-moving wagons could get right through the gorge in a day, which meant the teamsters could once again camp in open country where they were relatively safe from attack.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid: 11-6-1894.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid: 5-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid: 18-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{83} W. H. Willshire, \textit{Land of the Dawning}, 1896, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{84} E. H. Hill, \textit{The Territory}, 1951, p. 235; see also ‘Government Resident’s Trip to the Victoria River’, entry for 24-11-1895, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6891.
Fifty-two years after the event, J. Kyle-Little, who was on VRD in 1895, said the teams usually had 'an escort of five natives not of those parts...armed with Snider rifles and the teamsters had Winchesters.' 86 In the months leading up to the attack the names of four Aboriginal men who were working for Mulligan are mentioned in the Gordon Creek police journal – Harry, Dick, Major and Billy (alias 'Snowball'). 87 One of them, 'Mulligan's Dick', who came from Newcastle Waters, had cleared out well before the attack took place. 88 However, from various sources it is clear that the other three 'Queensland natives' had come to the gorge with Mulligan and Ligar and were involved in the attack upon them. 89 There were also three Aboriginal women and a 'half caste' child with Mulligan and Ligar on the fateful trip. 90 In initial reports the women are unnamed, though in later police journal entries three women are named – Mabel, Nellie and Rosy. 91 One came from Happy Creek, a short-lived police station near Camooweal, 92 another was from Wave Hill, and the origin of the third is not stated. 93

On arrival at TK Camp the teamsters found a large number of Aborigines in the area. It is clear that during the previous nine years when Mulligan had carried the station stores, some sort of peaceful contact between him and the wild blacks had developed; by 1894 some of the Aborigines knew him by name and would call out ‘Mulligan’ to travellers in the

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86 ‘Culkah’, 'Early Cattle Life', *Pastoral Review*, 15-3-1947. ‘Culkah’ was a pen name adopted by John Kyle Little, a man who spent a lifetime in the outback as stockman, station manager, mounted policeman and in other occupations ('J.K. Little' [obituary], *Pastoral Review*, 16-12-1953: 1205-06).
87 Gordon Creek police journal, 18-3-1895, 19-3-1895, 18-5-1895; Notes of the Week’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-9-1895.
88 Gordon Creek police journal, 31-3-1895.
89 ‘Outrage by Blacks. Two White Men Speared’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-6-1895.
90 Gordon Creek police journal, 18-5-1895; W. H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 89; Gordon Creek police journal, 22-7-1895; the 'half caste’ child may have been the 'half caste little girl known by the name of 'Mary Mulligan’, mentioned in the Timber Creek police journal, 28-1-1902.
91 Gordon Creek police journal, 8-12-1895.
92 The mention of Happy Creek is in a letter from Inspector Paul Foelsche to someone who is unnamed but almost certainly the Government Resident, Charles Dashwood, 14-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539. The identification of Happy Creek as a police station was made in a personal communication from Tony Roberts, author of *Frontier Justice*, in press.
93 Inspector Paul Foelsche to F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, 14-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539.
gorge.\textsuperscript{94} On the night in question 'six or seven myalls...visited the waggons and received some tucker', then made a camp across the creek and began a corroboree.\textsuperscript{95} Harry, Billy and Major took their guns and went across to join them, something they apparently did regularly and with the acquiescence of the teamsters, but their wives remained at the wagons.\textsuperscript{96} Some time after 8 pm the two teamsters were standing near the fire cooking a meal when they were suddenly showered with spears. A stone-headed spear hit Ligar in the back and he sprang for his rifle, but before he got to it a glass-headed spear hit him on the side of the face, nearly severing his nose and penetrating to the left cheekbone. At the same time Mulligan was hit by a spear tipped with a blade from a sheep shear. The \textit{Northern Territory Times} reported that he was wounded in the thigh,\textsuperscript{97} but Aeneas Gunn, who was a cousin of Bradshaw and for a period was closely associated Bradshaw's Run,\textsuperscript{98} said that the spear hit Ligar behind the knee and severed the tendons, crippling for life.\textsuperscript{99}

Initially Ligar was so shocked, and was bleeding so profusely from his face wound, that he was temporarily incapacitated. Mulligan reacted first – he pulled the spear out of his leg, drew his revolver and began shooting into the darkness. His quick action halted any follow-up attack. The spears that hit Ligar either broke off on impact or he managed to remove the shafts, and he soon recovered enough to start using his rifle. It jammed, and before he could free the mechanism the blood flowing from his face clogged it up. When this happened Mulligan handed him a revolver and he fired several shots at random. Thinking that their own Aborigines might be hiding in fear, Ligar called out to them, but got no response. The

\textsuperscript{94} For example, in 1894 the Government Geologist, HYL Brown, met five or six Aborigines in the gorge. One or two understood a few words of English and one said his name was "Mulligan." Brown remarked that 'They seemed rather nervous and doubtful of our intentions, and in a short time retired to their fastnesses in the rocks.' H.Y.L. Brown, 'Fountain Head to Victoria River Downs', in 'Northern Territory Explorations'. \textit{South Australian Parliamentary Papers}, vol. 3, no. 82, 1895; W.H. Willshire in \textit{Land of the Dawning} (1896, p. 77) also mentions this.

\textsuperscript{95} 'The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 28-6-1895.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.


teamsters then discovered that the women were not in their swags and concluded all were in league with the attacking Aborigines. 100

To stem the bleeding from his wound, Mulligan got Ligar to fasten a belt tightly around his leg. In spite of his own wounds, Ligar managed get on top of one of the wagons and drop a tarpaulin down the sides to form a screen behind which they could shelter. At this stage the spearhead in Ligar's back was working loose and Mulligan was able to extract it, 101 but fragments of glass from the other spear remained in his face. 102 As Ligar breathed, blood bubbled from the wound and he realised that his lung had been punctured. Because of his wounds, Ligar could not crouch under the wagon so instead he stood up all night with a rug over his shoulders and his back against a nearby tree. The blacks came back at daylight but mostly kept beyond rifle range. 103

Mulligan's wound made it extremely difficult for him to move, so throughout the day he kept the Aborigines at bay with rifle fire while Ligar got enough bags of flour and sugar off the wagons to form a barricade against further attack. With the help of the two dogs they had with them the teamsters were able to spend the next night in comparative safety and comfort but in the morning 'a large band of blacks and gins appeared'. Once again the Aborigines kept well back, sheltering behind rocks and trees, but one got close enough to throw a spear that landed near Ligar, and Harry fired a shot at Mulligan, which fell short. Mulligan tried to talk to the Aborigines, but was cut short by Harry who called out, 'We will kill both you white b--s to night'. 104

By this time the two men were becoming weak from loss of blood, and probably also from lack of sleep, prolonged stress and inadequate food. They knew the 'Ark' was due at the Depot again on about the 25th, and that Willshire was planning to meet it there. They expected he would come through the gorge on the 24th or 25th but they could not wait that

100 'The late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 28-6-1895.
102 'A Treacherous Tribe. Interview with Mr. Searcy', Adelaide Register, 18-12-1905.
103 'The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 28-6-1895.
104 Ibid.
long, and they could not take the chance that someone else would arrive in the meantime, so they decided to abandon the wagons and head to the Depot about 100 kilometres away. That evening they took saddles and rifles and went in search of the horses. Of the forty horses that pulled the wagons, the Aborigines had killed one and wounded three, and another three were missing. The other thirty-odd were grazing within a mile of the wagons and the teamsters managed to catch two and get away. 105

The two men rode slowly until about 3 am and then rested until daylight before continuing on to the Depot. They had hoped that the ‘Ark’ might have arrived early at the Depot but it was not there, so they left a note and continued on to Auvergne station. After a slow and tortuous trip during which Mulligan suffered severe pain and became delirious for an hour, they reached Auvergne homestead on the evening of May 19th. There they discovered that the ‘Ark’ was stranded on a sandbar some twenty-seven kilometres down the Victoria. They decided to rest for a day before heading down river to the boat. 106

On May 20th, while Mulligan and Ligar were resting at Auvergne, Mounted Constable Willshire was reading the letter Mulligan had written about Billy and his wife going missing. Of course, Willshire wasn’t to know that Billy had returned, let alone what had been happening at TK Camp, so on May 21st he and his two trackers left Gordon Creek to begin a search, as requested by Mulligan. 107 However, the next day he decided to abandon the search and go to meet the teams on the Depot road. 108 On the evening of May 22nd he camped at the eastern entrance to the gorge, and started through the gorge at 6 am the next morning. Twelve kilometres further on,

we came upon the wagons at T.K. Camp. I saw at once that they had been looted by the natives. I could see nothing of Mr Mulligan, George Ligar or anyone else belonging to the wagons & goods scattered about, I wrote a note & sent George back to V.H.S. [Victoria Head Station] whilst Larry & I remained in charge of the

105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Gordon Creek police journal, 21-5-1895.
At the wagons Willshire found everything covered with blood: ‘bloodstains on the felloes and spokes, blood on wearing apparel, blood on flour-bags and rifle cases.’ He thought the teamsters might have been killed and their bodies thrown in the nearby waterhole, so he ‘fired guns off into it to raise the bodies...and got [his] two blackboys to dive from end to end.’

At 9 am on May 24th Jack Watson arrived with two Aborigines and two white men, and everyone began collecting goods scattered on the sides of the gorge. They worked all that day and all the next, and at 6 pm eight more whitemen and four station Aborigines arrived. The latter included a group of overlanders heading for the Kimberley goldfields who had arrived at VRD in time to offer assistance. There were now twenty people at the attack site, all mounted and armed.

After the second lot of men arrived from VRD a letter written by Ligar was found, ‘stating that they were speared through their own boys betraying them, & setting the wild natives upon them & that they had gone on to the depot to try and find the "Ark" barge.’ Someone had brought bandages and medicines to TK, so Willshire set out to try and catch up with the wounded men to offer medical help. At much the same time (the records are mute on exactly when or why) Watson also set out to find Mulligan and Ligar. Willshire arrived at the Depot at midnight and in the morning found the message left by the teamsters. He immediately set off for Auvergne but on the way met Jack Watson, who had...
been to Auvergne already. Watson told Willshire that the teamsters had gone down river in a boat, so both men started back for Jasper Gorge.\textsuperscript{118}

Mulligan and Ligar had set off from Auvergne on May 21\textsuperscript{st} and reached the ‘Ark’ two days later. There they learnt that it was expected to float free on high tides in about five days time, so they remained on board until the 27\textsuperscript{th}, but the tides failed to float the ‘Ark’. As a result the wounded men had no choice but to wait for the arrival of the schooner ‘Victoria’, which was due at Blunder Bay on June 4\textsuperscript{th}. In the meantime they were taken by whaleboat up river to Bradshaw homestead where they arrived ‘in a half dead condition’.\textsuperscript{119} Before their arrival news of their misfortune had reached Hugh Young, the manager of Bradshaw, and he decided to lead an armed party to Jasper Gorge to try and secure the wagon and loading. When Young and his men arrived they ‘found a large number of whitemen assembled, so they only remained for a short time before returning to Bradshaw.\textsuperscript{120} The presence of the Bradshaw men is not mentioned by Willshire, so they probably arrived after he went to the Depot (the evening of the 25\textsuperscript{th}), and left before he returned (the evening of the 28\textsuperscript{th}). On June 5\textsuperscript{th} Mulligan and Ligar were taken aboard the ‘Victoria’ and arrived at Darwin two days later.\textsuperscript{121}

After meeting Jack Watson, Willshire started back for the gorge, but he claimed his horses were tired and he camped again at the Depot. In contrast, Watson’s horse was fresh so he continued on to TK Camp.\textsuperscript{122} Willshire made it back to TK Camp late the next day and found that, ‘Watson & a big party of his men & blackboys had gone out after the natives’.\textsuperscript{123} He spent the next day at TK, treating the wounded horses and loading the wagons,\textsuperscript{124} and that evening Watson and his party returned. According to contemporary sources, the only

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid: 27-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{119} ‘The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 28-6-1895; Log Book of Bradshaws Run, 27-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid: 30-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{121} ‘The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 28-6-1895; Log Book of Bradshaws Run, 27-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{122} Gordon Creek police journal, 27-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid: 28-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid: 29-5-1895.
result of their two days in the ranges was the capture of three middle-aged Aboriginal women whom Watson handed over to Willshire.\textsuperscript{125}

It is probably no accident that Willshire left it to Watson and others to go out after the culprits while he went to look for Mulligan and Ligar, and also spent time gathering goods taken from the wagon and scattered up the sides of the gorge. After his experiences in Central Australia I suspect that he was extremely reluctant to place himself in a situation where he might be forced to shoot Aborigines, with civilian witnesses present.

Early the next morning (May 30\textsuperscript{th}) Watson and his men left for VRD, but Willshire and his prisoners were delayed because he wanted to escort the teams through the gorge. A man named Fred May (plate 83) had taken charge of the wagons which were loaded with recovered goods, but it took him some hours to get everything ready. They got through without incident and camped on open ground beyond the eastern end of the gorge.\textsuperscript{126} That night the three prisoners escaped, and Willshire was ‘of opinion that someone has let them go, either blacks or whites, as they were Secured by neck chain to a small tree, & their ankles handcuffed.’\textsuperscript{127}

In private correspondence Watson was later to blast Willshire about the escape of the prisoners and other supposed inaction and incompetence, claiming that Willshire,

\begin{quote}
\textit{did not recover a single oz of stuff taken off Mulligans [sic] waggons beyond what I got my self in fact never tried and when I captured three of the agressors [sic] and handed them over to the police they lost them the first night though they were chained together and could not recapture them or said they could not.}\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

Willshire had the last word. In his book \textit{Land of the Dawning} he derided Watson for his ‘brilliant capture’ and claimed that one of the women had a broken arm, another was

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid: 29-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid: 30-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid: 31-5-1895.
\textsuperscript{128} Report on VRD by Jack Watson to Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., 5-12-1895. Goldsbrough Mort & Co.

Board Papers, 1893-1927. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, 2/124/1659.
\end{footnotesize}
covered in 'wales [sic] and stripe-like marks extending round her sides', and the third had her breasts swollen and leaking milk, indicating she had an infant that was unaccounted for.\textsuperscript{129} The implication of Willshire's statements is that Watson had flogged these women, and given Watson’s extreme cruelty on other occasions this may well be correct.

Willshire returned to Gordon Creek, but there was still unfinished business. Billy and Harry were wanted for attempted murder, and warrants were eventually issued for their arrest.\textsuperscript{130} There are two major sources of information regarding subsequent events – the police journal entries written by Willshire, and his book, \textit{Land of the Dawning}, the manuscript of which was written by August 1895, while he was still on VRD and the events he wrote about were still unfolding.\textsuperscript{131} The journal entries are usually brief and somewhat cryptic, and sometimes appear to contradict what is in the book.

On July 3\textsuperscript{rd} Jack Watson wrote to Willshire advising that 'Mulligans "Harry" had turned up again & that he secured him, & he eventually broke loose & made his escape,'\textsuperscript{132} but he appears to have left out important details. In his book, Willshire says that Jim Ledgerwood came across Billy and Harry, together with an Aboriginal man known as Major who is named here for the first time as one of those involved in the Jasper Gorge attack. According to Willshire a fight began, spears were thrown at Ledgerwood he shot back. Ledgerwood avoided injury, but shot Major dead, and captured Billy and Harry.\textsuperscript{133}

Ledgerwood took his prisoners to Jack Watson but Watson decided not to hand them over because Ledgerwood (his head stockman)\textsuperscript{134} would have to go to Darwin to give evidence at their trial. As a result, Ledgerwood took them 'on the road', presumably to deliver them to

\textsuperscript{129} W.H. Willshire, \textit{Land of the Dawning}, 1896, pp. 75-76.
\textsuperscript{130} Inspector Paul Foelsche to the Hon the Minister, Charles Dashwood, 20-6-1895. Northern Territory Archives, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539; Gordon Creek police journal, 29-7-1895.
\textsuperscript{132} Gordon Creek police journal, 3-7-1895.
\textsuperscript{133} W.H. Willshire, \textit{Land of the Dawning}, 1896, pp. 88-89.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid: 88.
Willshire at Gordon Creek, but they managed to escape. Willshire says that Ledgerwood later made a long statement to him about Major, Harry, Billy and Watson, and castigated Watson for ‘not offering any assistance, at such a time’. Strangely, in the police journal nothing is said about the shooting of Major, but after Ledgerwood made his statement Major’s name does not appear again.

The search for the wanted Aborigines continued for months. Throughout July and August Willshire made several attempts to locate Billy and Harry, without success. In late July Harry’s wife and ‘the half caste child’ were seen on the lower Victoria, and at one stage Harry himself was believed to be ‘100 yards from VRD meat house’. On July 26th both Billy and Harry were believed to be ‘lurking about the Wickham’ (that is, the VRD homestead), but a wide search the next day found no one. During the search Watson again hampered Willshire by taking back a station Aborigine named Tinker who was assisting him (Willshire), and saying, ‘let the bloody police find their own boys if they want any’. Willshire noted that Watson, ‘blocks me in my work every possible chance, he curses the police day to every and anyone.’ Next came word that Billy and Harry and their women were ‘knocking about’ in the bush near Wave Hill, so Willshire patrolled there, but again found nothing. In August Mounted Constable Burt arrived at VRD to investigate the circumstances of the escape of Billy and Harry, and to assist in the hunt for them. He went with Willshire on at least one patrol, but after that seems to have left the district.

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135 Gordon Creek police journal, 8-7-1895.
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid: 11-7-1895, 12-7-1895, 20-7-1895, 24-7-1895, 27-7-1895, 15-8-1895, 16-8-1895.
138 Ibid: 22-7-1895.
139 W.H. Willshire to J. Watson, 24-7-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6716.
140 Gordon Creek police journal, 26-7-1895.
141 Victoria River Downs homestead was, and still is, located on the Wickham River, and in early times the station and the homestead were often referred to as ‘The Wickham’.
142 Gordon Creek police journal, 27-7-1895.
143 Ibid: 27-7-1895.
144 Ibid: 16-8-1895 to 25-8-1895.
145 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 23-8-1895; Gordon Creek police journal, 15-8-1895.
146 Gordon Creek police journal, 15-8-1895.
147 Ibid: 17-8-1895.
Harry was finally arrested at Powell’s Creek in late August.\textsuperscript{148} On being questioned he was reported as admitting to being involved in everything except the actual spearing of the teamsters. He also said that subsequent to the attack, Billy had been killed by the ‘myall blacks’ who then ‘took possession of the lubras belonging to the Queensland boys.’\textsuperscript{149} The news of Harry’s capture reached Willshire on September 19\textsuperscript{th}, two days before his station was taken over by Mounted Constable Edmond O’Keefe.\textsuperscript{150} Willshire left Gordon Creek on September 26\textsuperscript{th}, travelling first to Darwin where he was to be a witness at Harry’s trial, and then on to a new post in South Australia.\textsuperscript{151}

After the arrest of Harry the women concerned were wanted as witnesses,\textsuperscript{152} so O’Keefe continued to search for them for months, questioning Aborigines on various parts of VRD,\textsuperscript{153} at Wave Hill on three separate occasions, and as far away as Bradshaw station,\textsuperscript{154} but they were never found.\textsuperscript{155} Harry faced court in Darwin in March 1896, but Justice Dashwood threw the charges out for lack of evidence.\textsuperscript{156}

This then is the story of the attack on Mulligan and Ligar as revealed in the historical record, but various questions remain. One is, what caused the attack in the first place? There are various clues to the answer. To begin with, it seems likely that there were pre-existing tensions between the teamsters and their Aboriginal assistants which had caused Billy to temporarily disappear a few days earlier. At the trial of ‘Mulligan’s Harry’, the judge,

vigorously denounced the conduct of Ligar and Mulligan towards their blacks, expressing the belief that much of the loss of life and limb recorded was brought on by the conduct of white men in supplying liquor to natives and chastising them for every offence they committed. In the opinion of His Honour a person had no more

\textsuperscript{148} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 30-8-1895.
\textsuperscript{149} ‘Notes of the Week’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 6-9-1895.
\textsuperscript{150} Gordon Creek police journal, 19-9-1895, 21-9-1895.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid: 26-3-1895, 26-9-1895; Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 4-10-1895.
\textsuperscript{152} Gordon Creek police journal, 4-12-1895.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid: 21-10-1895.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid: 30-9-1895, 9-12-1895, 11-1-1896.
\textsuperscript{156} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 13-3-1896.
right to take the law into his own hands with a native than one white man had to chastise another.\textsuperscript{157}

From this it would appear that on the night of the attack there was alcohol in the camp and the teamsters shared it with Harry and Billy, and that the teamsters had on occasion beaten them for misdemeanors.\textsuperscript{158} Giving alcohol to his Aboriginal employees would have been in keeping with Ligar’s past behaviour. He had twice been convicted for supplying Aborigines with alcohol,\textsuperscript{159} and in view of his disposition when drunk it is highly likely that he had been violent towards the ‘boys’. During Ligar’s trial for arson in 1879, storekeeper Frederick Griffiths, said in evidence that he was afraid of him, and that ‘The only danger was in prisoner’s erratic temper...when he’s drunk he’s a dangerous lunatic, he says so himself’. Mounted Constable W. Reed also gave evidence and said of Ligar that, ‘he is not quarrelsome when he is drunk but is dangerous.’\textsuperscript{160}

Another question is, was the capture of the three women by Jack Watson the only result of his foray into the ranges? The record is clear that the whites who came in response to Willshire’s letter were there for six days, and spent the first four retrieving goods scattered along and above the gorge. Once this had been done, a large party led by Watson ‘had gone out after the natives’. They were only out for two days and then returned to VRD. Willshire also returned to VRD, and there was no further attempt by anyone to find and arrest the bush blacks involved in the attack.

Two days is a remarkably short time to be spent in pursuit of Aboriginal offenders. Usually such parties were out for at least a week and sometimes for several weeks,\textsuperscript{161} and some years earlier Watson himself had spent weeks in pursuit of Aborigines who had attacked some drovers.\textsuperscript{162} Gordon Buchanan, who probably heard the ‘inside’ story from one or more

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid: 6-9-1895.
\textsuperscript{159} ‘Law Courts’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 18-6-1881, 9-7-1881.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid: 27-12-1879.
\textsuperscript{161} For example, the party that went out after the killers of Rudolph Philchowski in 1913 was gone for nearly three weeks (M. Durack, \textit{Sons in the Saddle}, Corgi Books, Britain, 1985, p. 398
of those directly involved, says that Watson’s party caught up with the Aborigines ‘after a long search and by patient tracking’; but I believe that Watson’s party actually caught up with the Aborigines very quickly; possibly Watson had sent a couple of his Aborigines into the ranges ahead of time to locate their camps.

Did he and his men return on the second day and make no further attempt to find the offenders because they felt that ‘justice’ had been done? And if so, what did this ‘justice’ amount to? Gordon Buchanan states that ‘a large camp of the enemy’ was surprised and ‘adequate punishment’ was inflicted, and his claim finds support in a cutting from the Northern Territory Times of June 14th 1895, held by the South Australian Archives. This cutting is a report of the attack on Mulligan and Ligar, and at the end, written with a nibbed pen in old-style cursive script is the comment, ‘and 60 were shot’.

Could sixty Aborigines have been shot? After Willshire arrived and more whites began to appear in the gorge, the Aborigines withdrew to the top of the gorge. They probably kept an eye on proceedings and after a few days with no pursuit they may have felt safe from reprisal, so moved to a convenient place on the plateau top and settled down to feast upon the flour and other foods looted from the wagons. Seventeen men rode out with Watson that day, many of them undoubtedly armed with modern-style repeating rifles and revolvers. If they came upon a large camp of Aborigines and caught them unawares, they could easily have shot sixty people.

And what of Mulligan and Ligar? Both men survived their wounds and the terrible ordeal they endured in getting to medical help in Darwin, and some months later Mulligan he left for Queensland for additional treatment. When he recovered sufficiently he returned to VRD, probably to retrieve his property, but the blacks seemed to have had it in for him.

164 Ibid.
165 This cutting was brought to my attention by Dr Peter Read and Dr Jay Arthur. It is in the State Records Office in South Australia, but the original reference information has been lost and I have not yet been able to relocate it. The original article comes from the Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 14-6-1895.
166 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 22-11-1895.
Some days after he arrived back on VRD Aborigines raided his camp and stole, among other things, his Winchester rifle and a lot of cartridges. This probably did not occur in Jasper Gorge, but the gorge blacks were suspects. Mounted Constable O’Keefe went to Jasper Gorge and spent a week riding over and around the Stokes Range looking for the offenders, but without success.

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**Figure 3:** The newspaper cutting about the attack on Mulligan and Ligar with the annotation ‘& 60 were shot’ (South Australian State Records Office).

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167 Gordon Creek police journal, 20-4-1896; Northern Territory Times & Gazette, after 15-5-1896.

168 Gordon Creek police journal, 20-4-1896 to 1-5-1896.
Mulligan returned to teamstering, but appears to have shifted his operations to the Katherine region. On April 25th 1900 he arrived in his camp on the Ferguson River looking worried and ill. The next day he looked much worse and was seen to write several letters and to burn some documents. Later he ‘vomited much blood’ and that night he died peacefully, after saying ‘he was tired and sad and going away to his own country’ His death was put down to natural causes, but the wound he received in Jasper Gorge had caused him ongoing pain, and he had become a regular user of morphine. From the circumstances of his death it seems likely that he had suicided with an overdose.

Ligar returned to VRD in August 1895, possibly to assist in retrieving Mulligan’s team horses, and left for Katherine a month later. According to Ernestine Hill, for the rest of his life Ligar would ‘scare the girls’ by pushing a hairpin or a peg through the hole left by the spear. Eventually he drifted over the Ord River country where he died from the combined effects of excessive drinking and dysentery on the ‘Bend of the Ord’ in December 1901. He bequeathed his estate to a sister living in Texas.

The attack on Mulligan and Ligar was the most serious that occurred in Jasper Gorge, but attacks, robbery and other problems continued for years. On his way through the gorge in January 1897 O’Keefe came across a large gathering of Aborigines in the gorge and dispersed them, and in 1899 two cyclists riding through the gorge on a round Australia trip had spears thrown at them, and saw ‘a number of natives on Mountain singing out & displaying their spears.’

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169 An advertisement which appeared in the Northern Territory Times & Gazette of February 7th 1896 advised that Mulligan was removing his teams from VRD to Maude Creek, north of Katherine.
170 ‘The late J. Mulligan’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 4-5-1900.
171 Ibid: 4-5-1900.
172 Gordon Creek police journal, 6-8-1895.
173 Timber Creek police journal, 6-9-1895.
175 Public Records Office of Western Australia, Occurrence Book [Wyndham], 1899-1902, entry for 29-12-1901, ACC 741-5.
177 Timber Creek police journal, 16-1-1897.
178 Ibid: 17-11-1899.
When drover ‘Dead Sweet’ Joe Stevenson was taking a mob of about 500 bullocks through the gorge in October 1900, a crowd of over one hundred armed Aborigines ‘sprang up from behind rocks, trees, etc., and commenced yelling and screaming like so many demons’.179 As was intended, the entire herd took fright and rushed through the gorge, and a number were either killed or so badly injured that they had to be left behind. As soon as the drovers had gone a safe distance the Aborigines came down and began a great feast. Later the ‘black fiends’ sent word to the ‘station boys’ that they intended to do the same to every mob passing through the gorge, and that they also intended to attack the station supply wagons, loot them, and kill the teamsters. The Northern Territory Times expressed the fear that if nothing was done local residents would be tempted to take the law into their own hands. It reported that many were of the opinion that the number of police in the district should be ‘very largely increased’, but that one old drover suggested withdrawing the police altogether and giving the locals a ‘free hand’ to deal with the problem.180

After Stevenson’s experience the authorities finally acted. The practice of providing a police escort for the teams travelling through the gorge was extended to drovers with mobs of cattle181 and an extra trooper and two trackers were sent to Timber Creek to begin special patrols of troublesome areas, including Jasper Gorge (see Chapter 4). Between January 1902 and November 1903 the police escorted drovers and travellers through the gorge on seven occasions.182 Within a few years of the special patrol being introduced, attacks on or harassment of white travellers in the gorge almost ceased. One writer has credited donkey teamster Burt Drew with demonstrating ‘how the cunning could be overcome, and the gorge could be made safe for democracy,’ but exactly how Drew did this is not stated.183

179 ‘More Trouble with the Blacks’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 23-11-1900.
180 Ibid.
181 For example, see Timber Creek police journal, 8-7-1901 (part of patrol report dated 14-7-1901), 13-8-1902, 27-9-1903.
182 Ibid: 4-1-1902, 1-5-1902, 2-5-1902, 13-7-1902, 4-8-1902, 6-8-1902, 7-8-1902, 8-8-1902, 13-9-1902, 31-10-1902, 6-11-1903.
Furthermore, Drew first appeared in the district in 1917\textsuperscript{184} but Aborigines had ceased to be a real problem in the gorge more than a decade earlier.

No doubt the special patrols contributed to the decline in conflict, but there are other factors that must be considered. At much the same time that the patrols were instigated, the stations began to establish ‘blacks’ camps’ at the homesteads and outstations (see Chapter 4). This undoubtedly increased communication between the two societies which may have helped ease tensions between them, and certainly increased the ability of the whites to identify particular troublemakers, but it probably also increased domination by the whites through their control of desired goods such as tobacco, and through fear of the gun. Only two incidents are known to have occurred in or close to the gorge after 1901. These are the spearing of VRD manager Jim Ronan, and the attempted spearing of Tom Wakelin in 1909.

According to Jim Ronan’s son Tom, while riding through the gorge his father encountered over one hundred Aborigines, the largest group of Aborigines he had ever seen. With Ronan was ‘Dutchy’ Benning who had been attacked in 1900 near the Gregory Creek-Victoria River junction (see Chapter 7). Ronan, ‘Dutchy’ and their ‘boys’ got through safely and camped in open country a few miles past beyond the gorge, but at daylight the next morning their camp was attacked and Ronan was speared in the leg.\textsuperscript{185} The incident is said to have been reported to the Timber Creek police, but there is no mention of it in the Timber Creek police journal, or elsewhere.

Tom Wakelin, a blacksmith ‘recently employed at Wave Hill’, had spears thrown at him while he was riding through the gorge in 1909.\textsuperscript{186} Wakelin was in the Kimberley in 1887\textsuperscript{187} and had been in the Victoria River district as early as 1895.\textsuperscript{188} He worked as a carpenter on the Elsey homestead when Jeannie Gunn was there in 1902, and was ‘Little Johnny’ in

\textsuperscript{184} Timber Creek police journal, 8-9-1917.
\textsuperscript{186} Timber Creek police journal, 22-8-1909.
\textsuperscript{187} State Records Office of Western Australia. Wyndham Occurrence Book, 1886-1888, entry for 9-8-1887. ACC 741/1.
\textsuperscript{188} \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 28-2-1896.
Gunn’s *We of the Never Never*. The Aborigines who threw the spears at him remained hidden behind rocks, but called out in English that they would ‘kill all white ——.’ Wakelin, ‘immediately set spurs to his horse and galloped for his life, spears following him until he outdistanced his pursuers.’ After a prolonged police investigation, Bamboo, Wooroola, and Wanbinola were charged with common assault, convicted, and each sentenced to a years’ gaol with hard labour.

The attack on Wakelin was the last known violent incident between blacks and whites in Jasper Gorge; but since that time the myths and legends surrounding the gorge have grown. Possibly the ‘aura’ of Jasper Gorge has been bolstered by the adventure of travel through it. Long after the possibility of violent conflict became a thing of the past, the gorge remained a rough place for travellers. As late as 1937, on possibly the last trip through the gorge by one of the old-style wagons loaded with stores for VRD, the wagon became bogged (plate 84). The teamster was Burt Drew, who had been carrying the VRD loadings since 1917 and was known as the ‘Donkey King’. Apparently Drew took advantage of being stuck in the mud in time-honoured fashion – he got stuck into the rum. A month later he was brought in to the VRD hospital (plate 85) where for days he ‘had the horrors well & truly.’

For years it appears there was a relic in the gorge which provided tangible proof of the violent history of Jasper Gorge – an Aboriginal skull with a bullet hole in it. From time to time I have heard stories about Aboriginal skulls with bullet holes, but I rarely met a storyteller who claimed to have actually seen one. For my own part, I have seen numerous Aboriginal skulls in rock shelters throughout the Victoria River country and elsewhere in the north, but never one with a bullet hole. I began to suspect that such stories were white
myths – until I finally met a firsthand witness. In 1948 Lexie Simmons\(^{195}\) went to stay with her sister at VRD and soon afterwards some of the station hands took them on a picnic to Jasper Gorge. While there the hands showed Lexie a skull with a bullet hole in a rock shelter near the eastern end of the gorge.\(^{196}\) As she was telling me her story a few years ago, in my mind I was planning to go and search for it myself, but when I mentioned this to Lexie she told me that the skull had been taken back to VRD homestead, and was no longer in the gorge.

However, there may be another one. In the 1980s I was told that a cook with a road working team based in the gorge had wandered around the cliffs and found a similar skull. It is possible that the skull seen by this cook was the same skull that Lexie Simmons saw, but it is just as possible that it was a different one. Is there still such a skull somewhere in Jasper Gorge? Until every inch of the cliff lines are searched – a massive job – we will never know. This chapter may have stripped away some of the myths of the gorge, and transformed some wild imaginings to a more sober ‘wild history’, but the aura of mystery in the gorge will remain for a long time to come.

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\(^{195}\) Lexie was born Alexandra Gurr and in 1949 became Mrs George Bates, George then being head stockman at Mount Sanford, on VRD. In later years she divorced George and remarried to a man named Simmons.

\(^{196}\) Personal communication, Lexie Simmons.
Chapter 6

CAPTAIN JOE’S BRADSHAW

It would be no exaggeration to call ‘Captain’ Joe Bradshaw a ‘Colossus of the North’ (plates 86, 87). He was one of the great entrepreneurs of early north Australia, standing with one business ‘foot’ in the Kimberley and the other in Arnhem Land, and Bradshaw station strategically placed below. An unenviable metaphorical position, perhaps, but ‘Bradshaw’s Run’ was to become one of the legendary Northern Territory stations, and would long outlast Joe’s other pastoral interests. This chapter is primarily concerned with the origin and early development of Bradshaw station, but this cannot be separated from the flamboyant Captain Joe and some of his other enterprises, and so his biography is also dealt with in some detail. Similarly, I have provided sufficient detail to highlight both the complexity of connections among whites and the often convoluted, problematic and sometimes sinister relations between the whites and the Aborigines.

Captain Joe was born in Victoria on June 10th 1854.1 He was born into money, the son of Joseph Bradshaw, a wealthy squatter who owned several sheep properties, including Bolwarra station.2 As an adult, Joe (junior) was always keen to add to the family fortune. During his life he had interests in mining, railways and shipping, as well as in pastoralism.3 In fact, his business interests were such that he spent comparatively little time living on any of his stations.

Joe’s first love appears to have been sailing. He owned a series of yachts and launches, including a schooner named The Twins,4 a ‘steamerette’ called the Red Gauntlet,5 a

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3 Ibid.
4 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for April 1894. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 2261.
kerosene launch, the Wunwulla,⁶ and another launch, the Bolwarra.⁷ These vessels were the main means for transport of goods and people to and from his various stations; at Bradshaw the remains of two landings where these boats moored can still be seen, opposite the sites of the pre-1905 and post-1905 homesteads.⁸ Joe’s title of ‘Captain’ may have been honorary, possibly bestowed by the Sydney Yachting Club.⁹ He certainly was not a qualified ship’s engineer because twice in 1894 he had to ask permission to sail the Red Gauntlet without a qualified engineer on board.¹⁰

In his schooner Twins (aka Gemini) Captain Joe explored a long stretch of the north coast and later published several papers on the north¹¹ for which he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.¹² For services to trade between Australia and the ‘Netherlands Islands’ (modern Indonesia) he was made a Life Fellow of the Imperial Institute,¹³ and he was active in public affairs, writing letters on various topics to Government officials or to

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⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for January 1894. This vessel is not to be confused with the nineteenth century luxury yacht of the same name, owned by Edward Langtry, the first husband of the famous Lillie Langtry (E. Dudley, The Gilded Lily: The Life and Loves of the fabulous Lillie Langtry, Odhams Press Limited, London, 1958); see the Sydney Morning Herald, 28-9-1880 for a description of this yacht in Sydney Harbour.
⁷ Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for June 1897.
⁹ Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 26-5-1925.
¹⁰ Under Treasurer T. Stevens to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5948; J. Bradshaw to Government Resident, 15-2-1894 and 2-10-1894, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6256; Harbor [sic] Master H. Marsh to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 2-10-1894, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6256.
¹³ ‘The late Mr. Joseph Bradshaw’, The Pastoral Review, 16-8-1916, p. 725; ‘Mr. Joseph Bradshaw’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 19-3-1914.
newspapers. He once advocated the adoption of a uniform phonetic system for the recording of Aboriginal words, but unfortunately the idea was not adopted.\textsuperscript{14}

Joe was a Justice of the Peace in several states and a Special Justice in the Northern Territory,\textsuperscript{15} and in this capacity he had the power to hear court cases, hold inquests, sign warrants, and perform other duties. When Mounted Constable O'Keefe was ordered to close the Gordon Creek police station and establish a new station at Timber Creek, it was Joe who ‘held a court at the Depot under a box tree’,\textsuperscript{16} and ‘approved of site for new [police] Station.’\textsuperscript{17} Joe laid down the law at the Depot several times over the next four years,\textsuperscript{18} but he was not above bending the law a little himself. After one hearing O'Keefe sent a memo to headquarters alleging that Bradshaw and another man attempted to avoid paying the dog licence fee by making out that their dogs belonged to Aborigines.\textsuperscript{19}

Exactly when Joe first went to northern Australia is unclear, but he soon gained an extensive knowledge of the north Australian coast and its pastoral potential. In 1890 he obtained a lease for over 400,000 hectares in the northwest Kimberley,\textsuperscript{20} and the following year he led a party overland from Wyndham to examine the leased area more closely. Included in this party were Joe’s brother Fred (plate 88), Hugh Young, W.F. Allen, and two Aborigines from Darwin.\textsuperscript{21} Deep in the Kimberley they discovered some finely drafted red ochre rock paintings of human figures. Joe believed these paintings were so different from Aboriginal rock art elsewhere, and so finely executed, that they must have been done by visitors from some ancient civilisation, a theory now long discredited.\textsuperscript{22} He published a

\textsuperscript{14} J. Bradshaw to the President of the Royal Geographical Society, South Australian Branch, 20-4-1900. Manuscript 14c, Royal Geographical Society of South Australia.
\textsuperscript{15} ‘The late Mr. Joseph Bradshaw’, \textit{The Pastoral Review}, 16-8-1916, p. 725; ‘Mr. Joseph Bradshaw’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 19-3-1914.
\textsuperscript{16} Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 11-5-1898.
\textsuperscript{17} Timber Creek police journal, 1-5-1898, Northern Territory Archives, F302.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid: 3-11-1902, 19-4-1903, 29-8-1903.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid: 19-4-1903.
\textsuperscript{21} J. Bradshaw. \textit{Journal, 31 Jan – 6 June 1891, on an expedition from Wyndham, W.A. to the Prince Regent River district}, W.A. Mitchell Library B967, CY reel 1515.

J. Bradshaw, Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, vol. 9, pt 2, 1892, pp. 90-103.


The tax was thirty shillings per head on cattle and twenty shillings per head on horses (Western Australian Parliamentary Debates, Sessions 1893, vol. 2, page 257).

J. Bradshaw to the Minister for Lands (NT), 27-7-1893. Australian Archives, A.C.T. CRS A1640, item 93/302.
Map 8: The map Joe Bradshaw sent to the Minister for Lands showing the area he wanted to lease.

The Minister was not impressed – the official rental was one shilling per square mile, so Joe’s application was rejected. On August 16th he wrote again, still offering to pay only six pence per square mile because, he said, ‘From reports at my disposal I estimated that nearly one half of the country I applied for is occupied by sterile sandstone ranges, and that I would be paying fully one shilling per mile for such country as I could use.”

Joe’s reports were completely accurate. Roughly half of Bradshaw station is within the Fitzmaurice River basin, almost all of which is wild, rough, stony country. The basin is bounded on the south side by the towering, cliff-lined Yambarran Range (formerly the ‘Sea

29 J. Bradshaw to the Minister for the Northern Territory, 16-8-1893. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, item 93/302.
Range’ of Stokes\textsuperscript{30}), a range that has been a dominating presence throughout Bradshaw history. Joe also told the Minister that considering how much unoccupied country there was in the Northern Territory the rent was too high, and he appears to have tried some subtle pressure to have the rent reduced:

I would feel obliged for your early decision on this matter as I am about despatching a cargo of sheep to my country in Kimberley W.A. but on receiving a favourable reply from you I would probably alter their destination to the Northern Territory.\textsuperscript{31}

It is clear Joe did not receive a ‘favourable reply’ because when he gave evidence to the 1895 Royal Commission into the Northern Territory, he stated, ‘I am paying for a lot of useless land, so that my rental is really 2s. a mile for that which is any good.’\textsuperscript{32}

Bradshaw’s Run came into existence on January 1\textsuperscript{st} 1894 when Joe obtained a lease for 6,800 square miles,\textsuperscript{33} and the size of the run was considerably expanded in January 1898 when Joe’s brother Fred obtained a lease for 2000 square miles immediately north of Joe’s lease. The two leases were run as one station making Bradshaw a massive 8,800 square miles.\textsuperscript{34} Fred appears to have lived permanently on the station from this time.

Some time after the original lease was taken up a station diary was begun, the ‘Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run’.\textsuperscript{35} Initially it was a record of some of the more significant events, quite likely written retrospectively, but from June 19\textsuperscript{th} 1899 it became a day by day account of station activities, finally ending on July 13\textsuperscript{th} 1901. It is a unique document in the early history of the Victoria River region, providing a fascinating insight into the process of

\textsuperscript{30} J.L. Stokes, \textit{Discoveries In Australia...During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle in the years 1837-43}, vol. 2, T. and W. Boone, London, 1846, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{31} J. Bradshaw to the Minister for the Northern Territory, 16-8-1893. Australian Archives, ACT, CRS A1640, item 93/302.


\textsuperscript{33} Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for January 1894.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid: entry for January 1898.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
exploration and early development of the station, and the complex state of relations between the European newcomers, and the ‘bush’ and station Aborigines.

The Log Book records that on May 17th 1894, a temporary camp was established at the base of ‘The Dome’ and all the stores and equipment were landed there, but later these goods were moved back onboard a boat to prevent theft by Aborigines. On September 22nd The Twins moved all the stores and other goods up Angalarri Creek to a place called Kumallalay or ‘Youngsford’, and a homestead was established there. This homestead was visited by a Norwegian zoologist, Knut Dahl, in April 1895 and his description of the buildings and station staff is the earliest on record:

Having rowed for several hours we heard bells and very soon saw the ‘station,’ an open shed surrounded by some other buildings of still simpler architecture. Three Englishmen, a Brazilian and a Swede, besides a couple of Port Darwin blacks with their women, occupied themselves in shepherding a few thousand sheep, and appeared on the whole to lead a precarious existence. The Swede got very excited at meeting a Scandinavian. The station itself, as a going concern, looked pretty miserable. The houses were, to put it mildly, very sketchily built, all sorts of implements, as it were, floating around anyhow.

The supply of freshwater at Kumallalay proved unsatisfactory so in January 1896 the homestead was shifted to a high bank on the north side of Angalarri Creek, close to ‘Duetpun spring’ which flows from under the cliffs of the Yambarran Range. In 1905 the homestead was shifted once more to a more elevated site about a kilometre away and this site was occupied until the 1950s (plate 89).

36 ‘The Dome’, named by Stokes-Wickham expedition, is a cone-shaped hill about nine kilometres below the Angalarri Creek-Victoria River junction.
38 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, 22-9-1894. The exact location of this homestead site has not been determined.
40 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for January 1896.
41 G. Le Hunte, ‘Northern Territory (Report by his Excellency the Governor of South Australia)’, South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 2, no. 37, 1905, p. 6.
Bradshaw station was set up with the help of 'foreign' Aborigines, one from south of Halls Creek\textsuperscript{43} and others from Darwin,\textsuperscript{44} and at least one from the local area. Although most local Aborigines were still quite hostile to the white settlers at the time Bradshaw station was established, the use of the placenames 'Kumallalay' and 'Duetpun' indicates that within a year at least one local Aborigine was assisting the settlers. This person probably came from the neighbouring Auvergne station which had been established in 1886,\textsuperscript{45} but may have been a bush Aborigine who previously had been in contact with or observed the white people at Auvergne or elsewhere, and who decided to come in to work for the newly arrived whites on Bradshaw. In this circumstance Bradshaw station was different from and more fortunate than other stations in the region. Elsewhere the settlers did not have local Aboriginal guides for many years, and had to find the various waters and access routes for themselves.

As might be expected, when a station was established one of the first actions was to begin exploring, or more appropriately, examining the lease. I say 'examining' because the country was 'new' or 'undiscovered' to the Europeans, but intimately known to and named by Aborigines for thousands of years, and the Bradshaw whites had access to local knowledge. Some trips were made specifically to quickly gain an overview where the best pastureland and waters were, while knowledge also was gained incidental to other activities.

For Europeans, 'learning the country' was a process that continued for years. In August 1894 'Communication was opened between the sheep party now on the Fitzmaurice River and the station at the Dome'.\textsuperscript{46} This line of communication was through the Angalarri Valley and if it had not already been examined, this trip revealed the extent of useful land – almost all the good land on Bradshaw. Shortly afterwards Joe Bradshaw and Captain

\textsuperscript{43} Aeneas Gunn, 'The Contributor. Pioneering in Northern Australia', \textit{Prahran Telegraph}, 5-8-1899; Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for August 8\textsuperscript{th} 1899.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 6-7-1894.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid: 28-8-1886.
\textsuperscript{46} Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for August 1894.
Lindsay examined the Fitzmaurice River by boat, and chances are their observations of the generally rocky country there, similar to that along the lower Victoria, deterred them from further exploration for a period. It was not until June 1897 that the Log Book again refers to exploration of the station:

Messrs Bradshaw [...?] & party made an exploration of the country between the Victoria & Fitzmaurice rivers, discovering good country along the course of the Lalxin creek with many fine pools of water such as Kibura, Dhimon Dhiriji, Laberi, Kokin jerima, Kulindu, Labangula, Dargatchi etc.

This passage documents the first time whites entered the Koolendong Valley, a major Aboriginal access route through the rough ranges between the Victoria and Fitzmaurice rivers. The location can be identified because some of the placenames are still recognisable today: ‘Dhimon Dhiriji’ is Jiminjerry waterhole, Kulindu is Koolendong waterhole. Once again, the recording of Aboriginal placenames shows that the Bradshaw whites had a local Aboriginal guide (or guides), and were not making discoveries for themselves.

In the course of examining and moving about the station the white men came across two boab trees marked by Europeans. One found near the Dome bore markings from Gregory’s expedition (plate 90), while another found on Angalarri Creek bore the words ‘Fred Adams Southhamp[...] sic] and a date that appeared to be either ‘Oct 15’ or ‘Oct ’75’. The excited station hands wrote to the Government Resident about it, and suggested the inscription had been cut in 1775 or 1815, either by unknown sailors looking for fresh water or ‘by some

48 Ibid: entry for June 1897.
49 Personal communication, Andrew McWilliam, who carried out an Aboriginal sites survey on Bradshaw in the late 1990s.
50 I have documented these sites in my 1996 National Trust report, The Boab Belt, vol. 1, sites 4 and 5.
51 Further ‘discoveries’ were yet to be made; the following year Fred Bradshaw found or was shown, ‘a fine spring called Wujemon’ about 40 miles from the station.’ (Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 22-7-1898). Other placenames in the Log Book that are recognisable today are Kullajunga Creek (Kurrajungle), Wujemon (Widgeman Spring), Eucumbon (Ikymbon Creek), Angalarri (Angalarri Creek) and Mairanyi (Marani paddock). These placenames are mentioned in entries for September 1897, 22-7-1898, 4-7-1899, 22-9-1899, and 22-10-1899, respectively).
shipwrecked seaman making inland for assistance. A similar letter was published in the *Northern Territory Times*, but when explorer Augustus Gregory learnt of the discovery he put a damper on these wild imaginings by revealing that Fred Adams had been a member of his expedition and therefore the date was 1855. Both trees have long since disappeared.

During the time the lease was being explored, Captain Joe was also stocking it and establishing basic infrastructure. Initially he brought in over 4,500 sheep he purchased from VRD. Their fate is documented in Chapter 8 and need not be recounted here. Suffice it to say that the project was a disaster. Less than two years after the station was established moves were made to replace the sheep with cattle and within ten years only three or four sheep were left.

The cattle that stocked Bradshaw came from Willeroo station which had been abandoned after Aborigines killed the manager in 1892 (see Chapter 7). Joe hired Jock McPhee to muster the cattle and bring them to Bradshaw, and over the next five years the Log Book documents the arrival of a total of 1,512 head from Willeroo. While there were sheep on Bradshaw, one or two yards and paddocks had been built to hold them, but generally they had been looked after by shepherds. Shepherds are neither necessary nor practical for cattle, but yards are virtually indispensable, so soon after the Willeroo cattle were bought, work on cattle yards began. At the time the Willeroo brand was ‘J41’ and ‘J41 Yard’, built during the time that the Willeroo cattle were being transferred to Bradshaw and still

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52 Aeneas Gunn, P.C. McDonald, Hugh Young, D. Buchanan and D. Darrock to Government Resident, 20-4-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6525.
54 ‘Notes of the Week’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-9-1895.
55 In the course of Historic sites surveys for the Australian National Trust (NT) I have carried out intensive surveys of boabs in the areas where these trees were found. Various historic marked trees were recorded, but not those found by the Bradshaw men.
56 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entries for 27-9-1895, 25-10-1895, 30-7-1896 and 15-7-1899.
57 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for April 1896 and 20-9-1900.
60 Ibid: entry for 5-7-1899.
marked on modern maps, is a reminder of the founding herd. As well as ‘J41’, by 1901 another eight yards were built, various areas were fenced and several outstation huts built.

In May 1896 a small dam was built at Deutpun Spring and pipes were laid from there to the homestead. The Log Book has many references to these pipes being cleared of blockages, but when it was flowing the supply to the house was up to ‘1500 gallons per 24 hours’. For decades Bradshaw was probably the only station in the district to have water on tap, and spring water is still being piped to the homestead today.

In 1900 work began on what is probably the most amazing early engineering work ever carried out on any station in the Victoria River district. On May 23rd the Log Book reported that ‘JB [Joe Bradshaw] FMB [Frederick Maxwell Bradshaw], Ivan [Egoriffe] and 3 boys’ were ‘blasting out a horse track to the top of the cliffs at Tyalutyi Spring.’ The next day ‘All hands except the cook’ were ‘making a zig-zag road up the cliffs at Tyuluchi.’ The result of their work can still be seen today; in the ‘slot’ where a huge section of the cliff was blown out, picks and crowbars must have been used to form a steep one-horse-wide track with two hairpin turns. On part of the downhill side of this track there is a sheer drop of more than five metres so if a horse or person slipped they would suffer severe injury or death. Immediately below the cliff the slope is quite steep so a long sweeping zig-zag track was made until a gentler grade was reached (plates 91, 92).

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61 J41 Yard is located on the Ikymbon 1:100,000 map, sheet 5067, (edition 1). Co-ordinates 949 327. Though the yard is still marked on this map it was burnt down many years ago.

62 The Log Book mentions construction of a stub yard near Mount Panton in November 1895, a stockyard ‘beyond Anglepoint’ in April 1896, one at the homestead in September 1899, Dusty Camp stockyard in September 1900, construction of a ‘draughting yard’ between October 1900 and January 1901, of a tailing yard at Larrikin Billabong (Larrung Pool) in May 1901, and tailing yards at Wilsons Creek (Ballan—Gootchee) and Snake Billabong in December 1901. Fences also were built; a horse paddock in January 1896, Wogura paddock in December 1898, Junction paddock in July 1899, a ‘division fence’ through the horse paddock in June 1899, a division fence ‘from Spring to River’ and the ‘Dome fence’ in January 1900, and a ‘Drop fence’ at ‘Myranna’ in December 1900. Old photos show that huts were built at Myranna and Larung in the early 1900s (see plate 93), and there were huts at Wombungie and J41 yard at an early date.

63 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for May 1896.

64 Ibid: entries for 19-6-1899.

65 Ibid: entries for 23-5-1900 and 24-5-1900.

66 I have documented this site in my 1996 report, The Boab Belt, vol. 1, site 16, pp. 87-95.
Given how relatively few cattle the Fitzmaurice River basin can support, it is surprising that construction of this packhorse track was considered worthwhile. However, built it was. The top of the Yambarran Range is flat and open from one to ten kilometres back from the edge of the cliff line, and then drops away into a network of gullies, the headwaters of streams flowing to the Fitzmaurice River. Once stockmen reached the summit they could ride along the range for over 45 kilometres, and begin a muster down any one of these creeks they chose. How often the track was used is unclear. In the historical record there are only a few references to it being used, including by the Liddy brothers who were stockmen on Bradshaw in the 1930s, and by a police patrol during the manhunt for Nemarluk in 1932.67

By the time Captain Joe had arrived to establish his station in 1894 there had been a regular though infrequent presence of Europeans along the river and at the Depot for a decade, and it is clear that hostilities between the Aborigines and whites in the local region were already well established. In 1894 the stores landed at the Depot were being held under guard until the station wagons arrived, and "the blacks had been so aggressive that the guards had to barricade themselves behind the flour bags and keep up a continual rifle fire all night."68 And there had been earlier, more serious incidents – the spearing of Tom Hardy at Auvergne, the attack on ‘Spanish Charley’ near the Depot, and the murder of Manton on the West Baines in 1890 (see Chapter 4).

Just as had happened on other stations in the region, conflict with Aborigines quickly became a dominant aspect of life on Bradshaw. Not long after the sheep arrived the Aborigines began to spear them, and consequently the Bradshaw stockmen fired on Aborigines whenever they saw them.69 After one instance of sheep spearing a number of Aborigines are said to have been shot dead and their bodies burned by Jock McPhee and Hugh Young.70 The original flock of 4,500 had diminished to less than 114 by early 1899 (see Chapter 8), so the shooting and burning of these Aborigines is likely to have occurred in the years 1894 to 1898. After Mulligan and Ligar were attacked in Jasper Gorge it was

69 Ibid: 190.
Hugh Young who led a party from Bradshaw to the gorge to secure the loading. In this instance they found matters already in hand so returned within a day or so without violent contact with Aborigines (see Chapter 5).

With the arrival of cattle on Bradshaw in September 1895, the Aborigines soon turned their attention to them. In April 1896, ‘The Myalls made themselves obnoxious by spearing horses and cows, so had to be dispersed near the stockyard beyond Anglepoint.’ Possibly the same ‘dispersal’ was reported by a ‘correspondent’ to the *Northern Territory Times*:

> The niggers have speared a few more horses, and were kind enough to send in word (the messenger standing on top of a cliff and sheltered by a big rock) that they would spear all the horses and then come along and spear all hands. They also tackled me and another man while poking about in the ranges, but they only hurt themselves.

Shortly after Fred Bradshaw arrived on the station in 1898 he was rudely awakened to the dangers of living in the north when, for reasons that are unknown, an Aborigine named Imgboro (alias Xilla Inixas Farhu) tried to kill him. In spite of this, Fred later was said to have been very kind to the Aborigines and there is evidence that in his case this statement may have been correct.

There may have been a camp for bush blacks on Bradshaw by 1899 as the Log Book entry for June mentions that ‘Ivan and five myalls went in the launch to Blunder Bay to meet the Sch [schooner] Midge.’ There certainly was one a year later because the Log Book records that, ‘During the night the two boys Larraba & Jacky, ran away... Three other myalls vis George, Jacky & Dyrter, were procured from the camp, to fill places of the runaways and were supplied with clothes and blankets.’ There can be little doubt that, as

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71 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 27-9-1895.
72 Ibid: entry for April 1896.
73 *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 17-4-1896.
74 Timber Creek police journal, 7-11-1900; ‘Attack by Blacks at the Fitzmaurice River’. *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 2-12-1898.
75 For example, see ‘Massacres in the Northern Territory’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 18-12-1905; An Alleged Terrible Tragedy’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 22-12-1905.
76 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 7-6-1899.
77 Ibid: entry for 28-6-1900.
on other stations in the region, for many years there was a flow of Aborigines back and forth between the bush, the myall camp at the homestead, and station employment. An instance of this is shown in the story of the killing of Larsen, described below. The Aborigines who killed Larsen were employed as crew on the station boat, and after committing the crime one of them returned to the ‘myall’ camp at Bradshaw while the other stayed with bush blacks at ‘Anglelarry’.

Troubles between the whites and Aborigines on Bradshaw were not restricted to the ‘myalls’ or ‘bush’ blacks. There were occasional clashes with Aborigines working on the station, and during the first decade on Bradshaw most of the problems seem to have been instigated by a white employee named Ivan Egoriffe, and fuelled by ‘grog’. Ivan worked for Joe Bradshaw as engineer and general hand from at least 1894 until his death in 1905. He was ‘a native of Russia or Finland’, a powerfully built man with ‘a reputation for surliness and harsh treatment of the natives under him.’ It is likely that he was an alcoholic and he certainly was a man who became ‘Ivan the Terrible’ when drunk. The Log Book entry for October 21 mentions that ‘Larsen and Ivan have been stealing grog out of the store, hence sundry rows’, and another entry records that ‘Towards evening Ivan was intoxicated and behaved like a madman.’

Ivan’s behaviour ‘on the grog’ probably accounts for much of his ‘harshness’ towards Aborigines (and sometimes towards whites). In October 1899 he went to the Depot, and on his return was seen to be showing the effects of heavy drinking. The next day Ivan was due to go out to ‘Myranna’, an outstation about fourteen kilometres east of the homestead (plate 93), but before he left he could not find his revolver. He left without the gun and when he arrived at Myranna, still showing the effects of alcohol, he accused an Aboriginal named Bingey of stealing it. At the homestead the following day Fred Bradshaw

79 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for April 1894.
80 ‘An Alleged Terrible Tragedy’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 22-12-1905.
81 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 23-12-1900.
82 Ibid: entry for 9-11-1900.
83 Ibid: entry for 10-11-1900.
questioned Bingey who ‘denied having taken Ivan's revolver, and accused Ivan of having fired at him with that weapon.' The revolver was eventually found in a box in Ivan’s room. Fred Bradshaw, Bingey and George went back to Myranna the next day, taking the revolver with them, and ‘On arriving at Myranna found all going on well, but on seeing Bingey Ivan commenced to beat him. FMB interfered, when Ivan became unbearable and abusive, & insulting but subsequently apologised.’

In September or October 1899 Kolumboi, an Aborigine who came from south of Halls Creek and had been part of the team at Marigui, ran away from the homestead with a ‘lubra’ named Yanimbella. The reason why they absconded is unknown, but on October 5th they were captured chained up for the night. The next day, ‘Ivan gave Kolumboi the father of a bumping and sent him and the lubra to glory.’ Being ‘sent to glory’ would normally be taken to mean that they had been murdered, but it is possible it just meant that they had been told to clear out for good; neither Kolumboi’s nor Yanimbella’s name appears in the Log Book again.

After a trip to Darwin in July 1900 the Bradshaw launch Wunwulla anchored in the mouth of the Daly River, waiting for the tide to rise before moving upstream. On board were Ivan Egoriffe, the skipper Jan ‘Jack’ Larsen, and a crew of three Victoria River Aborigines, namely George (aka ‘Josey’), Jimmy, and a young boy named Georgie. Shortly before it arrived there, two Daly River Aborigines were brought on board to act as pilots for the trip upstream. At about midnight as preparations were being made to start upstream, someone hit Ivan on the back of the head and stunned him, and then threw him overboard. The water revived him and he managed to clamber into the boat’s dinghy which was tied behind, but it was immediately cut loose. Ivan tried to paddle back but a shot was fired at him, so he let the current take him, and as he drifted away he heard Larsen cry out,

84 Ibid: entry for 11-11-1900.
87 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 6-11-1899.
and then a shot.\textsuperscript{94} It was later learned that Larsen had been shot in the forehead while being held by the neck and his body thrown overboard.\textsuperscript{95}

Ivan was rescued the next day by Captain Mugg on the lugger \textit{Minniehaha}. Eventually Ivan and Mugg got word to the authorities in Darwin who dispatched Mounted Constables Stott and Stone from Brocks Creek to investigate.\textsuperscript{96} In an Aboriginal camp south of the Daly River mouth they arrested two Daly River men – 'Cammerfor' and 'Monkgum'\textsuperscript{97} – who were said to have admitted to others in the camp that they had killed Larsen and the three Victoria River men.\textsuperscript{98}

The police arrived back in Darwin with their prisoners and three witnesses on August 1\textsuperscript{st}, and they appeared in court the next day. The Aborigines told their stories through an interpreter, and it was reported that, 'By their own confession the two prisoners appear to have committed a deed unique in the annals of outrages perpetrated by natives for the cool boldness exhibited in its accomplishment', and the police were 'congratulated on the clever and prompt manner in which they have succeeded in bringing the offenders to book.'\textsuperscript{99} The congratulations proved a trifle premature, and the court was about to find out how cool and bold these Aborigines really were!

While the police were out looking for the murderers, Ivan had been with Captain Joe looking for the \textit{Wunwulla}. They found the boat partly looted but undamaged\textsuperscript{100} and brought it back to Darwin the day after Cammerfor and Monkgum were in court confessing their

\textsuperscript{94} Telegram from WJ Byrne to Government Resident Justice Charles Dashwood, citing a letter from J. Nieman, 19-7-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 9877.

\textsuperscript{95} 'Daly River Outrage', \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 7-9-1900.

\textsuperscript{96} 'Reported Outrage by Blacks on the Daly River', \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 20-7-1900.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{99} 'Daly River Outrage', \textit{Adelaide Register}, 4-8-1900.

\textsuperscript{100} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 10-8-1900.
The next day Ivan went to identify the prisoners and declared emphatically that he had never seen them before! He repeated his belief that he had been attacked by the Victoria River crewmen, and this was confirmed the next day when the Minniehaha arrived with two Daly River Aborigines, Chatpa and Kadeel, who really had been on the Wunwulla. These men, identified by Ivan, maintained that the crew of Victoria River boys first attacked Ivan and Larsen, and then attacked them and forced them to jump overboard.

One of the Minniehaha party reported that 'the natives all along the [Daly] river seemed to be aware of the fact that the two men first captured by the police were entirely innocent of any complicity in the affair, and the mistake was the subject of much amusement among them.' Years later Ernestine Hill was told that the two men arrested by Stott and Stone had lied to the police about their involvement in the murder, and unwittingly placed their necks in a noose, because, 'that fella too much gammon he savvy eberyng allabout.'

As a result of this debacle, Mounted Constable Stott had to go out again, this time travelling to Bradshaw on the Wunwulla to search for the missing Victoria River boys. He captured Jimmy and Georgie in camps near Bradshaw homestead, and a few days later George, the supposed ringleader, was found in a group of fifty or sixty Aborigines about 100 kilometres northeast of the station. Some of the Aborigines threw spears at Stott and his Aboriginal assistants as they galloped after George, but none took effect. The police party caught up with George as he was escaping down a cliff, and after he threw spears at them and refused to stop he was shot dead. Five days afterwards it was reported that a

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101 'The Daly River Outrage', *Adelaide Register*, 4-8-1900.
102 'The Daly River Outrage', *Adelaide Register*, 9-8-1900.
103 'The Daly River Outrage. Contradictory Evidence', *Adelaide Register*, 7-8-1900; 'The Daly River Outrage', *Adelaide Register*, 9-8-1900. Chatpa was also known as Fennem or Datpull, and Kadeel was known as Cockatoo (*Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 24-8-1900; H. Christie to Inspector Paul Foelsche, 29-8-1900).
104 'The Daly River Outrage', *Adelaide Register*, 6-8-1900.
105 'The Daly River Outrage', *Adelaide Register*, 6-8-1900.
106 E. Hill, *The Territory*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 250; this roughly translates as 'the policeman is a real know-all'.
107 *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 17-8-1900.
108 'Daly River Outrage', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 7-9-1900.
number of myalls were coming to Bradshaw to avenge the shooting. Nothing came of it, but five weeks later two horses were speared on Bradshaw and the whites thought it looked ‘very much like an act of retaliation on the part of his [George’s] tribe.’

When Jimmy was arrested he denied the charge and claimed that Larsen had objected to Ivan beating Georgie, and that Ivan then ‘been killem Jack.’ However, when Georgie was questioned he laid the blame squarely on Jimmy and George. At the subsequent trial the charges against Georgie were dismissed but Jimmy was convicted and condemned to death, the sentence to be carried out at Bradshaw station, ‘as a warning to the natives of that locality’. Nothing was said at the trial about anyone being thrown overboard near the lighthouse in the day or days before the murder took place.

Mounted Constable Thompson at Timber Creek was ordered to go to Bradshaw ‘well armed’, and to cooperate with Fred Bradshaw ‘to collect and secure as large an assemblage of natives as possible’ to witness the hanging. On April 8th 1901 all available Aborigines, including one from Daly River, were ‘mustered’ to see the execution and Jimmy was duly hanged at 6.40 am. Sergeant Waters ordered Thompson and Tracker Gerald ‘to remain guard over body’ and also ‘to keep [the] Myall Natives around the Gallows’ while the officials had breakfast. Jimmy’s body was then cut down and buried behind the scaffold, and tobacco was distributed among the Aboriginal onlookers. Later Deputy Sheriff Little

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109 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 29-8-1900.
110 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 5-10-1900.
111 ‘Daly River Outrage’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 7-9-1900.
112 Ibid.
113 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 28-9-1900.
114 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 5-4-1901.
115 Timber Creek police journal, 4-4-1901.
116 Deputy Sheriff J. Little to Dashwood, 11-4-1901. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item number not marked on original.
117 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 8-4-1901.
118 Timber Creek police journal, 8-4-1901; Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 8-4-1901.
119 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 8-4-1901.

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In the court it appears that evidence was given that Ivan had hit George on the neck, and may have used a rope to hit him or tie him up, but this was not considered sufficient provocation to reduce the charge to manslaughter. One story which might have shown such provocation never made it into evidence. As the *Wunwulla* was going past the Point Charles Lighthouse on its way to the scene of the tragedy, lighthouse keeper Hugh Christie and another man, ‘noticed the *Wunwulla* stop & come back a considerable distance’. Christie later heard from an Aboriginal camped at the Lighthouse that ‘Ivan had thrown one of the Victoria River boys overboard off the Lthouse [sic].’ The Aboriginal who told Christie this was Datpull, also known as Fennem, one of the Daly River Aborigines who had been on the *Wunwulla* when the attack took place. Datpull and the other witness, Cockatoo, were on the Daly River when the *Wunwulla* arrived there, so the question is, how did they know the event at Point Charles took place? The most likely explanation is that they were told about it by the man who was thrown overboard, or by the other Aboriginal crewmen on the Wunwulla.

Four months after the hanging of Jimmy there were two ‘singular occurrences’ at Bradshaw. First, on August 11th 1901 a tremendous explosion shook the area. According to Joe Bradshaw, ‘It commenced with ‘a terrific deafening boom, like the simultaneous explosion of a park of heavy ordnance’, and this was followed by ‘loud rumbling and violent earthquakeing.’ A sick man convalescing at the homestead was thrown out of his hammock and a number of myalls rushed up, declaring, ‘Alambul was angry and would destroy them unless they got within the protection of the Whitefellow.’ F.W. Palmer, a

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120 Deputy Sheriff J. Little to Dashwood, 11-4-1901. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item number not marked on original.
121 *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 28-9-1900.
122 Lighthouse Keeper Hugh Christie to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 12-8-1900, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 9850, and Lighthouse Keeper Hugh Christie to Inspector Paul Foelsche, 29-8-1900, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 9973.
stockman who was with a mob of cattle a few miles west of the Dome, heard a severe
explosion to the north which made his horse stagger under him, and his packhorses and
bullocks rush. One of Palmer’s black stockmen fell off his horse in fright, and a few miles
away another black stockman and his wife caught their horses and galloped in terror
towards the homestead. Ivan Egoriffe was in his dinner camp about 40 kilometres north­
east of the homestead and felt nothing, though his ‘boys’ said they heard a distant noise.
Apparently it was a highly localised earthquake centred, as best could be determined, near a
‘twin coned mountain called by the natives Milik Menmiir’.123

A little over two weeks later came the second ‘singular occurrence’. On August 29th ‘a
remarkable meteorite’ was seen to the west-south-west of the homestead. When first seen at
about 7.30 pm it was close to the planet Venus, and had ‘Two bright, sharply defined tails’
diverging from it. As it moved these tails ‘extended in parallel lines over about 15 degrees
nearly horizontal’. It travelled in a southerly direction ‘at the rate of one degree in forty
seconds’, and slowly faded over a period of ten minutes.124 From this description this object
could hardly have been a meteorite, but what it was remains a mystery.125

In Aboriginal thinking unusual events are connected to other events – it is a case of cause
and effect – and it usually takes some time for a consensus to be reached as to what caused
a particular event, or what it signifies.126 The initial response of the myalls at Bradshaw was
that ‘Alumbul’ was angry, but why ‘Alumbul’ was angry would only be determined later.
What the Aborigines really thought of the earthquake and of the ‘meteorite’ is unknown.
There is nothing in the regional ethnographic literature about Aboriginal responses to or
interpretations of earthquakes and I have not been able to find out who or what ‘Alambul’
is. However, in current Aboriginal thinking, when a meteorite is seen streaking across the
sky they say that it is ‘traffic’, a highly dangerous Dreaming snake travelling to deliver

123 ‘Singular Occurrences at Victoria River’, _Northern Territory Times & Gazette_, 27-9-1901; ‘Milik Menmiir’
is a mountain now known as ‘Millik Monmir’, located at co-ords 471 189 on the Millik Monmir 1:100,000
topographic map (Sheet 4965, Edition 1).
124 Ibid..
125 The same ‘meteorite’ was seen from VRD homestead where it resembled a large comet and remained
visible for ‘three or four minutes’ before fading away (Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 1-11-1901).
retribution to a human murderer. It is likely that both phenomena would have been related to recent events and though we can only speculate as to which events might have been involved, the ‘Bradshaw massacre’, the shooting of George and the hanging of Jimmy loomed large in recent history.

The packhorse track up through the cliff behind the homestead was the next scene of conflict. Some time after it was built, Ivan Egoriffe and a Bradshaw stockman named Ernest Dannock were driving some horses up the track. When they were nearing the top, they heard a yell and spears and stones began to fly everywhere. They hid for a while; but the Aborigines had the best of it, being higher, and keeping back from the edge of a cliff so that they could throw without showing themselves. Ivan Egeroffe got hit on the shoulder by a stone and his horse was speared in the leg. The attackers were not the local Aborigines but the Wargite tribe, from the mouth of the Daly river.

Soon after this attack the Governor of South Australia, Sir George Le Hunte, visited Bradshaw on his way to the Depot (plates 94, 95). While at Bradshaw he gave blankets, flour, tobacco and pipes to ‘some fine-looking aborigines’, and in return the Aborigines ‘gave’ a corroboree to him. Le Hunte heard from ‘Mr. Bradshaw’ that there were possibly 500 Aborigines between Bradshaw station and the coast, and was told that they ‘give no trouble; but those on the high lands above the cliffs, which lie immediately behind the station, are unfriendly, and, to use his [Bradshaw’s] words, “chivied” his men away when they went up there after cattle.

On November 24th 1905 there occurred the most infamous event in the history of Bradshaw, the so-called ‘Bradshaw Massacre’, an incident that seems to have had reverberations around the Yambarran Ranges for years. In fact, the actual massacre occurred on the coast well to the north of Bradshaw station, but the story begins on

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127 This ‘traffic’ goes to kill a murderer after some of the victim’s belongings are burnt at a site for that Dreaming snake – it is a form of sorcery. D. Rose, Dingo Makes Us Human, 1992, p. 153.
129 ‘Visit of H.E. Governor’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 2-6-1905.
130 Ibid.
131 His Excellency George Le Hunte, ‘Northern Territory: Report by His Excellency the Governor of South Australia,’ South Australian Parliamentary Papers. vol. 2, no. 37, 1905, p. 6.
'Captain Joe's Bradshaw', and ends there. The event was called the Bradshaw Massacre because one of the murdered men was Fred Bradshaw, he and two others – Ivan Egoriffic, Ernest Dannoick – came from Bradshaw station, and the boat involved was the Bolwarra which belonged to Bradshaw. The other murdered man was Jerry Skeahan, brother of the manager of Auvergne station. The death of Skeahan was doubly tragic. He had broken his arm in the stockyard at Auvergne and had set out to ride to Wyndham for medical help. Shortly after he left a message reached Auvergne advising that the Bolwarra was about to leave for Darwin, so to save Jerry a long and painful ride Jack Skeahan sent a messenger posthaste to bring him back, a decision that was to cause him much grief in the coming months.\textsuperscript{132}

News of the massacre broke upon the world on December 8\textsuperscript{th} 1905 when Bobby, one of the Victoria River Aboriginal crewmen, turned up at Bradshaw station (plate 96).\textsuperscript{134} Bobby told an amazing tale: after continuing engine trouble the Bolwarra had called in at a Government coal-boring camp near Port Keats and discovered that two white men working at a well there had been murdered by the blacks. The other white men had captured and chained up seven or eight Aborigines, and asked Fred Bradshaw to take them to Darwin. The Bolwarra took the Aborigines on board and continued up the coast, and the next night Fred, against the protests of the other whites, decided to release the prisoners from their chains. No guard was kept and that night the prisoners killed the four whites, and the other three Aboriginal crewmen. Bobby only escaped the same fate by leaping (or being pushed) overboard.\textsuperscript{135} He described in detail the position of each man as he was killed and later said that as Fred Bradshaw was attacked he cried out, 'Bobby, get up. Wild blackfellow been killem along you and me.'\textsuperscript{136} After jumping overboard Bobby said he swam to shore and from a hiding place watched as the Bolwarra was looted. Then he headed for Bradshaw, arriving there twelve days later.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{132} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 12-1-1906.
\textsuperscript{134} 'Massacres in the Northern Territory', The Adelaide Register, 18-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{135} 'An Alleged Terrible Tragedy', Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 22-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{136} 'The Port Keats Massacre. Bobby's Story in Court', The Adelaide Register, 9-2-1906.
\textsuperscript{137} 'Massacres in the Northern Territory', The Adelaide Register, 18-12-1905.
Of course, Bobby’s story was rapidly communicated to the Timber Creek police,\textsuperscript{138} the Brocks Creek police\textsuperscript{139} and the Darwin authorities,\textsuperscript{140} and caused a sensation there and around the country – ‘Massacres in the Northern Territory...Six Whites and three Blackboys Killed’\textsuperscript{141} Later investigations showed that the facts were not quite as Bobby painted them. The \textit{Bolwarra} had left Bradshaw on November 12\textsuperscript{th} and as it moved down the Victoria and up the west coast it experienced a lot of engine trouble, just as Bobby described.\textsuperscript{142} There was a government drilling rig boring for coal near Port Keats, so when the \textit{Bolwarra} arrived opposite it, Fred, Ivan and Jerry Skeahan took a dinghy ashore to borrow some extra fuel, and materials for repairs. When they arrived they noticed that there were about 100 armed and excited Aboriginal men near the camp of the drillers, but no women or children. Ivan remarked that he recognised several of the Aborigines because he had seen them at Bradshaw, and Jerry Skeahan told one of the Aborigines because he had seen them at Bradshaw, and Jerry Skeahan told one of the bore party they should be on their guard as it looked like there was trouble brewing.\textsuperscript{143}

There were no Aboriginal prisoners in the camp and no white men had been killed, but there had already been some trouble with the local blacks. When the bore party first arrived at the site the Aborigines had been helpful and friendly, and formed a camp nearby. However, they became ‘cheeky’ and began stealing items from the camp, and were now said to be ‘rapidly becoming dangerously insolent.’\textsuperscript{144} The crew of the \textit{Bolwarra} were four Bradshaw Aborigines – Bobby, Calico, Myabilla and Mud-Blanket.\textsuperscript{145} They also came ashore, ostensibly to get water, but instead, at the first opportunity at least three and probably all of them cleared out.\textsuperscript{146} Perhaps they, too, had read signs of impending trouble.

\textsuperscript{138} Timber Creek police journal, 9-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{139} ‘Massacres in the Northern Territory’, \textit{Adelaide Observer}, 18-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{140} ‘An Alleged Terrible Tragedy’, \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 22-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{141} ‘Massacres in the Northern Territory’, \textit{The Adelaide Register}, 18-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} ‘An Alleged Terrible Tragedy’, \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 22-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Timber Creek police journal, 28-12-1905, 30-6-1906.
\textsuperscript{146} ‘An Alleged Terrible Tragedy’, \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 22-12-1905.
When the Bradshaw boys were missed, Fred had to find replacement crew. Among the Aborigines in the vicinity of the drilling camp he recognised two, 'Cumbit' and 'Mallie', who had previously been on his boat in the Victoria River.\textsuperscript{147} At least one of them, Cumbit, agreed to go on board the launch, along with Donah,\textsuperscript{148} Wunpulunga\textsuperscript{149} and Minemar.\textsuperscript{150} With its new crew the Bolwarra left Port Keats about midday\textsuperscript{151} and shortly afterwards, Aborigines threatened the camp, and attacked the foreman while he was working on a well near the coal boring camp. Fortunately he was not seriously hurt. Meanwhile the Bolwarra moved slowly up the coast, first by engine power and then by sail.\textsuperscript{152} It anchored for a night and continued on the next day, anchoring in the evening about 80 kilometres up the coast, near Cape Ford.\textsuperscript{153}

In the morning before the boat reached Cape Ford, Donah and Cumbit somehow fell foul of Ivan and he commenced to beat them with a stick. Cumbit ended up with a 'sore head', a 'sore hand' and a cut on his face, and Donah was sore on the top of his head.\textsuperscript{154} Why Ivan beat them is not clear – one account says they wanted to go ashore\textsuperscript{155} while another says they did not do the required work to Ivan's satisfaction\textsuperscript{156} – but after beating them it appears that he then tied up Cumbit, and possibly Donah and the other Aborigines as well. He may have had the help of one or more of the other whites to do this.\textsuperscript{157} If Donah and Cumbit were tied up, they were either released later (possibly by Fred Bradshaw), or somehow got

\textsuperscript{147} 'Northern Territory Massacre. All the bodies Recovered', \textit{Adelaide Advertiser}, 3-1-1906. Whether 'Mallie' is the same person as 'Donah' is unclear, but certainly possible.

\textsuperscript{148} In other documents his name is rendered as 'Donghol' (eg, 'An Interesting Expedition', \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 27-4-1906), but Donah' soon became the 'standarised' English version of his name.

\textsuperscript{149} Alternatively 'Won-pa-lunga' (‘An Interesting Expedition’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 27-4-1906).

\textsuperscript{150} Alternatively 'Mi-ma'.

\textsuperscript{151} 'An Alleged Terrible Tragedy', \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 22-12-1905.

\textsuperscript{152} Statement by Wunpulunga at trial of Donah and Cumbit, 25-3-1907. Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640.

\textsuperscript{153} Map of Cape Ford area, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 15086.

\textsuperscript{154} Statements by Doc Doc and Ned at trial of Donah and Cumbit, 25-3-1907. Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640.

\textsuperscript{155} Petition on behalf of Cumbit and Donah asking for remission of sentence, 23-9-1910. Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3. 1918/2640.

\textsuperscript{156} Statement by Wunpulunga at trial of Donah and Cumbit, 25-3-1907. Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.

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free after dark, killed all four men and threw their bodies into the sea.\textsuperscript{158} In the morning they each took tobacco, a pipe and a blanket from the boat and went ashore, eventually coming to a large camp of Aborigines where they told people what they had done, saying, ‘white fellow all day kill em me, alright me kill em behind.’\textsuperscript{159}

News of the tragedy reached Darwin on Saturday, December 16\textsuperscript{th}, and the next day a party of police and ‘special constables’ were dispatched on the steamer \textit{Wai Hoi}, bound for Port Keats. There they learned that no members of the bore party had been killed though there had been the serious assault described above. The police party remained at Port Keats with the intention of searching for evidence of the murder of Bradshaw and his men, and the \textit{Wai Hoi} returned to Darwin. The steamer reached Darwin on Tuesday and almost immediately it was arranged for two launches to be sent out to search the coast from Darwin to the Victoria River.\textsuperscript{160} The departure of the launches was unaccountably delayed for several days and eventually it was decided a sailing lugger would be sent instead, to be towed from Darwin to Port Keats by the \textit{Wai Hoi} (plates 97, 98).\textsuperscript{161} The steamer left Darwin on December 23\textsuperscript{rd}.\textsuperscript{162}

Meanwhile, throughout the night of December 20\textsuperscript{th} the coal-boring camp at Port Keats was lashed by a violent storm, and the bore workers and police party there were attacked three times by a large number of Aborigines. Flashes of lightning revealed the attackers as close as fifteen metres away, but gunfire kept them at bay. During the night the police devised a plan to capture some of the Aborigines. Before daylight they moved to a native well about three kilometres away and hid themselves. Later the trackers moved along the beach and forced eight Aborigines to go inland to the well where they were arrested by the police. Taken back to the drilling camp, two were recognised as being among the four who had gone on board the \textit{Bolwarra}, but when the police brought out handcuffs and chains all eight

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{158} \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 9-2-1906.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Statement by Ned at trial of Donah and Cumbit, 25-3-1907. Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640. roughly translated this means ‘the white man beat me all day, so I attacked him later.’
\item \textsuperscript{160} ‘An Alleged Terrible Tragedy’, \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 22-12-1905.
\item \textsuperscript{161} ‘Northern Territory Massacre. No Trace of the Bolwarra,’ \textit{Adelaide Observer}, 22-12-1905.
\item \textsuperscript{162} ‘Butchered by Blacks’, \textit{The Australasian}, 6-1-1906.
\end{itemize}
made a break for the bush. Cumbit and Donah were overpowered and two others were shot dead. The remaining four made their escape though one entered the sea and was not seen again. The two prisoners were subsequently taken to Darwin and charged with murder.

A party led by Mounted Constable Kelly arrived at Port Keats on the lugger Turquoise on December 26th, and found the Bolwarra stranded about eight kilometres south of Clump Point. It had been looted and stripped, and the engine damaged, and there was dried blood everywhere (plate 99). A body identified as that of Fred Bradshaw was found nearby and the bodies of the other men were found a week or so later. All were buried on the beach, with poles set up to mark each gravesite (plate 100). Nine months later Joe Bradshaw bought some coffins and went out to exhume the remains of the murdered men, intending to rebury them at Bradshaw. He found the remains of his brother Fred, Ernest Dannock and Ivan Egoriffe, but the marker over Skeahan's grave had disappeared, so his bones could not be recovered and presumably are buried on the beach to this day. At Bradshaw a vault was prepared about two kilometres from the homestead and when the coffins were carried there, 'A large number of friendly natives followed the remains to the grave, and the native women covered their heads with ashes, in token of grief.' Two years later relays of Aborigines carried the coffin containing Fred Bradshaw's bones to the top of an isolated, flat-topped mountain on the banks of the Victoria River, below the mouth of Angalarri Creek. Known ever since as 'Bradshaw's Tomb' (plates 101, 102), this hill has a top of

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163 Telegram from Government Resident Herbert to the Minister Controlling to Northern Territory, January 1906. Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, Inwards Correspondence, GRS 1 581/1905; 'Butchered by Blacks', *The Australasian*, 6-1-1906.
164 'Northern Territory Massacre', *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 4-1-1906.
166 'Northern Territory Massacre'. *Adelaide Advertiser*, 3-1-1906.
170 Notes taken from the Timber Creek police letter book by an unknown policeman (entry for 14-9-1908). This event is mentioned in the copy of Timber Creek police letter book held at Berrimah police station, Darwin (entry for 1-8-1908), but the last line of the entry is missing from the copy. Several accounts state that the remains of two of the other victims were also placed in this coffin, but this appears unlikely to be correct. Letter Book, 1911-1925, NTRS 2223, Northern Territory Archives.
171 E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 253; On the current 1:100,000 topographic map (Milik Monmir, Sheet 4965, Edition 1) the name 'The Tombs' appears at the end of the Yambararan Range (co-ords 300 993). However, early records and photographs show that the correct 'Bradshaw's Tomb' is the hill at co-ords 236 969, since confirmed by the discovery of the coffin handles there.
solid rock so the coffin could not be buried. Old photographs show that some flat rocks were placed on the coffin lid and it was then left to the elements (plate 103). Modern maps have the label 'The Tombs' near the western end of the Yambarran Range, but using one of these photos and armed with some local folklore, in 1984 I relocated the correct 'burial' site. Only the coffin handles, screws and nails remained, and these were later removed to the Timber Creek museum.

As soon as news of the murders reached Timber Creek Mounted Constable Burt went to Bradshaw to interview Bobby. He then asked Bobby to go with him to Brocks Creek, and Bobby agreed, but the first night out he cleared into the bush. Because of his apparently detailed knowledge of events Bobby was already under suspicion of possible involvement in the murders, and by absconding he increased the suspicions against him. Early in January 1906 he was arrested at Bradshaw and taken to Darwin as a witness in the trial of Cumbit and Donah. Mounted Constable Burt went to Bradshaw in March 1906 to try and get statements from My Blanket, Myabilla and Calico, but it does not appear that he was successful. In June the Timber Creek police were advised that 'My Blanket, Calico and Myabilla' were required in Darwin as witnesses on July 23rd.

As a result of police investigations it was determined that of the four Aboriginal crewmen on the Bolwarra, only Donah and Cumbit had committed the crime. They faced court on February 3rd 1906 and were remanded to appear at 'the next Circuit Court'. They appeared in court again in August but the hearing was held over until the next Circuit Court so that competent interpreters could be found. Witness Bobby (and probably also Wunpulung) was held at Fannie Bay Gaol but on March 1st 1907, less than three weeks before the trial began, he escaped and made his way back to Bradshaw. Mounted

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172 Millik Monmir 1:100,000, sheet 4967 (edition 1), co-ordinates 300 994.
174 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 22-12-1905.
175 Timber Creek police journal, 1-1-1906, 10-1-1906, 18-1-1906.
176 Ibid: 10-3-1906.
177 Ibid: 14-3-1906.
179 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 27-7-1906.
180 Timber Creek police journal, 14-3-1907.
Constable Artaud left for Bradshaw on March 16th to search for Bobby, Calico and others wanted as witnesses in the case (plate 104), with instructions that no effort was to be spared to catch Bobby and bring him to Port Darwin on the Wai Hoi. Artaud couldn’t find Bobby or Calico, but he did find ‘Mud-Blanket’ and took him to Darwin. He and Mud-Blanket arrived there on April 5th, too late for the trial which concluded on March 20th, with Cumbit and Donah being convicted and sentenced to death. After the trial Captain Joe suggested that if Aborigines were involved in cases of murder or attempted murder and the police were unable to capture them, they should be outlawed. Nothing came of his suggestion.

The sentencing of Cumbit and Donah was not the end of the sad tale. Mounted Constable Artaud left Darwin on April 5th to return Mud-Blanket to Bradshaw, and he had instructions that if ‘Mybilla’ and ‘Kalico’ could be found he should obtain statements from them about their desertion of the Bolwarra at Port Keats and to send the statements to headquarters. From events that transpired I can only presume that the statements of all three witnesses were required because an appeal was planned for the death sentence on Cumbit and Donah to be commuted. Such an appeal was made and evidence that Ivan Egoriffe had treated Cumbit and Donah cruelly was taken into consideration; in June 1907 their sentences were commuted to life in Fannie Bay Gaol.

The hunt for Bobby continued. He was still at large in August 1907, but was eventually arrested on September 27th and taken to Darwin. What grounds there were for his arrest and how long he was held in Darwin is unclear, but he was back on Bradshaw within a
year, and he and the other witnesses were once again being sought by the police. 190 Mounted Constable Holland went to Bradshaw on June 17th 1908 but could not find any of the wanted men and later reported that the chances of getting Calico, Myabilla or Mud-Blanket were ‘very remote indeed’, and he remarked that, ‘The Policeman has never appeared as their friend and neither Mud-Blanket or Bobby are likely to forget that the police took them away last Year.’ 191 With respect to Calico, Holland’s pessimism was more than justified. At the time that he was looking for him, Calico had probably been dead for two months, shot near Bradshaw homestead by the manager Walter Wye or one of his Aboriginal assistants (see below). 192

In November 1909 Mounted Constable Dempsey raided a ‘huge blacks camp’ in a gorge running off Angalarri Creek (plate 105). The approach was very difficult and most of the Aborigines escaped, but eight women were caught and told the police that the ‘notorious Bobby’ was one who got away. 193 Why Bobby was now regarded as ‘notorious’ is unknown and this is the last mention of him in the historical record.

In 1910 Cumbit and Donah sought a remission of sentence in a petition prepared on their behalf in which they restated their original claim that they had been tied up and beaten, and were not allowed to go ashore. 194 Their appeal was rejected. 195 In September 1911 they escaped, but were recaptured the following day. 196 They appealed again in 1915 and although their appeal was rejected once more, it was recommended that they try again in two years’ time. Donah never got the chance – he died in gaol in 1916 197 – and Cumbit

190 Memo from Sub Inspector Waters to M.C. Dempsey, 4-6-1908, Timber Creek police letter book, copy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
191 Memo from M.C. Holland to Sub Inspector Waters, 1-8-1908, Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin.
192 Memo from Sub Inspector Waters to M.C. Dempsey, 9-6-1908. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin.
193 Timber Creek police journal, 5-11-09.
194 Petition to the Governor of South Australia on behalf of Donah and Cumbit. Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640.
195 Memorandum, signed by H. Pollard, 10-2-1911, Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640.
196 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 15-9-1911.
197 Memorandum for the Minister for Home and Territories, signed by the Northern Territory Administrator (signature illegible), 11-7-1916, Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640.
didn’t wait. In May 1916 he and a prisoner named Katerinyan escaped and made their way to the Fitzmaurice River country.

First Mounted Constable Richardson, and then Mounted Constables O’Connor and Cameron, made separate patrols to recapture them and after many weeks in the bush, O’Connor and Cameron succeeded in apprehending Katerinyan. \(^{201}\) I have found no direct evidence that Cumbit was recaptured, but presumably he was because in November 1918 Atlee Hunt, the Minister for Home and Territories,\(^ {202}\) granted him a remission of sentence.\(^ {203}\) As far as is known he was released and returned to his country, bringing to a final end the saga of the ‘Bradshaw Massacre’.

On January 15\(^{th}\) 1906 something happened to cause all the Aborigines at Bradshaw, ‘both civilized & bush’, to clear out.\(^ {204}\) However, not being at the station meant that they could not get any rations, so some of them decided to help themselves. Two days after they left the lock of the store was picked with a nail and two bags of flour taken, and the door locked up again. Over the next two months the store was raided another four times with a total of nine bags of flour, one bag of rice, six dozen boxes of matches, fifteen tins of jam and honey, five towels, four shirts, about ten metres of ‘turkey red’ and a small amount of sugar and tea being taken. It was only after the third raid, by which time most of the stores had been stolen, that the station hands decided to remove the remaining stores to the homestead.

\(^{198}\) Carving on a boab near Bradshaw’s Tomb, made during the police manhunt after Katerinyan and Cumbit in 1916 (see plate 155).

\(^{199}\) Timber Creek police journal, 7-6-1916, 21-6-1916. Photocopy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin.

\(^{200}\) Ibid: 15-7-1916, 16-7-1916.

\(^{201}\) Ibid: 21-8-1916.


\(^{203}\) Atlee Hunt’s secretary to the Northern Territory Administrator, 10-11-1918. Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS A3 N.T. 1918/2640.

\(^{204}\) Mounted Constable F.J. Burt to headquarters, 3-3-1906. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
However, because the Aborigines had not previously taken any tea or sugar, these items were left in the store. On March 16th when the fourth raid was made and some sugar and tea was taken, what little remained was removed to the homestead.205

A message from the Bradshaw manager, Charles Webster, reporting the thefts was delivered to the Timber Creek police on February 10th,206 but floods prevented Mounted Constable Burt from leaving to investigate for another month.207 When he finally arrived at Bradshaw and learnt details of the robberies, he was staggered at the stupidity of the station hands: ‘It seems almost incredible that 3 white men, were living on this station, & that only after repeated raids, the greater portion of the stores taken, that they should conceive the idea of removing the remainder to where they were living & safety.’208 The offenders were believed to be the ‘Cadgerong’ tribe and because the deserters from the Bolwarra belonged to this tribe they were believed to be implicated in the robberies.209 Burt spent ten days searching for the offenders in the ranges and gorges on Bradshaw, but without success.210

While justice may have been served in the white man’s courts, it seems that some Aborigines were not satisfied. In mid-1907 Mounted Constable Kelly was told that a ‘Beringan’ [Brinken] man named Lungmier had been killed by the ‘Jumonjoos’ [Jaminjung]. The story was that Lungmier had swum out to the Bolwarra shortly before the massacre occurred, and the ‘Jumonjoos’ believed he had helped kill their ‘good friend’, Fred Bradshaw. As a result, when Lungmier appeared in a ‘Jumonjoo camp’ on the Fitzmaurice River he was promptly speared and clubbed to death.211

205 Mounted Constable F.J. Burt to headquarters, 28-3-1906. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
206 Timber Creek police journal, 10-2-1906.
207 Ibid.
208 Mounted Constable F.J. Burt to headquarters, 28-3-1906. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
209 Ibid.
210 His lack of success is not particularly surprising as ‘Cadgerong’ (Gajerong) country is on the west side of the Victoria River, on present-day Bullo River station and Legune station.
211 ‘Aboriginal Justice’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 26-7-1907.
The reign of ‘Ivan the Terrible’ may have ended (and Donah and Cumbit may have been gaoled), but if anything, violence against Aborigines on Bradshaw appears to have worsened. On July 1st 1908, Mounted Constable Dempsey received several memos from headquarters about ‘alleged atrocities [sic] on aborigines at Bradshaw’s Run’. The picture painted in these memos was of a series of murders and brutal assaults, verging at times on mayhem, and it is possible that one incident may have had an element of revenge for the deaths in the Bradshaw Massacre.

First, it was alleged that the Bradshaw cook had shot an Aborigine in broad daylight to get his wife. In the presence of the manager (Webster) the cook then carried the body to Angalarri Creek and threw it in, and later on when Joe Bradshaw, Justice of the Peace, heard about this murder all he did was dismiss the cook. A later memo reveals that this alleged killing happened some time before August 1st 1906, that the murdered man was ‘Old Fred’, and that the cook was Chas Williams, the same cook who was at Bradshaw station when news of the Bradshaw Massacre broke. Yet another memo alleged that Joe Bradshaw later said to some friends that, ‘if ever a man deserved to be hanged it was a cook of mine as he deliberately shot a man for his lubra.’ Not surprisingly, after this shooting all the Aborigines are said to have cleared out.

Second, it was alleged that in about October 1907 Joe Bradshaw, his manager Walter Wye, and a man named Mullins were involved in a ‘big drunk’ at the station. Mullins and Wye had a row, and when Joe intervened Mullins turned on him. Joe immediately gave a
loaded rifle to one of his ‘boys’ and said to him, ‘If that —— comes onto the veranda shoot him.’

Third, in about January 1908 Wye was supposed to have severely assaulted an Aborigine named ‘Jack Pur’ because he would not let Wye have his wife, and fourth, it was alleged that in about April 1908 some cattle had been speared near the homestead and that Wye, Larriba and Billy Wheela had gone out to investigate. As a result Calico, one of the Aborigines who had deserted the Bolwarra, was shot dead near the spring that supplied Bradshaw with water, and a man named Tommy and his lubra were both wounded. Later massacre survivor Bobby threatened to tell Joe Bradshaw (who was absent) all about these shootings. Wye heard of Bobby’s threat and a day or so later Possum, one of Wye’s boys, had a row with Bobby in the Bradshaw blacks’ camp. Bobby was ‘badly knocked about’ and cleared into the bush that night.

Finally, it was alleged that blacks’ tobacco steeped in cyanide had been kept in a jar in the station store. Not knowing that it had been poisoned, the current Bradshaw cook had given some to an Aborigine who became so ill after smoking it that he fell down four times before reaching his camp. Fortunately he survived, and later Wye was said to have ordered that the remaining tobacco be destroyed. Mounted Constable Dempsey was ordered to make ‘full and exhaustive inquiries’ into these allegations.

Eleven days later (July 12th 1908) Dempsey was able to question Walter Wye and one of his boys, Billy Wheelah. Wye denied the existence of any poisoned tobacco and declined to answer any other questions until he had consulted Captain Joe, but Billy Wheelah made a

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218 Memo from Sub Inspector Waters to M.C. Dempsey, 9-6-1908. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
219 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
222 Ibid.
statement in which he apparently claimed to have seen ‘Old Fred’ shot for stealing flour, rather than for the killer to get his wife, and he named other witnesses to this murder.\textsuperscript{224}

On July 24\textsuperscript{th} Dempsey went to Bradshaw to question Aborigines there, but they had heard the police horse bells and all of them cleared out into the Yambarran Range, supposedly because they thought they were going to be arrested for stealing from the station garden. One can’t help but wonder if Walter Wye hadn’t told them the police were coming so that they would clear out and not be available for interview. The only statement Dempsey obtained was that about two years earlier, that is, not long after the Bradshaw Massacre, a cook named Williams had shot an Aboriginal man at a spring near the homestead for stealing flour. It seems likely that this would have occurred in the period when the store was being raided, early in 1906. Williams was the cook at Bradshaw when news of the massacre first surfaced there,\textsuperscript{225} and would have had a personal relationship with the murdered men. Perhaps he felt compelled to avenge their deaths. At the time of Dempsey’s visit Williams was long gone from Bradshaw, and although Dempsey searched around the spring for human remains, he found nothing.\textsuperscript{226}

In the following months Dempsey questioned an Aboriginal man named Yama about the alleged shooting, but Yama said he only knew of it as hearsay.\textsuperscript{227} In November Dempsey received a memo from headquarters ordering that Billy Wheelah and all other witnesses to the alleged murder be brought to Palmerston when found,\textsuperscript{228} but there is no evidence that this ever occurred. Dempsey interviewed Billy Wheelah shortly afterwards to try and learn the names of the Aborigines present when Old Fred was shot, but Billy ‘alleged he forgot the names.’\textsuperscript{229} In December Dempsey promised Yama and another man a reward if they were successful in bringing in witnesses to the alleged shooting,\textsuperscript{230} but nothing came of it.\textsuperscript{231}

\textsuperscript{224} Timber Creek police journal, 12-7-1908, 24-7-1908, 9-10-1908.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid: 9-12-1905.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid: 24-7-1908.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid: 9-10-1908.
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid: 4-11-1908.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid: 10-11-1908.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid: 2-12-1908.
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid: 19-12-1908.
On December 27th 1908 M.C. Dempsey finally caught up with the Aborigines in the Bradshaw camp and interviewed twenty-two of them about the alleged murder of Old Fred. None of them could give any information so Dempsey sent two old men out to bring in ‘Tommy’ or any other witnesses, but on New Years Day they returned alone. For reasons which are not stated, Billy Wheelah and his lubra then asked Dempsey to take them to Timber Creek. They set out on January 2nd 1909 but Billy and his wife ran away that night. Headquarters remained completely unsatisfied with the results of the investigation and late in January sent a memo to Timber Creek, ‘directing that nothing is to be left undone to get at the truth re murder of “Old Fred”’. During a patrol to investigate horse spearing on Bradshaw in April, Mounted Constable Holland tried to get information on the murder of Old Fred, but like Dempsey before him he learnt nothing. From this time on there are no further police journal entries or other documents relating to the alleged murder of ‘Old Fred’ or other Aborigines on Bradshaw, and the matter finally seems to have been dropped.

The allegations of poison being used against Aborigines and the recurrent theft of flour and other food from the Bradshaw store may give some credence to an Aboriginal oral history account of a mass killing of Aborigines on Bradshaw station. Peter Murray, who owned the station between 1958 and 1968, was told by an old man named Johnson that in the early days Bradshaw had continual trouble with bush blacks breaking into the station store and stealing bags of flour, tobacco and other goods. Johnson said that eventually the station whites left a bag of flour laced with poison in the store. The bag was stolen and a ‘big mob’ of Aborigines was poisoned.

Although investigations into the allegations of murder and assault came to nothing, trouble between blacks and whites on Bradshaw continued. In April 1909 Walter Wye reported that he had ‘found a horse dead in a paddock 4 miles from Station with three spear wounds inflicted and supposed to be done by Jumminju Tribe’. The Timber Creek police

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233 Personal communication from Pauline Rayner (nee Murray), whose father was Peter Murray.
234 Timber Creek police journal, 11-3-1909, 17-4-1909.
investigated and were told by Bradshaw Aborigines that 'the spearing was done by the Cadgeronge Tribe whose country is across the Victoria River from Bradshaw.'\textsuperscript{235} In October the same year Wye reported to the police that some seventy kilometres from the homestead about thirty natives had thrown spears and rocks at himself, an employee named Raymond, and a 'blackboy'. According to Wye, all three fired all their ammunition at the natives – 14 rounds – and missed! They then rode off and camped four miles away but were followed by the Aborigines who set fire to the grass, forcing them to make yet another camp.\textsuperscript{236} While trying to locate the Aborigines who had attacked Wye and Raymond, Mounted Constable Dempsey came upon 'a huge blacks camp with approach so difficult that all except 8 lubras got away.' He questioned the captured women but learnt nothing of the identity of the Aborigines who had made the attack.\textsuperscript{237}

According to Surveyor C. Boulter who was at the Depot in 1913, cattle spearing was still rife on Bradshaw and a stockman there had recently been wounded by Aborigines.\textsuperscript{238} With one probable exception, this appears to have been the last time that a white man was attacked by Aborigines on Bradshaw until the murder of two prospectors on the Fitzmaurice River in 1932.

The possible exception was David Byers, who replaced Walter Wye as manager in 1910 or 1911.\textsuperscript{239} Byers was married and had his wife with him on Bradshaw, and they almost certainly were the 'victims' of the famous 'frogs in the pipes' story told by Ernestine Hill. The homestead at Bradshaw when Byers first arrived was the one that had been built in 1905 (see plate 89). In November 1913 a storm with hurricane force winds hit the station and unroofed all the station buildings, including the homestead, and then drenched the place with five centimetres of rain.\textsuperscript{240} It may have been this storm, and possibly problems

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid: 17-4-1909.
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid: 15-10-1909.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid: 5-11-1909.
\textsuperscript{238} Diary kept by Surveyor C. C. Boulter, assistant to Surveyor Scandrett in 1914, p. 130. This diary was given to the Northern Territory Historical Society by Boulters' daughter, in 1970, and apparently lost in Cyclone Tracy. I have a photocopy of the Victoria River section of the diary.
\textsuperscript{239} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 1-9-1911; Timber Creek police journal, 26-8-1913. Wye was still on Bradshaw in March 1910 (Timber Creek police journal, 26-3-1910).
\textsuperscript{240} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 4-12-1913.
with termites, that led to the homestead being rebuilt with a frame of water pipes. According to Hill, when the first wet season came after the pipe-framed building had been erected, hundreds of frogs took up residence in the pipes, and their amplified croaking was so loud that the occupants had to shift into the nearby store.

Byers was to become the subject of a strange mystery. In 1921 he and a man named Ford set out to ride from Brocks Creek to Bradshaw. About seventy kilometres from the homestead Byers, who was suffering from fever, stopped to rest and sent Ford on ahead, saying he would catch up later. Ford went on some distance and then waited for Byers, but he never came. He went back and looked for Byers but couldn’t find him, so he continued on to the homestead and raised the alarm. During an intensive search by police and station hands, tracks and other signs were found, but lost again in scrub or on recently burnt areas, and no trace of Byers’ body, or his horse, was ever found. Mrs Byers took the disappearance and undoubted death of her husband very hard indeed. The investigating constable reported that, ‘It was impossible to obtain particulars of Byers Age etc. from Mrs Byers when I was at Bradshaw as she used to scream & break down.’

Byers’ disappearance was always treated as something of a mystery, but because he was known to have been suffering from fever it was thought he probably had suffered an attack of delirium, become lost and died. However, according to a local Aboriginal oral tradition, an early white manager of Bradshaw had been speared because he was ‘too cheeky’ – too rough on the Aborigines – and no one ever found out. David Byers was the only Bradshaw manager ever to go missing on Bradshaw.

241 Report on Bradshaw station, ‘Northern Territory Pastoral Leases Investigation Committee’, Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS F658 Item 25. This report states that the homestead there in 1934 was built in 1913, but other evidence suggests that it was rebuilt at that time.


244 Ibid.

245 ‘Tragedy of the Bush’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 16-8-1921.


247 Personal communication, Pauline Rayner.
Bradshaw station remained in Joe’s hands until his death in 1916. In June of that year Joe travelled overland to his station, in the company of the Millar brothers. The brothers took over the station after Joe died and may have been going out to inspect the station with a view to purchase, although one source suggests that they were already partners at the time. Somewhere on this trip, or at the station, an old injury on Joe’s foot turned gangrenous. He returned to Darwin by lugger but the trip was slow because of low tides in the river. After five days, the lugger arrived in Darwin on July 19th and Joe had his foot amputated the following day. Initially the operation appeared to be a success, but he took a turn for the worse and died a few days later. Joe’s dying wish was for his remains to be placed with those of his brother Fred on ‘The Tomb’ at Bradshaw station, but this never happened. His funeral was held at the ‘two and half mile cemetery’ (Parap, Darwin), and the fragmentary remains of his headstone can still be seen there.

In Joe’s time Bradshaw’s Run had gone from a raw bush block, the home of so-called wild Aborigines, to a working station with a homestead, many yards, huts and a workforce of ‘civilized blacks’. This change was achieved in spite of various setbacks and in the face of brutality and murder – if Bradshaw station was born through the vision, hard work and enterprise of Captain Joe, his brother Fred and their various employees, it was baptised in blood. It had seen more than its share of tragedy and violence, but by the time Joe died both he and his station had become legends.

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249 ‘Report on Bradshaw station, Northern Territory Pastoral Leases Investigation Committee’, Australian Archives, Northern Territory, CRS F658 Item 25.
250 ‘Obituary’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 27-7-1916.
251 Ibid.
Chapter 7

THE WILD WARDAMAN WARRIORS

Of all the language or ‘tribal’ groups in the Victoria River district it was the Wardamans – the ‘Delamere’, ‘Willeroo’ and ‘Gregory’ blacks – who put up the fiercest resistance to the white newcomers. For a quarter of a century they were independent warriors, frequently attacking the white men who dared to travel through their territory, or those who took up their land for cattle stations. Indeed, for a while they won the war and drove the settlers from their land, the only Victoria River group to do so, and they gained such a bad reputation that, like some of the famous bushrangers, they were often blamed for attacks that were probably done by others.

For instance, after the murder of Tom Hardy at Auvergne in 1889 it was ‘believed by those who know the district that the perpetrators of this crime are half-civilised blacks from the Delamere Downs neighbourhood, who have already gained considerable notoriety for their murderous attacks.\(^1\) However, Auvergne is well away from Wardaman country and they are unlikely to have been the instigators of the crime. They were also blamed for the attack on Mulligan and Ligar in Jasper Gorge in 1895.\(^2\) At least one early report says that Jasper Gorge belonged to the Wardaman,\(^3\) but more recent studies indicate that the gorge is in the country of their immediate neighbours, the Ngaliwurru.\(^4\) While it is quite possible that Wardaman people were involved, it is also possible that they were blamed by Aborigines from other groups to divert attention from the real culprits. The Wardaman were even

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\(^1\) ‘The Victoria River Outrage’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-11-1889.

\(^2\) Gordon Creek police journal, 25-6-1895. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F302.


blamed for ‘coercing into evil actions’ the Aborigines on Elsey station, over 200 kilometres to the east.³

So, what was it that made the Wardaman so formidable in defence of their country? The fierceness of Wardaman resistance was due, at least in part, to the natural advantages of their country. Their land straddles the divide between the Victoria and Katherine-Daly Rivers and extends onto the Sturt Plateau, and in rough terms can be divided in three sections. On the south-eastern side about a third lies on the Sturt Plateau, a flat, almost featureless area, largely waterless in the dry season and boggy in the wet. Another third lies to the north within the Katherine-Daly catchment, a well-watered area with many creeks and scattered patches of sandstone, an area where people on foot stood a reasonable chance of escaping from horsemen. The final third lies to the south-west in the catchment of the Victoria River. This is well-watered country with many springs and large creeks, including Dead Finish, Little Gregory, (Big) Gregory, and Sullivans. These streams rise in rough, hilly, basalt country but soon enter a sandstone belt, a complex area of precipitous flat-topped and spinifex covered ranges, often capped with cliffs. Except for a few major valleys this region is virtually inaccessible for horsemen and was therefore a vast natural fortress for the Aborigines.

Another possible factor in the strength of Wardaman resistance is their location in relation to several Aboriginal culture areas. In Aboriginal Australia, culture areas – regions within which there are strong social and cultural links – tend to be defined by major catchment areas.⁶ The Wardaman are located on the divide between three culture areas – Victoria River, Daly River and Katherine River (Arnhem Land). The Katherine and Daly are part of the same catchment but nevertheless form separate culture areas. As might be expected Wardaman people display influences from all three regions, influences first noted by D.S.

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³ Aeneas Gunn (per Jeannie Gunn) to Government Resident, 28-2-1902. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 11226.
Davidson, an American archaeologist who excavated sites in Wardaman country in the early 1930s:

Like all tribes to their south, their initiation ceremonies are marked by both circumcision and sub-incision. The tribes to their north, however, practice only the former. The northern boundary of the Wardaman also forms the approximate northern limit of the use of the boomerang. Their southern boundary, where they meet the Ngainman [sic] tribe, represents the most northern limit of the shield and the southernmost appearance of...the arm-band.7

There appear to be relatively few links in mythology between the Wardaman and groups to their west, and Wardaman language is not related to other Victoria River languages. It is in fact the most southerly member of the Gunwinyguan Family, other languages of which are located in Arnhem Land.8 The influence of the three culture areas can be seen in Wardaman rock art. Stylistically this rock art belongs to the Victoria River rock art province, but a few figures have Arnhem Land style X-ray features and there are examples of ‘rayed faces’ more characteristic of Daly River rock art.9 Overall, Wardaman rock art is more elaborate than the rock art of other groups in the Victoria River country, and it may be that their position between three major culture areas has enriched them culturally. It may also have forced them to adopt a more assertive identity and to more aggressively defend their territory. Their rock paintings sometimes depict white men and these provide us with the only glimpse we have of how Wardaman people perceived the settlers (see plates 106, 107).

Early accounts only occasionally mention the name ‘Wardaman’ or a similar derivative; other names used include the ‘Gregory blacks’, the ‘Willeroo blacks’ (or natives) and the ‘Delamere blacks’. While it is likely that the majority of the Aborigines living within what is now considered to be Wardaman territory were Wardaman speaking people, it is probable that some were from other language-identified groups. For the purposes of this thesis, if an

event occurred within what is now considered to be Wardaman territory, I describe the Aborigines involved as Wardaman.

European knowledge of Wardaman territory began with the explorations of Gregory’s Expedition in 1855-56 (see Chapter 2). The Victoria River Gorge marks the western side of Wardaman country, and Gregory rode through this gorge three times. When the expedition broke up in June 1856, he led a party into the northern end of the gorge and soon turned eastward up Gregory Creek and crossed the tableland to Elsey Creek, passing through the middle of Wardaman country. During the time they were in Wardaman territory they saw few signs of Aborigines and had little contact with them.¹⁰

Between Gregory’s time and the arrival of the first settlers, several of the land-seeking or prospecting expeditions described in Chapter 2 passed through Wardaman country. Of these, only Sullivan and McDonald in 1878, and A.T. Woods in 1880 met Aborigines. These were the Aborigines near the junction of Gregory Creek and the Victoria River who spoke some words of English and called out ‘White fellow Jummy, white fellow Jummy’. Two years later A.T. Woods visited the same area with Aboriginal interpreters and was able to question the ‘Gregory blacks’. From the answers he received he concluded there was no ‘White fellow Jummy’, so it seems likely that the Aborigines met by Sullivan and McDonald had learnt the words from direct or indirect contact with whites on the Telegraph Line, and were trying to entice the land-seekers into an ambush. Of interest here is the fact that in both instances the Aborigines were (apparently) friendly. Unfortunately, such cordial relations were not to last.

In the first wave of settlement three stations were established within Wardaman country – Delamere, Price’s Creek and Willeroo. The leases that became Delamere and Price’s Creek were in the north of Wardaman country (see maps 3, 4).¹¹ They were taken up on behalf of

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¹¹ On today’s maps Price’s Creek does not have a junction with the Flora River but it did so in the past and what is now referred to as Mathieson Creek was originally Price’s Creek right to the Flora junction.
Dr. W.J. Brown in 1880 and stocked in 1881, and although the two blocks were contiguous (Price’s Creek was north of and adjoining Delamere) they were run as separate stations, each with its own homestead. By 1887 Brown was in severe financial difficulties and he placed the stations on the market. Alfred Giles, Brown’s manager at Springvale, bought the three stations, but because of the depression that began in 1890 he could not afford to pay the rents on all three places. He shifted all the stock off Delamere and Prices Creek and relinquished the leases, and he also relinquished Springvale.

In the hope that economic conditions might improve he paid the rent on Delamere up to the end of 1892 and paid a man to caretake the homestead for eight months, but finally had to abandon the lease. Price’s Creek homestead lay empty for a period and although ‘every possible care was taken to protect the homestead buildings... from fire the natives have recently burnt the buildings yards & everything.’ The homestead was never rebuilt and from about this time the name ‘Price’s Creek station’ was no longer used, but this is getting ahead of the story.

Willeroo was taken up by Cooper and Stuckey in about 1881 and stocked in 1885 (plate 108). Cooper was born on a property near Lake George, New South Wales, which had been

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Today’s Price’s Creek joins Aroona Creek about 37 kilometres from the Flora River, and Aroona Creek eventually joins Mathieson Creek. In 1999 I relocated the original Delamere homestead site near the Price’s Creek/Aroona Creek junction, and in 2000 I relocated the Price’s Creek homestead site on Mathieson Creek about 3 kilometres above the Flora River/Mathieson Creek junction.


15 ‘For Sale. The following properties, viz. Delamere Downs’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 11-6-1887.

16 Ibid: 19-6-1891.

17 A. Giles to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 15-12-1893. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5889.

18 ‘Notes From Victoria River, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 29-8-1885; Government Resident J.L. Parson’s ‘Quarterly Report on Northern Territory, June 30th, 1885’, South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 3, no. 55, 1885, p. 2; Notes supplied by Mr Vern O’Brien, former Director of the Northern
granted by the Crown to his father. The property was called Willeroo, the name of the curlew in the local Aboriginal language, and Cooper gave the same name to the land taken up in the Northern Territory. Originally Willeroo was located south of Delamere, but within twenty years the boundaries of both stations had changed dramatically. The Delamere and Willeroo blocks were all relinquished in the 1890s. Later new owners took up leases in different parts of the same general area and the old names were reapplied, but in the process the positions of the names relative to each other became reversed.

The first hint of problems to come occurred late in 1881. Two stockmen, James Walden and W. Arboin, were camped on Delamere with a wagon load of goods and a herd of cattle, waiting the arrival of the manager, Henry Gosse. In the days before Gosse was due to arrive the stockmen were severely frightened by Aborigines who visited their camp several times, and although the Aborigines did not threaten them the two men panicked, and decided to hide whatever equipment they could and leave. They buried all the harness and a lot of other goods, hid tools and other goods in a spring and threw other items into a waterhole, including a fresh bullock hide and some books wrapped in a new tarpaulin, and a tent containing perishable goods.

Gosse arrived an hour after Walden and Arboin had left but rain had washed out their tracks so he could not tell where they had gone, and he spent the next three days riding around the cattle looking for them. He then decided to ride in to Springvale and went out to round up his horses. While he was gone, Aborigines raided his camp, stealing his hammock, a fly, a mosquito net and some cartridges. When the mess was finally sorted out and a party of men returned to where the equipment had been buried they found ‘all the waggon harness dug up and strewn about by the savages’ and the leading reins, an axe, a tomahawk, tin plates, pannicans, knives and billycans stolen. In addition, some of the goods secreted in the spring

19 'Mr Robert Cowley Cooper' (obituary), The Pastoral Review, 15-4-14.
20 Territory Lands Department, through the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin. According to Vern, only Cooper’s name appears on the lease documents.

Summary of the early history of the Willeroo and Delamere leases, provided by Vern O’Brien, former director of the Northern Territory Lands Department, through the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.
had been washed away or were ruined by rust, bags of flour had gone rock hard and bags of sugar had dissolved into the ground.21

For the next four years things seem to have remained quiet. Then at the end of May 1886 a more serious incident occurred. While camping on Willeroo about eighteen miles from the homestead, a stockman named Harry Keane and a ‘blackboy’ were attacked by Aborigines at three in the morning. Keane was speared in the stomach and received many cuts on the head from stones while the ‘boy’ was speared in the back. Fortunately both recovered.22 No reason was offered for the attack and it is unknown if any retaliation took place. In September 1886 Mat Cahill was wounded and Fred Williams was killed on Gregory Creek.23 One account claims that ‘A few of the black scoundrels were shot in this case, but the police brought none of them to justice.’24

During the early 1890s the Wardaman were said to have been ‘so aggressive as to occasionally spear horses and cattle alongside the [Willeroo] stockyard, and on one occasion they had the cook – a ‘Celestial’ – besieged for days while the others were away.’25 In April 1892 it was reported that ‘One station owner, at least, has of late been seriously contemplating the withdrawal of all his cattle from his extensive runs in consequence of the incessant and increasing troublesomences [sic] of the wild blacks’.26 The station in question was almost certainly Willeroo, still owned by Cooper and Stuckey, and the ‘troublesomences’ included the wounding of George E. Scott, the brother of the manager.27

In October 1892 the Willeroo manager, William Sydney ‘Syd’ Scott, was murdered on the station near McLure Rocky Hole, on McLure Creek (plate 109). The story begins on the 10th when a band of Aborigines appeared at the homestead. Scott was planning to begin a cattle

21 A. Giles, The First Pastoral Settlement in the Northern Territory, nd.
22 The North Australian, 4-6-1886; Telegram from Alfred Giles to Government Resident, 29-5-1886.
Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item A9093.
23 ‘Victoria River’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 2-10-1886.
24 ‘The Aboriginals’ (Paddy Cahill to the editor), South Australian Register, 4-9-1900.
26 Ibid.
27 ‘Murders in the Northern Territory’, South Australian Register, 17-10-1892.
muster the following morning, so he spoke to the Aborigines and told them to go in the opposite direction to that where the muster was to be held.\textsuperscript{28} He gave them some tobacco and other items, and they made camp nearby. Later Scott discovered that a little boy named Crawford living with him at Willeroo had gone to the Aborigine’s camp so he sent his black stockman, Rollo, to bring him back. Rollo went to the camp but stopped there all night and only brought Crawford back at daylight.\textsuperscript{29}

Scott’s mustering team consisted of Rollo, who came from the Katherine area, Rollo’s wife Alpha who came from Blue Mud Bay (Arnhem Land), and little Crawford. Normally Syd Scott’s brother George would have gone with them, but he had left for a holiday in Darwin a few days earlier. In the morning the team started out and headed in the direction of McLure Rockhole, and while having dinner there (midday) a mob of blacks appeared. Scott asked them what they were doing walking about among the cattle and sent Rollo off to bring in the horses, but the Aborigines began acting aggressively, and scattered the horses and made them gallop. Scott called Rollo back for fear he might be killed, and fired a shot from his rifle to frighten the blacks away. When they had gone he sent Rollo out once more to bring in the horses, but when Rollo returned he found Scott dead, with several spears in his back and his head split down the centre of the forehead. The camp had been robbed, and the blacks had taken Scott’s Martini-Henry rifle and cartridges and cleared out. They had also taken Crawford and Alpha with them – they were never seen again – so Rollo packed up what gear was left and rode back to the homestead. There he told the Chinese cook what had happened and they decided to ride in to Katherine to alert the police, leaving the homestead unguarded.\textsuperscript{30}

It is clear that the Aborigines had not gone far and quite likely had followed Rollo back to the homestead, and seen him and the cook leave. They soon realised there was no one else at

\textsuperscript{28} Scott almost certainly communicated with these Aborigines through his stockman Rollo, who was a native of Katherine district and who therefore almost certainly would have spoken the language of the Wardaman, his immediate neighbours.

\textsuperscript{29} ‘Another Murder in the Victoria River District’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 21-10-1892.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
the homestead, so they broke in and ransacked the place, taking away most of the wet season loading which had only recently arrived. This included,

about 20 bags flour, 3 bags of rice, all the clothes blankets &c 2 doz pair new boots 60 lb tobacco all matches knives'. They also 'smashed the crockery took four rifles and about 300 rounds of ammunition, killed all the fowls and threw them in heaps and made a regular mess of things.31

The clothes stolen included ‘two dozen dungaree suits’, and other looted goods included pipes, rugs, a saddle and bridle, and ‘other sundries’.52

It seems likely that as they rode in to Katherine Rollo and the cook met Lindsay Crawford and one of his men who were on their way to VRD, because a party which set out from Katherine as soon as the alarm was raised arrived at Willeroo on November 20th, two days after Crawford had been there. The party from Katherine included Mounted Constable H.P. Browne, Arthur Giles, and F. W. Palmer who later provided a detailed account of his observations and actions at Willeroo. According to Palmer a note from Crawford was found pinned to the door advising that he and his man had gathered up various goods found scattered in the vicinity and cleaned up a lot of mess. While doing this they discovered thirty or forty Aborigines in the horse paddock and ‘charged their camp’, and found Mr. W.S. Scott’s saddle and bridle and some other things.33

Palmer says that before he arrived at Willeroo, Crawford and party had left for Victoria River, but he says nothing about what Crawford did to the Aborigines in the horse paddock or anywhere else, and other contemporary documents are similarly mute. However, two early sources suggest that severe retribution was delivered to the Aborigines. First, writing in 1896 Mounted Constable Willshire stated that, ‘They were tracked up by an avenging party, and sic transit gloria mundi!’ (‘Thus passes the glory of the world’). A decade later Hely Hutchinson, who passed through Willeroo with drover Rose on his epic trek with cattle

31 A Giles to Government Resident, citing information given to him by F.W. Palmer, 2-11-1892. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5861.
33 A Giles to Government Resident, 2-11-1892, NTRS 829, item 5861.

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from Lissadell Station in 1905, and who met many of the early residents, wrote that Crawford had ‘found the myalls gloriously drunk and capering about the house like a mob of black devils.’ Crawford then avenged Scott’s death,

in a terrible manner, and the “gruelling” he gave the myalls on that occasion is still spoken off by the niggers in those parts as the Israelites of old told to their children the horror of the wrath of the Lord, when he sent plague, pestilence and famine into their lands as a correction for their misdeeds... He and his half-caste dealt out white man’s justice with their Winchesters, and when the police arrived from Pine Creek, a couple of days later, they found plenty of employment burying the sons of darkness.

The day after they arrived at Willeroo, Palmer and Browne went in search of Scott’s body. When they found it all that remained were bare bones – mid-October is the height of the ‘build-up’ in northern Australia, a period of extreme heat and humidity which makes putrefaction extraordinarily rapid. Tracks, bloodstains and other marks told the story: Aborigines had crept along a creek bed to get close to where Scott was sitting or dozing under a tree, and attacked him. Scott was hit by at least one spear, but managed to run about a hundred metres to another tree where he was surrounded by a large number of blacks. There he was attacked again, and killed. The tree where Scott fell was “bruised with stones” and the ground round about strewn with broken spears. Palmer noted that Scott’s body had been, ‘terribly mutilated the arms certainly if not the feet, being chopped off with a tomahawk and the front and top of skull smashed in’, and that ‘One spear had been thrown or thrust with such force as to cause it to pass right through the thigh joint and was with considerable difficulty driven back from its lodgement [sic] in these bones with a stone.’ Scott’s remains were brought to the homestead and buried there.

On October 24th Mounted Constables Dooley and Freeman, George Scott, and several other men arrived, and two parties were formed to go out after the Aborigines. According to

35 Ibid. Hutchinson may be incorrect on one point: F. W. Palmer states that the Aborigines had not taken or consumed any of the alcohol in the homestead.
36 ‘The Willeroo Tragedy’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 4-11-1892.
37 A Giles to Government Resident, citing information given to him by F.W. Palmer, 2-11-1892. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5861.
reports at the time, they saw traces of the wanted Aborigines in all directions – spilt flour, bullet holes in trees or bullocks which had been shot\textsuperscript{38} – and found evidence of several large camps near the homestead,\textsuperscript{39} but their search for the culprits (other than those who may have been killed by Crawford and his offsider) was unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{40} Perhaps the fact that the Aborigines were armed with five rifles and plenty of ammunition was sufficient to discourage serious pursuit.

Scott’s murder appears to have made up the mind of the owners to abandon the station because in June 1895 Cooper and Stuckey sold the Willeroo cattle to Joe Bradshaw for what was said to have been a very low price,\textsuperscript{41} and these became the nucleus of the Bradshaw cattle herd.\textsuperscript{42} By August 1895 they had relinquished the lease, and at the time it was recorded that,

One cause of the failure of the station is said to be that the hostility of the blacks has prevented the herd from being systematically worked, and from what we know of the records of that district it does appear as though the natives had particular designs on Willeroo, for their depredations were most frequent. It is possible that Mr. Cooper took very little interest in the station after the brutal murder of W. S. Scott, the then manager, about three years ago, for as far as we can discover operations have since been carried on in a very easy-going fashion.\textsuperscript{43}

The abandonment of Willeroo is one of only two instances in Victoria River district history of a station being abandoned because of Aboriginal resistance. The other instance also involved Willeroo, abandoned soon after it was taken up by new owners in 1900 (see below).

After Joe Bradshaw brought the Willeroo cattle, Jock McPhee, 'Tam-a-Shanter' of \textit{We Of The Never Never} fame,\textsuperscript{44} carried out musters in the area for six or seven years, beginning in

\textsuperscript{38} 'The Willeroo Tragedy', \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 25-11-1892.
\textsuperscript{39} A Giles to Government Resident, 2-11-1892, NTRS 829, item 5861.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 25-11-1892.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid: 23-8-1895.
\textsuperscript{42} Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entry for 25-6-1895. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 2261; \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 23-8-1895.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} "Never-Never" People', \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 21-2-1942.
July 1894. A report in 1898 says he had taken up the Willeroo lease, possibly to safeguard rights to the cattle. While working on Willeroo McPhee was not immune from the attentions of the Wardaman who on one occasion attacked him and his boy and on another ‘went through [his] camp & took away rations & firearms Etc.’ However, if the report of Billy Linklater (aka Miller) can be believed McPhee displayed a remarkable sangfroid in the face of the danger the Aborigines presented. Linklater, who arrived in the Territory in 1887 and worked as a stockman there and in the Kimberley for over fifty years, claimed that, ‘One day when it was raining spears, McPhee walked out, picked some up, handed them back and told the blacks to go away like good boys or he would have to send the troopers after them. They went.’

On May 26th 1894, Joe Bradshaw, Jack Larsen, and a ‘blackboy’, Nym, set out to ride up the Victoria and Gregory Creek to Delamere to visit the ‘sheep camp’. In a ‘narrow defile’ on Gregory Creek just above its junction with the Victoria River they were attacked by a large number of Aborigines ‘securely ambushed in rank dense grass which at this place is

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45 Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entries for 25-10-1895, 30-7-1896, 8-7-1899 and 7-5-1900.
47 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 17-4-1896.
48 Timber Creek police journal, 30-11-1900. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F302.
50 Ibid: 50.
51 Carving on a boab on Fitzroy station, directly south of Bradshaw station. This was, of course, the same McPhee who was involved in the burning of dead Aborigines, shot for killing sheep (see Chapters 6 and 8). In McPhee’s time the area that later became Fitzroy station was unleased land and Bradshaw cattle would have ranged over the area.
52 The name ‘Nym’ was common in the early years of ‘Top End’ settlement. According to W. Wildey in Australia and the Oceanic Region (George Robinson, Sydney, 1876, pp. 108-109), ‘Nym’ was a short version of the Larrakia word ‘Nymgorla’ meaning ‘young man’. The Larrakia people are the traditional owners of the Darwin area.
53 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 26-5-1894; Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 6-7-1894.
fully 10ft high. Joe escaped unharmed and though one report says that his white companion was severely injured, Nym 'was fatally speared, death coming a couple of hours after he was speared.' Joe buried Nym, but apparently the grave was too shallow because in July Mounted Constable Willshire from the Gordon Creek police station found Nym's bones scattered about by dingoes. He reburied them but in October they were once again found scattered about on the surface.

An Aboriginal named Mahdi was murdered by blacks at Willeroo in November 1894. Reports at the time said that,

Mahdi was a boy Constable Wurmbrandt brought to these parts from Alice Springs some years ago. Of late he had been employed as a stockman and tracker at Willeroo station. He was noted for his cruelty to the local blacks, and the general impression here is that he played for what he got.

Three Aborigines were arrested for this crime and after they were brought to Katherine an 'aged black who is believed to be father of one of the suspected murderers' came up to the police station. Constable Burt went out to meet him, 'but when [he] had got within fifteen paces of the black fellow the old villain deliberately hurled a barbed spear at Burt, who by promptly ducking, caused the spear to do nothing more than graze his face.' After throwing the spear the old man got away.

In November 1895, Paddy Cahill took a mob of horses from Katherine to the Depot where he had arranged to meet the Government Resident, Charles Dashwood. As he was crossing

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54 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 29-5-1894; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-7-1894; Joe Bradshaw in *Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices*, 1895, answer to question 3284.
55 ‘The Northern Territory. Interview with Mr. J. Bradshaw’, *The Adelaide Observer*, 7-12-1895.
56 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 29-5-1894; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-7-1894; Joe Bradshaw in *Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices*, 1895, answer to question 3284.
57 Timber Creek police journal, 18-6-1894.
58 Ibid: 22-7-1894.
60 'Black Murderers Arrested', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-12-1894.
61 Ibid.
the Little Gregory Creek about fourteen miles from its junction with the Victoria River he
was attacked by Aborigines. In his words,

We had just started from the luncheon camp, and had hardly gone 300 yards when I
noticed some very fresh black’s tracks. Knowing that the blacks were very bad in that
part of the country I took my rifle from under my saddle flap and filled it with
cartridges. I rode on a few yards when one of my boys cried out, “Look out Paddy!” I
knew the blacks must be behind me, so I dodged down alongside my horse’s shoulder,
and only just in time. A spear struck my hat, going through it, and giving me hard
knock on the head. Luckily I am Irish, and a bit thickheaded, so it did very little harm!
Before I could say a word I had niggers all around. I could do nothing but shoot as
quickly as possible, and I can shoot fairly quickly. I don’t know how many niggers I
shot – I didn’t stop to count them.62

Cahill continued on, and was followed by the blacks for several days and nights, but was not
attacked again.63

E.R. Johnston was attacked on Dead Finish Creek in July 1896. Aborigines surrounded his
camp before daylight and drove his horses away, but before they launched an attack Johnson
and his ‘boy’ were alerted by their dog. At daylight Johnson tried to make friends with the
Aborigines, ‘but they showed fight & rushed around the Camp until dispersed by Johnson
and his boy.’64 Johnson knew that George Ligar was due to arrive later that day – the same
George Ligar who had been speared the year before in Jasper Gorge (see Chapter 5) – so he
stayed where he was. Skirmishing continued until about midday when Ligar arrived and
broke the siege. Johnson and Ligar then tracked the horses for twelve miles over some very
rough country to where they found, ‘The natives Killed a mare & had the heart taken out to
cook.’ The other horses had been ‘grazed about the front & hind quarters,’65 and ‘One of the
most valuable of the animals had been speared in the jugular, apparently from sheer wanton
wickedness and cruelty.’66

62 ‘Paddy Cahill’s List’, The Adelaide Register, 18-12-1905.
63 ‘Government Resident’s Trip to Victoria River’ [1895], Government Resident of the Northern Territory
(South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item
6891.
64 Timber Creek police journal, 27-5-1896.
65 Ibid.
66 ‘Aboriginal Marauders’, F. Burdett to the editor, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 3-7-1896.
Although few details about Johnson's fight survive, a man named Burdett who passed the spot some time later noted that, 'judging by the heap of broken spears I saw laying on the road...the attack [must] have been most determined.' Burdett noted that 'the blacks there seem to have some half-civilised ones amongst their tribe who can talk, and certainly swear, as fluently as any white man' and that in the same area there had been 'two other attempts within the last three months to waylay travellers'. He suggested the establishing of police patrols in the area, but nothing was done.

In 1899 drover McLeod was attacked in Wardaman country, but no further details are known, and drover Andison had two horses speared while passing Delamere. The Aborigines drove one of Andison's horses 30 kilometres before killing and cooking it. When they were tracked up only the horse's head remained.

The Timber Creek police reported in June 1900 that, 'Messrs Littleton and Madden arrived from Wyndham en route for Katherine [they have] taken up Old Willeroo Run, and going to settle there.' They soon met the Wardaman warriors, and a news report in September 1900 suggests they abandoned their lease almost immediately:

Mr. Madden, who, in conjunction with his partner, Mr. Littleton, has lately taken up some country in the Victoria River District, complains bitterly of the ferocious and mischievous character of the blacks in that neighbourhood. He states that his partner and himself took up this country with the intention of stocking, but after his recent experience of the character of the blacks, he feels rather doubtful as to whether they will proceed with their enterprise.

In May 1900 drover Fred Mork was taking a mob of Hodgson Downs cattle across Willeroo and on to Wyndham for export to Fremantle (plate 110). On about the 10th one of Mork's black stockmen was driving a lame bullock toward the main herd which was several miles

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67 Ibid.
68 'Katherine River', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 19-1-1900.
69 Timber Creek police journal, 22-6-1900.
70 *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 21-9-1900.
71 Timber Creek police journal, 9-6-1900; 'Victoria River', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 1-6-1900; 'Another White Man Speared By Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 22-6-1900; HWH Stevens to Government Resident, 30-3-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item, 9686.
ahead, when some Aborigines came out of the bush and took the beast off him. A week later one of Mork’s white stockmen, Walter Rees, was attacked by Aborigines who showed ‘great determination’ and called out ‘Come on, you white beggars’, but he managed to get away.\textsuperscript{72}

On the evening of the 19\textsuperscript{th} the cattle were camped on McLure Creek and in the morning Mork rode ahead, probably checking the route he would be taking that day. About ten miles from camp he unwittingly rode into a camp of ‘fifty or sixty’ Aborigines:

He was no sooner observed by its occupants than a shower of spears was sent flying in his direction. One of these, a three pronged wire-headed spear, struck Mork in the fleshy part of the thigh, going right through to the saddle-flap; another spear struck the horse Mork was riding in the stifle, only just missing the joint by about two inches.\textsuperscript{73}

The spear which hit the horse was tipped with an old sheep shear blade and if it had hit the joint could have crippled the horse, with disastrous consequences. Mork ‘wheeled round and galloped away, followed by another flight of spears, which fortunately flew wide, and he and his horse arrived back in camp, both weak from loss of blood.\textsuperscript{74}

Harry ‘Dutchy’ Bening, Billy Madden and others thwarted an intended ambush by about twenty Aborigines near the Gregory Creek-Victoria River junction in August 1900. That night and ten miles further on, Aborigines killed two of their horses and badly wounded another. When Bening’s party arrived at the Timber Creek police station they found that ‘an old man’, a French traveller named Clede Pennaman, had been ‘stuck up’ on Sullivans Creek and robbed of all his possessions, including a sporting rifle.\textsuperscript{75} Why he was not killed is a mystery.

\textsuperscript{72} ‘Troublesome Natives, A Drover Attacked’, \textit{Adelaide Advertiser}, 18-6-1900.
\textsuperscript{73} ‘Another White Man Speared By Blacks’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 22-6-1900.
\textsuperscript{74} ‘Ibid; H.W.H. Stevens to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, nd. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 9722.
\textsuperscript{75} Timber Creek police journal, 15-8-1900, 28-8-1900; ‘Further Outrages by Victoria River Natives. Three Horses Speared.’ W. Bening to the editor, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 28-9-1900.
Towards the end of October 1900 a traveller named James Osbourne was attacked and wounded near the junction of Sullivans Creek and the Victoria River. As reported by the *Northern Territory Times*,

whilst quietly riding along about midday, he was suddenly struck by a wire spear in the muscle of the right arm, the weapon being thrown with such force and murderous intent as to pass right through the arm and enter his side between the ribs, thus pinning his arm to his side. Frightened by the yells of the blacks his horses bolted. After galloping some distance Osbourne managed to extract the spear, and then feeling sick and faint from loss of blood, he got off and lay down…

After resting for several hours his horse alerted him that something was wrong, but before he could mount he was again attacked and,

another shower of spears was thrown, one of which struck him in the head, but fortunately glanced off without inflicting more than a flesh wound. With the blood from this fresh wound running down his face and almost blinding him, and the terrific yells of the black fiends sounding all around him, he succeeded in mounting his frightened horse and again making his escape.

Osbourne rode some distance and camped for the night, and in the morning he returned on his tracks to try and retrieve his six packhorses. The heat and his wounds led him to take another rest and while resting he was attacked again, but this time he drove them off with his revolver. He eventually found his six packhorses, all dead, and the pack bags looted. He then rode sixty-five miles to ‘McPhee’s camp on Willeroo’ where his wounds were treated, and eventually he returned to Darwin. Mounted Constable O’Keefe visited McPhee’s camp some time after Osbourne had left and McPhee told him that the blacks who speared Osbourne were the same ones that speared Mork and Cahill, and that they had raided his camp and stolen rations and firearms.

The attack on Osbourne finally prompted the Government to act. At the end of 1900 Mounted Constable Thompson and two trackers were sent to assist Mounted Constable

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76 ‘Another Outrage by blacks’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 9-11-1900.
77 Ibid; Timber Creek police journal, 29-11-1900.
78 Timber Creek police journal, 31-11-1900.
O'Keefe at Timber Creek, with instructions to carry out special patrols through Jasper Gorge and around through Willeroo and Delamere (see Chapter 4). Over the next three years Thompson or O'Keefe regularly made these special patrols, and while their reports in the Timber Creek police journal make no mention of any serious conflicts with Aborigines, attacks on white people in Wardaman country continued for several years.

By 1901 Delamere was owned by W.F. Buchanan, brother of the famous Nat 'Bluey' Buchanan, and stocked with cattle from Wave Hill. Europeans were also active on Willeroo in 1901 but what these men were doing there is unknown. However, the men on both stations enjoyed the attentions of the Wardaman. A 'Katherine correspondent' to the *Northern Territory Times* reported, 'I have just received a letter from Willeroo station that one of the mares has been killed and eaten by the blacks quite close to the camp.'

In August 1902 a man named Smith had 'an encounter' with Aborigines 'between the two Delameres'. He got away unharmed, but a few days later a German traveller, name unknown, disappeared in the same area. This man's horses were found a few days later but there was no trace of the man himself. The police at Katherine were notified and Mounted Constable Kingston spent about a month investigating, but he, too, found nothing. Eventually it was reported that, 'Bush blacks state that the man was killed and his body, and saddles, etc., burnt' but this was never confirmed. Late the following year Aborigines entered the camp of C.J. Walker six miles north of the Gregory Creek junction and demanded tobacco, and later they followed him, but no other incidents occurred.

79 W.F. Buchanan to Surveyor General, 11-1-1901. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640 Item 1901/46.
80 Timber Creek police journal, 30-5-1902; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 17-2-1905; ‘Notice’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 29-5-1903 (advertisement).
81 Notes on the entry of 7-5-1901 in the Timber Creek police journal, copied by an unknown policeman. Letter Book, 1911-1925, NTRS 2223, Northern Territory Archives; ‘Katherine’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 5-4-1901.
82 *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 4-10-1901.
83 ‘Supposed Outrage by Blacks’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 5-9-1902; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 24-10-1902.
84 Notes taken from the Timber Creek police letter book entry of 9-8-1903, written by an unidentified policeman. Letter Book, 1911-1925, NTRS 2223, Northern Territory Archives; Note: the Timber Creek police journal entry of 21-10-1903 says this incident occurred on the head of the Little Gregory Creek.
In 1905 Wardaman people were involved in a bloody incident with a ‘foreign’ Aborigine on Willeroo. In August, while the manager and all hands were out mustering, a dispute arose between Nipper, an Aborigine from ‘Red Lily’ (Elsey station), and someone at the homestead. There is a suggestion that Lee Gunn, the Chinese cook, had taken Nipper’s wife, which may have been the cause of the dispute. In any case, Nipper went bush for several days before returning and demanding tucker from the cook. The cook refused, so Nipper stole his rifle and cartridges and shot him dead, and for some reason he also killed an old Aboriginal woman who looked after the Willeroo goats. He then took a horse, the rifle, a blanket and other gear, slung an ammunition belt across his shoulder, and headed in towards Katherine, probably with the intention of returning to Elsey.85

By the time Nipper got close to Katherine the alarm had been raised and by chance he was seen. A police party led by Mounted Constable Johnstone quickly got onto his tracks and after a week-long chase in the Katherine area, Nipper doubled back towards Willeroo. Eventually the police party came upon Nipper near the Flora Falls, but Nipper saw them coming, dismounted and hid in a patch of thick, long grass and jungle, laced with small creeks. The police surrounded the area as best they could and began a search. Suddenly Nipper appeared and ‘raised his rifle, and was on the point of firing at tracker Jack, when the latter anticipated him by a snap shot...from his revolver.’86 Jack missed, and Nipper retreated into the thick vegetation. Johnstone called on him to surrender, but received no response, so, ‘The long grass was then set on fire, and being dry soon burnt itself out. But there was no trace of Nipper, who had apparently disappeared like a snake by crawling away through the surrounding grass whilst the conflagration was raging.’87

Nipper’s horse was almost burnt to death before it was rescued and was found to be carrying ‘about 40 lbs of fresh beef’, which it was thought Nipper was taking to a ‘bush natives camp.’ On this occasion Nipper got clear away, but he did not survive for long. After the fire

87 Ibid.
Johnston tried unsuccesssfully to find Nipper’s tracks, and then had to return to Katherine for fresh horses and more rations, but before he left he met three bush Aborigines and asked them to keep a ‘bright look out’ for Nipper while he was gone. There are two quite similar versions of subsequent events. In one, the three men soon found Nipper but he was suspicious of them, accusing them of being in league with the police and telling them to keep away from him or he would shoot them. He afterwards joined a camp of Wardaman blacks in the area and, ‘very foolishly boasted to them that he had not only shot the Chinese cook, but that he had also shot an old lubra employed as a goat shepherd at Willeroo. This revelation was suicidal on his part, as the old lady belonged to the Willeroo tribe.’

The Wardaman men took revenge by tricking Nipper into leaving his rifle in camp and going on a kangaroo hunt with spears. Not far from camp one of the Aborigines suddenly stopped and called to Nipper, ‘There is a kangaroo. Quick! Give me your spears until I spear him!’ Nipper did so and was then ‘speared to death where he stood.’ He was later found by Johnston with, ‘two spear wounds in the back, and also a hole in the back from whence the deceased’s “kidney fat” had been extracted by his slayers’.

In the other version Nipper had already joined the Wardaman camp before he escaped from the fire set by Johnston to drive him into the open. The three Aborigines met by Johnston found Nipper in this camp, but Nipper must have seen them talking with Johnston because he became ‘furiously angry, accusing them of being in league with the police, and ‘would have shot them had he not been prevented by the other natives.’ While he was in this angry state Nipper revealed that he had shot the old woman at Willeroo, and this led to him being killed by the Wardaman warriors in the manner described above.

The German traveller murdered in 1902 appears to have been the last European killed by ‘bush blacks’ in Wardaman country and there can be little doubt that soon afterwards a decision was made to stop attacking and killing whites. Within a few years there is evidence

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88 ‘End of a Murderer’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 8-9-1905.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
that a station blacks’ camp had been established at Willeroo homestead and possibly at Delamere, \(^{91}\) and some Wardaman were living elsewhere in the district. For instance, in 1905, four years after an Aboriginal camp was established at VRD, the Governor of South Australia saw a man there wearing ‘a large brass plate inscribed “Naaluk, King of the Wattamon.”’ \(^{92}\) Some diehards kept out of harms’ way in the bush, \(^{93}\) but eventually most came in to the homesteads and accommodated themselves to European settlement (see Chapter 4).

As discussed in Chapter 4, decisions about fighting and ceasing to fight appear to have been made universally across the region. Along with the decision of many Aborigines to accept the ‘offer’ of life in station camps, there appears to have been a parallel decision to stop attacking white men. From the time that the station camps appeared, or shortly afterwards, the rate of attacks against white men dropped markedly, especially in the territory of the Wardaman which formerly had been one of the most dangerous areas. Occasional attacks on or killings of whites still occurred in the district but most of these involved Aborigines who had remained in the bush, or who had experienced minimal contact with whites. Eventually only the largest areas of rough country remained dangerous for white men. For example, in 1922 a prospecting expedition into the Stokes Range later reported that ‘West and north of the Humbert River there were tribes not too friendly disposed towards the whites.’ \(^{94}\) Europeans avoided these areas or took strict precautions there long after other parts of the district had been more or less subdued.

Warriors the Wardaman were and warriors they no doubt remained. ‘Soft’ resistance such as cattle killing continued for many years, \(^{95}\) but after more than twenty years of being a force to be reckoned with, of making their name one of dread to both settlers and travellers, from this time on they no longer applied their fighting skills in violent resistance.

\(^{91}\) Timber Creek police journal, 10-10-1907; 24-9-1907.
\(^{94}\) ‘The Search for Oil’, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 27-9-1922.
\(^{95}\) For example, in the Timber Creek police journal, entry for 31-7-1917, the manager of Delamere reported cattle killing on Gregory Creek.
Victoria River Downs, ‘the biggest sheep station in the world?’ Many local cattlemen would probably be horrified to learn that some of the early settlers dreamed of vast sheep empires on the Victoria. These settlers overcame many obstacles and invested a lot of money to successfully bring sheep onto the land, but the only legacy of their experiment is a great tale of dreams that failed.

Sheep first arrived in the Victoria River district with Gregory’s expedition in October 1855, intended as meat supplies for the explorers. The expedition had 161 sheep when it entered the Victoria, but more than a hundred died from the effects of heat and thirst during the prolonged stranding of the ship, another 11 drowned while being taken in a small boat to the new Depot Camp, and only 44 made it alive to the Depot camp.

Surprisingly, at least one sheep was loaded aboard the Tom Tough when the expedition left in July 1856. The mouths of the crew watered when they saw this sheep – they must not have had mutton for some time – but instead of chops they were offered steaks from a large saltwater crocodile that had been killed that morning. Baines reported that the men were at first upset about this, but once they had cooked and tasted the crocodile meat they were keen for more.

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5. Surprisingly, the last sheep, named ‘Tom Tough’, was still alive two months later (R. Braddon, Thomas Baines and the North Australian Expedition, Collins, Sydney, in association with the Royal Geographical Society, London, 1986, p. 113).
In December 1877 Alfred Giles set out from South Australia for Dr Browne’s Springvale\(^6\) and Newcastle Waters leases with 2000 cattle and 12,000 sheep.\(^7\) Near the Devil’s Marbles nearly 600 sheep died after eating ‘poison bush’.\(^8\) This happened on the same spot where Ralph Millner had lost nearly 2000 of the 7000 sheep he was taking to the Roper River telegraph camp in 1870-72,\(^9\) and no doubt these disasters contributed to the ongoing but largely unfounded fears of ‘Top End’ pastoralists of sheep losses from ‘poison bush’. Giles’ trek took almost two years to accomplish, with 1800 cattle and 8000 sheep arriving at Katherine in June 1879.\(^10\) What happened to the other 3000-odd sheep is unknown; they may have been left at Newcastle Waters or perhaps sold to the various telegraph stations en route.

It was quickly realised that the grass at Springvale was unsuitable for sheep because of its ‘coarse and rank nature at its maturity in the green state, and the total absence of any nourishing properties when dry, it being exactly like crisp and brittle straw.’\(^11\) The sheep had arrived in June when the grass was very dry and of the 8000 that arrived at the station nearly 800 died over the next three months.\(^12\) By the end of 1880 there were said to be only 4000 sheep left and sheep raising on Springvale was considered a failure.\(^13\) The need to find better pasture for the sheep was the driving force behind the establishment of Delamere station.

Giles stayed on to become the first manager of Springvale and when the Delamere leases were taken up for Dr Browne (see Chapter 2) he arranged for them to be stocked with 1100

\(^{6}\) Springvale is located a few kilometres out of Katherine.
\(^{8}\) A. Giles, ‘The First Pastoral Settlement in the Northern Territory’, nd. State Library of South Australia, V 1082, p. 32. Giles states that Von Mueller later identified this plant as *Gastrolobium grandiflorium*.
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
\(^{13}\) *Adelaide Observer*, 20-11-1880.
cattle and 3000 sheep. These arrived in July 1881 and though the cattle did well, the sheep did not. A traveller passing through the district a decade later remarked, 'They tried sheep here in big numbers for which the country from a practical point of view was utterly unsuitable sour bladey rank grass with no herbage whatever.'

Apparently Giles realised the shortcomings of Delamere very quickly because when he provided notes on his stations to the Government Resident in 1886 he made no mention of sheep on Delamere. When the station was advertised for sale in 1887 the numbers of bullocks, cows and horses were given, but there was no mention of sheep, sheep yards or anything else associated with them.

Giles bought Dr Browne’s Delamere and Springvale leases and continued to run sheep at Springvale. In 1891 there were still 200 sheep there, shepherded by ‘southern blacks from Alice Springs’, but by then Giles knew that, as on Delamere, sheep would never do well, remarking that, ‘In its primitive state it is not a sheep country, as proved by Dr. W.B. Browne, but it can be made capable of supporting small herds’. At times the sheep were shepherded by Chinese and at other times by Aborigines from Alice Springs. Exactly when the last sheep disappeared from Springvale is unknown, but eventually the Alice Springs Aborigines were sent home, armed with a revolver and ammunition for self-protection during the 1200 kilometre trip.

One positive outcome of the Springvale and Delamere sheep experiments was the discovery that the quality of the wool remained good. The Government Resident reported that,

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17 ‘For Sale’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 11-6-1887.
18 Ibid: 19-6-1891.
20 A. Giles, nd., State Library of South Australia, V 1082, p. 133.
21 Ibid: 155.
scarce if any deterioration in the wool was noticeable. The third clip to be taken off in the Territory was found to be genuine, clean, and good stapled wool? not hair, as many people insisted upon asserting would be the case if sheep were brought to the tropics. 22

Almost as soon as VRD was established there were plans to stock the station with sheep. Perhaps encouraged by Lindsay Crawford’s opinion that the Camfield Creek area was ‘Splendid sheep Country’; 23 Fisher and Lyons had decided to bring sheep to VRD. 24 By late 1884 preparations were being made to overland a mob of 5000 ewes from Queensland, but before they could be started the country became so drought-stricken that they could not be moved. The drought had eased sufficiently by the end of 1885, 25 but by then Fisher and Lyons financial problems had become so acute that the sheep project was abandoned.

In 1887 VRD was taken over by the English-owned Northern Australian Territory Company, 26 but two years later it came under the control of the Australian firm Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd. 27 B. Blair to inspect the station and write a report. On his return to Darwin he sent the following telegram to Goldsbrough Mort.

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27 Ibid: 69.
In October 1889 Blair produced a very detailed assessment of the potentials and limitations of the station for both cattle and sheep. Specifically for sheep he recommended improvement of natural water supplies, the provision of paddocks, and the building of a woolshed at the Victoria River depot, about four and a half kilometres below present-day Timber Creek. Encouraged by Blair's report Goldsbrough Mort decided to trial sheep on VRD, so in November 1890 1,005 picked maiden ewes from James Booth's New South Wales station were shipped to Darwin on the S.S. 'Tsinan'.

The decision to try sheep was regarded as one of great importance to the future of the Northern Territory. Goldsbrough Mort's general manager in Darwin, H.W.H. Stevens, thought it 'without doubt the most important pastoral experiment that has yet been undertaken' and 'it will be superfluous to enlarge upon the prospects which the successful depasturing of sheep will have upon the enormous area of the Territory suitable for sheep runs.'

Apparently through fear of poisonous plants in the Darwin-Adelaide River area, and to try and shorten the route, Stevens suggested that the sheep could be landed at Point Pearce and the drover could 'Explore the track' from there. Clearly he had no idea that for the first few hundred kilometres this would have entailed crossing some of the roughest terrain in

30 Earl of Kintore, Dispatch 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. Printed for Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1891.
the Northern Territory, and an area then densely populated with uncontacted and potentially hostile Aborigines. It would also have required crossing both the Fitzmaurice and Victoria rivers, and for all anyone knew the area could have been full of poisonous plants! Fortunately for all concerned, the idea was abandoned.

After discussing the matter with Alfred Giles, the man most experienced with overlanding sheep in the Northern Territory, Stevens decided to land the sheep up the Adelaide River, ‘and thus have the advantage of travelling them through the most settled and best Known part of the country.’ Still concerned about poisonous plants, Stevens obtained eighteen head of the local butcher’s sheep and grazed them on the Adelaide River, and watched for any symptoms of poisoning.

No poisoning occurred, but when the first consignment of sheep arrived on December 5th 1890 it was too late for them to be taken up the Adelaide River (presumably because of flooding or boggy conditions). Instead they were unloaded at Darwin and immediately sent by train to the end of the line at Fountain Head siding, and from there they were overlanded on the hoof in charge of drover Fred Mork (see plate 110). Luckily the wet season rains were late so none of the rivers was in high flood. Mork swam the sheep over the ‘lowest crossing’ of the Katherine River and was then joined by Mick Fleming who knew the road. The sheep reached Delamere early in 1891 where they were described as

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34 Ibid.
35 H.W.H. Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd, 8-1-1891. 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; Telegram from H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager, 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.

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being in good condition, with the loss of only 47 head.\(^38\) The surviving 955 ewes finally arrived at VRD on February 11\(^{th}\).\(^39\)

Meanwhile, arrangements were being made for a consignment of 56 rams to be sent to VRD. Stevens wanted them to arrive about mid April ‘for transhipment Victoria depot’.\(^40\)

At this stage his intention was to transfer the rams from the ship to ‘the local hulk’ so that there was no risk of them eating any poisonous plants, and then to send them on the next boat going to the Victoria River depot. At the depot they would land only a few rams at first to see if there were poisonous plants in the area, and if so the other rams would be carried to VRD by express wagon. Otherwise they could be walked to VRD, but he warned that ‘The Blacks, being troublesome on the Depot Road, increase our difficulties, & I shall have to provide for all such emergencies.’\(^41\)

The rams arrived at Darwin in June and as it turned out they were sent the same way as the ewes. The dreaded poisonous weeds were finally met with near the Douglas River where twelve rams died, and three more died later, but 41 made it to VRD in good condition early in September, 1891.\(^42\) When they arrived it was noticed that their wool was full of Bathurst Burr, so they were shorn and the wool burnt.\(^43\) They were then sent to ‘the main branch of the Victoria River’ and were reported to be ‘doing famously’.\(^44\)

\(^{38}\) ‘The Victoria River Sheep’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 16-1-1891.


\(^{40}\) Telegram from H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd., 30-1-1891. Goldsborough Mort & Co. Pty. 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.

\(^{41}\) H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager, Goldsborough Mort & Co. Ltd, 6-2-1891. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.

\(^{42}\) H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager, Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd., August 1891. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872; Telegram from H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd., 4-9-1891. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.


\(^{44}\) Ibid.
Another problem was to find someone who knew how to look after sheep. Although Stevens knew that ‘several of the station hands are well accustomed to the ordinary work of a sheep Run,’ he was concerned to find someone with greater experience. On the recommendation of ‘the local butcher’ and ‘Mulligan, the Victoria River Contractor’, in March 1891 Stevens hired an old and experienced sheep man named James Mavor in Darwin. He was sent to VRD to look after the sheep and to teach the other station hands about sheep husbandry. A hut which existed on Camfield Creek in 1891 was probably built for Mavor.

Mavor was impressed with the country’s suitability for sheep. In October he wrote to Lindsay Crawford,

> Since I came up it has been very dry & was a long time before I came. On all the stations I been on, on the Barcoo, & Flinders River, the sheep here done fully as well as on the best of them and fewer deaths in comparison to most others. The country is free from boggy water holes, and has good clean water. The country is better than it looks Every way but it is bad for timber for making sheep yards. There has been a good shower of rain & the next will make the green grass spring. The Rams are doing very well in the Ewes: I was out yesterday shepherding them & Everything is all right.

Mavor was only hired for a year and he may have decided not to stay longer because by February 1892 Stevens was again talking about the need for an experienced sheep man. He wrote to Goldsborough Mort that because,

> the Manager of Victoria River Downs has only limited Knowledge of sheep management, I would suggest for your consideration, that a thoroughly practical working man should be engaged to accompany the Rams & to remain on the station, at any rate, until after the first lambing.

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45 H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager, Goldsborough Mort & Co. Ltd, 24-7-1890. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.


By that time Mr. Crawford would be fully capable of working without any special assistance. This man could also do the shearing in July, and I would ask you to send the necessary gear with him, the same being unobtainable here.\textsuperscript{49}

In October 1891 another 1495 sheep arrived at Darwin and were immediately started on the road to VRD.\textsuperscript{50} Of these, 315 died soon after starting out, most from over-eating on board ship and suffering bloat soon after landing. The remainder reached VRD in January 1892,\textsuperscript{51} making a total of 2,172 sheep on the station.\textsuperscript{52} All the sheep were pastured on the open downs country south of Pigeon Hole and along Camfield Creek, and sheep yards were built near Red Rock on Camfield Creek, at Longreach Waterhole, and possibly near Ra Ra Spring east of Pigeon Hole.\textsuperscript{53}

The first shearing was done by ‘station amateurs’ and took twelve days, and the wool was taken by wagon to the Depot and shipped from there to Melbourne (see plate 80).\textsuperscript{54} According to Stevens the ‘general opinion is that the wool is good & clean for travelled and shepherded sheep. Unfortunately we could not get sufficient packs out in time so that a large portion had to be compressed into a wagon, and thus brought to the Depot.’\textsuperscript{55}

The sheep did well on VRD. The Government Resident reported that by December 1893 there were 3,260, an increase of 50 per cent\textsuperscript{56} (by January 1894 the flock had grown to 3,858).\textsuperscript{57} The Resident said that the wool looked good and clean, and was optimistic about

\textsuperscript{49} H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager, Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd, 6-2-1891. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.
\textsuperscript{50} Report by HWH Stevens to General Manager Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd, Oct 1891. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.
\textsuperscript{51} H.W.H. Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., 19-12-1891. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.
\textsuperscript{53} Personal communication, Mr. Anzac Munnganyi, who was shown these yard sites by his elderly relations when he was a young man in the 1930s.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
the future of sheep on VRD. However, by the time his report was published and in spite of the good increase in sheep numbers, Goldsbrough Mort had decided to do away with sheep on VRD.

Before the sheep had even arrived in Darwin, Stevens knew what difficulties the project faced, because the sheep would be going into what was effectively a war zone. From the time that the station was first settled there had been little contact between the Aborigines and the whites, and a regime of constant reprisals and attacks prevailed. In March 1890 Stevens reported that only ten miles from the homestead one of the ‘foreign’ Aborigines employed on VRD was murdered by the ‘bush blacks’, and expressed concern about what would happen to the sheep when they came.

It is with much regret that I have to report the murder of our blackboy Bob Some ten miles from the Victoria homestead. The wild blacks had speared a beast, & the boys were Sent out to drive them away & try to discover the culprit. Our boy Bob got separated from the others who only rejoined him in time to see a spear enter at the shoulder & pass right through to his groin. He pulled the spear out, but died almost at once. The best & most valuable native we ever had on the runs. Mr Crawford followed the blacks for some 60 miles into some large gorges, but with a good start, they got away. I only trust we shall be able to Keep them from ascertaining what sheep are.

Concerns about attacks by Aborigines continued, with the Northern Territory Times & Gazette reporting in April 1891 that, ‘the worst danger now to be feared will be the blacks, who, when once they get the taste of mutton, are bound to become exceedingly troublesome.’ The blacks had long since developed a great fondness for beef and horse flesh, but strangely they do not appear to have ever ‘ascertained what sheep are’. It wasn’t for want of trying. In December 1892 Stevens wrote that ‘the Aborigines of the Victoria River District are becoming so hostile, that it is a most difficult matter for the settlers to

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59 H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager of Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 3-3-1890, pp. 7-8. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.
60 ‘Another Consignment of Sheep’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 3-4-1891.
carry on their ordinary avocations".\footnote{H.W.H. Stevens to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 30-12-1892. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) Inwards Correspondence – 1870-1912. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5151.} He went on to cite a letter he had received from Lindsay Crawford which claimed that,

They are Killing a great number [of cattle]... In fact the blacks are too many for us. They have lookouts posted on the hill tops & keep up a system of signalizing from one to the other, & if we try to get near them they are off into the sandstone. I am always in a funk about the Sheep Camp. They have been within a mile, but so far have not commenced hostilities.\footnote{L. Crawford, cited in H.W.H. Stevens to the Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 30-12-1892. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5151.}

When the \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette} heard about Goldsborough Mort’s decision to do away with the sheep it expressed surprise and disappointment, and remarked that,

the bulletins which came in from time to time were of so cheerful a nature that we were fully justified in expecting nothing but the very best results. The sheep kept in splendid order, the fleeces showed no sign of deterioration, the grass seeds gave no trouble, and the lambing could not be better.\footnote{\textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 27-10-1893.}

The paper posed the question, ‘What causes the abandonment?’ and gave the answer gathered from ‘authoritative sources’ that,

the blacks of the Victoria River district are so troublesome and treacherous that sheep-breeding could not under existing circumstances be made a profitable enterprise. It would be impossible, we are told, to shepherd large flocks and keep them free from native depredations except by a very expensive force of shepherds.

The same article went on to remark that there had never been any reports of shepherds being attacked or of sheep being taken by the Aborigines, and it now came as a surprise to hear this given as the reason for the sheep being removed from Victoria Downs.

Years later, Tom Pearce claimed the sheep were sold because, ‘the manager [Lindsay Crawford] was a telegraph operator, managing a cattle station, and did not want the sheep
there', and a more recent study stated that the sheep were sold 'for reasons unknown today'. However, there can be no question that Aborigines posed a continual and costly threat, and while the manager may have had an ambivalent attitude towards the sheep the main reason for abandoning them was financial.

The threat posed by the Aborigines required the sheep to be guarded by armed shepherds at all times. This was a major expense over and above the cost of running sheep in Queensland or the other colonies, and there were other high expenses to be taken into account. In June 1893 B. Blair carried out an audit of the Goldsbrough Mort sheep account and reported that 'From a perusal of the accounts of the above Coy. it is apparent that sheep breeding on the Victoria Downs is proving a costly experiment.' He found that the cost of establishing sheep on VRD had amounted to more than £5000 and since then 460 of the old sheep had died, including 18 high-priced rams. Strangely, he claimed that these losses were offset to some degree by an increase over two years of 698 whereas other sources indicate a much larger increase.

Blair noted that the working expenses were extremely high with wages for 1893 estimated at £550 and shearing and wool carriage at £250. However, the 1892 clip had netted less than £250, leaving a loss of £550 for wages alone. He discussed various possible changes in the way the sheep were managed which might reduce costs, but concluded all were financially risky. Even if the wool clip could be greatly improved by running the sheep in paddocks, Blair believed that the cost of shearing and transport of wool to the depot would absorb all the gains, and even if transport costs could be reduced by shearing the sheep at the depot, the expense of fencing paddocks was too great. He recommended that the sheep be disposed of as soon as possible, but added,

What to do with the present stock of sheep is a puzzle, it certainly is folly Keeping on shepherding, and if they are turned at large on the country they are now being fed

65 J. Makin, The Big Run, 1992, p. 71
66 B. Blair to General Manager, Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd, 20-6-1893. Reports on station properties, 1890-1897. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/306/146.
over, the chances are, that what with wild blacks and dingoes rushing them about, and not being able to find water, few, if any will be left in a few months.

Blair thought that the only other possibility was to sell the sheep to sheep stations in the Kimberley – if these stations were still in existence.

The Kimberley sheep stations were still in existence, but before they could be approached the problem was solved by an extraordinary stroke of luck. ‘Captain’ Joe Bradshaw, the southern pastoralist who had taken up country in the north-west Kimberley in 1890-92, was planning to stock his country with sheep (see Chapter 6), and on November 8th 1893 he signed an agreement to purchase the VRD flock. One of the conditions of sale was that Bradshaw would own all lambs born after August 8th 1893, which suggests that a verbal deal had been stuck at this time. Other terms were that the purchase would include the wool at the station, that he could leave the sheep on VRD for up to six months, and that VRD would pay the wages and keep of the men looking after the sheep before delivery. Clearly VRD was keen to dispose of the flock.

Shortly after the deal was done the Western Australian Government introduced a tax of two shillings and sixpence per head on sheep entering the state. Because of this Bradshaw was inclined to get out of the agreement to buy the sheep, but this was not possible. Instead of taking the sheep to his Kimberley property, Marigui, Bradshaw decided to throw up that lease and take the sheep to Bradshaw station, the property he had recently taken up on the lower Victoria River. Aeneas Gunn, made famous in the book _We of the Never Never_, and

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68 J. Bradshaw to the Minister for the Northern Territory, Adelaide, 16-8-1893. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, item 93/302.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 _Western Australian Parliamentary Debates_, sessions 1893, volume 4, 1894, page 257.
74 _Northern Territory Times & Gazette_, 10-11-1893.
Hugh Young inspected and took delivery of the sheep on Victoria River Downs on January 20th 1894. Gunn then returned to Darwin while Young stayed on to take the sheep overland to Bradshaw. 75 Five white men took charge of the sheep and by February or March 1894 the last of them had left VRD. Today one of the few visible signs that there ever were sheep on VRD is a set of rock paintings of sheep in the Stokes Range, on the northern boundary of the station (plate 111).

From VRD the sheep were first taken to Delamere where about a dozen died from poisoning on the headwaters of Gregory Creek. 76 The sheep had been shorn some time before they arrived on the Gregory (probably while they were still on VRD where men to shear the sheep were available) and the wool was carted to the Depot by James Mulligan. 77 From there it was taken by boat to the Dome where it was loaded on Bradshaw’s ‘steamerette’, the ‘Red Gauntlet’, and shipped to Darwin. 78

Probably because of the poisonings that had occurred it was decided that the route to Bradshaw via Gregory Creek was impassable for sheep; they were instead taken the long way around via Delamere, the Flora River and across to the headwaters of the Fitzmaurice River. 79 By August 1894, Young had formed a sheep station on the ‘open tableland’ of the Upper Fitzmaurice, but had ‘considerable trouble with the blacks,’ 80 who on at least one occasion attacked the camp. No one was injured, but one man received a spear through his

75 J. Bradshaw in ‘Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices’. South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 2, no. 19, 1895, answer to question 3254; Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, introductory paragraph for 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.

76 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 6-7-1894; J. Bradshaw in Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices, 1895, answer to question 3279.

77 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 2-6-1894.

78 Ibid: entry for 2-6-1894.

79 Ibid: entry for 2-6-1894.

shirt and was pinned to the ground. From the upper Fitzmaurice the sheep were soon shifted to an area near the homestead. 700 lambs had been born since the sheep left VRD so by the time it arrived at Bradshaw the flock numbered 4,558. There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that for a time the sheep may have been located lower down the Fitzmaurice River at the Koolendong valley. In the 1960s Northern Territory cattleman Tex Moar was mustering in the Fitzmaurice River country and when he arrived at the Koolendong his Aboriginal stockmen told him they were at the ‘ship camp’. Tex was puzzled and asked what they meant by ‘ship camp’, and they replied, ‘Ship! Alla same nanny goat!'

The Government Resident expressed his regret on the demise of sheep breeding on VRD and the removal of the sheep to Bradshaw station. He commented that Bradshaw was, ‘a different class of country to that on which been seen a success, I am sure I hope may be the case.’ His caution was not misplaced.

On Bradshaw the sheep faced various dangers and to try and protect them, for the first few years, at least, the sheep were shepherded. Shepherding on Bradshaw seems to have been a lethal occupation. One of the shepherds, Antonis Bolan, died in January 1896 and was buried at the back of the horse paddock, the first white man to die on the station. A few months later ‘Gunn’s Bend’, presumably on Angalarri Creek, was fenced in to form a sheep

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81 J. Bradshaw in *Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices*, 1895, answer to question 3284.
82 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 22-9-1894.
84 Personal communication, Tex Moar, Pine Creek. In the 1960s Tex was the owner of Dorisvale station, near the headwaters of the Fitzmaurice River.
86 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for April 1896.
87 List of deaths in the Victoria River district, compiled by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society, Darwin.
paddock\textsuperscript{88} and then in July another shepherd, James Edkins, became the second white man to die on Bradshaw.\textsuperscript{89} He was buried next to Bolan.\textsuperscript{90}

In spite of being shepherded, sheep turned out to be a disaster on Bradshaw. In December 1895 it was reported that, ‘extraordinary mortality has taken place amongst the sheep at Mr. Bradshaw’s station... About 90 per cent of the last lambing is reported to have been lost through one cause and another’, and deaths among the adult sheep were attributed to poisonous plants.\textsuperscript{91} The Log Book contains regular accounts of Aborigines being sent out to look for the sheep. Sometimes they found a good number,\textsuperscript{92} but more often they could not find any, or only a few.\textsuperscript{93} On one occasion sheep tracks led to a waterhole and station Aborigines read the signs showing where an ‘alligator’ grabbed one.\textsuperscript{94} Another time the sheep were attacked and killed by dingoes. The carcasses were laced with strychnine and baits were laid. Whether any dingoes were killed is unknown, but at least one station dog was poisoned.\textsuperscript{95}

Bush Aborigines were an ongoing problem and, unlike at VRD, they appear to have developed a taste for mutton. After causing ‘considerable trouble’ on the upper Fitzmaurice, Aborigines continued to ‘make themselves obnoxious’ near the homestead, spearing cattle and horses – and sheep.\textsuperscript{96} When the Norwegian explorer-zoologist Knut Dahl visited the station in May 1895, he remarked that, ‘The local blacks were very aggressive and had taken a fancy to spearing sheep, and for this reason the shepherds fired at them whenever they saw them.’\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{88} Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for April 1896.
\textsuperscript{89} List of deaths in the Victoria River district, compiled by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society, Darwin.
\textsuperscript{90} Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 22-7-1896.
\textsuperscript{91} Northern Territory Times \& Gazette, 6-12-1895.
\textsuperscript{92} For example, see the Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entries for 28-9-1899, 21-7-1900.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid: entries for 9-7-1899, 11-7-1899, 4-11-1899, 7-7-1900, 5-2-1901.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid: entry for 19-12-1901.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid: entries for 11-7-1899 and 13-7-1899.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid: entry for April 1896.
\textsuperscript{97} K. Dahl, In Savage Australia: an account of a hunting and collecting expedition to Arnhem Land and Dampier Land, Alan, London, 1926, p. 190.

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In at least one instance Aborigines who had killed sheep apparently were tracked down and shot by Bradshaw stockmen. In a letter to Billy Linklater in 1948, Tom Pearce inquired as to Hugh Young’s fate, and had this to say:

let me know how Young died — he was a heavy drinker — and carrying a load on his mind — after Shooting, he & McPhee98 — many of the Blacks out on the Run for Killing Sheep & burnt them. McPhee informed me — when one of them was partly Burnt — Rose up & scared Young — the eat [sic] of the fire Caused this to take place.99

The Government Geologist visited Bradshaw shortly before the sheep arrived and remarked that ‘Mr. Bradshaw...has a cutter in which stores are kept as a precaution against the thieving propensities of the natives.’100 After the sheep arrived the Aborigines stole shears and fashioned them into spear blades. It may have been one of these that struck Mulligan in the thigh when he and Ligar were attacked at Jasper Gorge in 1895 (see Chapter 5), although it also could have come from VRD or even Delamere.

According to the ‘Log Book’, the first shearing on Bradshaw was carried out in September 1894 on a billabong some distance east of Bradshaw homestead. The wool was brought in boats to Bradshaw’s Schooner ‘The Twins’ and taken to Darwin by Aeneas Gunn.101 Unless this account is wrong, there was a second shearing early in 1895 and it ended in disaster. Like VRD before him, Bradshaw was unable to obtain woolpacks in time for the shearing, so,

the newly-shorn wool was stacked into huge heaps, handy to the landing place for shipping purposes. One night the creek came down a banker from its head, and swept the lot into the Victoria. There was wool hanging on the mangroves for forty miles down the river. The niggers along the lower reaches must have thought there had been a snow-storm.102

98 This was Jock McPhee, ‘Tam-a-Shanter’ in Jeannie Gunn’s, ‘We of the Never-Never’, (Hutchinson, London, 1908); ‘“Never Never” People. Their Strange Fate’, Sydney Morning Herald, 21-2-1942.
101 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 22-9-1894.
102 Letter from S.E. Pearson to G. Buchanan (senior), 31-3-34. Original in possession of Bobbie Buchanan, Macclesfield, South Australia. See also K. Dahl, In Savage Australia, 1926, p. 190, and Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 24-5-1895.
Of the 4,558 sheep originally brought onto Bradshaw in mid-1894, there were only 1,553 left to be shorn in late 1896, producing 18 bales of wool. Nevertheless, Captain Joe was still optimistic and brought seventeen rams to Bradshaw on ‘The Twins’ in October 1896. By July the following year only 662 sheep were shorn for nine bales. Then in March 1899 Bradshaw reported that,

The wet season culminated in an exceptional flood which drowned nearly half the few surviving sheep although all hands were working up to their necks in water till midnight trying to save the sheep in boats. It might have been avoided if the sheep had been moved to the base of the mountain at the first indications of a high flood. The water was two feet deep in the dwelling house and three feet in the kitchen and outhouses. The station staff vacated the house and camped for ten days on a stony rise in the horse paddock.

Probably largely as a result of this flood, in April 1899 Bradshaw reported that ‘only 114 surviving sheep shorn today’. Sixteen bales of wool were shipped to Darwin the same month, but some of these are likely to have contained wool from an earlier shearing. By September 1899 there seem to have been only 62 sheep left.

In spite of their dramatic decline, as late as 1902 Bradshaw imported fourteen more sheep. These ‘declined’ as fast as the others and by 1904, ‘Fred Bradshaw had the six survivors...kept in a wire-netted enclosure at the homestead, where they were fed and watered by the station gins. We used to jest with Fred, and call it his “sheep museum”.’

103 Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 15-10-1896.
105 Ibid: entry for July 1897.
106 Ibid: entry for March 1899.
107 Ibid: entry for 5-4-1899.
108 Ibid.
111 Letter from S.E. Pearson to G. Buchanan, 31-3-34. Original in possession of Bobbie Buchanan, Macclesfield, South Australia.
This was the ignoble end of the great Victoria River Sheep Saga and dreams of vast sheep stations in the region, although some continued to think of the district as potential sheep country. In 1907 Surveyor Wells remarked ‘A large tract of this country is well adapted for sheep, especially that lying latitudes south from Pigeon hole,’ and in an interview he gave in 1908 he envisioned up to 2,000,000 sheep on the Victoria, Ord and Sturt Creek! In 1913 the manager of Wave Hill thought that ‘fully 65 per cent of the Wave Hill Station should be well adapted for sheep... There were large areas of the Victoria River country suited for sheep, and he considered much of it would carry 120 sheep per square mile.’

On Argyle station there was a thriving flock of sheep in the 1950s, apparently kept solely for meat, but they were never again tried on a commercial basis.

Even though it has long been known that sheep have a more severe impact than cattle on vegetation, and the failure of the sheep experiment probably saved VRD from worse environmental degradation than has already occurred, the failure was still being lamented as recently as 1992. Jock Makin, a farmer and grazier from South Australia, discussed the attempt to establish sheep on VRD in his book, The Big Run, a history of Victoria River Downs station. His startling and hyperbolic conclusion was that ‘For the Northern Territory, this was one of the greatest tragedies of all time. Had the sheep been kept on the Victoria there is every likelihood that stations now carrying cattle would also be counted as wool producers.’ Well might cattlemen today say ‘Baa Humbug!’

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113 ‘Northern Territory. Interview with Mr. L.A. Wells’, pp. 3-4. Department of Territories, Correspondence files NT series, Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, file 1908/43.
114 ‘The Railways Commission’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 7-8-1913.
116 J. Makin, The Big Run, 1992, p. 71. This book was first published in 1970 and has been reprinted and revised several times.
Chapter 9

THE NEST OF THIEVES

For twenty years after the first settlers arrived, the Victoria River country was the preserve of big stations, most of them owned by wealthy companies and southern pastoralists. There never was a Northern Territory equivalent of the Robertson Land Act that opened up the big stations in New South Wales for closer settlement, so once the big Victoria River stations were established in the 1880s, the land within their leases could not be taken from them by 'selectors'. It was possible to gain a lease, or later a pastoral permit or grazing licence, on whatever land was left, but almost all the worthwhile pastoral land was locked up in these stations and only areas of rough ranges or arid country remained as Crown Land. Any later would-be landowner had to make do with the 'left-overs', and what was left was largely worthless.

Some of the first to come seeking land found small left-over areas here and there in rough range country on the edge of the big stations. Most of these areas were eventually consolidated into the big runs, or held by longer-term battlers. Once this happened, later arrivals were forced to turn their eyes to the south, to the almost limitless expanse of the Tanami Desert, beyond the southern borders of Wave Hill, Inverway, Gordon Downs, and other big stations further west (see Chapter 10).

In 1909 a journalist named Burton travelled across the Victoria River district from the Kimberley. Later he published a description of local society:

The population of the district consists of station managers, cattle duffers, horse thieves, wild and woolly stockmen, and outlaws. A man is almost out of the pale of the law when he reaches the Victoria, and it may well be called “No Man’s Land.”

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1 This Act was passed in 1861 and enabled people to select an area from 40 to 320 acres anywhere on the large stations of the time (S. Roberts, History of Australian Land Settlement (1788-1920), Macmillan and Co. Ltd., Melbourne, 1924, pp. 222-232.
His account may have been accurate enough for the time, but a decade earlier he could not have written his story in quite the same way. Certainly there were station managers and wild stockmen then, perhaps even the occasional outlaw, and at different times horse stealing was a problem; during the gold rush to Kimberley in 1886, Auvergne station lost over 100 head, and there were raids on other stations. No doubt white travellers also killed the occasional beast for beef – during the Kimberley gold rush it was claimed that because of illegal cattle killing most stations along the route were keeping their cattle twenty miles off the main road – but until 1902 there was not a cattle duffer to be seen.

For twenty years nobody bothered to take up and stock any of this ‘left over’ land. Then, almost overnight the country was overrun with ‘small men’, ‘battlers’ who took up blocks here and there around the edges of the big runs (map 9). This influx began in 1902 and lasted for a decade; it was the Golden Age of cattle duffing in the Victoria River district.

This chapter looks at the rise and fall of cattle duffing society across the Victoria River country in the first decade of the twentieth century. It seeks to answer the following questions: why did it take so long for ‘small men’ to appear in the district, who were they, what happened to them, and why did the stations they established last for only a decade? Quite often the people who figure in works of outback history are the ‘big men’ – the cattle barons, explorers, government officials and so forth. In contrast the men who were the actors in this story are a microcosm of the types of ordinary workingmen who lived in the Territory in this early period. Their origins and lives are varied and colourful, and the events which surrounded them are complex. Their stories provide an insight into social attitudes and relations – between each other, between themselves and the big stations,

2 ‘An Irresponsible Journalist’. Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 30-4-1909. This is a reprint from ‘a Queensland paper’ under the heading, ‘Victoria River Depot Race Meeting’.


4 Ibid.
between themselves and 'authority', and themselves and the Aborigines – and are thus worth telling in some detail. In the process I hope to bring these cattle duffers back from virtual oblivion and place them within the broader picture of Victoria River and ultimately Australian history.

Map 9: Pastoral leases and pastoral permits in the Victoria River district, c1906.

In answer to my first question, several reasons can be put forward, but before doing so two points need to be addressed. First, the terms ‘poddy dodger’ and ‘cattle duffer’ should be explained. A poddy-dodger is one who steals unbranded calves from a branded mother and marks them with his own brand. A cattle duffer is one who steals cattle, young or old, cleanskin or branded. In terms of risk, branding cleanskin cattle was a relatively safe procedure. Because the runs were unfenced cattle regularly wandered from one lease or permit to another, so unless a man was actually caught branding cleanskins outside his own boundary, finding cattle with his brand on your land was not grounds for legal action.

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6 Ibid: 10.
Cross-branding cattle – that is, placing a new brand on top of an existing brand to obliterate it – was a much riskier business. For a variety of reasons a beast sometimes carried the original owner’s brand on more than one part of its body. Double-branding was sufficiently rare that a cattle duffer would not expect to encounter it, and when he cross-branded one original brand, the other could be overlooked.\(^7\) A second and much greater problem was that when a cross-branded hide was wet the original brand often could be detected under the new one.\(^8\) Both situations have led to charges of cattle duffing being laid.\(^9\)

Branding cleanskin cattle was not regarded as a crime by many people. The logic seemed to be that if the owner was not branding them he deserved to lose them, but cross-branding was not so readily condoned. In the Victoria River district and elsewhere the term ‘cattle duffer’ was often used rather loosely to include men who branded full-grown cleanskin cattle, those who cross-branded cattle, and poddy-dodgers.

The second point of clarification concerns lease covenants. Once a person obtained land there were certain conditions that had to be met before they could become a cattleman. One was to stock the land with legitimately obtained cattle. No doubt some men bought cattle and moved them onto their land, but for those with limited cash or no desire to spend their money there were other ways to become ‘legal’. Ernestine Hill described how it was done on one of the Victoria River cattle duffers’ blocks discussed in this chapter:

The cattle that formed Illawarra were a mythical mob. Negotiations consisted of a cheque – never presented – and a receipt from a cattle-dealing friend that “Jim Campbell has this day taken delivery of five hundred mixed cattle of various breeds and colours” – the usual poddy-dodger legalities to stave off pertinent questions.\(^10\)

\(^7\) For example, in 1909 when the police were examining VRD cattle allegedly stolen by Jim Campbell, they found a bull which bore both Campbell’s diamond 40 brand and the VRD G10 brand (Timber Creek police journal, 3-7-1909. Northern Territory Archives, F302).

\(^8\) C. Schultz and D. Lewis, Beyond the Big Run, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1995, p. 171.

\(^9\) An example of cattle theft being discovered occurred when a herd of cattle from Coolibah were dipped at Anthonys Lagoon in 1953. Once the brands were wet it was noticed that in some instances the ‘Q’ of the Coolibah brand ‘MTQ’ was superimposed on the VRD ‘bulls head’ brand.

\(^10\) E. Hill, The Territory, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 324.
The other legality – a formality – was to obtain a registered brand. This was supposed to be applied only to the progeny of the founding herd and officially this meant that no cattle could be turned off the property for twelve months. Any cleanskin cattle over twelve months old on Crown Land were regarded as the property of the Crown and were supposed to be sold at public auction.\textsuperscript{11} However, as will be seen, this is not how things always happened.

To return to my first question of why it took so long for battlers to establish themselves, when the big stations were first formed the only ‘left-over’ land was on the arid edges of the region, or some areas of coastal country. It wasn’t until the settlers had time to examine their leases that they began to redraw their boundaries to exclude much of the poorer country between the best areas, and consequently make it available to others. However, for the first two decades, more or less, the entire region was in a raw and dangerous state (see Chapter 4), and apparently there were other factors which discouraged the ‘battlers’ for some time.

One factor may have been the availability of cattle, and in particular cleanskin cattle. Because of the prevailing open range system of cattle management, the stations quickly began to lose control of their herds, and cleanskin cattle soon became common (see Chapter 3). For nearly two decades this problem was intensified through lack of markets and generally low prices for cattle.\textsuperscript{12} Initially the herds were small and relatively easy to supervise, so the number of cleanskin cattle was correspondingly low, but the cattle numbers grew exponentially. On VRD in 1889 there were about 14,000 cattle,\textsuperscript{13} but by 1905 there were 56,000.\textsuperscript{14} By 1900 there were probably more than 150,000 cattle in the

\textsuperscript{13} Government Resident J.L. Parson’s ‘Report on the Northern Territory for the Year 1889’, \textit{South Australian Parliamentary Papers}, vol. 2, no. 28, 1890, p. 2
region as a whole. They had spread out to the edges of the big stations and almost all control of the herds was lost.

Any man who obtained a block of land on or near the boundary of one of these stations had easy access to large numbers of unbranded cattle, a great incentive for cattle duffers to move in. For such men it was of no consequence that the available land was too poor or the area available too small to form a viable cattle station. They could gain title for as little as 100 square miles, but because the station boundaries were unfenced until the 1960s and later, they could effectively use much more land. On the one hand, cleanskin cattle could wander onto their block from the neighbouring station, and on the other they could surreptitiously muster and brand cattle on their neighbours’ land. And, of course, any cattle branded on their own block could graze all over the good land of the neighbouring big station.

The most important factor undoubtedly was the price of cattle. There was not much point in obtaining a block of country and branding cleanskins if there was little financial reward. Throughout the 1890s depression gripped Australia and there were other problems peculiar to Northern Territory pastoralists. In 1892 Western Australia imposed a tax of thirty shillings per head on cattle entering the state. This tax was removed in 1896, but by this time all livestock from the northern areas of the Northern Territory had been banned from entering Western Australia and the other colonies to try and stop the spread of ‘tick fever’.\textsuperscript{15} These bans were dropped progressively by each state, with South Australia the last in 1903,\textsuperscript{16} but while they were in place they effectively closed or restricted the outlets for many Territory cattle producers.\textsuperscript{17} The near impossibility of selling cattle during this period meant that many station owners could not afford the infrastructure and man-power needed to adequately look after their herds, so the proportion of cleanskin cattle grew ever larger.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} R. Duncan, \textit{The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910}, 1967, pp. 58-9.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} ‘The Victoria River and the Meat Works’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 20-6-1902.
\end{itemize}
As discussed in Chapter 3, in Queensland the ban on Territory cattle was completely ineffective because the ‘tick fever’ had been present since at least 1888. It only became a serious problem in 1893 but during the next seven years or so it spread rapidly and decimated the Queensland beef cattle industry.19 This calamity was overlapped by a series of dry years, beginning in 1895 and culminating in the great drought of 1900-1902.20 This dry period put a stop to the cattle ticks but further reduced the herds. Before the drought really took hold the depression eased and cattle prices began to rise; when the dry years finally ended there was a great demand for cattle to restock the stations, as well as to supply meat to the eastern markets. As a result, the price of cattle increased significantly.21

Even though all these factors were coalescing by 1900 – available land, numerous cleanskin cattle, the opening of markets, an easing of the depression and an increasing sale price for cattle – there was no immediate rush of cattle duffers into the region. A couple of men took up leases early in 1902, and at the same time another gained the use of a leasehold block taken up by someone else in 1900, but before others could follow suit, in July 1902 the South Australian Parliament passed the Transcontinental Railways Act. A provision of this act was that contracts for construction would be awarded ‘on the land grant principal’, and to ensure that land would be available for such grants it was decided not to issue any more pastoral leases for a distance twenty-five miles (forty-one kilometres) on either side of the proposed line.22 Instead, a system of annual pastoral permits was introduced, but when the act was gazetted it was worded in such a way that instead of being restricted to a corridor twenty-five miles either side of the proposed railway, the law applied to the entire Northern Territory.23

22 Correspondence dockets, N.T., memo re withdrawal of land from leasing 25 miles either side of proposed railway line, Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1 item 1902/273.
23 Correspondence dockets, N.T., copy of wire addressed to the Government Resident Northern Territory, from F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the NT, 18-8-1902. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 1902/273; C. Herbert, ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1905’, South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 8; South Australian Government Gazette, 2-6-1904.

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It does not seem likely that the new permit system was an inducement to those considering taking up land. The annual pastoral permits were far less secure than pastoral leases, which were issued for a period of forty-two years, and for the first seven years the permits were dearer. From 1890 the annual rent on pastoral leases cost sixpence per square mile for the first seven years, one shilling for the next seven years, two shillings for the third seven years, and a charge for the remaining years of the lease to be determined by valuation, but pastoral permits were a flat one shilling per square mile per year.

Nevertheless, during the time that pastoral permits were being issued, hundreds were taken up throughout the Northern Territory. Some were issued to existing large landholders but many were obtained by battlers on the edges of big stations. In the Victoria River district more than twenty permits were issued, of which eight or so formed the basis of about six small stations in the hands of perhaps a dozen men. They were industrious men, and by 1905 one writer declared that “The two principal industries on the East Kimberley side are cattle rearing and cattle “duffing”...and cattle duffing is about the principal of the two industries.”

So who were these battlers? In a number of cases very little or nothing is known about them. In the Victoria River district, of the fourteen or so men who at one time or another were involved with small holdings between 1902 and 1912, W.J.J. Ward, Jimmy Wickham, John Duggan, Tom Hanlon and William Patterson appear ‘out of the (historical) blue’. Fortunately, the backgrounds of the Fleming brothers, Jim Campbell, Ben Martin, Jack Beasley, Jack Frayne, Mat Wilson, James Kearney and Jack Newton are less mysterious. In some cases they were associates before they took up any land.

25 Correspondence docket, N.T., copy of wire addressed to the Government Resident Northern Territory, from F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, 18-8-1902. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 1902/273.
26 Duncan reports that by 1910, 49,150 square miles were held under permits (R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, 1967, p. 121).
27 At any one time there were about ten or a dozen men involved with these permits, but there were changing partnerships so the total number was more like fourteen or fifteen.
Mick and Jim Fleming both were early Northern Territory pioneers. Jim is said to have been in charge of fifty Chinese brought to McArthur River station in the 1880s to build yards, fences and huts,\(^{29}\) and for a period he was proprietor of the Macarthur River hotel at Borroloola.\(^{30}\) Mick had been in the great Kimberley gold rush of 1886\(^{31}\) and in 1891 acted as a guide for the first sheep taken to VRD.\(^{32}\) He was also one of the drovers who in the 1890s took VRD cattle to Darwin.\(^{33}\) In 1895 Mick and Wave Hill manager Tom Cahill were summoned for failing to pay the rent on pastoral leases they jointly held in the Victoria River district.\(^{34}\) By June 1899 he probably was working for Wave Hill as he had a camp twenty miles west of the station,\(^{35}\) and in May 1902 he took 2000 cattle from Wave Hill to stock W.F. Buchanan’s ‘New Delamere’ station on Gregory Creek.\(^{36}\) He built a homestead there and stayed on for some time as manager.\(^{37}\) With his extensive experience of the district, Mick clearly had ample opportunity to see the potential for a small station on the margins of VRD and Wave Hill.

Ben Martin originally came to the Victoria River district intending to take up a job offer made to him in Queensland many years before by Jim Ronan, who had been appointed manager of VRD early in 1900.\(^{38}\) Before Martin arrived he met the Fleming brothers and decided to throw in his lot with them, and became ‘another hard riding individualist’ on the eastern boundary of VRD.\(^{39}\) Martin certainly could ride. In 1887 he won tent-pegging and


\(^{30}\) *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 15-9-1888.


\(^{33}\) T. Meldrum to drover J.A. Davis, 6-7-1897. Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd: Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.

\(^{34}\) Statement of charge, signed by Plaintiff’s Attorney J.K. Stuart, 17-12-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6950.

\(^{35}\) Timber Creek police journal, 27-6-1899.

\(^{36}\) Ibid: 15-5-1902, 30-5-1902; W.F. Buchanan was the brother of Wave Hill pioneer, Nat Buchanan, and was the outright owner of Wave Hill from 1894 (*Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 23-2-1894).

\(^{37}\) Timber Creek police letter book, 27-6-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.

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lunar-slicing contests at an athletics carnival in Darwin.\textsuperscript{40} He could also shoot. While buffalo hunting in the 1890s he was credited with shooting thirty-six beasts from horseback with thirty-six shots (Paddy Cahill held the record with 58 shot in one day).\textsuperscript{41}

Ernestine Hill claims that Jim Campbell came to the Territory with a mob of horses stolen from South Australia in 1893,\textsuperscript{42} and that later he worked as a sub-contract teamster for Tom Pearce, carting steel poles from Borroloola to the overland telegraph line.\textsuperscript{43} ‘Honest Tom’ Pearce was ‘Mine Host’ in Jeannie Gunn’s, \textit{We of the Never Never},\textsuperscript{44} and was to play a major but largely hidden role in coming events. Campbell was in the East Kimberley district as early as October 1898, working with Jack Beasley, Jack Frayne and others on Argyle station, one of the Durack properties.

According to M.P. Durack, Campbell and Beasley had a ‘fighting partnership’, and he claimed that ‘There is nothing Campbell has not taught Beasley except for what Beasley already knew’.\textsuperscript{45} One of the early Northern Territory police, Mounted Constable Jack Johns, described Campbell in his prime as ‘a splendid type of a man physically, standing well over six feet high...a super horseman, a crack shot, a hard living man, master bushman, hard, defiant, cruel on occasion, and above all, apparently, a thief.’\textsuperscript{46} Aborigines

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Northern Territory Times} \& \textit{Gazette}, 8-1-1887. R.S. Summerhays’ \textit{Encyclopaedia for Horsemen} (Frederick Warne, London, 1975, pp. 332-33) defines tent-pegging as ‘A spectacular equestrian sport, which originated in India. A soft, white wooden peg, bound with wire, is placed in the ground at an angle...and it has to be taken with a lance or a sword at full gallop.’ Lemon-slicing is not defined in this book, but presumably it involves cutting a lemon with a sword at a full gallop.


\textsuperscript{42} E. Hill, \textit{The Territory}, 1951, p. 317.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid: 318-322; The sub-contract work is substantiated in the \textit{Northern Territory Times} \& \textit{Gazette}, 11-5-1900.

\textsuperscript{44} W. Farmer Whyte, “Never Never” People. Their Strange Fate’, \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 21-2-1942.


\textsuperscript{46} D. Lewis (ed.), \textit{Patrolling the ‘Big Up’: The Adventures of Mounted Constable Johns in the Top End of the Northern Territory, 1910-1913}, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1998, p. 41. Johns examined Campbell’s body some weeks after he was killed but whether he actually met Campbell alive is unknown. However, he undoubtedly knew many Territory people who had met Campbell, including his brother, William Francis, who was a trooper in the Territory from 1905 to 1915. When Campbell was being hunted by the police, a description of him was issued to all stations and interstate. This described Campbell as ‘forty five feet nine about fourteen stone dark complexion [sic] dark scraggly beard good moustache turning grey mark on forehead over one eye eyes weak’ (Public Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 741-9. Rough Occurrence Book [Wyndham] 1907-1908, entry for 10-5-1909).
in the Victoria River country would add that he was a murderer.\textsuperscript{47} Subsequent events were to reveal just how cruel Campbell could be.

All I know about Kearney is that, like many men in the outback, he was a man with a 'history'. In 1892 he and a man named Sam Long had been charged with the murder of a Chinese miner on the Macarthur River. In spite of damning evidence against them, both were acquitted in unusual circumstances.\textsuperscript{48}

Somewhat more is known about Newton, largely because a contemporary of his, Billy Linklater, compiled a short biography of him.\textsuperscript{49} According to Billy, Newton 'got left at Wyndham' by a cattle boat in about 1897. From there he went inland with a drover, and received his nickname, 'Colorado', on Argyle station after he told a stockmen there he had been in America. It seems likely he had indeed been to America because, according to Linklater, he later built a Mexican-style pise homestead at Texas Downs (East Kimberley). He was also a very good bush carpenter.\textsuperscript{50}

The 1891 census lists Jack Frayne as being born in Bendigo, Victoria, in about 1865. In the late 1880s he held the licence for the Roper Bar Hotel\textsuperscript{51} and in 1892 he was one of a party led by police hunting the Aborigines who murdered W.S. Scott at Willeroo (see Chapter 7). Two years later he passed through the Victoria River country because Mounted Constable Willshire reported inspecting his horses there.\textsuperscript{52} Possibly he was then on his way to the East Kimberley because in 1896 he was working as a drover for Connor, Doherty and Durack (CD&D),\textsuperscript{53} and during 1898 and 1899 he was working as a stockman or drover on Auvergne, Newry and probably other Durack stations.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{47} Personal communication, Big Mick Kangkinang (now deceased).
\textsuperscript{48} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 15-7-1892; 'The Northern Territory Murder Case', Adelaide Observer, 1-10-1892, p. 36, c. 5 and 15-10-1892, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{49} W. Linklater, hand-written manuscript, in possession of Bobbie Buchanan, nd.
\textsuperscript{51} Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 15-9-1888.
\textsuperscript{52} Timber Creek police journal, 8-7-1894.
\textsuperscript{53} Public Records Office of Western Australia, Ace 741-3 Occurrence Book [Wyndham] 1895-1897, entry for 10-1-1896 and 14-4-1896.
Apparently Frayne was a highly competent all-round bush worker, an outstanding horseman and a great personality; like many of his contemporaries he was fond of ‘lifting his little finger’. Mary Durack states that he ‘was too valuable a stockman to be dismissed for his drinking habits’, and she adds that, ‘It was obvious that [her father] M.P. had a considerable respect for Frayne, who would carry out a job he had undertaken where others might well give it up as impossible’. Tom Ronan, author of several books on the Victoria River district, heard about Frayne’s ‘magnificent achievements’ from his father and others, and intended to write a full-length novel about him. Unfortunately he never did so. When Jim Ronan took over the management of VRD in 1900, Frayne was one of the team of first class stockmen he assembled. According to Tom Ronan, his father sent Frayne to establish Montejinni outstation to stop the Aborigines killing cattle, and Frayne had a camp in that area by May 1902.

Finally, there was Jack Beasley (plate 112). Beasley was in the East Kimberley and Victoria River district from at least 1896 and spent most of his life working on various stations in the region, including Auvergne, Ord River and VRD. He must have occasionally worked elsewhere because, according to Mat Savage who was one of his contemporaries, it was Beasley who formed Soudan station, on the Barkly tableland. Savage says Beasley could not write his own name but instead would sign with a conjoined JB, which was also his brand.

55 M. Durack, Sons in the Saddle, 1985, pp. 69-70.
57 Ibid.
59 Timber Creek police journal, 11-5-1902.

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Aborigines from one side of the Victoria River district to the other remember Beasley as a very hard man and one of the main culprits in early massacres. He certainly was in the district early enough to have been involved in such killings, and Aboriginal oral traditions as widespread and consistent as this should be taken seriously. There is only one piece of written corroboration. When Doug Moore became bookkeeper on Ord River in 1900, Jack Beasley was the head stockman there. Years later Moore wrote a short memoir and he remembered Beasley as ‘a rough good natured chap who talked about gouging out blackfellows eyes with a blunt pocket knife’. At the time Moore thought it was ‘only talk’, but he was forced to reconsider when ‘some built on it later.’ Jimmy Manngayarri, one of the oldest Aboriginal men I interviewed, had known Beasley years ago. He claimed that on one occasion Beasley’s Aboriginal wife ran away, and when Beasley caught her he shot her.

These, then, are the backgrounds of the men of the ‘second wave’ of settlers in the Victoria River district about whom anything is known. What follows are the stories of what happened to them and their associates over the following decade, or more. Because the duffers settled in two widely separated localities – more or less the east and west sides of the district – and because they are not known to have interacted to any great degree, I will deal with them as two distinct groups, beginning with those on the east.

The Fleming brothers were in the vanguard of the battlers who moved into the east side of the district. They obtained their first lease (PL 2198) on the eastern boundary of VRD on
October 1st 1901, and stocked it the following February or March with some cattle the police thought they had obtained from Tom Pearce in Katherine. The Flemings soon acquired three other leases and together the four leases gave them a north-south strip along the VRD boundary (see map 9). They named their station Illawarra, presumably a reference to their place of origin in New South Wales. From November 1905 Mick also held pastoral permit 29 for a block further south, near Camfield Creek, on the western edge of Wave Hill. Although only Mick’s name appears on the lease documents for Illawarra, various sources state that he was in partnership with his brother Jim, and probably at times with Ben Martin and Jim Campbell.

Jim Campbell also was in the district early in 1902, having obtained the right to use a 400 square mile pastoral lease taken up in 1900, but never used, by a New South Wales man named Kirby. In one of the strange outcomes of the original system of land allocation, this block was actually inside the boundaries of VRD, in the north-east corner of the station (see map 10). It became Campbell’s famous ‘Retreat station’ and lasted until 1904 when Kirby sold the lease to W.F. Buchanan, owner of Wave Hill (plate 113). Buchanan renamed the block ‘Killarney’, after his home property of that name near Narrabri, in northern New South Wales. Campbell also seems to have been in partnership with or employed by the Flemings. When Mick Fleming was setting up and managing ‘new

67 Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, office copies of pastoral permits - 1902-1922, Northern Territory Archives Service, F670 vol. 1, lease 2213.
68 Timber Creek police letter book, 27-7-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
69 They obtained leases 2212 and 2213 on January 1st 1902, and lease 2214 on January 4th 1902 (information from the Office of the Placenames Committee, Lands Department, Darwin).
70 File at the Office of the Placenames Committee, Lands Department, Darwin.
71 An entry in the Timber Creek police letter book (12-3-1903) and others in the Timber Creek police journal (18-8-1902, 24-8-1902, 3-11-1902, 12-3-1903 and 17-6-1903) make it virtually certain that Campbell, Martin and Fleming were partners on Illawarra station. Mounted Constable E. O’Keefe, cited in ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1905’ (South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 23), states that Fleming and Martin had dissolved their partnership.
72 Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
73 A history of Killarney lease, compiled by Mr Vern O’Brien, formerly the Director of the Northern Territory Lands Department, Darwin.
Delamere' in 1902, he left Jim Campbell in charge of Illawarra, and later Martin took on this role.

Before he could begin work on Kirby's block Campbell had to have a brand, and the one he devised, a 'brand of genius', shows that he intended to do more than brand cleanskins. At the Timber Creek police station some time in 1902, he registered a diamond-shaped

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75 Timber Creek police letter book, 17-6-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
76 Ibid.
brand (◊). This was to become the basis of one of the most famous and versatile brands in Australian cattle-duffing history – the Diamond 88 (◊88) – and also the lesser known Diamond 40 and Diamond 30. With these brands Campbell could cover the 62U brand used both on Delamere and Wave Hill, the O55 on Ord River, the O71 on Auvergne, and the G10 of Victoria River Downs. By contrast, Ben Martin’s brand was M76 and the Flemings’ brand was BMF, neither of which was suitable for cross-branding other local brands.

Within months of Campbell and Martin beginning work in the eastern VRD area they were to face charges of ‘unlawful possession of cattle on Armstrong Creek.’ The case was heard at the Depot by Captain Joe Bradshaw, JP, on November 3rd, the day before race day (plate 114). Jim Ronan and ‘his man’ Jack Frayne arrived on November 2nd, and Jim Campbell, Ben Martin and one of the Fleming brothers turned up together the next morning. At 5pm Captain Joe held court and asked the protagonists – Jim Ronan and Ben

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78 The information about Campbell’s diamond brand is on the inside of the front cover of the Timber Creek police journal that begins on March 31st 1902, but whether it was written that day or some time later is unknown.

79 Timber Creek police letter book, 17-6-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin; Timber Creek police journal, 3-7-1909.

80 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 29-5-1903 [advertisement].

81 The Ord River brand at since at least 1893 was a circle with a dot in the centre followed by ‘55’ (Australian Archives, ACT. A3 NT 14/5459; G. Bolton, A Survey of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to the Present, 1953, p. 169; M. Durack, Sons in the Saddle, 1985, p. 404.


83 Timber Creek police journal, 16-5-1904, 21-5-1904.

84 Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

85 ‘The Northern Territory. Huge Pastoral Holdings Held at 1/- per Square Mile’, The Leader, (Melbourne), 29-7-1922. It is probable that this brand incorporated the initials of Ben Martin and Mick Fleming.

86 Carving on a boab on the Victoria River above Timber Creek. The diamond with the attached ‘JC’ almost certainly represents ‘Diamond’ Jim Campbell (see plate 171).

87 Timber Creek police journal, 25-9-1902.

88 Ibid: 3-11-1902.

89 Ibid: 2-11-1902, 3-11-1902.
Martin – to ‘come to some agreement and settle the case out of court’, and this they were able to do, though no details of the settlement are known.\textsuperscript{90} This probably annoyed Mounted Constable O’Keefe because ‘previous to this [he] told Ronan he would have to go on with the case,’\textsuperscript{91} and it wasn’t long before the police began to pay special attention to the activities Campbell, Martin and the Flemings.

Races were held the next day, only the second ever held at the Depot, and the first with sales of alcohol. This undoubtedly suited Jack Frayne who had been drinking rum for a day or two before he arrived at the Depot, and was drunk the whole time there.\textsuperscript{92} At one stage O’Keefe had to throw him out of the police station kitchen because he kept trying to entice Tracker Wombat to go with him.\textsuperscript{93} Then Campbell and Martin got into a fight and Campbell had to be restrained.\textsuperscript{94} No doubt a good time was had by all (except O’Keefe), and everyone (except O’Keefe) left the next day.\textsuperscript{95}

Some station managers quickly realised that the influx of small men around their boundaries could mean trouble for them. In December 1902, just four months after the permit system was introduced, Aeneas Gunn, then managing Elsey station, wrote to the Government Resident protesting the allocation of pastoral permits and pointing out that:

however honest the intentions of the lessees may be anyone who is acquainted with conditions of pastoral settlement & enterprise in this country is aware that it is almost impossible to profitably work a holding of 400 or 500 square miles on an honest basis unless such country is exceptionally good. A premium is given to illicit branding by the practise when as has been the case in most of the recent allotments, the country leased has been for years frequented by stragglers from the established stations’ herds, the temptation to pick up any unconsidered trifles of clearskin [sic] cattle must be nigh irresistibly strong.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid: 3-11-1902.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid: 2-11-1902, 4-11-1902.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid: 4-11-1902.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid: 5-11-1902.
\textsuperscript{96} A. Gunn, manager of Elsey station, to the Government Resident, 9-12-1902. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 11817.
Gunn argued that if permits could not be refused the big stations should at least be given 'due notice that their cattle must be removed within a given time & that on the expiry of the term the right to the cattle running on the blocks will be sold by Public Auction.'

Other managers held a different view. According to Tom Ronan, his father Jim was of the opinion that the battlers,

were actually the best friends Victoria River Downs had. For every cleanskin they picked up there were fifty cows and calves and young bullocks turned back into the herd. What's more, they kept the bush blacks out. Had it not been for them the G10 (V.R. Downs brand) cattle had nothing to stop them till they hit the Overland Telegraph Line, and the losses from spearing would have been much heavier than they were.97

A similar sentiment towards the battlers was voiced by M.P. Durack.98 Tom Ronan said that his father thought 'Men like Ben Martin and Mick and Jim Fleming were good types', and 'The country could have done with more of them.'99 But Jim Campbell was 'a bloody dingo', and Tom said his father refused to eat with him when on one occasion Campbell rode into his camp.100 Jim Ronan reserved his anger towards the man (Tom Pearce) who financed the battlers on his eastern boundary and bought their cattle:

The poor devils would work like slaves and live like blackfellows, and when they got a few head of cattle he'd buy them at bedrock prices. He'd then poor [sic] rot-gut grog into them until they were so far in debt that all they could do was go out after another mob.101

In March 1903 Mounted Constable O'Keefe reported that Campbell had formed a camp at Coolibah Creek on Kirby's block (Retreat station). He was of the opinion that Campbell and Martin were working for Tom Pearce, hotelier and general businessman in Katherine,102 and said that although Campbell had brought no cattle onto the block, in a few

100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

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months’ time there would be VRD cleanskins there and that Campbell and Martin intended ‘to get all the clean skin Animals there is to be got in that country.’ He also reported that Campbell and Martin had mustered a number of brumbies there the previous year, and said that either he or Mounted Constable Gordon would go ‘to watch the movements and take particular notes of there [sic] work at Coolibah & Illawarra Downs’. 103

Finally, O’Keefe noted that he had heard that ‘Mr. Ronan and Martin has come to an understanding re the clean skins cattle.’ On this subject, on June 20th 1903 he wrote to Ronan as follows:

I am informed by good authority that you have offered the clean skin cattle east of Victoria river to Campbell and Martin also that you do not forget to notify Campbell and Martin when the police are in the neighbourhood. Yet you cry out about not being able to get justice, and have the audacity to write and say you have no relations with them whatever, and you supply Campbell with rations to enable him to prosecute his career amongst the clean skin herd at Vict River Stn. 104

In April and May 1903 Mounted Constable Gordon patrolled from Timber Creek to Illawarra Downs, Retreat station and Delamere station, and interviewed Martin, Campbell and Fleming. His report paints a picture of volatile relationships and changing alliances between these men, and possibly between them and Jim Ronan. Martin told Gordon that he had bought Illawarra Downs, including the brands and stock. He also said that Ronan refused to cooperate in any way with him, but during a joint muster on Battle Creek had said that if Campbell turned up he would give him a number of old cleanskin bulls they had in hand. Later Campbell told Gordon that Ronan had helped him repair his dray and lent him some rations to keep him going until his own rations arrived. Gordon then saw Mick Fleming who was then managing Delamere, and Fleming told him that the previous year he had placed Campbell in charge of Illawarra, but that Ronan had ‘bluffed him off all the good waters’ and for that reason he then placed Ben Martin in charge.105

103 Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin. Many of the pages in this photocopy have the bottom line or two missing and in this case the signature is missing. However, by comparison with the handwriting on pages where O’Keefe’s signature is present, it is clear that this report was written by O’Keefe.
104 Ibid: 20-6-1903.
105 Ibid: 17-6-1903.
It is difficult to reconcile these police reports with what Tom Ronan had to say about his father’s relationship with Campbell, Martin and the Flemings. It may be that Jim Ronan did make deals with the cattle duffers, and was supportive of Jim Campbell, but painted himself in a good light for his son’s benefit. Or it may be that the cattle duffers lied to the police in order to make trouble for Ronan, and perhaps for one or more of their fellow battlers.

Fleming also told Gordon that he ‘had purchased the clean skin cattle running on the neighbourhood of Illawarra Station’, presumably meaning those running on Crown Land east of Illawarra, rather than those on VRD. This surprised O’Keefe because he had not heard that the government had sold the rights to any cleanskin cattle recently. However, he thought Fleming had bought the rights to cleanskin cattle on Armstrong Creek in 1898 and had not been able to muster them at the time because of the very bad season.\textsuperscript{106}

In July 1903 O’Keefe reported that Martin intended to take some cattle in ‘to the line’ for the butchers. He pointed out that ‘Campbell Fleming & Martin are very little over twelve months at Illawarra station and if Martin can muster aged cattle fit for Butchers meat he must undoubtedly get them unlawfully.’\textsuperscript{107} Whether Martin did take cattle in to the line is unknown, but there is no record of any action being taken against him by the police.

Over the next three years the police kept an eye on the three men. In June 1903 there was police correspondence that Campbell and Martin had been caught ‘branding cleanskins 18 months old’,\textsuperscript{108} but no legal action seems to have been taken, so it may have been a reference to the 1902 case. The following August Fleming and Martin were fined £1 each and fifteen shillings costs for possessing unregistered dogs (plate 115),\textsuperscript{109} and at various times they checked Campbell’s horses to see if any were stolen.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid: 27-6-1903.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid: 27-7-1903.
\textsuperscript{108} Timber Creek police journal, 8-6-1903.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid: 29-8-1903.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid: 22-5-1904, 1-8-1904, 10-10-1904.
During 1905, Campbell left his partnership with the Flemings and shifted his cattle to a block north of Illawarra, which he called Mayvale.\(^{111}\) He also obtained pastoral permit 121 for a block between the western end of Delamere and the south-east corner of Bradshaw\(^{112}\) (map 11). This didn’t please Fred Bradshaw who in October asked the police to check on Campbell’s activities in the area.\(^{113}\) Ben Martin also dissolved his partnership with the Flemings in 1905 and in September 1905 removed his share of the cattle, 950 head, to Scott Creek, between Willeroo and Katherine.\(^{114}\) In 1909 the police ordered him and a partner, ‘notorious duffers’, to shift from this area.\(^{115}\) Apparently he had been squatting on Crown Land for four years and had never bothered to obtain a pastoral permit.

Martin got out of the Victoria River district in good time. In 1906 L.A. Wells began the first official survey of the Victoria River district and this quickly led to substantial adjustments to the boundaries of some stations. The *Northern Territory Times* received a report on the early results of Wells’ survey, with sarcastic comments on some of the settlers:

The readjustment of their boundaries – or what they have hitherto looked upon as their boundaries – has come at a great and a not too pleasant surprise to a few. It is found, for instance, that the Victoria River Downs boundary runs 25 miles further to the southward and 10 miles further to the eastward than was supposed by some of the settlers.\(^{116}\)

This meant that for more than twenty years Wave Hill had been using something in the order of 2,500 square miles of prime Mitchell grass downs country that really belonged to VRD! Wells later claimed that because of this change ‘one station’ (undoubtedly VRD)

\(^{111}\) Pastoral permit 42, taken up on 21-2-1905.
\(^{112}\) Pastoral permit 121, taken up on 21-2-1905.
\(^{113}\) Timber Creek police journal, 27-10-1905.
\(^{115}\) Timber Creek police journal, 3-7-1909.
\(^{116}\) ‘The Victoria River Survey’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 23-3-1906.
increased its carrying capacity by 20,000 head." This survey was bad luck for Wave Hill, but for the Fleming brothers and Jim Campbell it was a disaster. The eastern boundary of VRD was found to be ten miles further east and the same correspondent to the Times reported that:

the owner of the adjoining Illawarra Downs Station now discovers that all his principal sources of water supply are located on the rival territory [VRD]. As a consequence of this unpleasant discovery I hear that Mr. M. Fleming is now removing the whole of his herd to country on the Daly River. I fear that in that case he will not have so good a time as he has had on the Illawarra Downs country; the country on the Daly is certainly not so good for cattle, and they will not thrive or breed so quickly there as on the rich pastoral lands around the Victoria Downs. I hear that Mr. Campbell is also beating a retreat from Maryvale [sic]. He is said to be removing his cattle on to Bradshaw’s (Fred) Creek, situated between the Daly River and the head of the Fitzmaurice River."

The Flemings were able to acquire pastoral permits for land in the Daly River country. Mick’s block formed the basis of the future Douglas River station and Jim’s block became Ooloo station, and the brothers had no further connection with the Victoria River district. Campbell was able to hang on, the last of the cattle duffers in the eastern part of the district. He retained the Mayvale block but may have shifted his base to his pastoral permit (PP121) on Sullivans Creek.

In 1907 Paddy Cahill, then the manager of Delamere, made general complaints about Campbell ‘stealing calves and altering brands and earmarks’, and there were suspicions that some stolen horses were at Campbell’s camp, but no specific evidence could be found and no charges could be laid. Then, in 1909, all hell broke loose.

118 ‘The Victoria River survey’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 23-3-1906.
119 Files at the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.
120 Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199, Box 3, PP 121/1907; the Timber Creek police journal of 7-9-1907 states that Campbell was actually on country held by Willeroo (permit 93). This appears to be wrong, but if it was correct it would once gain highlight how close the relationship was between Pearce and the battlers.
121 Ibid: 7-9-1907.
122 Ibid: 20-5-1908, 14-6-1908.
Map 11: Pastoral permits in the Bradshaw station area, c1906.
On or shortly before April 23rd Dick Townshend, the VRD manager, and a stockman named Harry Bening,

found James Campbell @ Muir, of Mah Vale, tailing 400 and odd mixed cattle on Dry River on the V.R. Downs station. The cattle had recently been branded 40 and earmarked 〈. The brands were deeply and widely burnt and no doubt covered the G10 which is the old V. R. Downs brand. The earmark would cut out ⊂, the V.R. Downs earmark.123

This encounter was the end of ‘Diamond Jim’ in the Victoria River country, but the beginning of one of the great cattle duffing stories of the Northern Territory. Townsend immediately took possession of the cattle and as he began to shift them Campbell called out, ‘This would have been another Mount Cornish if I had got away with them”.124 This was, of course, a reference to the famous cattle ‘lift’ by Harry ‘Captain Starlight’ Redford and his gang who stole about 1000 head of cattle from Bowen Downs in western Queensland in 1870, and drove them 1500 kilometres down Coopers Creek and through to South Australia.125 For much of the way their route was through unsettled and little-known desert country where only nine years earlier Burke and Wills had perished. Redford eventually was arrested and charged with the theft of a distinctive white bull, and tried at Roma, but despite overwhelming evidence he was acquitted. As he left the court many people shook his hand and because of his tremendous feat of daring and bushcraft he was hailed a hero by many bushmen throughout the outback.126

Of the 428 cattle taken from Campbell, twenty-three bore the brands of Delamere, Ord River and Illawarra, or were old diamond 88s. The remaining 405 were recently branded 88 or 40. In a remarkable echo of the Redford story, among the 405 was a white bull with a 40 brand, and also a VRD ‘G’ which had been overlooked. This bull was killed and the brand and earmark preserved as damning evidence against Campbell.

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123 Ibid: 25-4-1909, 3-7-1909.
124 Ibid: 3-7-1909.
In a strange twist to the story, Tom Pearce, who had previously quietly supported (and exploited) Campbell and the other cattle duffers in their unlawful activities, was called upon in his capacity as Justice of the Peace to sign warrants for the arrest of Campbell and his accomplices.\textsuperscript{127} We can only guess, but it seems quite likely that as he fled the region Campbell would have let Pearce know he was in trouble, and to avoid any embarrassing connection being revealed, Pearce would have helped him on his way. An intensive and sustained manhunt for Campbell and his known associates (Aboriginal and white) was carried out in the district, but no trace could be found and the police were convinced that 'all save Mr Townshend and the M.C. were actively working in his [Campbell’s] interest.'\textsuperscript{128} The chances are that Campbell was out of the district before the police were even notified. Within three days of being caught with the cattle he had arranged for a friend, Arthur Love, to sell his permit and stock. A drover named George Stevens who was then in the Willeroo area bought it, and installed Love as acting manager.\textsuperscript{129} Campbell then ‘went into smoke’ beyond the frontier in Arnhem Land.\textsuperscript{130}

In Arnhem Land Campbell settled in to a life of trepanging,\textsuperscript{131} buffalo hunting and prospecting.\textsuperscript{132} He had a friend or partner with a lugger who would take his trepang and buffalo hides to Darwin and sell them, and bring rations and other goods out to him. Eventually the police found out where Campbell was and made several attempts to arrest him, but the ‘bush telegraph’ kept him informed of police movements. If the police came overland Campbell would shift out to an offshore island, and if they came by sea he would ride his horses inland for a while.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{127} Timber Creek police journal, 11-5-1909.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid: 3-7-1909.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid: 41.
He remained out of harms’ way in the bush until 1913 when the charges against him were dropped, and he was finally free to make a trip to Darwin.\textsuperscript{135} In yet another parallel with the Redford story, according to an oral tradition he was greeted there as a hero, and carried shoulder-high down Smith Street and into the Victoria Hotel.\textsuperscript{136} Campbell returned to Arnhem Land shortly afterwards, and within a few months he was speared and killed while trepanging (115).\textsuperscript{137} His murder caused the usual outrage amongst his friends and supporters, who claimed he was ‘one of the best’, but one man echoed Constable Johns’ assessment when he remarked, ‘My friend Campbell, he very rough on blacks’.\textsuperscript{138}

At the same time that the Flemings, Martin and Campbell were establishing themselves on the eastern side of the district, another group of battlers was doing the same further to the west. These men were Billy Patterson and Jack Beasley, Jack Frayne, Jimmy Wickham, Jack Newton, W.J.J. Ward, and others who were their partners for varying lengths of time (map 9).

Billy Patterson and Jack Beasley were the first to arrive. In June 1903 they obtained pastoral permit 10 for an area extending north from Stirling Creek. Their block abutted the eastern boundary of Ord River and the north-west boundary of Wave Hill. They built a small hut and a stockyard on the south bank of Stirling Creek, and named their block ‘Mount Stirling’ (plate 116).\textsuperscript{139} At the time they obtained their permit, Beasley was

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\textsuperscript{134} Rock painting of Jim Campbell’s brand in the prime buffalo hunting country around Mt. Borrodaile, west Arnhem Land.

\textsuperscript{135} ‘Murder by Blacks’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 10-7-1913.

\textsuperscript{136} Personal communication, Reg Wilson, who was told the story by John Mott, a Territory surveyor in the period 1913-15.

\textsuperscript{137} ‘Murder by Blacks’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 10-7-1913.


working as head stockman on the neighbouring Ord River station, and he immediately commenced ‘doing all he could to stock that country up for the partnership’ by branding as many Ord River cleanskins as he could with the Mt Stirling brand.\textsuperscript{140}

Map 12: The cattle duffing blocks of Beasley and Patterson, Wickham, Frayne and Wilson, and Newton and Ward, on the western side of the Victoria River district.

Jack Frayne was next. When he was sent to establish Montejinni outstation on VRD, ostensibly to put a stop to cattle killing by bush blacks, he no doubt was also told to keep an eye on the local battlers. Apparently he liked what he saw. Not one to miss an opportunity himself, by August 1903 he had left VRD\textsuperscript{141} and in September he moved onto pastoral permit 26, on the watershed between Stirling Creek, the West Baines River and Humbert River.\textsuperscript{142} This location gave Frayne access to Auvergne in the north, VRD to east, Wave Hill to the south and Ord River to the west (see map 12). Frayne built a hut on the

\textsuperscript{140} Doug Moore’s Memoirs, nd. Battye Library. Acc 3829A MN 1237.
\textsuperscript{141} Timber Creek police journal, 29-8-1903.
\textsuperscript{142} Pastoral permit 26. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1903/553.
banks of Kunja Rockhole, on Kunja Creek, and applied this name to his station.\textsuperscript{143} He had a
'sleeping partner', drover Mat Wilson who was later to be the owner of the Depot Store for
many years, but who does not appear to have ever lived at Kunja.\textsuperscript{144}

After Frayne came Jimmy Wickham who in July 1904 obtained pastoral permit 22 for a
block on Uindait Creek, on the north side of the Stirling and east of Beasley and
Patterson's permit 10.\textsuperscript{145} Later he acquired pastoral permit 111, a long and very narrow
strip of country along the western end of the Humbert River block (permit 56; see map
12).\textsuperscript{146} He called his place Uindait station\textsuperscript{147} and built a substantial homestead of local basalt
rocks, bush timber and corrugated iron\textsuperscript{148} – 'a little fortress of stone and ant-bed' as
described by Ernestine Hill\textsuperscript{149} – as well as two large basalt-walled yards and other stone
structures (see plate 67).\textsuperscript{150} Unlike the other battlers, Wickham was married and had his
wife Olive and their children at Unidait (plate 118).\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{143} In 1989 I was taken to the site of Kunja homestead by Mr Jimmy Manngayarri, senior Malngin-Bilinara
elder, who told me the name of the rockhole. The name 'Kunja station' appears on various early maps.
\textsuperscript{144} Wilson and Frayne's names appear together on maps which show pastoral permit 26.
\textsuperscript{145} Temporary Inspector of Stock, Mounted Constable E. O'Keefe, cited 'Government Resident's Report on
the Northern Territory, 1904', South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 2, no. 45, 1905, p. 27;
Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies
\textsuperscript{146} Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies
of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199 PP111/1915. Wickham held this block from June 10\textsuperscript{th} 1906
to June 10\textsuperscript{th} 1912.
\textsuperscript{147} There are various spellings of this name, for example, 'Uyndoyte' (agreement signed by James Wickham,
14-6-1910, Battye Library, Acc 2184A/1, MN485, letterbook, 1901-1912. Inward and outward
 correspondence relating to Connor, Doherty & Durack); 'Vandyke' (Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-
Inspector N. Waters, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous. Australian
 Archives, ACT, CRS A1640, Item 1906/223; 'Ewandyte' (Ernestine Hill, 1951: 339); 'Nyerdoyle' (Mary
Durack, 1985: 331); ‘Wyandotte’ and ‘Mindyit’ (L. A. Wells to Mr Justice Herbert, Government Resident,
Darwin, 8-11-1907. Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: (Aborigines Reserve
\textsuperscript{148} There is no corrugated iron at the site today, but Jimmy Manngayarri, who as a child visited the homestead
with his parents not long after the building was abandoned, remembered the upper part of the walls and
the roof being clad with corrugated iron.
\textsuperscript{149} E. Hill, \textit{The Territory}, 1951, p. 339.
\textsuperscript{151} E. Hill. \textit{The Territory}, 1951, p. 399; In a letter written by M.P. Durack to Jimmy Wickham on 24-7-1910,
he sends his regards to 'Mrs Wickham and child' (Battye Library, Acc 2184A/1, MN485, letterbook,
1901-1912. Inward and outward correspondence relating to Connor, Doherty & Durack).
Finally came ‘Colorado’ Jack Newton and James Kearney who in May 1905 took up pastoral permit 56, on the Humbert River immediately west of Kunja.152 In what was almost certainly a great joke on their part, on their pastoral permits both men described themselves as ‘Halls Creek sheep farmers’.153 In 1906 Kearney withdrew from his partnership with Newton and disappeared from the historical record, and his place was taken by W.J.J. ‘Brigalow Bill’ Ward, another self-proclaimed sheep farmer from Halls Creek.154 On the south bank of the Humbert River one or more of these men built a stockyard, and a hut with a bush timber frame clad with cane grass, and roofed with thatch.

Apparently Colorado and Brigalow couldn’t get along because by October 1906, Ward wanted to dissolve his partnership with Newton and asked the Lands Department if he could pay half the rent for ‘the portion next to the Victoria Station Boundary’155— the only part that wasn’t spinifex-covered sandstone ranges! In May 1907 Newton tried to counteract Ward’s move by sending in money for the entire rent and asking for the block to be transferred solely to his name.156 I don’t know what the result was of their competing claims, but eventually only Brigalow Bill was living on the block.

Once the battlers obtained their permits, all was well for a while. Huts, homesteads and yards were built, and no doubt the men were quietly building up their herds, but in 1907 Surveyor Wells came along to ‘readjust’ all their boundaries, or should I say, to place their boundaries in their proper positions. Wells’ survey showed that the boundaries of the various permits were substantially further north and east than previously believed, and as a result the homesteads built by Beasley and Patterson, Wickham, and Frayne were not on

152 Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199 PP 56/1908; Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1, item 06/102. These records indicate the Humbert River block was taken up in 1905, but other records suggest that it occurred in 1903. I have not yet been able to determine the facts of the matter (see the ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1903’, South Australian Parliamentary Papers, vol. 2, no. 45, 1904, p. 8).

153 Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199, Box 2, PP 56/1908; Australian Archives, ACT A1640/1 Item 1906/102.

154 Ibid.

155 W.J.J. Ward to Lands Department, 28-10-1906. Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1, item 1906/102.

156 J. Newton to Lands Department, 1-5-1907. Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1, item 06/102.
their own land. As Surveyor Wells explained to the Government Resident in November 1907,

The lessees of No 10 were settled on lease No 2227 [Wave Hill’s] and lessees of No 22 were on No 10 [Beasley and Patterson’s]... Permit 10 is over 3 miles north of Stirling Creek and has but one creek, Wyandotte? (“Mindyit”) of any importance which trends south through the block from its north boundary where a permanent spring exists.

Permit No 22 [Wickham’s] is a dry block except the east portion which is very rough and forms the source of the Wickham River. This block has never even been occupied by the lessees.157

It is not clear if Beasley and Patterson moved at all, and it may be that they stayed squatting on south bank of Stirling Creek, on Wave Hill country. Jack Frayne built a new homestead further north at Coomanderoo Spring,158 on the southern edge of the great Pumuntu sandstone. In the early 1900s Pumuntu was a major refuge area for bush Aborigines (see Chapter 4), and it appears that his move brought Frayne into conflict with them. Billy Miller, who worked for Frayne at ‘Koonju’, was ‘warned to take no chances whatever with the blacks, for they were always ready to show a very practical belligerence towards the occupation of their country’. In spite of this warning Billy was attacked, and very nearly lost his life,159 Jimmy Manngayarri told me that bush people had been shot near Coomanderoo, in one instance after they had speared a number of milking cows near the homestead.160

The battler most seriously affected was Jimmy Wickham who had inadvertently built his homestead on Beasley and Patterson’s block. I have no hard evidence that he abandoned the site, but this is likely because in the middle of where pastoral permit 22 was shown to be, on the headwaters of the Wickham River, there is the remains of a hut made from

Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.
160 Interview with Jimmy Manngayarri, recorded at Midnight homestead, 1989.
basalt rocks and bush timber in a similar manner to the house at Uindait. Jimmy Mannigayarri said that this site was named ‘Midnight’ and this name appears in a few historical documents.  

The problems caused by this ‘readjustment’ of their boundaries was soon overtaken by a more serious threat. In April 1907 Mounted Constable Dempsey began a seven week patrol through the western district, among other things, to report on the suitability of various areas for an Aboriginal reserve. He recommended sections of Ord River station along the Negri River and the north side of Stirling Creek, and all of pastoral permits 10 and 22. Dempsey’s report was forwarded to Surveyor Wells who pointed out that Dempsey had made his suggestions in ignorance of the fact that the supposed boundaries of the blocks had been corrected, and as a result did not have the abundant water and traditional foods that Dempsey believed. Wells instead suggested that permit 56 (Humbert River station) be declared an Aboriginal reserve. Later he elaborated on his recommendation:

Permit 56 has a few head of cattle, running on the Eastern end. It is of little value for depasturing, owing to its roughness, and is held by questionable characters, who are not likely to become good Crown tenants.

The latter block, having abundance of fish and game, I thought would be most suitable for a reserve.

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162 Timber Creek police journal, 11-6-1907.


News of the plan to establish an Aboriginal reserve reached the battlers around the time that Mounted Constable Dempsey was on patrol in their district. Understandably, they were outraged, and Dempsey later reported that,

This they all bitterly resent and put it that it is because they are “small settlers” that they are being driven off their country. To a man the workers of this district are in sympathy with them. All fail to recognize that these particular “small settlers” are “large thieves” It would appear that cattle raising blunts the moral principles and makes those working at it oblivious to the law of meum and tuum. 166

Dempsey added that Wickham had gone to Adelaide to try to get the resumption notice revoked, and Beasley had been to Wyndham to seek ‘the aid of one Skinner there to prepare a long indictment against the squatters.’ Beasley’s ‘long indictment’ was in fact rather short:

please do utmost to prevent forfeiture lease represent matter as iniquitous harassment of small settler who Govt pretend desire no Aboriginal reserve required there even so why take small mans whole country after expensive improvements leaving untouched surrounding big stations Victoria Wave Hill Ord River proceedings appear monstrous please do best prevent such injustice. 167

Beasley’s partner, Patterson, 168 told Dempsey that all the permit holders were planning to camp on the lease of Charlie Whittaker, north of the Mt Stirling block, and continue running their cattle on their old blocks, but Dempsey convinced him that this plan would not work. Dempsey then summed up the situation as follows:

From such a nest as that on the Stirling may come a Kenif. 169 It is politic that such people be dealt with promptly. I cannot but feel that the resumption was an excellent

168 Beasley had two partners named Patterson. The first was Billy Patterson who died at Mt Stirling on 24-2-1907 (Timber Creek police journal, 29-6-1907). Another Patterson, possibly Billy’s brother, is mentioned in records after that date (e.g. Timber Creek police journal, 25-7-1908; Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, Darwin, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223).
169 The Kenniff brothers were stock thieves–come–bushrangers active in central Queensland in the late 1800s. In March 1902, they shot two police in the bush and burnt their bodies, and were subsequently declared outlaws. In June 1902 they were captured, tried and convicted. Paddy Kenniff was hanged in January.
move and I would respectfully request you, Sir, to use your influence to see that it is not permitted to these people to sit down any longer on the country in question than is necessary in fairness to remove their stock.170

Brigalow Bill Ward was the most strident in protesting the proposed resumptions. In April 1908 he wrote to the Lands Department that,

I have been informed that my country held by Newton & Ward Humbert River Block 53 has been canseled [sic] for Aboriginal reserve I should like to know the reason why after going to a lot of trouble of brining [sic] cattle from the Kimberley District in to the territory [sic] and stocking it and been put to a lot of truble [sic] time & money in settling the country to be Hunted of [sic] they were plenty of country before I came and are plenty now only fit for Black reserve without chising [sic] one of the only few that is there now it is a nice way of settling people on the land. I am put to a great deal loss I will have to give my cattle away.171

Ward went on to allege that the big stations were holding land that was not stocked and asked that he be allowed to keep the lower end of his country, or be given one of the unstocked blocks on VRD. He had good cause to be worried. Unbeknown to him his block had already been singled out as the most suitable for an Aboriginal reserve, and on top of that he had the bad luck to be linked to a man who was the subject of a police manhunt – Colorado Jack Newton.

During a joint muster on the boundary between Ord River station and ‘Whittaker’s place’ in September 1907, the Ord River stockmen found a bullock and a cow, both branded N93 on top of O55 – in other words, with Colorado Jack’s brand on top of the Ord River brand. The earmarks had also been changed. The Timber Creek police were notified and began proceedings against Colorado.172 After sending Mounted Constable Artaud to Willeroo to

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1903. James Kenniff was also sentenced to hang but this was later commuted to life in prison and he eventually did sixteen years with hard labour. The Kenniff outbreak was only three years before Dempsey wrote his report on the battlers on Stirling Creek, and the Kenniff episode clearly was still fresh in his mind (R. Good, *Ketching the Kenniffs: the origins and exploits of the Kenniff brothers – Patrick and James*, Booringah Shire Council & Booringah Action Group, Mitchell Queensland, 1996, pp. 121-128, 163-167, 190-196).


171 W.J.J. Ward to Surveyor General’s Department, 15-4-1908. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

172 Timber Creek police journal, 17-10-1907.
get Tom Pearce, J.P., to sign summonses for Newton and various witnesses.\textsuperscript{173} Mounted Constable Dempsey then patrolled to the Stirling Creek country to serve these summonses.\textsuperscript{174} However, the 'bush telegraph' had been at work – Colorado knew the police were onto him and the police later learnt that shortly after they had been at Willeroo Colorado turned up there, asking if a summons had been issued against him.\textsuperscript{175}

At Campbell Springs, an outstation of Wave Hill located close to the various battler's blocks (plate 119), Dempsey requested that the manager call a muster of the Campbell Springs country in the hope that Colorado would attend, and also that they might find cross-branded cattle. Colorado never appeared and nothing incriminating was found, so Dempsey had to return to Timber Creek empty-handed.\textsuperscript{176} He came away feeling that 'the nest of reputed thieves on the Stirling should be broken up' and that Newton,

must be driven from the district. He has no country in it and palpably is a thief. Only last year he put up a yard on Farquharson's [sic] country and in it a "crush". This though his few head of cattle could have but calves that would not need "crushing". He was on the country too, without permission. … Newton may have left the country – he is in deadly fear of arrest – and if so the country will be rid of a nuisance.\textsuperscript{177}

The police never did catch up with Newton. In July 1908 they heard that he had sold his cattle to Beasley and Patterson and gone to the Kimberley, and furthermore, the chief witness against Newton was no longer in the Territory.\textsuperscript{178} A month or so later Newton applied to have his brand transferred to Jack Beasley, and it was believed that Newton and Ward wanted to transfer their permit.\textsuperscript{179} Referring to Newton and Ward, Mounted Constable Dempsey declared,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{173} Ibid: 21-10-1907.
\item\textsuperscript{174} Ibid: 13-12-1903.
\item\textsuperscript{175} Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, Darwin, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.
\item\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{178} Timber Creek police journal, 25-7-1908.
\item\textsuperscript{179} Sub-Inspector N. Waters to the Government Resident, 7-9-1908. CA60 Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal] 1906-1910. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 Item 1906/223.
\end{itemize}
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Both men are, as a matter of common notoriety, as are all the small settlers, cattle
uffers if there be a chance to get clean skins from their neighbours, [sic] and they
and their fellows with very few exceptions I regret to report, do not think that “Thou
shall not steal” applies to clean skin cattle.180

Meanwhile, the government was moving inexorably towards declaring Newton and Ward’s
Humbert River block an Aboriginal reserve. In May 1908 the Government Resident
expressed the opinion that a reserve should be declared ‘before the country becomes more
settled’, and he added that ‘If Newton is half as bad a character as M.C. Dempsey gives
him, (and I have no reason to doubt the constables honesty of intention) he should be
deprived of his Permit even were it not wanted for the purpose of a reserve.”181 The
Humbert River permit expired March 28th 1909 and was not renewed.182

As well as being threatened with losing his pastoral permit, Brigalow Bill was being
threatened by Aborigines. In March 1908 he wrote to the Lands Department asking once
again to be given a separate permit for the lower half of the Humbert block, and also
complaining that ‘after sivelizing [sic] the country and getting half my stock killed with
Blacks’ he might be forced off the place.183 Three months later he wrote an urgent message
to the Timber Creek police demanding ‘your instant protection here at once the Blacks
Killing Cattle & throwing spears at me. They are now hostile and defiant they forbid me to
go out again I will expect you here in the course of a week.”184 Afterwards he had cause to
regret such precipitous action.

Mounted Constable Holland arrived a month later, and heard both sides of the affair. The
basic story is that while riding around his cattle Brigalow met a group of Aborigines,
including a number of so-called ‘outlaws’. He accused them of killing his cattle, and they told him they had indeed killed a beast but that it was a VRD bullock they had seen Brigalow muster from VRD to Humbert. As a result, it was agreed that if Brigalow did not tell the police about their cattle killing, the Aborigines would not tell the VRD manager about his cattle duffing. When the Aborigines moved off into the hills Brigalow followed, so they threw spears at him. When all their spears were thrown there was a stalemate until one Aboriginal said ‘you let us get our spears and we let you pass’ – Brigalow let them get their spears and they let him pass. Holland and Brigalow made a search for the Aborigines involved, but Holland later remarked that ‘As the country is highly mountainous and affords splendid hiding places for the Natives, there appeared to be no chance of getting any of them and Ward was disinclined to prosecute if any were got.’

In September 1908 Brigalow again wrote to the Lands Department, this time asking for a lease instead of a permit, and once again asking to be given title to the lower half of the permit area. He also complained about the rent, declaring that ‘I reckon the rent to [sic] high it ought to be sixpence insted [sic] of a shilling considering they are four watersheds on it country walls of mountains you cant get up and spinfix [sic] they call this a river the Humbert it is only a short creek.’

Whatever letters Brigalow may have written after this time either have not survived or have not been found. The next mention of him is in March 1909 when Mounted Constable Dempsey reported that he was on the Murrangji Track in pursuit of a man named Webb who had enticed away Brigalow’s Aboriginal ‘wife’ and was headed for Borroloola. Following Brigalow was a man named Nye and ‘a ruffian Known as “Rackarock”’. The police

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185 Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, 15-8-1908. CA60 Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal] 1906-1910. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 Item 1906/223; No Victoria River district Aborigines were officially outlawed. The term was applied to persistent, known trouble-makers, who defied the whites in various ways – cattle spearing, stealing, or threatening attack. In this instance the ‘outlaws’ were Riley and his son, Malgat and his brother Picknarry, and Billy. Years later Riley later became a valued employee of Humbert River station (C. Schultz and D. Lewis. Beyond the Big Run, 1995, pp. 36, 43, 60).

186 W.J.J. Ward to the Lands Department, 20-9-1908. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

187 Timber Creek police journal, 1-3-1909. ‘Rackarock’ Mahoney was ‘a rough old bushman’ and ‘a famous bagman’ whose nickname was the name of an explosive (G. Broughton, Turn Again Home, The Jacaranda
‘feared a tragedy might be the end of the affair’, but Ward soon returned with the woman,\textsuperscript{188} and a month later Webb wrote to the police reporting Ward ‘for ill treating a lubra’.\textsuperscript{189}

The Humbert River block was declared an Aboriginal Reserve in June 1909,\textsuperscript{190} but Brigalow refused to leave and was still squatting there some months later when he was speared and killed at his homestead. Rumours of his death reached the police in February 1910.\textsuperscript{191} They travelled to his hut, and found it empty and ransacked, and with bloodstains on the doorway (plate 120). Later they learnt that Judy, almost certainly the woman he had retrieved from Webb in 1908, had been a key player in his death. She had taken his pistol down to the river in a bucket and the bush Aborigines then attacked Ward and speared him. While he was dying they pulled out his beard,\textsuperscript{192} and then Judy and other women urinated on his face – a sign of contempt for his sexual demands.\textsuperscript{193} Accounts vary as to what happened to his body. One says it was buried,\textsuperscript{194} another that it was thrown into the river,\textsuperscript{195} and yet another that it was buried in the bed of the river.\textsuperscript{196} In any event, it was never recovered.\textsuperscript{197}

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\caption{Gordon J Shot → 1910}
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\textsuperscript{188} Timber Creek police journal, 15-3-1909.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid: 21-4-1909.
\textsuperscript{190} South Australian Government Gazette, June 17, 1909.
\textsuperscript{191} Mounted Constable Dempsey, 15-2-1910. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
\textsuperscript{192} Timber Creek police journal, 17-4-1910.
\textsuperscript{193} C. Schultz and D. Lewis, Beyond the Big Run, 1995, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid: 43.
\textsuperscript{195} Timber Creek police journal, 17-4-1910.
\textsuperscript{197} Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1910.
\textsuperscript{198} Carving on a boab in the ranges near Humbert River homestead (see plates 161, 162).
\end{flushright}
According to the police account of the hunt for Brigalow’s murderers, only one Aborigine, Gordon, was shot dead. However, Charlie Schultz, a cattleman who owned Humbert River station from 1928 to 1971, heard from old-time VRD locals that a great many Aborigines were shot. Eventually Mudgela, Fishook, Longana and Walgarra were arrested and a number of witnesses detained (plates 121, 122), but Longana and one of the witnesses escaped before they could be taken to Darwin. Of the others, only Mudgela and Fishook were convicted. Both were sentenced to death, later commuted to life. In 1914 it was reported that Mudgela had escaped, but whether he was again captured or made it back to Humbert River and remained at large is unknown. Fishook must have eventually been released because in later years he worked for Charlie Schultz on Humbert River. Charlie didn’t know Fishook’s background, but said he was always terribly afraid of the police. Several other Aborigines implicated in the murder, including Maroun and Cockatoo, were never caught and remained in the ranges as ‘outlaws’ for the rest of their lives. The final irony of the sorry saga is that although Brigalow’s block was declared an Aboriginal reserve it was never used as such, and within five years of his death a grazing license was issued for the area.

So, Brigalow Bill was murdered and Colorado had ‘smoked’, but what of the other battlers in ‘the nest of thieves’? Jack Beasley and his partners managed to avoid trouble with the

199 Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1910.
200 Personal communication, Charlie Schultz. This statement was in the original manuscript of Charlie’s biography, Beyond the Big Run, but Charlie wanted it removed because, he said, ‘Those townies wouldn’t understand that it was us or them in those days’.
201 Timber Creek police journal, 15-7-1910, 18-7-1910.
202 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 16-9-1910. The conviction of Fishook in September highlights problems the police sometimes had in identifying bush Aborigines, or at least, potential problems with the police accounts of events. The previous April a man supposedly named ‘Fishook’ had been involved in an attack on Harry Condon, the manager of Bullita. The police tracked the offenders into the East Baines country and shot Fishook dead (Timber Creek police journal, 4-4-1910).
203 Pine Creek police journal, 21-3-1914. Northern Territory Archives, F294.
204 Personal communication, Charlie Schultz.
205 C. Schultz and D. Lewis, Beyond the Big Run, 1995, pp. 43, 60. In 1924 Cockatoo was one of three Aborigines who ‘stuck up’ the cook at Mt Sanford outstation (VRD) with spears, and demanded flour from him (Mounted Constable Sheridan to Police Commissioner, 1926. Department of Home and Territories, Correspondence Files, Annual Single Number Series, 1903-38: Victoria River “N.T. Fight between police and Natives”. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1, Item 1926/2816).
law, although through their association with Colorado and along with the other battling
they were under intense suspicion of unlawful activities. They undoubtedly were among
the East Kimberley duffers a drover-cum-journalist named Hely Hutchinson wrote about in
1906 when he said that, ‘Every cow they possess must have at least twenty calves per year,
and many of the calves born with horns, and about two to three years of age at that.’
Hutchinson quoted ‘the managing partner of one of the largest cattle-buying firms the day
he took delivery of a mob of 100 fats from a 'small' man at £5 per head.’ This man told
Hutchinson, 'with a very bitter tone in his voice, “It is hard luck to be buying your own
cattle back at £5 per head, especially when they have grown fat on your own country.”'207
The ‘large cattle-buying firm’ was probably Connor, Doherty and Durack, which in the
early 1900s was buying cattle from many stations in the region, including from Mt.
Stirling, Undait, and other small holdings.208

Billy Patterson died on February 24th 1907 and bequeathed all his property to his partner.209
Later it appears that Beasley went into partnership with someone named Barry (probably
Jack Barry210). In 1910 the police reported that, 'Messrs Barry and Beasley disposed of their
Mount Stirling Station to Mrs Skuthorpe, of Waterloo',211 but records in the Northern
Territory Archives indicate that the block remained in Beasley's hands until 1911 when he
sold it to W.F. and C.H. Buchanan of Wave Hill. On December 16th 1913 Wave Hill was
sold to Vesteys so the Mt. Stirling block then became part of the Limbunya run.212

207 'H7H' (Hely-Hutchinson) 'How Cattle are run in the East Kimberley', The Pastoralists' Review, February
1906: 1001 (reprinted from The Queenslander).
Rosewood Records, Battye Library, Acc 2184A/1, MN485.
209 Timber Creek police letter book, 21-6-1907. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
210 There were two men with the surname Barry in the Victoria River district in the early 1900s. One was
Frank Barry who died on Wave Hill in 1911, and is therefore unlikely to have been Beasley’s partner. The
other was Jack Barry (Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 14-7-1911).
212 Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of
After the sale of Mt Stirling Beasley went back to stock work and droving, mostly in the Victoria River-East Kimberley districts. Apparently old habits died hard. In 1932 he was sacked from his position as head stockman at Moolooloo outstation (VRD) because a number of Delamere-branded cattle were found with calves carrying the Moolooloo brand.

Jack Barry also remained in the district for many years, working as a yard builder, drover, stockman, station manager and cattle duffer. An oral tradition suggests that

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213 An insult written on a water tank at Murranji Bore.
214 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 10-2-1911; ‘Cattle Shipment from Darwin’, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 31-5-1912.
216 Carving on a boab tree, upper East Baines River.
219 Taped interview with Stan Jones, Katherine, August 2000. Stan, who was manager of Gordon Downs from 1952 to 1964, said that Barry had once been head stockman at Birrindudu.
221 According to Vic Hall (Outback Policeman, Rigby, Adelaide, 1970, pp. 181-85), in 1928 Barry stole a mob of cattle from Wave Hill and tried to take them across the Tanami Desert, but the track was too dry and he turned them loose. When the police found him at Hooker Creek they could not prove a connection between him and the cattle in the area so he escaped arrest.
Barry could also be cruel to the point of murder. When his Aboriginal wife ran away from Birrindudu to Turner station, he caught her there and ‘flogged her back with the whip...on the horse back, and she died when she got back.’

Jack Frayne never got into serious trouble with the law either, although the police were certainly suspicious of him, too, on one occasion declaring ‘He has not a halo’. In 1908, after agreeing to sell eighty bullocks to Connor, Doherty and Durack (CD&D), Frayne instead sold them to Ord River, an action which M.P. Durack described as ‘most dishonourable’. He also sold cattle to the great friend of the battler, Tom Pearce.

In 1911 Frayne agreed to sell Coomanderoo to Wave Hill but he must have retained ownership of his livestock and had time to muster them because in June 1911 he was reported to be ‘on his way in with all his stock, some 700 or 800 cattle’ to a block on the Katherine River, and in May the following year he started to bring another 500 head down the East Baines River. This time he didn’t get far – he died from fever on the headwaters of the East Baines in May 1912. Some time later his cattle were put up for auction by the administrator of his estate. Good old ‘Honest Tom’ Pearce was the

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222 Taped interview with Stan Jones, Katherine, August 2000. Jones was manager of Gordon Downs from 1952 to 1964, and met Barry when Barry was an old man. He was told this story by Jacky Burns, an old-timer who had worked at Birrindudu and Gordon Downs for many years, and who had known Barry in earlier decades.


224 Diary of M.P. Durack, 1-1-1908 to 31-12-1908, entry for 3-7-1908. Battye Library microfilm, MN 71/3 4587A-28.


226 Inscription on a boab at the Drovers’ Rest, East Baines River.


228 Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 30-6-1911.


Like Frayne, Jimmy Wickham and his partners were never charged with any offence, nor were any specific allegations made against them. His partnership with John Duggan was dissolved in August 1909, and it may be that Duggan moved to a block immediately south of Katherine that he had taken in 1908. Wickham soon acquired a new partner, a tall and solid man named Thomas Hanlon whose ancestry was reputedly Chinese, the name Hanlon coming from 'Han Loon'. In March 1910 Hanlon tried to get the brand ‘OIQ’ transferred to his name, but the police were onto his game. His application was rejected on the grounds that it was ‘too like other brands’ – namely, the G10 of VRD.

Like Frayne, in 1908 Wickham went back on his word to sell cattle to Connor, Doherty and Durack, but this didn’t stop CD&D buying his cattle in subsequent years. Wickham and Hanlon retained permit 22 until July 1912 when they sold out to Wave Hill station. They had sold permit 22A to Wave Hill a month earlier, on June 10th 1912. I suspect that Wickham, Beasley and Frayne had agreed to sell out to Wave Hill in 1911 but were given time to muster and dispose of their cattle. In 1911 Wickham and three companions took cattle down the Canning stock route, the second or third droving team to attempt the 1500 kilometre track. According to an old Canning drover, Ben Taylor, the drovers were Wickham, Beasley, Patterson and possibly Hanlon. On their way down the

232 Timber Creek police journal, 3-8-1909.
233 Information from files at the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.
235 (Mounted Constable?) John Needham to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, Timber Creek police letter book, 14-3-1910. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.
238 Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, Office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199, Box 1, PP 22/1910.
239 Ibid: Box 3, PP 111/1915.
Canning, Wickham and his companions found the murdered bodies of the preceding drovers, Shoesmith and Thompson.\(^{240}\)

After selling their stock Wickham and Hanlon shifted to pastoral permits on the Frew River in Central Australia.\(^{241}\) Wickham went on to other colourful exploits. Among other things, he lifted a mob of 600 cattle from Lake Nash, was caught and spent five years in gaol;\(^{242}\) he was reported murdered by bush blacks in the Tanami, but ‘rose from the dead’;\(^{243}\) he acquired Willowra station on the Lander River;\(^{244}\) and he spent years prospecting in the Tanami. Some believed he found, and lost, a rich gold reef there.\(^{245}\)

Hanlon helped Wickham steal the Lake Nash cattle, but avoided conviction. One story has it that while Wickham was in gaol Hanlon sold the Frew River blocks, but he neglected to give Wickham’s share of the money to Wickham’s wife, Olive, and as a result spent years in fear of running into Wickham.\(^{246}\) In the late 1920s he owned Huckitta station,\(^{247}\) and in 1929 was involved in the discovery of a supposedly ancient skull there.\(^{248}\)

So why did Beasley, Wickham and Frayne all sell out at much the same time? Why didn’t one or more of them continue on as landowners in the district for many years? There is no


\(^{242}\) *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-12-1916, 19-4-1917; Another version has it that Wickham and Hanlon only lifted about 200, but were blamed for the theft of another 400 stolen by someone else (R. Kimber, *Man from Arltunga: Walter Smith Australian Bushman*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1986, pp. 111-12, endnote 12).


\(^{246}\) Personal communication, Lester Caine, who worked with Hanlon for a time. Another version has it that Hanlon spent Wickham’s share of the profit from a jointly owned Wolfram mine on a huge spree, and that when Wickham found out he accepted it as a fait accompli (R. Kimber, *Man from Arltunga: Walter Smith Australian Bushman*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1986, p. 107).


evidence that the government was going to resume their permits, or that the police placed them under severe pressure, or that Aborigines were killing all their cattle. The answer appears to be a reversal of one of the reasons that encouraged them to take up land in the first place – the price of cattle. In 1909 the price of cattle began to drop. I am not certain of the reason for this fall, but it may have been because the Queensland herds, depleted by the tick fever and drought in the period 1895-1902, had finally increased to the point where the eastern markets were well supplied.

The cattle duffers appeared in the Victoria River district, and elsewhere in the Northern Territory, because particular conditions had developed – relative peace in the rough country, vast ‘empty’ areas, plentiful cleanskin cattle and high cattle prices. They appeared in the district like crows to a carcase, and when cattle prices eventually dropped they ‘flew’ off to other vocations. Only one of the Victoria River cattle duffers, Jimmy Wickham, had a wife and children on his cattle duffing block, and he, along with most of the others, eventually left the district. Only Jack Beasley remained in the region after selling out, and he never married. Consequently, there were no family dynasties established in the Victoria River country to remember these men and the events they experienced. The only descendant of any of the Victoria River cattle duffers I have met was a daughter of Jimmy Wickham, Patsy Garling, who lived Darwin until her death in 2001. She had almost no knowledge of her father’s station or his time in the region.

The Victoria River cattle duffers discussed here were typical outback bushmen of the time. In common with the majority of outback working people, they worked at various outback activities and regarded the law as a nuisance, something to be broken if circumstances required and opportunity permitted. They gave much greater loyalty to each other than they gave to law officers, and were of the view that if the legitimate owners did not brand their cattle they deserved to lose them. The Timber Creek police highlighted this attitude when they wrote that ‘To a man the workers of this district are in sympathy with [the cattle

and that few of them [the duffers] believed that ‘Thou shalt not steal’ applied to clean skin cattle. A couple of the Victoria River duffers ‘crossed the line’ – they cross-branded cattle – but even they were protected from the police by their bush comrades.

Such attitudes were part of a long and honourable tradition. In 1873 Anthony Trollope wrote of stock theft that ‘It is like smuggling, or illicit distillation, or sedition, or the seduction of women. There is little or no shame attached to it among those with whom the cattle stealers live...A man may be a cattle-stealer, and yet in his way a decent fellow.’ Doug Moore echoed these sentiments when he commented about Jack Beasley and other duffers in the Ord River country in the early 1900s: ‘What rogues these chaps were – all had something against them that they had done in the past but otherwise very nice chaps to meet and converse with.’

There were to be other small landholders in the Victoria River country in the years to come, and other instances of cattle theft, but when the last of the battlers left the country north of the Stirling, the Golden Age of cattle duffing in the Victoria River district came to an end.

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Chapter 10

THE ELYSIAN FIELDS OF THE TANAMI

When the Golden Age of cattle duffing ended in 1912, most of the blocks held under grazing licence were absorbed by neighbouring large holdings, but the exodus of cattle duffers did not spell the end of battlers' efforts to secure a place in the pastoral world of the region. Others came in their wake, but almost the only land available was south of the big stations in the Tanami Desert, and it was to the desert that many turned their attention.

The Tanami country first became known to many Europeans when the discovery of payable gold in 1909 brought a flood of prospectors into the region.¹ There are pockets of good grazing land in the Tanami, and in spite of the fact that water sources were few and rainfall highly unpredictable, it wasn't long before men began to apply for grazing licences there. Over the years there has been a succession of men whose 'vision splendid' was of a station in the Tanami. Some are now little more than names that appear fleetingly in the historical record. Typical of these was F. Castles who, in 1926, applied for a grazing licence over 100 square miles immediately south of the Tanami Commonage (map 13).² He was granted a licence but afterwards is lost to history.

Two other names that appear fleetingly are George Forrestal and Fred Leeson. On January 18th 1919 these men obtained a grazing licence for 512 square miles of country east and south of the Buchanan Hills (on Winnecke Creek), to be called Ely Station (map 14). Forrestal obtained a brand, FTF, and an earmark for cattle,³ but their partnership quickly soured. Towards the end of the year Leeson advised the Lands Department that if Forrestal should try to have his (Leeson’s) name dropped from the grazing licence, he (Leeson) did

³ G. Forrestal to Land Department, 12-12-1919. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL302.
not want his name dropped. His concern was misplaced. In May 1920 Forrestal wrote to ask that his own name be dropped from the grazing licence, and after this the two men, and Ely station, disappear from view.

Map 13: F. Castles’ permit south of the Tanami Common.

Of some a little more is known. In December 1927 a man named T. Dwyer successfully applied for a grazing licence for 200 square miles at the eastern end of Winnecke Creek, near the Buchanan Hills (see map 14). As it turned out, Dwyer was a bush con man. He paid the rent on GL601 up to June 1930 but then dropped out of contact with the Lands Department. In March 1931 the Department wrote to the Wave Hill police, asking them if they could collect the rent, and Mounted Constable Sheridan replied:

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5 G. Forrestal to Lands Department, 10-5-1920. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL 302.
7 Chief Clerk of Lands Department to Wave Hill police, 10-3-1931. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, GL 601.
Mr Dwyer left this district about 18 months ago. The last I heard of him he was going across country from Brunette Downs Station to Alice Springs with a string of camels. I am of the opinion that Mr. T. Dwyer only took this Block of country up with a view of trying to get some fool to stock it for him. He very seldom works and has very little cash, in fact he is a nomad who begs most of his provisions. I heard an Irishman say some days ago that he didn’t consider it natural for one Irishman to shoot another, but if Dwyer ever returned to this district he was going to prove an exception to the rule. In view of this fact I do not think Dwyer will return to this district to take up such a large area of country. 

One man had more legitimate aims. Owen Cummins was born on the Dargo High Plains of Victoria in September 1874, early enough for him to have later been the model for Banjo Patterson’s famous character, ‘The Man from Snowy River’, as he sometimes claimed when ‘in his cups’ (plates 123, 124). Albert Lalga, a now deceased Mudbura man from Montejinni station, pronounced Owen Cummins’ name (to my ear) as ‘Old Home Coming’, a name evocative of warmth, comfort and nostalgia, but Albert knew Cummins personally and said that he was one of the men who shot Aborigines in the early days. There is evidence that Cummins was on the Pine Creek goldfield by 1894, working as blacksmith, wheelwright and farrier. From May 1914 to July 1917 he worked on Victoria River Downs, probably a bit late for him to have been involved in shooting Aborigines there. However, it is likely that from VRD he went to Wave Hill which bordered Tanami desert, the home of ‘bush’ Aborigines in the 1920s, ‘30s and ‘40s. He also spent a lot of time in the Tanami itself, and so could have come into conflict with desert people.

Owen Cummins

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8 Mounted Constable F. Sheridan to Director of Lands, Darwin, 4-5-1931. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL 601.
9 E. Evans, Owen Cummins 1874-1953. The Territory’s Man From Snowy River, privately published, Darwin, nd.
10 Ibid.
11 Personal Communication, Albert Lalga Crowson.
12 E. Evans, Owen Cummins 1874-1953, nd.
14 R.M. Berndt and C.H. Berndt, End of An Era: Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, pp. 15-17, 30-32; The Wave Hill police journal of 31-7-22 mentions Cummins repairing the well at Hooker Creek (Northern Territory Archives, F 292).
15 Owen Cummins’ name scratched on a water tank at Murranji Bore.

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Cummins worked for many years on Wave Hill station as a stockman and in charge of the horse stud, but he wanted to run horses for sale to the big stations. In 1923 he applied for a grazing licence for 100 square miles near Floris Rockhole, on the western headwaters of Winneke Creek, south of Wave Hill station. His application was approved (GL 356) but in 1924 lack of water forced him to relinquish this licence and instead take up a block further west, at Frog Valley (GL 375). On this new block the water went dry in two years out of the next three, so Cummins decided he needed to put down a well. He asked the Lands Department for permission to do so, but pointed out that it would not pay him to sink a well unless he had a guarantee that his annual grazing licence would be renewed each year. He also pointed out that, if he was to sink a well, it would be better for him to do it on his original block as it was closer to Wave Hill:

I must do a little improvement bild yards and a bit of a paddock and as I could not make a liveing just of the sale of horses alone I must get work elsewhere and as the block 356 would suit me best as it is nearer to Wave Hill where I can get something to do for a few months in the year I would again take that block up starting a fresh this year but I would not pay the back rent as I have had all my horses on the Frog Valley block or on Wave Hill Country and one block is quite as mutch as I can afford.

The Lands Department issued Cummins with a new grazing licence (GL 581) for his original block (formerly GL 356) and gave him permission to sink a well there, and Cummins relinquished block 375. At this point he began to have problems, although it is not fully clear exactly what went wrong. Either the Lands Department forgot to cancel his first grazing licence (GL356), or at some stage Cummins had not sent enough money to cover the fees and rent on this block. The situation is further complicated by the

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16 Personal communication, the late Charlie Schultz, former owner of Humbert River station.
17 E. Evans, Owen Cummins 1874-1953, nd.
19 Owen Cummins to Director of Lands, Darwin, 11-7-1924. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 GL 375; see map in NTRS F28, Box 16, GL 601.
20 Owen Cummins to Secretary, Lands Department, Darwin, 24-2-1927. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 GL 581. Cummins' spelling left something to be desired.
possibility that in his correspondence to the Lands Department, Cummins referred to the land covered by his third grazing licence (GL581) by its original appellation (GL 356). In any case, Cummins thought he was being asked to pay rent money on a block which he had forfeited in 1924, and he protested that ‘It seems strange to me that I am unable to cancel GL 356 and when I forward in rent for GL375 the money is confiscated to pay rent on a Grazing Licence which I forfeited by notifying your Dept I desired to cancel over 3 years ago.” The Lands Department persisted in its request for payment of an extra £2 and at the end of 1929 an exasperated Cummins wrote:

I must try to explain I did not intend to hold that country after 1928 nor do I intend holding it now. I made a mistake when I paid the dog tax on it as the dog man was dogging me up so long that I thought I must have owed the money for 28 but I see by the receipt it is for 29 so I will have to get a refund so to save me any further trouble you can give him back the receipt which I am enclosing and tell him to collect the money and shout.23

The whole experience appears to have soured Cummins and there is no record that he held any grazing licence after this time, though Ted Evans claims that Owen continued to try to obtain Tanami land into the 1940s.24

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22 Owen Cummins to Secretary, North Australia Commission, Darwin, 12-8-1927. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 35, GL 581.
23 Owen Cummins to Secretary, North Australia Commission, Darwin, nd (received 10-12-1929). Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 35, GL 581.
24 E. Evans, Owen Cummins 1874-1953, nd.
men were and two sons, David Elijah. Drovers station were apparently possessed of the grand dream of a paradise in desert. Indeed, their dream was such that at times the Tanami seemed to take the form of the fabled Elysian Fields. Without doubt, Captain Cadell would have been impressed (see Chapter 2). For years the Bickleys tried to fulfil their dream, but they suffered one setback after another. Their story, probably best termed ‘The Bickley Saga’, can be traced through correspondence between them and the Lands Department, and through police journal accounts. In quotations from these sources reproduced below, I have retained all original spelling, punctuation and idiosyncrasies of expression. The saga

\[25\] In 1916 on an application form for a grazing licence, all three gave their occupations as drovers (Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 6, GL 177).

\[26\] In a letter to the Lands Department in November 1918 James Bickley said he was then working as a stockman on Auvergne (Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177. His son David was probably there with him because his name and the date 1917 are carved on the Retribution Camp boab on Auvergne (D. Lewis, *In Western Wilds: A Survey of Historic Sites in the Western Victoria River District*, site 21, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 64-67, vol. 2, p. 40. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust [NT]).
begins on May 14th 1916 when James Bickley wrote to the ‘Minister for Lands’ in Darwin, saying:

Please find inclosed Cheque for the sum of Five Pound for Fees & Rent on undermentiond Lot of Land I hereby apply to you for a Block of Land Situated on the Tanami Road I want to take up this Block as a Grasing Block & also make my Home on it & Stock it’. 27

The block in question (GL177) was of 32 square miles, extending north and east from Pingidijarra Rockhole on the old Halls Creek to Tanami Road. The Lands Department sent James an application form on which he wrote that the block would initially be stocked with twenty-five head of ‘brud’ Mares, and twenty-five head of cattle. 28

Along with the application form the Department sent a receipt for the rent money, and this contained a minor mistake, the first of a long series of more serious mistakes and problems that beset the Bickleys. The receipt had only James Bickley’s name on it, so when he returned the form on October 10th he advised the Lands Department that ‘I want to let you know there is tree of us James Bickley & David Bickley & Elijah Bickley we apply jointly now’. 30 In a separate letter also dated October 10th, the Bickleys sought permission to erect huts and yards, and to sink wells on the block, 31 but before an answer came their first real problem arose. Apparently their agent had marked out the block on a map provided by the

28 James, David and Elijah Bickley to Lands Department, 14-5-1916. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 6, GL 177.
29 Carving on the Retribution Camp Boab, Auvergne station (see plate 167 and fold-out, page 380).
30 James, David and Elijah Bickley to ‘Minister of Lands’, Darwin, 10-10-1916. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.
31 Ibid.
Lands Department, but he put it in the wrong place, and made it 32 miles by 32 miles, which is 1024 square miles rather than the modest 32 square miles the Bickleys wanted.\textsuperscript{32}

Map 15: The Bickley's GL 177 at Pingidijarra Rockhole (top left), and F. Castles permit south of Tanami.

The mistake was corrected, but permission to construct huts, yards and wells did not come, so in August 1917 the Bickleys renewed their request.\textsuperscript{33} The Lands Department wrote back asking for expected costs of the proposed improvements and in December the Bickleys provided an estimate of £460, and added:

\textsuperscript{32} James, David and Elijah Bickley to Lands Department, Darwin, 31-10-1916. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.

\textsuperscript{33} James, David and Elijah Bickley to 'Minister of Lands', Darwin, 22-8-1917. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.
we want to make our Home on the Land & live their & we must fence in some Paddocks so we will be able to classify our Stock well now to make a Home on the Land & to do that we must Improve as Water Yards & Houses & Fencing we Remain yours Truly J D & E Bickley.34

Almost a year later the Bickleys realised their grazing licence stated that their block began 24 miles from the 'Tanami Commonage', when the distance was really about 42 miles. They wrote to the Lands Department asking for the error to be fixed, and presumably it was.35

After this all remained well until November 12th 1920. On that day the Bickleys wrote an astounding letter to the Lands Department,

to let you know we intend to pay no more rent on Block No 177 as when we took up No 177 Block we been advised by our agent that the Land was good & now we came to inspect this Block & to put on it – Cattle & Horses & we find it consist of Hills & Rocks & that the poison plant called Gastralobium36 which is a most Dedly fodder for Stock & the Block is of no use to us we had to Send all Cattle back as I want you to understand we could not get away to inspect the Block personaly so we was advised by our agent to apply for this Block No 177 & been marked out by our agent there is plenty of Land here better then this Block No 177 which we have been paying rent on Since 1916 & never used it there is a grate deal of Gastralobium growing in this part which is a most deadly poison for Stock we have applied for a block West of Block No 177 which [has] not so much of Gatralobeum on & if recominded to us we intend to grub & to try & Destroy it by Grubbing this plant is the draw back you cannot Stock it & Block No 177 is a hopeless reguards getting rid of Gasterlobeum as it is too plentifull Growing so we want to advise you that that it is no good to us & we intended paying no more rent on it we intend looking for better Land37

Undoubtedly this setback was a great disappointment to them, but two weeks earlier the Bickleys had applied for a block of 50 square miles adjoining the west side of block 177,38

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34 James, David and Elijah Bickley to ‘Minister of Lands’, Darwin, 18-12-1917. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.
35 Ibid.
36 *Gastrolobium grandiflora*.
37 James, David and Elijah Bickley to ‘Minister of Lands’, Darwin, 12-11-1920. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.
38 Ibid.
and this was approved towards the end of January 1921.\textsuperscript{39} Perhaps the Bickleys finally believed all was well, but in March the Lands Department advised that there had been a mistake and their new licence (GL313) would have to be cancelled.\textsuperscript{40}

Map 16: The Bickley's GL 177, north west of Tanami, and the adjustment they asked for to exclude the poisonous \textit{gastrolobium}.

\textsuperscript{39} Lands and Survey Department to James, David and Elijah Bickley, 27-1-1921. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 11, GL 313.

\textsuperscript{40} Lands and Survey Department to James, David and Elijah Bickley, 11-3-1921. Northern Territory Archives, F28 Box 11, GL 313.
What the Bickleys thought of this has not been recorded. They removed their stock to Western Australia and in October they applied for, and were granted, several blocks on the Bullo River, on the west side of the Victoria River mouth.\(^{41}\) There is no evidence that they ever stocked these blocks or kept them for long. In any case, they did not abandon their desert dream and, as it turned out, this was another mistake.

They may have applied for another block on the Western Australian side of the border, for it was while camped at Granny’s Soak, at the eastern end of the Gardiner Range, that the Bickleys became central players in a major drama. At the end of August 1923, Mounted Constable Kemp of the Northern Territory police arrived at Gordon Downs (plate 125) and received a report from the manager, J. Egan, that ‘James Bickley of Granny’s Soak had just recovered from having his throat cut by a stock-boy named “Willie”, alias “Pitchel”, who was then Escaping from police in the bush’.\(^{42}\) Egan told Kemp that the Western Australian police had already spent two weeks looking for Willie, but had temporarily returned to Halls Creek to attend the annual visit of the Inspector of Police. Unless otherwise stated the following summary is based on the version of events written by the Wave Hill police on October 19\(^{th}\) 1923.\(^{43}\)

As soon as he heard the story, Mounted Constable Kemp began his own investigation and within a week had received information that “Willie” had been joined by “‘Winter” and 2 gins’, and was heading west towards rough country on Nicholson station, and that he was going to try and get hold of a rifle. In fact, Willie was headed in the opposite direction. On September 10\(^{th}\) at Flora Valley station, Kemp joined forces with Constable Flinders of the Western Australian police. First, they went to Granny’s Soak to enlist Elijah Bickley’s aid in the coming manhunt. He agreed to go, and was to be a witness and participant in all that

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41 James, David and Elijah Bickley to ‘Minister of Lands’, 21-10-1921. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 11, GL 332; Telegram from Director of Lands to Northern Territory Administrator, 24-1-1922. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 11, GL 332.

42 Mounted Constable E. Heathcock to Acting Inspector Burt, 31-8-1923, reporting on patrol by Mounted Constable Kemp to Gordon Downs and the hunt for Willie. Wave Hill police journal, Northern Territory Archives, F292.

43 Ibid.
followed.\textsuperscript{44} On September 17\textsuperscript{th} the two Mounted Constables, Elijah Bickley, W. Barry (manager of Sturt Creek station\textsuperscript{45}), a number of Western Australian and Northern Territory trackers, and several Gordon Downs 'boys' who knew Willie's track, entered the desert country to find Willie.

The party visited a number of waterholes whose names belie the harshness of the country – Sweetwater Hole, Cowculdalgi, Marrlla Hole, Cooljun. At Marrlla they found a camp of 'bush blacks' who said that Willie had 'gone by Jumbra towards Farqharson's [Inverway station] about [a] month previous.' After searching around Marrlla for another three days the party headed east. At Cooljun they found a 'beast bogged in hole & water not fit to drink – country burnt completely out,' and at Bunda Top Hole they found two 'stock-boys' on walkabout, and learned from them that Willie had gone into rough country east of Inverway. The police took the two stockboys with them so that they could not warn Willie of their approach.

\textsuperscript{44} Inquest Book, Darwin, 1904-35. Northern Territory Archives, F 286.
\textsuperscript{45} 'W. Barry' appears to be a mistake as other records refer to Jack Barry as the manager at this time (M. Terry, \textit{Hidden Wealth and Hiding People}, Putnam, London, 1931, p. 116).
On arrival at Inverway on the 26th, they learnt Willie ‘was “running” about Stony Bar & Spring Ck’ on the headwaters of the Victoria River. Continuing eastward, they found twenty-seven Aborigines at Buchanan Spring. The police formed a base camp at the spring and detained the Aborigines found there, handcuffing several and assigning two Western Australian trackers to guard them. Later Mounted Constable Kemp justified detaining and providing food to these Aborigines, stating that:

The natives in question, were kept under surveillance and fed during the period prior capture of Willie, to prevent them warning him of an approach, which they most certainly would have done. They all know that Willie had committed a serious offence, and he was kept posted of police movements; if these natives had not been confined to our camp, we may have still been searching for Willie in the rough country he knew so well.46

The party then continued on foot, searching for several days around Hooker Creek, Maggie Creek and the old Catfish outstation (plate 126), before discovering recent tracks of Aborigines heading towards Spring Creek. They followed these tracks through rough country for another five days, and finally found Willie’s tracks near Neave Gorge on October 6th. Following these tracks, the police discovered a large camp of Aborigines in the gorge. The Neave Gorge area is known to Victoria River Aborigines as Walakula; it is very important site on the track of the Dingo Dreaming, and it is probable that the Aborigines were gathered there for ceremonial reasons.

The next day was the day of reckoning. Mounted Constable Kemp reported that, ‘At daylight – party raided large camp – called on Willie to surrender – he replied by throwing spears and was shot by police whilst escaping to the immediate rough country in Neave Gorge’ (plate 127). Mission accomplished, the police party returned to the base camp at Buchanan Springs. Several Aborigines captured at the Neave Gorge camp were taken to the base camp where they were “‘lectured” – spears broken and released.” Exactly why the word ‘lectured’ was placed in double inverted commas in the police report is interesting. One can’t help but wonder whether it meant ‘beaten’, rather than ‘spoken to sternly’. The Aborigines who had been held at Buchanan Springs were released and some who ‘had been of service’ were given tobacco. Back at Inverway an inquest into the shooting of Willie was held by Harry Farquharson, J.P. Apparently on the basis of verbal evidence alone he handed down a verdict of ‘justifiable homicide’, and commended Mounted Constables Kemp and Flinders for their ‘capable & persistent manner in finalizing this case.”

After the manhunt and eventual shooting of Willie the police investigated the circumstances of the attack on Bickley. Mounted Constable Heathcock reported that,

47 I have been told this by a number of Aborigines at Daguragu Community. Among the Walbiri, who share this Dreaming track with the Gurindji people at Daguragu, the site is called Walgara (M. Meggitt, ‘Gadjari among the Walbiri Aborigines of Central Australia’. Oceania, vol. 36, no. 3, 1966, pp. 193 and map on page 178).
M.C. Kemp & I have made minute enquiries concerning this assault on Bickley & find...that there is no suggestion of drink mentioned. Furthermore, I have known James Bickley for more than six years & have never known him to drink & have always known him as a rather decent sort of man.50

So what was the cause of the attack on Bickley? Shortly after Willie was shot and the case considered closed, two local white men raised doubts about the official version of events. In one instance allegations were made against the police and in the other against J. Egan, the manager of Gordon Downs (plate 128).

In March 1924 Tom Laurie (plate 129), a prospector who had rendered assistance to James Bickley on the morning after he was attacked, wrote a letter to the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Perth. In it he claimed that there was a native rumour going around that Egan had told Willie to kill Bickley. He pointed out that Egan had a set against both himself and Bickley for previously ‘interfering in native matters’, and that Egan knew he and Bickley were in Bickley’s camp because a few days before they had passed through Gordon Downs on their way to the camp. According to Laurie, Willie was ‘Egan’s boy’, was ‘more intelligent than most natives’, and was ‘well behaved and thought a deal of by previous managers of Gordon Downs.’ After the attack, Bickley had told Laurie that he did not know Willie and ‘certainly never took his lubra’, a common cause of similar trouble. Laurie said he knew Willie well, and unless there was a good reason, he could not see that Willie would take a station horse and ride forty miles from Gordon Downs to Bickley’s camp, hang about until 10 pm, and then creep in and try to kill Bickley. No motive had been put forward by the police or anyone else, and Laurie’s conclusion was that Willie had ‘been prompted to act by the superior domination of the white’ (that is, by Egan).51

51 T. Laurie to the chief Protector of Aborigines, 22-3-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, item 4871.
Inspector Douglas of the Derby police advised the Chief Protector that Laurie’s allegations were probably the result of an ‘old trouble’ between Laurie and Egan, and that he had known Egan for some years and could not believe he would have told Willie to kill Bickley. Because the main players in the affair lived in the Territory and the crime itself had been committed there, Douglas further advised that any additional investigations would have to be carried out by the Northern Territory police. There is no evidence that this ever occurred.

The other letter was written in February 1924 by a man named W. Sclanders, and sent to Tom Woodlands, the Protector in charge of the Moolaboola Aboriginal station. Sclanders reported Aboriginal rumours that the police hunting Willie had waited at Buchanan Springs, while Elijah Bickley and six trackers followed Willie’s tracks. Elijah’s party was supposed to have caught Willie and after a short conversation with him, shot him, cut off his head and carried it back to Buchanan Springs. The trackers were also said to have shot two other Aborigines who were running away, and burnt their bodies. Woodlands forwarded Sclanders’ letter to the Chief Protector in Perth and added that he had heard the rumours himself.

Inspector Douglas was sent to investigate Sclanders’ allegations. In his report he said he questioned four of the trackers involved who told him only Willie had been shot, and that he made general inquiries throughout the district but found nothing to support Sclanders’ claim. He also said he questioned Mulga Jim, who was Sclanders’ main informant and one

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52 The ‘old trouble’ was a court action brought against Egan after a complaint by Laurie that Egan had ‘half beaten to death with a hobble chain’ a young Aboriginal woman at Gordon Downs. Egan was convicted and fined £5. Laurie’s complaint was supposed to have been kept confidential but Egan found out who it was and afterwards victimised Laurie whenever he could (T. Laurie to the chief Protector of Aborigines, 22-3-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871; Inspector W. Douglas to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth, 31-7-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871).

53 Inspector W. Douglas to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth, 31-7-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.


of the party that shot Willie, and that Mulga Jim maintained only Willie was shot. Douglas noted that both Sclanders and Woodlands had grievances against Constable Flinders, and had 'joined forces to endeavour to get rid of Flinders from Halls Creek.' He concluded that there was no evidence that the original police report was flawed and that the rumours of other Aborigines being shot were baseless. Sclanders was in no position to argue the point because later in 1924 he died after a fall down a well.

So what was the truth of the matter? We will probably never know with any certainty, but in 1991 I interviewed an eye-witness to the shooting of Willie. Inverway Mick (now deceased) was a small child in the Neave Gorge camp when Willie was shot, and later heard details of the manhunt from various Aborigines involved. When I interviewed him he was probably the last person alive who had been there on the fateful day. According to Mick there were actually two brothers involved in the attack on Bickley, and he was attacked by one of them because he (Bickley) had taken his wife. In Mick's words:

This nother one bin sneakin' up him find the rifle, nah, knife – butcher's knife. That kadia [European] and that girl bin sleep. Him bin want to go and cuttim throat. But when, soon as bin put the knife there, well he [the white man] bin, you know, put his head down a bit, you know, he [the attacker] bin cuttim this way longa whisker side, you know.

Mick went on to describe events that closely parallel the police account until the final moments of the manhunt. He mentioned two men met by police between Gordon Downs and Inverway, which would be the two stockmen met and detained by the police at Bunda Top Hole. He said that the police went on past Inverway homestead and found a 'big mob [of Aborigines] longa Buchanan yard, and they bin put a handcuff... They bin tied up, oh a couple of bloke bin tied up longa tree, you know. Then they went, they go through, they bin go through from Buchanan for the old Mucka Yard.'

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56 Inspector W. Douglas to the Commissioner of Police, Perth, 31-7-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.
57 C. Clement, *Historical Notes Relevant to the Impact Stories of the East Kimberley*, East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project, a joint project of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, Anthropology Department, University of Western Australia, and Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, p. 2.
58 Inverway Mick, interviewed by Darrell Lewis at Daguragu Community, c1991.
When the police finally raided the Neave Gorge camp, according to Mick, the two wanted Aborigines were captured alive and chained by the neck, and then,

They [the white police] bin ask that number one police tracker now... ‘Alright. Whata you gotta do? It is your land, not ours. This your boundary and Northern Territory side and not West Australia. [the tracker replied] ‘Ah, we’ll have to do finish now’. They bin shoot im two fellas. Shoot im right there... They bin burn him, then they bin walk away you know.

Mick also said that when the raid took place a lot of people in the camp managed to get away, but the Western Australian trackers were sent after them and shot a large number.

Mick’s account provides a motive for the attack different from the rumour circulating at the time and reported by Laurie. However, the overall correspondence of his account with the police report, and with the reports of both Laurie and Sclanders, suggests that his version of events is likely to be accurate – that at Neave Gorge two men rather than one were shot, that the men were shot after being overpowered and chained, rather than while throwing spears at the police, that their bodies were then burned, and finally, that a number of other Aborigines were afterwards shot by the Western Australian trackers in the ranges around Neave Gorge.

In spite of the murderous attack on James, the Bickleys remained committed to their dream. On November 28th 1923 they received grazing licence No. 350 for 200 square miles immediately south of and adjoining Wave Hill station.59 True to past experience, within a year they had more problems. On October 3rd 1924 they wrote to the ‘Minster for Lands’ in Darwin, advising that the rent on block 350 had been paid ‘by two people in a mistake unknowable to each other’, and asking for a refund of £11.60 However, this was the least of their problems. They explained that they had never used the land because they had been forced off in a dispute with Wave Hill:

59 Director of Lands, Northern Territory, to J. D. and E. Bickley, 28-11-1923. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL350.
60 J. D. and E. Bickley to Minster for Lands, Darwin, 3-10-1924. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL 350.
We came on to the Land in about August last & we left it on September 27 we depended on a Government Well (for water until the Wet or until we sunk a Well) on Hookers Creek about 100 yards from the main creek and we believed the Well to be on our country so we are in dispute with Wave Hill Boundary the Well is not marked on the map and we intended to water our stock at the Well until it rained but we received a Notice from the Wave Hill Station manager to remove all our stock or otherwise he will Impound and their is no other Water in the District & we were forced to Destroy our goats 150 head by cutting their throats as we could not take them with us sooner & let them perish for Water we have had a 40 miles stage through the Desert and it was impossible to bring them with us so we have decided to leave that part for good after going to a lot of Trouble in Bringing our stock over to it so we have had no use of the Block & we decided to leave the block for good and we ask you Kindly to send us our £11 Eleven pound back £11 was sent as over paid in a mistake now I put it I think plain to you we are over £250 out by having anything to do with the Block on Hookers Creek no 350.

The Bickleys went on to explain what their hopes had been and although their dream undoubtedly was unrealistic, even amusing, it is hard to not be moved by their plight:

we Intended to breed up those 150 goats for Moyah hair & to experiment in growing Wheat & Cotton we went their to make it a Home which we are forced to leave behind the Well is not marked on the map & the Well could be on our block and there is no other Water in the district So we want our £11 paid back to us as £11 was paid by two parties in a mistake we travelled 200 miles to come on the block through the Desert & now we got to go back with disgust - we are only poor people & only got a few horses & cattle & goats & we could not afford to go to Darwin in Law with Vestey Bros over our Boundary as our means are limited we are only Workers and £11 would be a help to us as we are in a bad way for want of cash as it cost us all we had to bring things on to Hookers Creek thinking we was going to do well and now we are going back to whence we came from and penless and down in Heart ...

And just in case the Lands Department had not got the message by this time, they added the following postscript:

PS we have had a bad time coming on to Hookers Creek and we got a very bad time going back I let you understand we are gone off the block & at present camping on Mr Owan Cummings block by his permission untill it rains as it is impossible to go any further as there is no more Water on our way and very Small Water here if Wave Hill impounded our Stock which he said he would do we have no money to
release them as we spent all we had to bring things on to block 350 Hookers Creek &
which we had to leave behind\

For the Bickleys this was a shattering blow and they were justifiably bitter at the turn of
events. Wave Hill was then owned by the Northern Agency, better known as Vesteys, a
wealthy and powerful British company with extensive properties in Australia, Britain and
many other countries around the world,\textsuperscript{62} so the Bickleys were quite right not to attempt
redress through the law. Although it almost certainly was not Lord Vestey who concerned
himself with this would-be neighbour, Joe Egan, the then manager of Wave Hill,\textsuperscript{63} was the
face of Vesteys on the ground. For the Bickleys the difference was academic.

It was a classic Australian story of the ‘little man’ versus the power of money and
authority, and of a mean and bullying attitude on the part of the representative of this
power and authority, the Wave Hill manager. Egan had been accused of holding a grudge
against James Bickley at the time of the knife attack a year earlier, when he was manager
of Gordon Downs and before he took over at Wave Hill.\textsuperscript{64} He certainly knew the Bickleys
personally and opposed their ‘interfering in native matters’,\textsuperscript{65} and backed by the power and
wealth of the great Vestey Company he probably took any opportunity to cause them
trouble, possibly even instigating violence against them.

In the early 1920s Wave Hill comprised 8,000 square miles of country, and carried 61,000
cattle and 1500 horses (plate 130).\textsuperscript{66} Besides Wave Hill, Vesteys owned another ten
stations in the Victoria River-East Kimberley region. If the disputed well had been on
Wave Hill land as claimed, it is difficult to see what difference it would have made to

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Egan was manager of Wave Hill for over two years, beginning there early in 1923 (Wave Hill police
journal, entry for 16-2-1923, Northern Territory Archives, F292). He had previously been manager of
Gordon Downs. Late in 1925 or early in 1926 he was transferred to Ord River station (Wave Hill police
letter book, 30-9-1925, Northern Territory Archives, F292). He remained at Ord River until 1948 or 1949
(personal communication, Cec Watts, a Vestey employee for forty years).
\textsuperscript{64} Letter from Cathie Clement to the Stockman’s Hall of Fame newspaper (September 2000 issue), citing
Western Australian police journal entries.
\textsuperscript{65} T. Laurie to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 22-3-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc
430, Item 4871.
\textsuperscript{66} Interview with Wave Hill manager F.R. Taylor in \textit{The Age} [Melbourne], 4-10-1921.
Wave Hill, or Lord Vestey, to let the Bickleys access the water until rain came, and to use the relatively tiny amount of grass their livestock would have required. The ultimate tragedy is that the Bickleys were almost certainly in the right. When the dispute became known to the Lands Department an official there noted that he had camped at the well the previous year, and he was of the opinion that the well was on the Bickley’s block.\(^{67}\)

Whether the rent money was refunded as the Bickleys requested is unknown. Quite possibly it was not because they were still in possession of the block in January 1925, and in spite of their terrible setback they had decided to battle on:

> We Write to you asking your permission to Sink Wells for Water on our block No 350 on Hookers Creek & to build yards & Huts as we want to make it our Home to bring our Wife & Family to live their if you will kindly give us permission & again we want to Experiment in growing Wheat & Maze & Coton & Fruit trees such as Peach & Apricots & Gordon Armons Oranges & Limons & etc\(^{68}\)

The Bickleys also wrote to Harold Nelson, MP, explaining what had happened to them on block 350 and reporting on the poor condition of the wells along the Tanami road (see plate 131). They suggested that there should be a reserve of one square mile around each of these wells, including the disputed well on Hooker Creek\(^ {69}\).

As far as is known, nothing more came of their would-be Garden of Eden at block 350, Tanami, but their dream had not died. Until March 1926 they appear to have retained GL177, their Gastrolobeum-infested block around Pingidijarra Rockhole which they first obtained in 1921,\(^ {70}\) and at some time they obtained another grazing licence for a block east of the Gardiner Range, because in August 1929 they wrote to the Lands Department with a now familiar complaint:

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\(^{67}\) Note ‘for the Land Board’s consideration’, attached to a copy of a letter from the Collector of Public Moneys to J. D. and E. Bickley, 9-12-1924. Northern Territory Archives, F28 GL 350.

\(^{68}\) J. D. and E. Bickley to Minster for Lands, Darwin, 10-1-1926. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL 350.

\(^{69}\) J. D. and E. Bickley to Harold Nelson MP, Melbourne, 10-1-1926. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL 350.

\(^{70}\) Map dated 17-2-1926 in Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 Box 6, GL 177.
I wish to draw your attention to a mistake made by our agent in over payment on Grazing licenis No 632 as this land is of no use to us as it is infested with Poison plant called Gastraloubim and is no of no use to us will you please refund £36 and we will look at Tanami Cuntary we have not used this Block Situated East of Mount Brophy Spring...we will go out Tanami away as soon as it Rains to be able to travell about & to select Cuntary ourselves as the Grazing License is considerable over paid & we would like if you would refund to us £36 as it is a mistake of our agent.71

It may be that the Department refused their request because twelve days later Elijah Bickley wrote again, repeating their complaint and asking for ‘200 miles of Cuntary West of Tanami along the border of WA & Territory Border,’ and saying that ‘it is hard for me to loose my £36 for nothing’.72 In January 1930 Elijah alone applied for a grazing licence for 250 square miles of land along the border west of Tanami,73 and this was approved the following March (map 18).74

Map 18: Grazing licence 646, south-west of Tanami, the last northern Territory bock taken up by the Bickleys.

71 E. and D. Bickley to Minster for Lands, Darwin, 2-8-1929. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 17, GL 632.
72 Elijah Bickley to Minster for Lands, Darwin, 15-8-1929. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 17, GL 632.
73 Elijah Bickley to Lands Office, Darwin, 28-1-1930. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 17, GL 646.
74 Annotation at bottom of Elijah Bickley’s letter to the Lands Office, 28-1-1930. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 17, GL 646.
Unfortunately this new venture was short-lived. In December 1930 James Bickley wrote the following letter to the Government Resident at Alice Springs:

I with regret to inform you that Elijah Bickley of Halls Creek is Dead & Buried on 15 inst in Halls Creek. I am his Father & I do not want the Land that he has taken up in the Territory & I am as I am a old man & I am grieved at the loss of my Dear Son Elijah.\footnote{James Bickley to Government Resident, Alice Springs, 16-12-1930. Northern Territory Archives, F28 Box 17, GL 646.}

Figure 4: The most poignant letter of the Bickley Saga: James Bickley reporting the death of his son Elijah.
This appears to be the last letter any of the Bickleys sent to the Lands Department in Darwin, so there can be little doubt that after fourteen years of struggle and setback, their dream of becoming independent landholders, growers of fruits, nuts, grains, cotton, and breeders of cattle, horses and mohair goats, had finally evaporated. At what must have been great expense, James and David paid for a marble headstone and iron railing to be sent from Perth and placed it upon Elijah’s grave in the Halls Creek cemetery (plate 132); neither of the surviving men appears to have a grave at Halls Creek and they may have eventually left the district.

There is, however, one more cruel twist to the Bickley story. While he was still hopeful of achieving his dream of independence, in 1927 James Bickley decided he wanted to marry the woman of his heart’s desire. But this woman was an Aboriginal, and under the laws of the day James had to have the permission of the Chief Protector of Aborigines to marry her. He engaged a law firm to approach the Chief Protector on his behalf and initially the Chief Protector thought the request had come from one of James Bickley’s sons, and was willing to consider it. However, when he discovered it was the elder Bickley, ‘a white man, aged approx 65’, he refused permission, and instead warned him ‘against committing any breach of the “Aborigines Act” in this connection.’ The Protector asked the police for a report on Bickley and Constable Archibald at Halls Creek replied that,

although not exactly living in an Aboriginal camp, [he] comes very close to it. There is little doubt about him consortiing with them. He seems to me to be endeavouring to gain some influence over them, and also the half-castes in the district. All or most of them go to him for advice.”

Archibald also reported that Bickley had ‘been instrumental in having one or two half-castes exempted from the Act some years ago’, and through solicitors in Perth was trying to get exemption for others in the Halls Creek district. He added the surprising information

76 Chief Protector of Aborigines, cited in report by Constable W. Archibald, Halls Creek, to Commissioner of Police, Broome, 30-12-1927. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.
77 Constable W. Archibald, Halls Creek, to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 31-12-1927. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.
that ‘To my knowledge he has no half-caste children of his own, although he claims David and Elijah Bickley as his own sons...The fact that he wants to marry a gin goes to show that he must consort with them.’ This combination of inhumane law and heartless bureaucracy denied James yet one more of his dreams and left him the choice of either giving up the woman or breaking the law. We can only guess at the choice he made.

The various documents that relate to the Bickleys reveal James Bickley as a humane and decent man with not a trace of prejudice in his heart; a man who tried to assist Aborigines to escape from the provisions of the onerous ‘Aborigines Act of 1905’; a man who treated two ‘half-caste’ men as his own sons (if, indeed, they were not his own sons) and tried for years to make a home for them. Unlike many white men of his time and place, he was a man who wanted to do the right thing and marry an Aboriginal woman he was associated with, rather than keep their relationship secret and in the process break the law. For his trouble he was denied permission to marry, treated with great suspicion, and placed under close and ongoing scrutiny by government authorities. In subsequent decades others were to follow the Bickleys’ footsteps into the Tanami, and try to establish themselves on a desert block. None had the Bickleys’ grand vision and few, if any, were to endure the problems they encountered, yet most failed just as surely as the Bickleys did. Unlike the Bickleys, they failed much more quickly, and few ever tried more than once.

It is easy to laugh at the Bickleys – for their idiosyncratic and phonetically Irish spelling, for their repetitious lamentations at their misfortunes, and their wildly unrealistic vision of a veritable Garden of Eden in what most white people would consider a classic ‘howling wilderness’. But at the same time I cannot help feeling a great measure of sympathy for them as true ‘Aussie Battlers’. For years they struggled to achieve their dream, however wild and unlikely it might now seem. They made mistakes and suffered the mistakes of others. They were bullied by a mean and powerful neighbour who caused them great loss.

79 Constable Archibald to Inspector Leen, Broome, 2-5-1928. State Records Office of Western Australia, Ace 430, Item 4871.
of livestock and money, and one of them was nearly murdered out in the wastelands. Yet they persisted for fourteen long years, and it was only the death of one of the sons that sounded the death-knell for their hopes.

The Bickley saga reveals the structure of power relations in the Northern Territory and Kimberley in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. These were weighted strongly against ordinary workingmen and in favour of the big cattle companies. It also gives us a glimpse of another possibility, another Australia that might have been, and reminds us of the good relations experienced by members of Gregory’s expedition on the lower Victoria in 1856.
EPILOGUE

The people, places and events described in this thesis are only part of a cavalcade of wonderful stories that constitute Victoria River district history. Stories of paradise lost and paradise denied, of murder, massacre and manhunt, of wild and modest dreams, grand enterprises, successes and failures.

Over millions of years the configuration of what is now the Victoria River country changed again and again. Several times it was under the sea. Each time, sediments built up and turned into rock, and when the sea withdrew these rocks were worn down into valleys and gorges. Lava flowed, too, and gradually the land took on the form that it has today.

Aborigines appeared on the land something like 40,000 or 50,000 years ago – it makes little difference exactly when. Over thousands of years they achieved a deep understanding of the region, its climate and ecology, and they learnt to control and modify the environment to their advantage through the use of fire. Aboriginal burning almost certainly created and maintained the great Mitchell grass savannas that were to attract the cattlemen and their herds like flying foxes to bloodwood blossoms.

Then the cattle came, and unquiet times descended like a blight on the tribes and the settlers alike. For twenty years people on both sides were killed and maimed, and lived in constant fear. Jasper Gorge rang with rifle fire and curses and taunts, and blood ran there and elsewhere throughout the district.

VRD and Captain Joe spent fortunes trying to establish sheep stations, but only succeeded in creating a legend of failure. The Wardaman people twice drove the whites out of their country, but like the other tribes of the region were forced to make peace in the end. Cattle duffers came and went (and came again later), and many a battler tried to make a go of it in all but impossible circumstances. Across the decades of white settlement, some people were driven half mad, others heart-broken.
When the first settlers and cattle arrived in the Victoria River country they were unarguably in a frontier situation. For the next twenty years this frontier was characterised by violent conflict with the Aborigines, extreme isolation, desperately slow communications, and rough living and working conditions. If medical assistance was available at all, it was primitive and supplies often took months to arrive, brought to the stations from the Depot Landing on the lower Victoria River or direct from Wyndham or Katherine on horse and bullock wagons, or by packhorses or pack-camels. In common with many outback areas, the Victoria River region attracted its share of adventurers and fortune hunters, and became a last refuge for the brutal, the criminal, the half-mad, the alcoholics and other social misfits who were not tolerated ‘inside’. In 1905 a member of a droving team passing through the district declared that ‘This country is more or less of lunatics; in fact all the loonies of the various states seem to gather in this part’.

During this time the station workforce consisted of white stockmen, Aboriginal stockmen and domestics brought in from distant areas, and perhaps a Chinese cook-come-gardener. Most if not all of these employees had to be paid, including at least some of the ‘foreign’ Aborigines, and wages in these remote and dangerous areas were high. Cattle were run on the open range system, and soon became wild and unmanageable. They were mustered on horseback and driven to the nearest, often far-flung yard for drafting, branding and other treatment. Markets for the cattle were extremely limited. It was difficult, dangerous and expensive to run a Victoria River district station.

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1 ‘Inside’ was the term outback bushmen used to describe the long-settled regions of Australia, usually near the coast. The corollary was, of course, ‘outside’, meaning outside the settled districts (Australian National Dictionary, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 326, 453).
2 Hely-Hutchinson, The North Queensland Herald, 21-5-1906; other references to misfits and criminals in the district can be found in ‘Odd Stock and Other Notes’ The Morning Bulletin, Rockhampton, 20-1-1906 and in ‘An Irresponsible Journalist’, Northern Territory Times, 30-4-1909.
3 A paysheet for employees on VRD dated March 1887 lists ‘Bob Herbert Blkboy’, ‘Charley Mungylah Boy’ and ‘Doctor’ as each having drawn money from a station account. They probably had actually drawn goods from the station store to the value shown (Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892, Noel Australian National University, Archives, Canberra. 2/876/22).
4 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).
The movement of bush Aborigines to the various homesteads caused a major change to the station workforce. The able-bodied among them became available as unpaid and almost unlimited labour, and they began to replace Aborigines ‘imported’ from distant areas, and probably also some of the white staff. At much the same time that the Aborigines were coming in the bronco method of handling stock was introduced, increasing efficiency of management and reducing the cost of running the stations. Also, cattle prices rose sufficiently to make it worthwhile to overland Territory stock to Queensland. In short, several changes coincided and Victoria River cattle station economies adjusted and improved accordingly. An economic pattern developed whereby Aborigines worked on the stations throughout the dry season and were paid only in clothing and rations. People too old, too young or too sick to work subsisted on rations provided by the station and whatever bush food they could find. When the wet season was imminent the workers returned their clothes to the station store, were issued with a supply of rations, and were free to go on walkabout.

Coming in to the homesteads may have proved less stressful for the Aborigines than staying out, but living conditions on the stations were hard. By coming in they placed themselves under the control of white people, whether it was a policeman, the station manager, a jackeroo, or a passing bagman. White people living in the district were relatively few in number and isolated, and so often felt that they had to be ‘hard’ on the blacks, to ‘show them who was boss’. Aborigines could and sometimes did resist unwanted situations, but most whites carried a firearm for shooting unwanted livestock, and also for self-defence and to enforce their demands, and if other whites were present they would always back each other up.

By about 1905 white pastoralists had established a social and economic situation that remained little changed for more than sixty years. For all this time, almost all the land in the district was cattle station land, controlled by white men, and all this time the Aborigines were effectively slaves – unpaid, with few rights, and at the bottom of the station social hierarchy. For whites in the region conditions were more congenial, but still hard. They, at least, were paid, and had the option of leaving any time they desired.

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5 Their slave-like status was recognised by cattle station whites. During my conversations with long-time cattleman, Charlie Schultz, he actually referred to particular Aborigines as having been ‘a good old slave’.
While conflict with bush Aborigines diminished markedly once the homestead camps were established, it was not the end of the frontier. There were still occasional outbreaks of violence between Aborigines and whites, but these were localised in nature, and most of the physical conditions of the first two decades of settlement continued for many more. There was change, but change came slowly until the 1960s. In the 1930s and 1940s Traeger two-way pedal-radios were introduced (plate 133). These enabled instant communications, and combined with the presence of aeroplanes based in Katherine and Darwin, they enabled the quick evacuation of serious medical cases. However, these radios, and the two-way battery-powered radios that superseded them, were inefficient and could not always make a connection, especially during the wet season. Two-way radios remained the only means of electronic communication until the mid-1980s when telephones were installed throughout the region, and since then satellite and computer technology has linked the region directly to television and the internet.

Motor vehicles began appearing in the district in the 1920s (plate 134) and their use was firmly established by the 1930s. Trucks replaced the original packhorse mail service and were in turn replaced by an aerial service in about 1939 (plates 59, 135, 136). The motor vehicles also replaced the donkey teams, camel trains and pack horses in many areas, but for decades the main roads were little more than rough tracks (plates 137, 138). For months on end the country was too wet for motor travel, or the roads too badly damaged by water to be passable to motor vehicles until repairs were made. On many stations there were few graded tracks until the 1950s and 1960s, and camels, donkeys, mules or horses were used to pull wagons or to carry packs into some areas until the 1960s, or later (plates 139 to 143). By the time I arrived in 1971 the main highway across the region had been sealed with a one-lane-wide strip of bitumen, but the Victoria River had still not been bridged and most rivers and creeks elsewhere had only culverts, low-level concrete crossings, or no improvements at all.

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7 Stan Jones, who took over management of Gordon Downs in 1952, told me that he used pack camels on the station until he left in 1964.
The open range system of cattle ‘management’ remained in use until intensive fencing programs were implemented in the 1960s and 1970s. On VRD hundreds of kilometres of fencing were erected in the 1960s\(^8\) but the paddocks were so large that in many instances it was still effectively open range mustering, with many beasts able to escape into rough or timbered areas. Wild bulls, brumbies and donkeys remained in plague proportions into the 1960s and beyond. The stations employed full-time shooters, but for years on VRD wild bull numbers remained around 15,000 to 20,000.\(^9\) Substantial inroads into the feral animal problem were only made with the advent of the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Program (BTEC) in the late 1970s and 1980s. It required more intensive fencing, shooting from helicopters, and lastly, the ‘Judas Collar’ technique introduced in the 1990s.\(^10\) The problem persists, however, and within the last five years there was estimated to be 42,000 wild horses\(^11\) and 103,000 donkeys in the district as a whole.\(^12\)

The Golden Age of cattle duffing had passed by 1912, but there continued to be other episodes over the years. For example, three men were jailed for stealing 200-odd cattle from the VRD-Delamere boundary area in 1928 and driving them across country to Dorisvale,\(^13\) and in 1953 the trial of a well-known cattleman for stealing cattle from VRD caused a sensation in the Territory and down south.\(^14\) He got off in what a policeman involved told me was ‘a travesty of justice’.\(^15\) Instances of alleged cattle stealing still occur, and though it is much more difficult to get away with now that there

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\(^8\) _The Territorian_, vol. 1, No 10, December 1967: 26.


\(^10\) The ‘Judas collar technique’ relies upon the social habits of most feral animals. First, a feral animal is captured alive and fitted it with a collar containing a radio transmitter. It is then released and will team up with other feral animals of its own species. After a time the radio signal is tracked down and all the animals destroyed except for the one wearing the collar. The surviving animal will again find ‘mates’, and the process is repeated until there are no feral animals left (see _Savanna Links_, issue 9, March-April 1999, p. 7).

\(^11\) Personal communication, Keith Sarfield, Invasive Species Management Officer, Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission.

\(^12\) Personal communication, Darryl Hill, resident of the Victoria River District almost continuously since 1969, as station hand, station manager, Soil Conservation Officer with the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, and at present Project Officer with the Victoria River District Conservation Association, based in Katherine.

\(^13\) ‘Supreme Court’, _Northern Territory Times_, 20-7-1928.

\(^14\) As well as being reported in the _Northern Territory News_ (27-8-1953, 1-10-1953, 8-10-1953, 10-10-1953), the case received several pages of text and colour photographs in A.M. magazine (November 3rd, 1953, pp. 56-58).

\(^15\) Personal communication, John Gordon.
are aeroplanes and helicopters, and modern communications, it is still difficult to obtain a conviction.

It is now 121 years since the first settlers and cattle came to the Victoria. Their coming has not been kind to the land or to the Aborigines. A century of uncontrolled grazing by hard-hoofed animals has caused large-scale erosion and considerable damage to the ecosystems of the region. Some species of animals and plants are regionally extinct and others are becoming rare. Although recently some attempts have been made to alleviate the worst damage by fencing off riverbanks and shooting out the remaining feral donkeys, the problem is ongoing and may actually be increasing as land use in some areas is intensifying. Introduced weeds have swept across the land. Prickly Parkinsonia and Rubber Bush now inhabit the hills and plains, while Castor Oil bush and Noogoora Burr choke the riverbanks. Devils Claw, Mesquite and other weeds have appeared in recent years and are threatening to become major problems.¹⁶

The Aborigines also suffered, first from shootings and poisonings, later from inadequate nutrition, housing and medical attention, and sometimes from brutal treatment at the hands of whites. They were unpaid and effectively under the control of station whites until the mid-1960s. Before this time they were denied access to the cash economy, and when the wet season came their only means of travel was to walk, so the tradition of wet season walkabout continued until the late 1960s. Among the last Aborigines to go on walkabout were Old Tim Yilngayarri and his wife, Mary Rudungnali. In 1970 they set out with their dogs to walk from Daguragu to VRD. Along the way Old Tim became weak in the legs, so he and Mary and their dogs camped at a bore until the following dry season when they were found by a bore maintenance crew.¹⁷

Living and working conditions for Aborigines on most stations were extremely poor for decades after they came in from the bush. Infant mortality was extremely high, and

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¹⁶ The scientific identification of these plants and more detailed information about them and other Victoria River weed problems, can be found in my book, Slower than the Eye Can See (Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2002).

¹⁷ Personal communication, Tim Yilngayarri.
housing and sanitation ranged from sub-standard to non-existent. On Wave Hill the living conditions of the Aborigines, and social relations between them and the whites, had been so poor for so long that in 1966 the local people, the Gurindji, went on strike. Over the next six years other Victoria River Aborigines joined the strike, and an initial demand for equal wages soon shifted to demands for the return of traditional lands (plate 144).

The strikes were a major turning point in the history of the district, spelling the end of the mustering and branding system established in the founding years of settlement. Denied access to plentiful unpaid or low-paid Aboriginal labour, the stations quickly turned to mechanisation, replacing horseback mustering with helicopter mustering, and the labour-intensive bronco method of cattle branding with mechanical crushes (plates 145, 146). The stations also ceased to provide rations to the station camps and in some instances closed them down and forced the Aborigines to shift to the nearest town.

The strikes focussed attention on the plight of Aborigines nation-wide, and legislation since the mid-1960s has led to equal pay, citizenship, education, health and legal services, and the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT)* 1976. These legislative changes led to Victoria River Aborigines regaining control of several cattle stations and other areas of land, and the breaking of a ninety-year stranglehold on the land by white

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22 For example, see ‘Aborigines pondering their next move at Gordon Downs’, *Canberra Times*, 31-1-1981.

23 Aboriginal Freehold Title now exists on the Amanbidji (Kildurk), Mistake Creek, Fitzroy and Innesvale station leases, and a large section of Wave Hill station. Other successful claims have been made over various areas of former Crown Land, including the Timber Creek Town Common, the Top Springs Travelling Stock Reserve, and long sections of stock routes.
pastoralists. The first land title was handed over in 1973\textsuperscript{24} and the Gurindji regained title to some of their land in 1975 (plate 147),\textsuperscript{25} but it probably took at least another decade for the old whitefella mind-set to begin to change. Once Aboriginal people became substantial landholders, they had to be taken seriously by their white neighbours and government agencies, and are now being incorporated into regional programs such as weed, disease and feral animal control.

Aboriginal land rights was not only change to land tenure in the region. First, in the 1980s portions of a number of cattle stations were bought or resumed by the Northern Territory Government to create the Keep River and Gregory National Parks. Second, in the late 1980s to mid 1990s the Federal Government purchased two areas of land for military purposes. One area was part of Delamere station, to be used as a bombing range,\textsuperscript{26} and the other was Bradshaw station, bought in 1995 for use as an army field training area.\textsuperscript{27}

Like other groups throughout the region, the Wardaman are now but a shadow of their former power. After they came in to Delamere, Willeroo and Manbuloo they became well-regarded station workers, but decades of sub-standard living and working conditions took their toll. However, the old warrior spirit remained strong. In 1944 on Delamere station a dispute arose between head stockman Jack Connors and the Wardaman men. Several Aborigines confronted Connors with spears and boomerangs, and attempted redress of a perceived wrong, but the affair ended in tragedy when Connors shot dead a Wardaman man named Tiger.\textsuperscript{28} In common with Aboriginal communities throughout Australia, in recent years the collective fortune of the Wardaman has undergone a change for the better, but many problems remain.

\textsuperscript{24} This was Kildurk station, since renamed Amanbidji, purchased for the Aboriginal traditional owners by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission, a Commonwealth Government-funded authority. It has since been converted to Aboriginal Freehold Title through a successful land claim under the \textit{Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1976} (B. Higgins, \textit{Historical Submission : Amanbidji Land Claim}, Northern Land Council, Darwin, August 1976; M. Durack, \textit{Sons in the Saddle}, Corgi Books, Sydney, 1985, p. 511).

\textsuperscript{25} I was privileged to have been present in 1975 to witness the hand-over of part of Wave Hill station to the Gurindji when the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, poured a handful of sand into Vincent Lingiari’s hand.

\textsuperscript{26} Part of Delamere pastoral lease No, 567 was purchased in 1989 (personal communication, Vern O’Brien).

\textsuperscript{27} '\$5m defence force cattle station sale', \textit{NT. News}, 25-12-1995.

So what, if anything, remains of the old frontier? Very little, it would seem. Even the original wild and ill-bred shorthorn cattle have been replaced with Brahman and Brahman-cross cattle (plates 148, 149). One of the last vestiges is in the social attitudes of people in the region. In a situation where frontier conditions were dominant until quite recently, technologies, cattle management and communications may have reached modern standards, but the mentality of the frontier remains. One aspect of this is seen in the social relations between Aborigines and whites. While for many people these social relations have changed significantly since the tense days of the Aboriginal strikes, old attitudes, prejudices, fears and ignorance still exist. The memories and experience of older residents extend back to the time before the Aboriginal strikes, when social relations between the Aborigines and the whites were still those of master and servant. Some have passed these attitudes on to their children, and sometimes to newcomers to the district.

A sad demonstration of the old-time mind-set of both whites and blacks occurred in September 1988 when Debbie Rose and I were working on the Bilinara Land Claim on VRD. One of my responsibilities was to produce a map of Dreaming and historic sites for the land claim. I knew that the station owner was hostile towards land claims and Aborigines, and had declared that Land Council employees were not to be allowed on the station. The Land Council lawyers assured me that as a consultant I was not an employee, and so was exempt from this prohibition, but it was clear that if I asked for access to the station it would be denied. However, I knew that the station was so large that I could probably do the work without being noticed, so I commenced the work without advising the station manager. Almost all the mapping was done with Anzac Mungindi, a Bilinara elder about sixty years old who had lived all his life at Pigeon Hole, a VRD outstation (plate 150). After spending a week on the station mapping most of the area under claim, we returned to Pigeon Hole one afternoon and learnt that the VRD whites had finally discovered I was on the station. When Anzac realised we had been ‘sprung’ and a confrontation with the station whites could be expected, he visibly panicked and could not get me off the station quickly enough. This was surely a legacy of the ‘old days’ of complete domination by white people. I left, and that same day gates on every access track to Pigeon Hole were padlocked.
The following September Debbie Rose and I, a group of Aborigines, their lawyers, and other Northern Land Council employees set out to drive to Pigeon Hole. The lawyers advised the station manager of our intention, whereupon he contacted the station owner, and received instructions to lock the gates on all the access roads to Pigeon Hole. Several times we had to backtrack and try different access routes, but all were locked (plate 151). Eventually, Debbie and the two lawyers climbed over a locked gate and attempted to walk the last ten kilometres to Pigeon Hole. On the way a station helicopter hovered overhead, engulfing them in dust and gravel, and the station manager arrived to try and prevent them continuing (plate 152). This did not stop them, but before they reached Pigeon Hole they were served with a court order denying them access.29

Although most of the good cattle land is now intensively fenced and effectively controlled, large areas of rough country remain. A characteristic of frontier conditions is that both the population and the law are spread very thin. This is still the case in the Victoria River country and there have been some notable events in recent times that have taken advantage of this situation. For example, in 1986 there was a court case in which some people were seen and photographed within their neighbours’ lease, throwing and branding cleanskin cattle. Their defence was that as there was no boundary fence between the two leases, cleanskin cattle could wander back and forth at will, and it was therefore a moot point which side they were on when caught and branded. The judge agreed and the case was dismissed.30

A more recent example concerns crocodile poaching. In 1994 I bushwalked through the remote Fitzmaurice River valley and saw very few saltwater crocodiles, yet the Conservation Commission rangers at Timber Creek later told me that the previous year, crocodile numbers had been so high that ‘you could have walked from back to back on them’ in the waterholes. The rangers were of the opinion that someone had gone into the valley during the previous wet season and cleaned out the crocodiles for their skins.

30 Personal observation.
Map 19: Modern-day land tenure in the Victoria River district and surrounding areas. The dark areas are National Parks (Keep River at the left, Gregory in the centre and right). White areas are Aboriginal Freehold Title and the rest pastoral leases. Bradshaw station and Delamere station east of the highway are now military training areas while Spirit Hills is now a ‘Conservation Zone’ (an extension of the Keep River Park).

Another aspect of the frontier relates to the great size of the stations. Again, the memories of older residents extend back to a time when the stations were huge and unfenced, and there was a corresponding social space in which individual personalities could reach their full potential. Although resumptions in the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s reduced the original size of some stations, many are still vast. For example, Victoria River Downs is now a ‘mere’ 11,885 square kilometres, Bradshaw is 8710, Cattle
Creek, formerly part of Wave Hill, is 7085, and many others are well over 4000 square kilometres. I believe that these wide expanses still provide a social space within which human personalities are often more expansive, and more room for laws and social conventions to be ‘bent’.

In sum, the Victoria River country has seen many changes since the coming of the white settlers. Initially the Aborigines were massacred, displaced, brutalised and enslaved. Some pastoralists succeeded, but others had their dreams dashed. The hard-hoofed cattle, horses and donkeys ran wild and bred out of control, reaching phenomenal numbers, and causing severe soil erosion and damage to the flora and fauna. Men of limited means struggled to create a life of independence for themselves, only to be thwarted in the end. Eventually the Aborigines were legally accorded the same rights as other citizens and regained access to some of their traditional lands. The cattle and feral animals were brought under control, and the country made more ‘civilised’.

Yet in spite of the damage to the land and ecology, in spite of the spearings and massacres and brutalities, and the failed dreams of station owners and battlers alike, the aura of the land remains. The great ranges are still majestic, Jasper Gorge remains as beautiful and forbidding as ever, and the great Mitchell grass downs are still a ‘vision splendid’ in the late afternoon sun. The mid-dry is still a delight, the lightning storms of the build-up are as spectacular and frightening as ever, and the monsoons still bring tremendous floods as of old.

For a hundred years the stories of the Victoria River country have been lost or only vaguely known to outsiders, and ultimately most were lost to white station people, as well. Local Aborigines retain the greatest knowledge of past events, but even among them the stories are slowly being lost. Historically speaking, for most white people the land remains a vast and largely silent ‘blank’, a place of wild imaginings. Now, through this thesis, the land is at last being repopulated with the characters of the past, and their stories. Much more remains to be told, but that is a task for the future.

31 Pastoral and General Tenure Map, produced by the Mapping Branch, Northern Territory Department of Lands and Housing, Darwin, 1990.
Appendix A

INSCRIBED BOABS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Boabs inscribed by humans become living documents. Any significant carving or damage to a boab heals over, and unless subsequent damage occurs the impression remains visible for the life of the tree. Exactly how long Australian boabs live is unknown, but they certainly survive for many centuries; an example on the Kimberley coast was carved by crewmen from HMS Mermaid in 1820, and of course, the Gregory boab on the Victoria River was carved by Thomas Baines in 1856. However, boabs are not composed of solid wood. Their internal composition is more like a dense fibre, and when they die they rot very quickly and collapse within a few months (plate 153). Cattle and other animals may then eat the interior wood, the rest disintegrates, and within a year or two there is nothing to show that a boab ever lived at the spot.

If inscriptions are carved deeply enough they stand out well and are easy to read. Sometimes the grooves become partially filled with a black substance, possibly a species of lichen, and these also are quite easy to read. In some instances the grooves are shallow and of the same colour as the surrounding bark. These can be quite difficult to read or virtually invisible. In such cases I burn some grass or twigs to make charcoal, crush this and mix it with water, and then rub a thin smear into the grooves. This creates a mild contrast with the surrounding bark which enables the inscription to be identified, and makes them stand out in photographs. Liquid charcoal causes no damage to the bark and washes off in the first rains.

Sometimes the inscription or inscriptions extend around the trunk of the tree and cannot be recorded in a single photograph. In these cases I use drawing pins to fix a sheet of polythene in place over the carvings, and then outline them with a black felt-tipped pen. Later the outlines can be filled in and the resulting extended image photographed to create a permanent record. I have done this with a number of important boabs, including the specimen carved by the Gregory Expedition of 1855-56, and also the 'Retribution...
Camp boab' which produced a set of images and inscriptions twelve metres long (see page 380).

All of the trees listed here have been fully documented in my National Trust reports. Most of the names I've given the trees refer to what is carved on them. If readers wish to know more they should consult these reports (see bibliography).

**1814 Boab.** Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Has a name like 'Casabila' and date 1814 (see chapter 2). No record is known of this name or of a visit in 1814.

**A/B Boab.** Baines River, Auvergne station. Has 'A' and 'B' with arrows pointing in each direction. It is a signpost – 'A' means Auvergne station and 'B' means Bullo River station.

**Aboriginal-Carved Boab.** Upper Little Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Has a snake-like design carved on it and a conical standing stone close by.

**Aboriginal-Carved Boab.** Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Has a clear but unidentifiable design carved on it.

**A Martin's Boab.** Victoria River, Bradshaw station. This was almost certainly was carved by Alf Martin who was in the district from about 1900 and manager of Victoria River Downs station from 1926 to 1946 (see plate 3).

**ART Boab.** Victoria River, Bradshaw station. These are the initials of Ray Thatcher, a Second World War soldier (a 'Nackaroo'), based on the river in 1942 to watch for a Japanese invasion.

**Arthur's Boab.** Drover's Rest, Gregory National Park. The name of a drover, with the date 1925.

**AW Boab.** Bullo River station. The initials AW are associated with a broad arrow, the mark of a government employee, so they possibly are the initials of A.J.A. White, a policeman at Timber Creek in 1910.

**'Bagman's Retreat' Boab.** Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Bagmen were itinerant station employees who travelled from station to station and living out of their packsaddle bags, hence 'bagmen'. During each wet season most station employees were laid off and the bagmen used to gather at prearranged spots and set up a wet season camp. No doubt they whooped it up on 'crinkly' rum and maybe had a black girlfriend or two. There are dates on the tree from the 1920s. It also bears the name 'P. Sasck'. The Sascks were a large family in the Kimberley in the past, and a saying arose that the Kimberley was overrun with 'Sascks, blacks and bloody Duracks' (see next page).

**'B' Boabs.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Two boabs here have random letters, varying in size and some reversed, all indications that they were carved by Aborigines familiar with the appearance of writing but not with the system.
Blondie’s Boab. Victoria River, Bradshaw station. This boab has the word ‘Blondie’ and a picture of a scared face carved on it by Nackaroos. It is at the same camp as the ART boab and several others listed below. The Nackaroos were young men and had a lot of time on their hands in these camps.

Bloomer’s Boab. Bradshaw station. Bloomer was an Aboriginal stockman in the 1940s-1970s.

Blunder Bay NAOU Boab. Blunder Bay, Spirit Hills Conservation Zone, lower Victoria River. NAOU stands for ‘North Australia Observers Unit’, otherwise known as the Nackaroos. This is at a different location from the ART boab and Blondie’s boab. There is only one marked tree here, but there are signs of occupation such as a sheet of corrugated iron, and a stone ‘hide’ on a nearby ridge which has a great view down river. A very remote place to this day.

Bottle Tree Yard Boab. Jasper Gorge. A landmark boab at the eastern end of Jasper Gorge. It has various initials carved on it, but none are identifiable. It is also a Dreaming tree – it is Waluwpil, the black-headed python which formed the gorge.

Bullita Homestead Boab. Gregory National Park. It is right alongside the old Bullita homestead and has names and dates of station people (including children) from the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s.

Bullo River Gorge Boab. Bullo River station. The tree has the name ‘Mark’ and broad arrow, and date ‘11-4-17’. There is no record of any patrol by police or other government employees to this area in 1917. However, this gorge was the location of the shooting of at least four Aborigines by police after a white man was speared in 1918.

Broad Arrow AM Boab. Timber Creek area. Again, who ‘AM’ was remains unknown but the tree is not far from the Timber Creek police station so the broad arrow probably indicates that he was a policeman.

Cali Boab. Retribution Creek, Auvergne station. The tree bears the picture of a boxer and the name ‘Cali’ in very large letters. I have no idea who or what Cali might have been. A nearby boab has 1890s dates so Cali might have been a boxer in that period.

Cambalin Spring Animal Carvings Boab, Bradshaw station. This has pictures of marsupials and birds carved on it, in the style of local rock paintings (plate 154).
**Cambalin Spring ‘House’ Boab.** Bradshaw station. Has a strange house-like design carved on it. I suspect it is an Aboriginal version of a building they saw in Darwin, quite probably in the early twentieth century.

![Diagram of a boab with a house-like design](image)

**Cameron’s Boab.** Mosquito Flat, Bradshaw station. Cameron was a policeman on a manhunt after escaped Aboriginal prisoners in 1916 (plate 155).

**Canoe Boab.** Blunder Bay, Spirit Hills Conservation Zone, lower Victoria River. This is an amazing ‘living canoe’. Someone has chopped down a boab and begun shaping and hollowing it into a dugout canoe. It was never finished and later the chopped parts healed over with bark, it sprouted roots and branches, and is still alive to this day. It is located at a site where in 1942 there was a Nackaroo camp. I have questioned surviving Nackaroos but none of them knew of anyone trying to make a canoe while they were there. However, the men I spoke with were not in the camp for the last few months before it was closed (plate 156).

**Captain 1955 Boab.** Access road, Bullo River station. Captain was an Aboriginal stockman.

**Captain 1957 Boab.** Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Captain was probably proud that he could write his name.

**Chamber’s Grave Boab.** Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Chambers was a former surveyor turned cook who died on the track in 1907 and was buried where found, at the foot of a boab. Later a galvanised iron sheet ‘headstone’ was made with the details punched into it. It is still on the tree, in near perfect condition after 90-odd years (plates 157, 158).

**Charlie Schultz’s Boab.** Bullita homestead, Gregory National Park. Charlie Schultz owned Humbert River station from 1928 to 1971, and Bullita station from 1947 to 1967. Bullita was on the track from the Depot store on the Victoria River, to Humbert River station. Charlie carved his name on this boab in 1929, probably when he was travelling with packhorses to pick up supplies or retuning with them (plate 159).

![Signature of Chas. N. Schultz](image)

**Chas. N. Schultz**

**11-7-29**
Club Hotel Boab. East Baines River, Gregory National Park. This is one of several different ‘Hotel’ boabs along the East Baines River. This river was a stock route in the early 1900s and according to Charlie Schultz, cooks would set up camp under a boab and in their spare time would carve a hotel name. Perhaps their ‘skin was cracking’ in the heat and they were dreaming of rehydrating with cold beer!

Colin Dawson’s Boab. Bradshaw station. Colin was almost certainly an Aboriginal stockman. There are several boabs at this location marked by Aboriginal stockman and it was probably a stock camp during a muster.

CS Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. ‘CS’ was probably Charlie Schultz, or his father Charles Frederick Schultz who was on the station for a very limited time in 1928.

Daly’s Boab. Near Bullita homestead, Gregory National Park. Daly was an Aboriginal stockman who worked for Charlie Schultz. Daly was born about 1926 and I knew him quite well until his death about 1992. Many Aboriginal stockmen learnt to write their names but were otherwise non-literate.

Dare & Scanlan’s Boab. Blue Mud Yard, Auvergne station. Tom Dare and Jack Scanlan were both stockmen in the district in the 1960s.

Dave Fogarty’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Dave Fogarty was in the district during the 1930s-1950s and then shifted to Central Australia. He was part owner of Buffalo Springs and regarded by those who knew him as one of the greatest horsemen ever.

Drover’s Rest Boab. Gregory National Park. The ‘Drover’s Rest’ was an area of open grassy flats at the junction of Barak Barak creek and the East Baines River. Both streams were stock routes in times past. The junction area had good water and the first open flats after travelling through narrow valleys for days, so the drovers could let the cattle graze and take a rest (plate 160).

DT Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Who DT was remains unknown.

‘Ease Up’ Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. The boab has a message for drovers: ‘Ease Up Mate That’s The Baines’, ie you’ve come through the hard part and the Baines River is just ahead, so now you can take it easy.

Ernie Rayner’s Boab. Bullo River station. Ernie Rayner was a stockman on various stations in the region during the late 1950s and 1960s, and later was a stock inspector based at Top Springs. In 1962 his boss, Peter Murray, was contracted to muster all the cattle on what later became Bullo River station. To get there the stockmen tried to swim their horses across the Victoria River, but the horses had too much ‘horse sense’ – they knew all about crocodiles. Instead the stockmen had to walk the horses about fifty
kilometres upstream, cross the horses above the tidal reach, and walked them back
down the other side. They mustered 600 or 800 head and walked them out along the
present Bullo River access road to Auvergne station where trucks picked them up. On
the way out Ernie carved his name and date on this boab.

EV 1911 Boab. Big Horse Creek, Gregory National Park. Who ‘EV’ was remains
unknown.

42 Bot Boab. Victoria River, Bradshaw station. ’42 Bot’ stands for ‘1942 Bottle
Glenn’. Bottle Glenn was the name the Nackaroos gave to this camp on the Victoria
River, based on the number of boabs in the area.

Finlay’s Grave Boab. Victoria River, Bradshaw station. This boab is marked with a
large cross, a smaller cross and various initials. The crosses were cut to mark the grave
of Finlay who was the ship’s carpenter on Gregory’s Expedition of 1855-56 (plate 161).

Flyin’ Fox Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. A signpost boab,
alerting the traveller that the creek leading off the East Baines at this point is Flying Fox
Creek, and the ‘road’ to take to Humbert River station.

Fogarty Brother’s Boab. Bradshaw station. Has the names of Dave and Ted Fogarty
who owned this part of Bradshaw station in the 1940s-1950s. The block they owned
was called Buffalo Springs.

Four Boats Boab. Bradshaw station. The tree has four sail boats on it, and nothing else.

Four Men in a Boat Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Has the outline of a
sail boat with four side-view heads inside it, each one wearing a hat. There are no names
or dates.

Frank Lewis’s Boab. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. Lewis was a stockman in the
1960s.

Frayne’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Jack Frayne was a local
stockman in the 1890s and small-time land-owner/cattle duffer in the early 1900s. He is
said to have been a remarkable character but I know little about him (see Chapter 9). He
died on the upper East Baines River in 1912 and Reg Durack said that on the upper East
Baines there was a boab with Frayne’s name on it. This could be his grave, but the area
is inaccessible and I haven’t tried to relocate it yet.
Fred Marton’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Fred Marton was a very big ‘half caste’ man who got in trouble with the law on many occasions – for theft, cruelty to horses, etc. He could fight, too. He was known as ‘The Whispering Baritone’ or ‘Whispering Fred’, because of his deep soft voice. The inscription shown here is more than 350 centimetres long and was cut with a tomahawk or axe.

F.Marton. BOTTLETREE

F.V. Neaves’ Boab. Bottle Glenn, Bradshaw station. Neaves was one of the Nackaroos.

FVN Boab. Bottle Glenn, Bradshaw station. FVN stands for FV Neaves, as above.

Giant Face Profile Boab. Bullo River station. This boab literally has a giant (184 cm) face profile carved on it, but nothing else. It is along side the Bullo River access road but it is so large that it is easy to think that it is a piece of natural damage and thus miss it.

‘Gordon Shot’ Boab. Humbert River station. This boab has the words ‘Gordon J Shot 1910’ and an arrow pointing upstream. Gordon was an Aboriginal ‘outlaw’ who speared ‘Brigalow Bill’ Ward in 1910 and was hunted down and shot by the police (see Chapter 9). Apparently the police camped at this tree after the event and carved the inscription – the only known ‘memorial’ to such an outlaw. The ‘J’ may be the initial of Gordon’s skin name, which was ‘Jangala’ (plates 162, 163).

Gregory’s Depot Boab. Auvergne station. This is a famous boab, located where Gregory Expedition had its base camp in 1855-56 (see Chapter 2). It also bears the initials of early settlers and police (plates 164, 165 and fold-out on page 374).

Guild’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Probably the name of a drover.

Hanson’s Boab. Auvergne station. Chas Hanson was a builder who erected the Timber Creek police station in 1908. The tree is on the edge of the old road from Timber Creek to Auvergne. Hanson carved ‘Hanson builder overland NSW to WA 1908’ on the tree. On the other side of the tree is the statement ‘The Fallop O’Keefe, the Big I Am’. ‘Fallop’ is a slang term from Ireland and Scotland that means either a large lump of
something unpleasant or something tattered and torn. With these meanings in mind, the O’Keefe named on this tree almost certainly was drover O’Keefe, who in 1927 was described as being so large that he found it very difficult to negotiate the Bullwady scrubs of the Murrangi Track. When he got through he was said to have been so tattered that he could have won a fancy dress contest (plate 166).

**Haskett’s Boab.** Big Horse Creek, Gregory National Park. Who Haskett was is unknown.

**HLVH 1942 Boab.** Baines River, Auvergne station. HVLH remains unknown.

**Hungry Billabong Boab.** Newry station. Has initials of stockmen and a policeman, and also a police coat of arms – not well done.

**HH Boab.** Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. HH was probably Harry Huddlestone, a stockman in the 1930s.

**Jack Barry’s Boab.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Jack Barry was a stockman, yard builder and station manager from about 1900 to the 1940s.

**JB 97 Boab.** Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. The JB is conjoined and is probably the initials of stockman Jack Beasley who was illiterate and used to sign his name this way. He was around from the 1890s until the 1930s. Jack was part-owner of the Mount Stirling block on Stirling Creek and indulged in cattle duffing. He is also said to have been involved in the massacre of Aborigines (see Chapter 9).

**J12 Boab.** East Baines River, Gregory National Park. J12 is an early brand of Willeroo station. After the Willeroo manager was killed by Aborigines in 1892 the cattle were sold to Bradshaw station. It is possible some of these cattle then strayed up the East Baines and someone carved the brand in the tree, or else some human strayed up the river and for some reason did the same.

**Jiminjerry Waterhole Boab.** Bradshaw station. Several boabs here have various names of stockmen and also the initials of the North Australia Observers Unit.

**JL Boab.** Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. JL probably stands for Jack Liddy who was a stockman on Bradshaw in the 1920s. Remembered as a great horseman.

**J Ryan’s Boab.** Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Probably a drover.

**Julius Peter’s Boab.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Julius was a ‘half caste’ stockman in the early part of last century.

**Junction Boab.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. A signpost boab, alerting travellers that they had reached the junction of ‘Cattle Creek’ and the East Baines. It was carved in 1897. Later ‘Cattle Creek’ became known as Flying Fox Creek.

King Billabong Boab. Bradshaw station. Had numerous names and initials, mostly of Aboriginal stockmen from the 1940s-1950s. A large ‘X’ on the tree was the shorthand name of Tex Moar, a white stockman. The tree died in 1999.

Koolendong Waterhole Boab. Bradshaw station. A boab with a large Aboriginal carving of a bird on it, and also several names.

Koolendong Yard Boab. Bradshaw station. A boab with Aboriginal stockmen’s names on it from the 1940s-1950s period.

Kostin’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Eugene Kostin was a drover in the 1950s-1960s. He is still alive and living in Mt Isa.


Lady Ruth Boab. Bradshaw station. ‘Lady Ruth’ was a boat used by the Nackaroos in 1942-43.

Larry John’s Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Larry Johns is a ‘half caste’ Aboriginal who was a stockman working for Charlie Schultz. He is still alive, only about 55 years old, and living at Timber Creek.

Lawler’s Grave Boab. Victoria Highway, Timber Creek. John Lawler was a stockman who committed suicide near the Depot in 1909 by cutting his own throat.

Lennie from Beswick Boab. Bradshaw station. Lennie Lawrence was an Aboriginal stockman, apparently from Beswick Aboriginal Reserve.

Lennie Lawrence’s Boab. Bradshaw station. As above.
Lindsay Crawford’s Boab. Bullita turnoff, Gregory National Park. Crawford was the first manager of Victoria River Downs, from 1883 until 1894. The initials have the date 1883 or 1885 – the last number is damaged.

Macartney Gap Boabs. Victoria River, Timber Creek area. Several boabs here have comparatively recent, shallow inscriptions, including motor vehicles and sexual imagery.

McDougall’s Boab. Bradshaw station. McDougall was a Nackaroo. The tree is located on the banks of the Victoria River between Bradshaw homestead and Timber Creek.

McPhee’s Boab. Fitzroy station. Jock McPhee was a stockman in the 1890s, made famous as ‘Tam O’Shanter’ in the book We of the Never Never. He was involved in a massacre of Aborigines on Bradshaw station in the 1890s and the burning of the bodies. The heat made one of the bodies contract and, in effect, sit up in the flames (see Chapter 8). This so unnerved McPhee’s assistant that he was never the same again, hit the grog hard and in 1905 disappeared at the edge of a waterhole during the night. It was thought he was cooling his legs in the water while drunk and was taken by a crocodile. McPhee perished in about 1910 while travelling in to Katherine.

Mairani Outstation Boabs. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. A number of boabs with initials and names of stockmen. Mairani was an outstation from about 1900 until perhaps the 1920s.

Mick Vandeleur’s Boab. Bradshaw station. His brother and father were owners of the part of Bradshaw station which was then known as Buffalo Springs, in the 1950s. Mick may have had shares himself. The actual inscription is ‘Big Prick Mick’.

Morgan’s Boab. East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Morgan was a Wardaman Aboriginal stockman who worked for Charlie Schultz on Humbert River and later lived at Yarralin Community. He died in distressing circumstances in about 1990.

Moriarty’s Boab. Newry station. The only Moriarty known in the district was there in the 1890s. He was a stockman and one of the early miners in the Kimberley gold rush.

MQM Boab. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. A cattle station brand.
Muir's Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Probably Robert Muir, the manager of Willeroo and Delamere stations in about 1917. He was also out in the Tanami desert chasing gold in the 1920s.

'Mystery Ship' Boab. Bradshaws Tomb area, Bradshaw station. This is the name I gave to a strange design which looked a lot like certain Aboriginal rock paintings of Macassan boats. However, later the Cambalin Springs 'house' boab was discovered and the design on it looks a lot like this one, but is clearly not a boat. It is therefore possible that I was mistaken and that the design represents a building.

![Boab design](image)

'My Water' Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. A large boab that has fallen over but continued to live, sprouting vertical branches from the top of the trunk. Somehow a hole has formed on the top side of the trunk, which is hollow, and during the wet season it collects water. It is like a giant water bottle and someone has carved 'My Water' on the side in large letters (plate 167).

Naked Woman Boab. Bradshaw station. A lonely stockman's fantasy - a full sized image of a naked woman, but the top was apparently too high for the artist to complete it, so it has no head.

NAOU Boab. Wombat Yard, Auvergne station. Another Nackaroo camp, this time on the old road between Timber Creek and Wyndham.

Newman's Boab. Bottle Glenn, Bradshaw station, Victoria River. The name of another Nackaroo.

Nugget and Connie's Boab. Bradshaw station. Nugget and Connie were Aborigines - a stockman and his wife. Also carved on the boab is a bull.

![Cow](image)

Oliver's Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Oliver remains unknown, but was probably an Aborigine.
OP Boab. Drover's Rest, Gregory National Park. ‘OP’ remains unknown, but it may refer to over-proof rum.

Oriental Hotel Boab. East Baines River, Gregory National Park. One of the hotel boabs described above.

Prendergast’s Boab. Skeahan’s Billabong, Auvergne station. S. Prendergast was a drover in the 1930s-1950s.

Pre-1905 Bradshaw Homestead Boabs. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. Two boabs with carvings of sail ships on them, as well as several names.

Price’s Boab. Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Price was a Nackaroo who patrolled through this area on horseback in 1942.

‘Private Road’ Boab. Gregory National Park. A signpost boab warning travellers they have crossed the boundary from Bullita into Humbert and are trespassing.

Prossor’s Camp Boab. East Baines River, Auvergne station. Prossor was a stockman early last century. The inscription is dated 1909.

Quilty and Underwood 38 Boab. Bradshaws Tomb area, Bradshaw station. Tom Quilty and Olive Underwood were the owners of Bradshaw station from about 1938 until 1950. Tom was married to someone else but his wife wouldn’t give him a divorce, so he and Olive ‘lived in sin’ for years. Olive is still alive, aged about 93, and living south of Perth.

Quilty and Underwood 40 Boab. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. As above.

Quilty and Underwood 49 Boab. Wombat Waterhole, Auvergne station. As above.
Retribution Camp Boab. Retribution Creek, Auvergne station. A huge old boab with many names and initials and 1890s dates; also pictures of horses, boxers, etc. The name ‘Retribution Camp’ carved on it without doubt refers to an early undocumented shoot-up of the Aborigine. Reg Durack told me that in the ranges higher upstream there are springs with the name ‘Retribution’. It seems likely that whatever the retribution amounted to took place near the springs (see plates 168-170 and fold-out, page 380).

RJJ Boab. Old Bradshaw homestead, Bradshaw station. RJJ remains unknown.

Roderick Creek Sorcery Boab. Roderick Creek, Gregory National Park. The boab has a series of human figures carved on it, some of which are inverted. They have hands and other body parts distorted and swollen which indicates the intent to inflict such problems on a victim.

Rodney’s Boab. Old Bradshaw homestead, Bradshaw station. Probably carved by Rod Quilty, son of Tom and Olive.

Rod Quilty’s Boab. Bradshaw station. As above.


Rollo Barry’s Boab. Bradshaw station. As above.

Royal Hotel Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. One of the East Baines River hotel boabs, explained above.


Saddle Creek Boab. Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Has pictures of a ship and a bull’s head.


Six Houses Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Has pictures of six houses on I, and nothing else. They are classic simple ‘schoolkids’ houses, possibly done by children from a stock camp.

Skeahan’s Billabong Boabs. Auvergne station. Two boabs with unidentified names on them.

‘Snail’ Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Has a strange snail-like design carved on it but no names or dates.
Sorcery Boab. Crocodile Yard, Bradshaw station. Another boab with inverted human figures and a snake-like design, almost certainly Aboriginal sorcery designs. Nearby there is a conical stone.

Springer’s Grave Boab. Auvergne Lagoon Creek, Auvergne station. In about 1920 a man named Adolph Springer died under this boab, which is on the old road. He was buried where found. The boab has a cross carved on it but does not have his name or a date. There are several other names on the tree.

Spring Creek Yard Boab. Gregory National Park. Has the name of a yard builder and a 1960s date on it.

‘Stingray’ Boab. Bradshaw homestead area, Bradshaw station. Has a strange stingray-like design on it, probably Aboriginal.

Strange Mark Boab. Bradshaw station. Has a well-carved but unidentifiable design.

Swanson’s Boab. Wombat Waterhole, Auvergne Station. Swanson remains unknown.

The ‘Diamond’ Boab. Line Creek/Victoria River junction. The tree has a row of playing card symbols on it. The largest is a diamond that has a JC hanging from the bottom. This probably refers to Jim Campbell who was also known as ‘The Diamond’ or ‘Diamond Jim’ because of his brands with the diamond in them (see Chapter 9 and plate 171).

The Governor’s Boab. Bullita station turn-off, Gregory National Park. A boab marked by the Aide de Camp of George Le Hunte, the Governor of South Australia, during a tour he made in 1905 (see plates 95, 172).

The Bottle Rum Camp Boab. Parry’s Lagoon Road, East Kimberley. Nothing known about this inscription.

‘Thy Will Be Done’ Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. This boab is only a couple of hundred metres from Jim Crisp’s grave and almost certainly refers to his death. Crisp was speared in 1919. In the 1890s a teamster was speared in the East Kimberley and his body was discovered by a fellow named Philchowski. In 1913 Philchowski was speared and his body was discovered by Jim Crisp. Then Jim Crisp was speared. One can’t help but wonder if whoever discovered Crisp’s body was watching out for a spear for the rest of his life!
**Tom Cole’s Boab.** West Baines River, Auvergne station. There were several Tom Coles in the region and it is impossible to know which one carved the tree. One wrote his biography, *Hell West and Crooked*. The others were a father and son who were drovers and station workers from early last century.

**Travers’ Boab.** Bottle Glenn, Bradshaw station, Victoria River. Another Nackaroo.

**Triffit’s Boab.** Victoria River bank, Coolibah station. Triffit remains unknown.

**Tunney’s Boab.** Victoria Highway, Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Tunney was a natural history collector, working for a museum in Perth, Western Australia, and also for a private collector. He passed through the area in 1902.

**Watton 1936 Boab.** Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Probably the name of a drover.

**Wangkangki Boab.** Sundown Creek, Victoria River Research Station. This is the boab illustrated by Thomas Baines and recorded as being 58 feet in circumference. It is also a Dreaming tree for Walujapi, the black-headed python.

**Warnawarnal Boab.** Jasper Creek, Victoria River Research Station. The most incredible boab I’ve ever seen. It is not very high and not the largest in circumference, but all its branches extend out from the trunk, sag down and run along the ground for some distance, and then raise their ends upwards again. Two branches were torn off during a storm a few years back but last time I visited the tree the damage was healing over. The branches spread forty paces wide and it looks like a giant alien being or a giant octopus. It has some names and initials, including those of two Stock Inspectors of the 1960s. It is, as might be expected, a Dreaming tree (plate 173).

**WD Boab.** East Baines River, Gregory National Park. WD remains unknown.

**White’s Boab.** Crocodile Yard, Bradshaw station. White was a Nackaroo from Tasmania. There was no camp here so he was passing through.

**W Long Birthday Camp Boab.** East Baines River, Gregory National Park. W Long remains unknown to me.
Wombat Waterhole Boab. Wombat Yard, Auvergne station. A big old boab with numerous names and dates, including those of several Nackaroos.
Appendix B

WHAT ABOUT LEICHHARDT?

In Chapter 2 I looked at the various expeditions known to have visited the Victoria River district between Gregory’s time and the arrival of the first settlers. Four official and eight private expeditions are known to have entered or passed through the region, but there were probably others that we know nothing about. One of the most intriguing possibilities is that a party of explorers may have come from the east and passed through the region long before the land-seekers and prospectors came, before Darwin was established, and even before Gregory explored the region – the expedition of the long-lost explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt.

Accompanied by five white men, two Aborigines, twenty mules, fifty bullocks and seven horses, Leichhardt set out in 1848 from Canning Downs, the ‘furthest out’ station on Queensland’s Darling Downs. His aim was to cross the continent to Swan River Settlement in Western Australia. Instead, he and his entire party vanished and their disappearance remains the most enduring mystery of Australian exploration.

Before presenting my case for Leichhardt having passed through or near to the southern Victoria River district, I want to make two points about the man himself, points which have an important bearing on any theory about his fate. First, the studies by Webster and by Roderick show that Leichhardt was not the incompetent bushman and leader that he was long believed to be. He was at least equal to and probably better than any of the other explorers of his time, and he is unlikely to have led his last expedition into disaster through ignorance or some ill-advised decision. Second, according to Professor Rod Home,

Leichhardt was the best-trained scientist to work in Australia up to that time and was a disciple of the great German scientist, Alexander von Humbolt. Humbolt was the originator of the idea that the earth, and its oceans and atmosphere, was an integrated physical system, and as a ‘Humboltian’ scientist Leichhardt would have been dedicated to discovering the broad structures of the flora, fauna and topography of Australia.

To return to my central theme, there have been many theories as to the route Leichhardt took on his 1848 expedition. Some have him passing more or less westward into Central Australia and dying there. Others, aware of Leichhardt’s stated intention, suggest a route similar to that which I will outline here and either have him dying in the Gulf country or possibly reaching the eastern edge of the Tanami Desert, or even ‘Warburton’s Sand Hills’ (the Great Sandy Desert). At least one writer has him cutting southwest through the Tanami and dying there, but others who have him reaching the edge of the desert suggest that he then retreated and took another route, including turning southwards and eventually perishing near the Simpson Desert.

People who believe that Leichhardt travelled directly westward into Central Australia have not looked at, or have ignored, what Leichhardt explicitly stated he planned to do. Possibly Leichhardt would have liked to have travelled directly across the continent, but he had long believed that there were ‘great desert lands’ in Central Australia, and he knew this idea had been at least partially confirmed by Charles Sturt’s discovery in 1845 of arid sand-dune

7 ‘The Alleged Leichhardt Relics’, Sydney Morning Herald, 1-1-1881. This article is a reprint of a letter from the Brisbane Courier, signed ‘W.F.B.’
9 ‘Leichhardt’s Fate’, The Sydney Mail, 6-3-1880.
and stony desert country in the centre. Leichhardt was very cautious with respect to water, or the lack of it. On his trek to Port Essington in 1844-45 his practice was to ride ahead of the main party to search for water. If he found sufficient he would move his party forward, but if the country was dry his party would stay where it was until water was found elsewhere.

With the knowledge he had that there was extremely dry country in Central Australia, Leichhardt devised a plan to avoid the arid zone, a plan first outlined in a lecture he gave in Sydney in 1846. Briefly, it was to start out northwards along his Port Essington route, and when he reached the McKenzie River to follow it up and cross the divide to the headwaters of the Flinders River. From there he would make for the headwaters of the Albert River and, follow that river up to ascertain the latitude of its sources, and the nature of the country.

Again I would try a westerly course, to come successively to the heads of the Nicholson, the Van Alphen [possibly now Settlement Creek], the Abel Tasman [the Calvert], the Robinson, and the Macarthur, and from the latter river I would hope to reach the waters of the west coast...

This is precisely what he tried to do. In 1846 he set out along his original route to Port Essington, but through illness and other reasons his party was forced to turn back after travelling about 900 kilometres.

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Back in the settled districts Leichhardt began to reorganise for a second attempt, but before he set out he learned that Major Mitchell had discovered and named the ‘Victoria River’ (now the Barcoo) in western Queensland,\textsuperscript{18} and also that explorer Kennedy had subsequently shown that Mitchell’s ‘Victoria’ was almost certainly Sturt’s ‘Coopers Creek’, which ran into very dry country.\textsuperscript{19} As a result Leichhardt modified his earlier plan. In at least four of his last letters,\textsuperscript{20} and in verbal statements,\textsuperscript{21} he said that he intended to go out to Mitchell’s ‘Victoria River’ and then head to the north (see map 19). For example, in a letter he wrote to Phillip Parker King in March 1848, Leichhardt declared, ‘My intention is to go from the Victoria to the Northward, until I come to decided waters of the Gulf’, and his ‘Humboltian’ thinking was revealed when he added, ‘If I succeed I shall solve three

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{18} Ibid: 450-51.
\bibitem{19} Sydney Morning Herald, 8-3-1848; C. Roderick, Leichhardt the Dauntless Explorer, 1988, p. 466.
\bibitem{21} Moreton Bay Courier, 19-2-1848, reprinted in Sydney Morning Herald, 6-3-1848.
\end{thebibliography}
very interesting questions – the Northern, North-western, and Western Water Sheds.\textsuperscript{22} There can be no doubt that when he set in April 1848, this was his plan and there is evidence that he stuck to it.

In the Gulf country Leichhardt hoped to find what he called a ‘collar range’\textsuperscript{23} from which the Gulf of Carpentaria rivers flowed to the north, and possibly unknown rivers flowed inland, perhaps providing a line of travel towards Swan River Settlement.\textsuperscript{24} North of the desert country found by Sturt is the Barkly Tableland where water is extremely scarce throughout much of the year. Leichhardt set out at the beginning of the dry season, so if he had tried to head west or north-west into the Barkly Tableland, dry conditions are likely to have forced him further north. Once he reached the Gulf rivers and started heading westward, he would soon have discovered there was no ‘collar range’ – the Gulf rivers rise gradually off the Barkly Tableland. Nevertheless, he is likely to have kept to the headwaters of the rivers in the hope of finding an inland-flowing stream.

In sum, Leichhardt did not just want to go in as direct a line as possible from Moreton Bay to Swan River Settlement. He wanted to add to scientific and geographical knowledge, and especially, to determine some of the major geographical structures of the continent. To this end he had two objectives: to determine the inland extent of the northern rivers, including the Gulf rivers and the Victoria River and perhaps even the Fitzroy River, and to outline the limits of the dry inland country. He hoped that in the process he would find a stream flowing inland from his supposed ‘collar range’ or ranges that he could use as a ‘highway’ towards Swan River Settlement. Of course, where such a stream was found would determine how much of his main objectives he could achieve.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid: p. 1002, L. Leichhardt to W.B. Clarke, 26-2-1848.
\textsuperscript{24} According to Ferdinand von Mueller, a countryman and friend of Leichhardt, ‘He contemplated nothing less than crossing the continent at its widest extent from east to west, confiding either on the sources of the northern rivers, or trusting to the corresponding southern watercourses rising in the dividing ranges and table lands of the north, until some propitious, though perhaps widely separated waters, would lead him to the settlements of the south-western coasts.’ (F. Mueller to Colonial Secretary, New South Wales, 22-5-1865. ‘Dr Leichhardt. Correspondence Respecting Proposed Expedition in Search of.’ \textit{Journal of the Legislative Council of New South Wales, Session 1865}, vol. 12, p. 5).
In the years after Leichhardt disappeared reports came in from various places of trees marked with an ‘L’, of Aboriginal stories about white men perishing or being speared long before the first settlers arrived, and of relics in remote areas which might have belonged to Leichhardt. There were also reports of ‘wild white men’ here and there who might have been survivors of the expedition. Indeed, so many such ‘clues’ were found that some have joked that Leichhardt must have explored most of the continent, scattered wagon loads of equipment about as he went, and as The Bulletin remarked in 1889, ‘been killed over and over again in as many different places’25 Most of the reports were only poorly investigated, or not investigated at all, but every time one came in new theories were proposed or old ones modified. In most instances these reports are now impossible to verify and have to be taken at face value.

One problem with devising theories about what happened to Leichhardt is that it is difficult to find many of the ‘clues’. Some have been well publicised and are easily found, but others are hidden in old official reports or newspaper files, or even in the minds of people today. Some which were once well-known have since been ‘lost’, and some were never taken seriously as possible evidence. As a result, theories have often been put forward with only limited knowledge of the number of possible ‘dots’ on the map. In this appendix I examine the ‘dots’ I have found leading to, and beyond, the Victoria River country (map 20). Exactly how these ‘dots’ should be joined is not of paramount concern here. Wherever Leichhardt went it is likely that at times he was forced to backtrack and travel in a different direction, so to try and map his exact route from the available clues is problematic. What is central here is the fact that there are ‘dots’ scattered along his proposed route, including in the Gulf country, the southern Victoria River and northern Tanami Desert, and beyond.

Map 20: In very broad terms this map shows the locations of various discoveries which may indicate the line of travel Leichhardt took on his 1848 expedition, and his ultimate resting place.

'L' indicates the locations of trees marked with an L and not on the line of travel of Leichhardt's expedition to Port Essington.

'L?' is the location of the L tree somewhere near Anthony Lagoon that William Frayne said he had heard about.

'E' indicates the location of the supposed Leichhardt hut on Elsey Creek

'J' is the location where Aborigines called out 'white fellow Jummy!'

'LP' is the location where Charles Harding is believed to have found the brass plate marked 'Ludwig Leichhardt 1848' (see plate 174).

'C' is the location where Carnegie encountered an Aboriginal family who had an old-fashioned iron tent peg, a matchbox lid and part of a saddletree in their possession. It was probably somewhere between this place and Lake Gregory that desert Aborigines saw the white men and Aborigines on horseback come from the north-east. And later found their bodies.
In the 1850s several trees marked with an ‘L’ were discovered on the Barcoo-Cooper system, and in the absence of evidence from further north, theories about his fate centred around south-west Queensland or eastern Central Australia – he went westward and died of thirst, or he had been killed by Aborigines. However, during the mid-1860s several ‘L’ trees were located on or near the Flinders River, far to the north of the ‘L’ trees on the Barcoo-Cooper.

The first discovery was of two ‘L’ trees at one location, ‘cut by a skilled hand’, and in a condition which suggested they had been cut many years before. These were found in 1864, or earlier, by a man named Gilliott, the superintendent of ‘Mr. Hanning’s station’ on the Cloncurry River. Apparently Gilliott did not publicise his discovery, but he or his men told Donald McIntyre about them when McIntyre passed through the station on his way from the upper Darling River to the Gulf of Carpentaria. McIntyre visited the trees and when he later published an account of his expedition they came to attention of the authorities and the general public, and he was incorrectly credited with their discovery.

The Cloncurry River is a western tributary of the Flinders River and not on the route of Leichhardt’s expedition of 1844-45. Some wondered whether the trees had been marked by explorer William Landsborough who travelled up the Flinders in 1862, but Landsborough had travelled on the opposite side of the river, and in any case, few believed that an experienced bushman like McIntyre would not know the difference between a tree marked

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27 The South Australian Advertiser, 22-7-1858.
28 ‘Meeting in Reference to Dr. Leichhardt’, The Empire (Sydney), 12-9-1857; The South Australian Advertiser, 9-8-1858.
29 ‘Late Explorations on the Shores of Carpentaria’, Brisbane Courier, 12-1-1865.
30 ‘The Late Explorations and discoveries on the Paroo, Flinders, and Shores of Carpentaria’, Riverine Herald, 31-12-1864.
31 ‘Leichhardt’s Marked Trees’, Riverine Herald, 3-6-1865, p. 3, c. 1; ‘Traces of Leichhardt’, Sydney Morning Herald, 21-10-1865. The Riverine Herald report says the station was owned by ‘Hanning’ but the Sydney Morning Herald gives the name as ‘Hemming’.
32 ‘The Late Explorations and discoveries on the Paroo, Flinders, and Shores of Carpentaria’, Riverine Herald, 31-12-1864; ‘Late Explorations on the Shores of Carpentaria’, Brisbane Courier, 12-1-1865; ‘From the Darling to Carpentaria’, Brisbane Courier, 17-1-1865; in view of the fact that McIntyre was being credited with the discovery of the ‘L’ trees, a man named Barnett, who had been with him on his overland trip, wrote to the Riverine Herald to clarify that the marked trees had actually been located by Gilliott (Riverine Herald, 3-6-1865, p. 3, c.1).
two years earlier and one marked fifteen or sixteen years earlier, in 1848. Not far from the marked trees McIntyre also found two aged horses (some accounts say mules), and for many this clinched it. The trees were generally accepted as relics of Leichhardt’s 1848 expedition, and taken as evidence that Leichhardt did not perish in western Queensland or head into Central Australia, but rather had followed his original plan. Other discoveries were soon made which added considerable weight to this claim.

In the same year that McIntyre made his discovery a land-seeker named McDonald travelled from Port Denison (Bowen) to the Nicholson River, and ‘fifteen miles west of the Flinders’ he found an ‘L’ tree. This location precludes the possibility that it was marked by Landsborough or was one of those found by McIntyre. However, the exact route McDonald took is unknown. If he crossed the district close to the coast, the tree he found might have been marked by Leichhardt during his first expedition, but if he was further inland the tree may well have been marked by Leichhardt during his last expedition.

In 1865 a man named Hays found another ‘L’ tree, this one on the banks of the Flinders on about 170 kilometres east of the one found by Gilliott. The tree was reported as one of ‘poor Leichhardt’s’, so presumably the marking was taken to be too old to have been made by Landsborough in 1861. In 1873 a prospector named Goodfellow is said to have found a dead tree marked ‘LL’, ‘on the William River, a stream which enters the Flinders River from the west, upstream from the Cloncurry River junction. Like the trees found by Gilliott and by Hays, the location of this tree was too far south to have been marked by Leichhardt during his 1844-45 expedition. Being on the west side of the Flinders it could not have been marked by Landsborough, and having a double ‘L’ it could not have been one of the trees found by McIntyre. Finally, the double ‘L’ also indicates that it was not the same tree that McDonald had found.

34 ‘Late Explorations on the Shores of Carpentaria’, Brisbane Courier, 12-1-1865.
36 The Brisbane Courier, 16-2-1865.
37 Port Denison Times, 4-10-1865.
The tree found by Goodfellow was burnt down shortly after it was discovered. Neither it nor any of the other marked trees found subsequent to Gilliott’s discovery appear to have become known to people like Ferdinand Mueller and others concerned with the fate of Leichhardt, or to subsequent researchers. What their existence amounts to is that, in the Flinders River-Cloncurry River region, five ‘L’ trees were found at four widely separated locations. The one found by McDonald might have been marked by Leichhardt during his Port Essington expedition but the other four cannot readily be explained as the work of Landsborough or anyone else whose name began with ‘L’, and this renders it virtually certain that Leichhardt passed through the area on his final expedition.39

We know that once Leichhardt reached the Flinders River his intention was to head westward to the Albert River, follow it up to the headwaters and continue west from there, and there are clues to the route he may have taken. Writing in 1906, a man named William Frayne claimed that in 1882 he was prospecting in the Limmen River country, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, when he heard about a reward of £1000 being offered by the New South Wales Government for relics from Leichhardt’s last expedition.40 Frayne said he had heard of ‘a tree marked “L” on the divide at the head of the Nicholson Creek’, a tributary of the Macarthur River, and another ‘L’ tree out on the Barkly Tableland, somewhere near Anthony Lagoon. On modern maps there is no Nicholson Creek forming part of the Macarthur River system, so exactly where on the ‘divide’ the supposed ‘L’ tree was is unclear (and Frayne said it was subsequently cut down). The name ‘Nicholson Creek’ suggests that it might have been an access route from the Macarthur River to the Nicholson

39 In January 1881 the Sydney Morning Herald ran a series called ‘The Story of the Leichhardt Expedition’. In part four (26-1-1881) of the series a detailed account is given of the discovery in 1861 of a it an ‘L’ tree on the Flinders River, ‘about 12 miles above Mount Brown’ (about fifty to sixty kilometres above the junction of the Cloncurry River and the Flinders River). The source of this information is not given, but two points can be made. First, if the date of 1861 is correct, it could not have been marked by Landsborough, and the overgrowth of bark and wood also precludes Landsborough. Second, the location suggests that the tree could be the same as the one found by Henning in 1865. If the report is correct and it was not the tree found by Henning, it could represent yet another Leichhardt-marked tree on the Flinders River.

40 W. Frayne to the Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, 18-5-1906. The reward of £1000 was actually made by The Bulletin magazine (25-12-1880), rather than by the New South Wales government.
River. Wherever this ‘L’ tree was located, Frayne decided to begin a search there and then head into the Anthony Lagoon region.

Travelling inland from the Macarthur River headwaters towards Anthony Lagoon, Frayne would have come to Creswell Creek, a relatively large inland-flowing stream which runs generally west and south-west across the Barkly tableland and past the present day Anthony Lagoon homestead. Some distance south-west of Anthony Lagoon, Creswell Creek disappears into a large flood-out area now known as Tarrabool Lake. This ‘lake’ is usually dry and beyond it are extensive plains with very few waterholes. The ultimate fate of Creswell Creek would not be known to an explorer coming down from the headwaters, and it would therefore have been an attractive route for them if they were trying to head south-west. Frayne travelled down Creswell Creek until he reached the big flood-out, and though he ‘hunted about a good while’ on the dry plains, he found nothing.  

Given Leichhardt’s known caution with respect to water, there is no way he would have gone out onto the Barkly Tableland and marked a tree near Anthony Lagoon unless he had a chain of waterholes or a watercourse to follow. If he had followed his intention of travelling along the headwaters of the various Gulf rivers and looking for a stream flowing inland from a ‘collar range’, he would eventually have come to the headwaters of the Nicholson River. The Nicholson has a long branch which flows from west to east, and beyond its western headwaters rises Creswell Creek, the first stream of any significance to flow inland to the west and south-west. If Leichhardt found this creek it would undoubtedly seem like the stream he had dreamed of. Assuming Leichhardt did follow Creswell Creek and marked a tree ‘somewhere near Anthony Lagoon’, he eventually would have come to the big flood-out found by Frayne.

Beyond the end of Creswell Creek, the next permanent waters are in roughly a north-south line, more or less where the overland telegraph line was later built and where the Stuart Highway runs today. The closest of these are sixty to one hundred kilometres to the west.

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41 W. Frayne to the Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, 18-5-1906. State Library of South Australia, Research Note 732.
and south-west, between present-day Powells Creek and Tennant Creek. Whether Leichhardt would (or could) have travelled beyond the end of Creswell Creek would depend upon the time of year he arrived there. If it was the wet season he could conceivably have moved on, but if it was the dry season he would either have had to wait for the summer rains, or retreat and find a more northerly route through the Gulf river country.

Of course, if Leichhardt made it to the end of Creswell Creek and there was enough water in Lake Tarrabool for him to move forward, he may well have done so. When explorer John McDouall Stuart reached Tennant Creek on June 6th 1860 he discovered marks ‘very much resembling old horse-tracks’. This was twelve years after Leichhardt left Queensland and it might be thought that tracks could not last that long, but instances where horse tracks remained visible for many years after they were made can be found scattered throughout the historical record.

Further north, in July 1862 Stuart encountered a group of Aborigines near Newcastle Waters, one of whom was a boy ‘much lighter than the others, nearly a light yellow. Yellow is the colour often ascribed to people of mixed European and Aboriginal descent. Newcastle Waters Aborigines had (and have) strong social links with neighbouring Aboriginal groups so the mother of the boy could have become pregnant anywhere within a few hundred kilometre radius, including the northern Tanami, the southern Victoria River country or the Roper River headwaters.

The northern and north-western parts of the Tanami Desert are the scene of a number of stories and discoveries that might relate to Leichhardt, but there is no reason to presume that Leichhardt actually crossed the desert from east to west. If he did make it as far as the

43 To give one example, when John Forrest was exploring part of Western Australia in 1869, he found horse tracks from Austin’s expedition of 1854 (J. Forrest, Explorations in Australia, Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Scarle, London, 1875, p. 27).
eastern edge of the Tanami he would soon have discovered that there are no water courses to follow for more than thirty or forty kilometres to the west or south-west, and even if there had been widespread rain I believe it unlikely he would have risked his expedition on what would have obviously been ephemeral waters. Instead, it seems more likely he would have found a way directly north, or retreated along his outward track and then headed towards the Gulf rivers. He would then have continued with his original plan to follow the watersheds of the northern rivers and tried to find another stream flowing inland from a 'collar range' at the headwaters of the Roper, the Victoria, or even the Fitzroy. The 'L' tree that Frayne said existed on the divide at Nicholson Creek may well have been marked by Leichhardt during such a retreat. Before outlining the Tanami discoveries I will deal with a number of discoveries and stories from the northern rivers country which some claimed were evidence of Leichhardt's passing.

When Gregory explored the Victoria River and Sturt Creek valleys in 1855-56 he made many discoveries, including that fact that Sturt Creek ended in a huge salt lake (now known as Lake Gregory), but he found no sign of Leichhardt in either region. However, on his way overland to Queensland he found the remains of a campsite on the western headwaters of the Roper River, on a creek which he named after the expedition surgeon, Joseph Elsey. In his first report on his expedition, published in 1858, he merely noted 'Several trees near the camp had been cut with iron axes.' As he neared the settled districts, Gregory came across two camps that definitely were from Leichhardt’s earlier expeditions. Then, a little over a year after his return to civilisation he was sent to western Queensland specifically to search for traces of Leichhardt, and on the Barcoo River he found another definite Leichhardt camp, identified by a tree marked 'L'. In this camp were the remains of a lean-to made by Leichhardt's party.


Eventually Gregory produced at least three other descriptions of the Elsey camp, each with different details. The number of trees cut down increased to ‘many,’\(^48\) then to ‘twenty to thirty big wattles from six to nine inches through’,\(^49\) and then returned to ‘several’ again.\(^50\) He mentioned that in the camp there were the burnt remains of a lean-to, ‘built by cutting notches in standing trees and resting a large pole therein’, and there was also a heap of ashes that would have taken several weeks to accumulate.\(^51\) He also said that he and his men had searched for anything of European origin, but none was found.\(^52\)

Figure 6: An artist’s impression of the way the hut on Elsey Creek would have looked before it was damaged by fire (Sydney Mail, 6-3-1880).

\(^{48}\) Sydney Morning Herald, 9-2-1874 (reprinted from the Brisbane Courier).

\(^{49}\) ‘The Fate of Leichhardt’, Sydney Morning Herald, 17-2-1880. This report refers to a letter Gregory wrote to E.W. Lamb to correct a mistake Lamb had made in a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald (7-2-1880). Gregory apparently told Lamb that ‘it is correct to say that there were in the locality indicated evidences which led him to believe it had been Leichhardt’s camp; but there was not a tree marked L. There was the humpy, and there were twenty or thirty big wattles from six to nine inches through, cut round, and remains of old campfires. The humpy was on Elsie Creek about a mile back permits [from its] junction with the Roper.’


\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Sydney Morning Herald, 9-2-1874 (reprinted from the Brisbane Courier).
Gregory correctly noted that the Elsey campsite was about one hundred and fifty kilometres west of Leichhardt’s Port Essington route and located ‘Exactly where a party going westward would first receive a check from the waterless tableland, between the Roper and Victoria Rivers, and would probably camp and reconnoitre ahead’. The absence of any European material suggested to Gregory that if it was an explorer’s camp they had moved on, rather than being destroyed by Aborigines. While it is clear Gregory believed this camp was made by Europeans, in none of his published writings does claim it was made by Leichhardt. However, in at least two newspaper articles he was cited as making this claim. The fact is that there are problems in accepting the Elsey Creek camp as having been made by Europeans, let alone by Leichhardt.

First, at the time he found the camps on the Burdekin, McKenzie and Barcoo, Gregory was not struck with the supposed similarities between them and the camp on Elsey Creek. In fact, in his official and unofficial accounts of his expedition in search of Leichhardt he expressed the opinion that Leichhardt had probably died of thirst somewhere to the northwest of the Barcoo, or possibly had been killed by Aborigines. However, it would appear that the significance of the Elsey Creek camp grew in his mind over the years and by 1871 he was reported in the Brisbane Courier as suggesting that it ‘must have been’ a Leichhardt camp.

Second, the trees in the Elsey camp could have been cut by Aborigines because in northern Australia they had occasional access to iron axes obtained from visiting Macassan sailors, and they may also have received iron axes along trade routes from the Queensland frontier. Indeed, in the vicinity of the Roper River, Leichhardt, and Stuart both saw iron

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54 *Brisbane Courier*, 15-4-1871, p. 4, col. 7; ‘The Fate of Leichhardt’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17-2-1880
56 *Brisbane Courier*, 15-4-1871, p. 4, col. 7.
axes or signs of their use,\textsuperscript{58} and apart from the evidence of iron axes being used at the Elsey camp, Gregory saw evidence of their use in a camp near the Macarthur River.\textsuperscript{59}

Third, the shelters made by Aborigines varied significantly in size and method of construction,\textsuperscript{60} and in the Elsey region some were said to be constructed in a manner similar to the remains seen by Gregory.\textsuperscript{61} Fourth, Aborigines only made bark shelters during the wet season, and during prolonged periods of heavy rain and flooding they often stayed in one place for weeks, so a large heap of ashes like the one Gregory apparently saw could easily accumulate.\textsuperscript{62} Finally, it would be extraordinary if Leichhardt’s party had camped there for several weeks, and used their axes to cut down trees and build a substantial shelter, but did not follow the usual practice and mark a tree with an ‘L’, or other markings.

While these objections cast serious doubt on the Elsey camp being one of Leichhardt’s, as settlers moved into the Northern Territory other discoveries were made which led some to believe Leichhardt had passed up the Roper valley and continued into the Victoria River district. On the Roper River in the mid-1870s there was said to have been a general belief that Leichhardt had passed the Elsey going west on his last trip, and trees had been discovered ‘8 to 10 feet apart with 2 inch Auger Holes that had been used for hammocks, and this was known to be a custom of Leichhardt’.\textsuperscript{63} Similar auger holes were found in 1930, this time on four or five trees on Willeroo station, west of the Elsey Camp.\textsuperscript{64} In this instance it seems unlikely that auger holes would still be visible after the passing of eighty years, and a problem with both claims is that, as far as I can determine, there is no evidence


\textsuperscript{60} For example, see John Lewis, \textit{Fought and Won} (W.K. Thomas and Co., Adelaide, 1922, p. 90) for a description of a hut south of Daly Waters which was constructed quite differently from that at Elsey Creek.

\textsuperscript{61} ‘The Explorer. The Fate of Leichhardt (sic)’, \textit{Adelaide Observer}, 23-10-1880 and 31-10-1880.

\textsuperscript{62} Ethnographic observations of wet season life are unavailable for the Elsey region, but enforced wet season sedentarism certainly was the case in parts of West Arnhem Land (C. Schrire, \textit{The Alligator Rivers: Prehistory and ecology in western Arnhem Land}. Terra Australis 7. Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1982, p. 25).


\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
that Leichhardt used a hammock in this way. In addition, if Leichhardt had travelled up the Roper Valley, and made the auger holes, some trees marked with an ‘L’ should also have been discovered. It should also be remembered that Leichhardt wanted to determine the watersheds of the rivers and the northern limits of the desert, so he is unlikely to have travelled close to the actual Roper River. Instead, he would have kept to the southern edge of the Roper catchment, and such a course could have brought him to Elsey Creek.

A final point in connection with the Elsey camp and the Roper River catchment concerns a claim made by Lochie’ McKinnon, the self-styled ‘Last of the Bagmen’. In the 1950s and 1960s Lochie was in the habit of wandering the back-country alone with a packhorse ‘on holidays’. On an ephemeral waterhole somewhere in the dry country south or south-west of Elsey Creek, Lochie claims he found a tree marked with an ‘L’.⁶⁵ In view of his claim one can’t help but think of Gregory’s proposition that men trying to go west from the Elsey camp would have to ‘reconnoitre ahead’ to find water. Following up Elsey Creek leads you in a south-west direction, straight into the general area where Lochie says he found the ‘L’ tree. However, it should also be noted that the same area would be entered if you travelled west from the south-west corner of the Roper catchment.

Another possible ‘clue’ which caused some interest at the time was discovered by two land-seekers, Sullivan and McDonald, who travelled through the Victoria River country in 1878 (see Chapter 3). Near the Gregory Creek-Victoria River junction they met Aborigines who McDonald said ‘were anxious he should visit their camp nearby’, indicating to him, he believed, that they had a white man with them, and repeating the words, ‘White fellow Jummy, white fellow Jummy.’⁶⁶ McDonald started to go with them, but when they entered a dense thicket of cane grass he feared an ambush, and did not investigate further. This was in Wardaman country, and in view of later events McDonald was probably wise to avoid the dense thicket (see Chapter 7).

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⁶⁵ Personal communication, Lochie McKinnon. Lochie made the same claim in a taped interview held by the Northern Territory Oral History Unit (TS 636).

McDonald’s report led to speculation that ‘white fellow Jummy’ could have been a survivor of Leichhardt’s expedition. However, when Alfred Woods went out to the same area on the expedition that led to the formation of Delamere station (see Chapter 3) he knew of Macdonald’s claim, and with the assistance of Aboriginal interpreters he made inquiries among local Aborigines. These Aborigines claimed no knowledge of the supposed white man, and when similar inquiries were made among ‘blacks from distant parts’ who came in to Springvale (Katherine) they all agreed that, ‘No more whitefellow outside.’ It would therefore seem likely that the Aborigines met by Sullivan and McDonald had learned their English from Europeans at the Telegraph Line, rather than from a white man stranded in the bush. The line had been erected in 1871-72, and was only about 170 kilometres away (see Chapter 6).

One of the stories from the early days of Victoria River settlement tells of a raid by a group of Aborigines on the newly established Wave Hill homestead. They were caught in the act, and as they attempted to escape across the river one man was shot dead. When the settlers examined his body they were convinced he was of mixed European-Aboriginal descent, and old enough to have been fathered by a member of either Gregory’s or Leichhardt’s expeditions.

Finally, like Aborigines in many parts of the outback, those in the Victoria River district maintain traditions of a white man or white men being killed in the district before the settlers and cattle came. Once they gave up violent resistance and began working for the settlers, the Aborigines eventually heard about Leichhardt, and they now believe that it was ‘old Leichhardt’ who was killed. While the details vary according to whoever tells the story, the basic facts are that one or two white men were travelling westward or south-westward, and that one or both were killed somewhere in the south-west corner of Victoria River Downs.

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 B. Buchanan, In the Tracks of Old Bluey, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 1997, p. 105; also see C. Flinders, 45 years in the great nor-west of Western Australia, unpublished typescript, 1933, for a similar account.
Senior Mudbura elder, Albert Lalka Crowson (now deceased), told me that two men had come from the north-east and he described in detail the route taken. When they got to Seale Yard, Albert said, ‘He come to pull up for camp, he see ‘im Aboriginal people and do wrong – he bin shoot people. After that, that old people bin come around, bin spear ‘im. That kardia [white man] name, ‘im Leichhardt!’

The only record of any Europeans travelling from the east and going missing before the first settlers arrived on the Victoria concerns the two prospectors, Forgan and Ahern, discussed in Chapter 3, but marked trees provide solid evidence that these men made it as far as south-central Kimberley. Albert’s version of the story says that the white men had a bullock wagon, but it is virtually certain that Leichhardt took no wheeled vehicle with him. However, oral traditions do vary through time, and from teller to teller, and it is possible that the detail of the bullock wagon was merely an embellishment. If the story has any basis in fact the possibility that Leichhardt’s party was involved cannot be entirely dismissed.

One of the stories from the Tanami proper concerns an Aboriginal woman who was taken from Tanami to Darwin in about 1909 and who supposedly told the whites that ‘the old blacks of her tribe spoke of bullocks being in the Tanami district with bells on before white men came to the country at all.’ Another story comes from Jack Beasley, one of the very early stockmen in the Victoria River country (see Chapter 9 and plate 112), who claimed that in the desert south of Wave Hill ‘he met up with an old lubra who had an adult halfcaste son.’ Presumably the son was middle aged, because, ‘from her account of his origin, Jack formed the opinion that he was the son of a member of Leichhardt’s party.’

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70 Taped interview with Albert Lalka Crowson, by Darrell Lewis, Daguragu, 1990.
72 J. Lovegrove to J.D. Somerville, 4-11-1935, State Records of South Australia, PRG 15/62, pt. 7.
73 Hoofs and Horns. September 1953: 53.
Finally, in 1911 L.C.E. Gee, the mining warden on the Tanami goldfield, heard rumours of the discovery on Sturt Creek of traces of Leichhardt’s long-lost expedition.\textsuperscript{74} Exactly what these ‘traces’ might have been was not stated. It may have been nothing more than the ‘strong conviction’ of many Victoria River and East Kimberley cattlemen that Leichhardt’s party had reached Hooker Creek and continued south into the desert\textsuperscript{75} but it is equally possible that Gee had heard about a relic found in the Sturt Creek area, of which more below. In any case, at the time little seems to have been done to follow up on his information.

If Leichhardt did enter the Victoria River country, the question arises of why no clear traces of his passage were found by Gregory or others who came after him. The fact is that a party of explorers need not leave many signs of their passing. It would be a matter of chance if tracks of livestock remained visible after five or six tropical wet seasons, and lean-tos would only last until the first flood or fire swept them away, or the white ants did their work. Even if an effort was made to leave signs, a later explorer could easily miss them. This was the case with the ‘L’ trees found by McIntyre, but missed by Landsborough because he travelled along the opposite side of the river.

While tracks and lean-tos might disappear within a few years, trees cut with steel axes and marked trees could be expected to last much longer. Just how long would depend largely on the species involved and its location. On the one hand, I have seen living trees burn and fall during a slow-moving late dry season bushfire on Victoria River Downs, so many trees in the region may be relatively short-lived, but on the other hand, some years ago I discovered a coolibah tree on the edge of a waterhole which had an inscription on it, cut by explorer Forrest in 1879 (see plates 27 and 28).\textsuperscript{76} In this instance the branch bearing the inscription was dead, so if bark had once grown back over the inscription it had since peeled off again.

\textsuperscript{74} ‘Resurrecting a Mystery’, \textit{Northern Territory Times \\& Gazette}, 14-7-1911.

\textsuperscript{75} L.C.E. Gee to W. P. Auld, 24-5-1910. Correspondence file 1885-1915 of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch).

The main exception here is the boab tree. Once beyond the juvenile stage, boabs are virtually fire-proof. They are extremely long-lived trees and their wood is soft enough to be cut with a pocket knife (see Appendix A). The fact is that in the Victoria River district no ‘L’ boabs have ever been reported. This suggests that if Leichhardt did cross the region his route was south of the ‘boab belt’, which covers only about the northern third of the Victoria River country. A route along the southern fringe of the district would fit well with Leichhardt trying to delineate the watersheds of the northern rivers while also trying to find a stream flowing inland to the west, or south-west. If trees south of the boab belt were marked by Leichhardt, they were missed by Gregory, and by the time settlers arrived almost thirty years later, such trees could have been destroyed by fire, or had their bark grow over the inscription.

A route along the southern watersheds of the Roper and Victoria Rivers and into the northern fringes of the Tanami would account for the story of bullocks with bells before the settlers came, the existence of mixed-ancestry people in the region, and for the apparent absence of marked trees and metallic relics in the Roper River or Victoria River country.

Furthermore, such a route would make it much less likely that later explorers and settlers would discover any traces of the expedition. First, in much of this region there are few trees large enough to be marked. Second, fires burn quite severely in the desert and desert fringe, and could have destroyed any marked trees or any non-metallic relics. Third, much of the Tanami is sandy country, so any relics lost or discarded there could be hard to find. Finally, very little of the Tanami was ever taken up by European settlers, and most of them did not stay long, so in comparison with the Victoria River cattle lands the chances of evidence being discovered was much reduced.

None of the stories and pieces of ‘evidence’ described above is conclusive or even particularly compelling as to the fate of Leichhardt, but they take on more significance in

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During National Trust historic sites surveys throughout the district I have sought out boabs to check for early inscriptions (see appendix A), so this distribution pattern is based upon personal observation.
light of my next story. In July 1920 a brass plate stamped ‘Ludwig Leichhardt, 1848’ was lent to the South Australian Museum (plate 174). It was never exhibited and the following year was returned to the owner, a Mr H.R. Bristow-Smith, and it was not until 1934 that J.D. Somerville, the President of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia (RGSSA), began an exhaustive investigation into the origin of the plate.

One of the first things Somerville discovered was that the plate had been given to Bristow-Smith by a man named Charles Harding, and that Harding had since died and was thus not available for interview. As a result, all the information Somerville collected about the origin of the plate came from Bristow-Smith or others who knew Harding, and it was somewhat confusing. To try and sort things out, Somerville drew upon numerous other sources, and his findings were published in the Proceedings of the RGSSA in 1937. The following is a summary of what he learnt.

In the late 1800s and/or early 1900s, Harding was working as a drover in the East Kimberley district. He also did some prospecting in the arid country to the south (probably during the wet season when droving was not possible, but the rains made water readily available in the desert). On one of these prospecting trips, Harding had an Aboriginal assistant with him, a ‘boy’ named ‘Jacky’, and it was Jacky who found a partly burnt and rusted firearm ‘in a “bottle tree” marked with an ‘L’. The detail of the tree being marked with an ‘L’ is especially significant because it almost certainly precludes the possibility that the gun had been passed along Aboriginal trade routes far from the place where it was lost, discarded, or taken from the owner.

Attached to the gun was the brass plate marked ‘Ludwig Leichhardt 1848’, the name ‘Leichhardt’ being correctly inscribed with a double ‘h’. Jacky showed the relic to his boss

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78 J.D. Somerville to R. H. Bristow-Smith, 18-8-1936. Bristow-Smith family papers.
79 Charles Harding was born at Kanmantoo on August 1st 1862 and died at Laura in March 1926. R.H. Bristow-Smith to J.D. Somerville, 14-8-1935. Bristow-Smith family papers.
who discarded the gun but kept the plate, and carried it around the outback in his saddlebags for many years. Harding was illiterate and could not have made the plate himself, and it seems unlikely that he was the victim of some strange hoax. Apparently he treasured the plate and there can be little doubt that he believed it to be genuine, but he never sought personal acclaim by publicising it.

When Somerville tried to pinpoint the location where Harding obtained the plate, he was told five key facts:

* It was found ‘in a bottle tree’
* It was found about a days’ ride from the Musgrave Range.
* It was near a Mount Inkerman.
* It was about 90 miles from the Western Australian border.
* It was not far from Sturt Creek.

Initially this set of facts caused some confusion. The location of Sturt Creek was never in question, but Somerville could not find a Mount Inkerman on any available map, and the only Musgrave Range he could find was in the north-west of South Australia, close to the Northern Territory border and 800 kilometres east-south-east from the salt lake at the end of Sturt Creek.

The discovery of the gun ‘in a bottle tree’ also complicated matters. The term ‘bottle tree’ was known to refer to boabs (Adanosia gregorii), but initial investigations suggested that boabs were restricted to areas well north of the Sturt Creek country. ‘Bottle tree’ was known also to be the colloquial name of the Queensland kurrajong (Brachychiton rupestris) and it was thought that some bushmen might call any kurrajong species a ‘bottle tree’. In addition, there were reports that kurrajongs existed near the South Australian Musgrave Range.
Through extensive correspondence with cattle station managers, police, surveyors, botanists, geologists, anthropologists, miners and others, and examination of various published reports, these matters were largely resolved. First, it was learned that the Gardiner Range bordering the east side of Sturt Creek was named the ‘Musgrave Range’ by explorer Peter Egerton Warburton in 1873. Second, it was discovered that a peak near the western end of this range was known to local Aborigines as ‘Inkermane’, and third, that there was a scattering of boabs in the desert country east of Sturt Creek, separated from the ‘real’ boab country to the north by at least 100 kilometres (some said over 300 kilometres). Some of these boabs were in the vicinity of the Gardiner Range. As a result Somerville was satisfied that the plate had been found in the Sturt Creek region rather than near the South Australian Musgrave Range. It is interesting to note that in the vicinity of the ‘Musgrave’ (Gardiner) Range, Warburton discovered an old iron tomahawk in an Aboriginal camp. The fact that the name ‘Leichhardt’ on the plate was spelt correctly with a ‘double h’ – something the average bushman of the time was not expected to know – was an additional factor in convincing Somerville that the relic was genuine.

If it is accepted that Leichhardt reached the Sturt Creek area, the question remains whether he perished or was killed in the vicinity, continued on, or retreated to another region. A few writers have considered the possibility that Leichhardt and his men made it to the edge of the Tanami, or even to the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, but could not go further and instead retreated and turned to the south, making it to Central Australia where by one means or another they eventually died. Others believe that the expedition broke up in the north and that one or two members managed to join Aboriginal tribes, where they lived out their days – hence the stories of ‘wild white men’. However, there is one more piece of

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83 Ibid: 199.
87 For example, see ‘Leichhardt’s Fate’, *The Sydney Mail*, 6-3-1880.
Evidence which suggests that at least some expedition members continued on down Sturt Creek to Lake Gregory, and beyond.

Early in 1890 an intriguing story came to attention of the great nineteenth century botanist, Ferdinand Von Mueller. Some time in the previous year or so a man named Alexander McPhee, ‘a well known and daring Australian bushman’ based at Lagrange on the Eighty Mile Beach south of Broome, heard through local Aborigines of a white man living with a tribe deep in the Great Sandy Desert. McPhee decided to go with the local Aborigines to find this white man. About 400 kilometres to the east-south-east, his guides brought him to Joanna Spring, made known to Europeans and given its European name by explorer Warburton in 1873.

At Joanna Spring McPhee met Jun Gun, who turned out to be neither a white man nor a man of European-Aboriginal ancestry – his mother claimed she had never seen a white man until McPhee turned up. Instead he was said to be either an albino, or ‘a very lightly coloured man of real Australian type’ (plate 175). Possibly McPhee was disappointed that Jun Gun was an Aboriginal, but while he was at Joanna Spring he learnt from the oldest members of Jun Gun’s tribe that a long time before, in the country of a neighbouring tribe about ‘ten days walk to the southeast’, two whites and two Aborigines came into that region on horseback from the northeast. The Aborigines told McPhee that the horsemen headed for rocky outcrops, no doubt hoping to find water in rockholes, but without success. First their horses died, then the party split up and one by one each of the men also perished. McPhee was told that the Aborigines had seen the men come and later found them dead,

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88 *The West Australian*, 6-1-1890; ‘The Lost Leichhardt Expedition’, *The Times* (London), 4-9-1890.
90 The spelling of his name varies from Jun Gun to Jun Jun, Junjun, Jungun, Junqun and Jongon.
91 *The West Australian*, 6-1-1890.
93 Ibid: F. von Mueller to A. McDonald, 25-9-1893; ‘The Albino from Western Australia’, letter from A. McPhee to the Editor of *The Argus*, 5-2-1890.
and still had a number of their possessions, including an iron axe and harness from the horses. 94

Von Mueller was a countryman and personal friend of Leichhardt’s, and had taken a lifelong interest in Leichhardt’s fate. When he heard of McPhee’s story he was certain that the perished men must have been from Leichhardt’s party. 95 He arranged for McPhee to bring Jun Gun to Melbourne where he was put on display at Krietmeyer’s Waxworks, and, on February 14th 1890, McPhee addressed a meeting of the Victorian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia. 96 Von Mueller subsequently was influential in the formation of the Elder Expedition of 1891 which was sent to explore the Great Sandy Desert, and to search for traces of Leichhardt. Prior commitments prevented McPhee from leading the expedition and instead David Lindsay took command. As it turned out, extremely dry conditions and other problems caused the expedition to be cut short well before it could complete its original aims. 97

Needless to say the expedition found no relics of Leichhardt, but in 1896 at Family Well, about 300 kilometres south of Joanna Spring, the Carnegie Expedition met Aborigines who had in their possession an iron tent peg, the lid of tin match box and part of a saddle tree. 98 Then, as now, Family Well was one of the most remote places in Australia, and I think it would be surprising if in this area, at this time, one family group possessed three items of European manufacture obtained via trade. One cannot help but wonder if these were some of the people McPhee had been told about, who were said to still have some items taken from the white men who came from the north-east and perished ‘long ago’.

Carnegie claimed that in his time (1896), heavy iron tent pegs were old-fashioned and had been replaced by pegs of wood, and he remarked that only a large expedition would carry such pegs. It is worth noting that on Leichhardt’s second expedition he had two tents for all hands, and may have had a single large tent on his last expedition. Carnegie sent the items to J.A. Panton, a man who was then the Melbourne City Magistrate, part-owner of Ord River station in the Kimberley and, according to Carnegie, an authority on Leichhardt. For what it is worth, in Panton’s view the tent peg was quite likely to have been part of Leichhardt’s equipment.

How far Aborigines would get ‘ten days walk’ southeast from Joanna Spring would depend on a number of factors, including the availability of water and the ages of the people making the trip, but McPhee, who had experience of desert Aborigines at La Grange, was of the opinion that the Aborigines with the relics were ‘about 200 miles further to the south east.’ It is interesting to note that ‘about 200 miles’ (330 kilometres) southeast from Joanna Spring a point is reached about 300 kilometres south of Lake Gregory, and that this is within the Aboriginal territory that encompasses Family Well.

As well as the livestock he set out with, Leichhardt’s party would have had a large amount of equipment, including many metal objects – pots and pans, cutlery, water bottles, stirrup irons, harness buckles, shoeing gear, horseshoes and nails, bullock and horse bells, rifles and pistols, ammunition, powder flasks, sheath knives, pocket knives, coins, chronometers, a telescope, axes, clothes with metal buttons, and more. This is an awful lot of gear to go missing, and stay missing for more than one hundred and fifty years. In the outback various

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100 E.M. Webster, Whirlwinds in the Plains, 1980, p. 96.
103 D. Carnegie, Spinifex and Sand, 1898, p. 246
104 Ibid.
105 Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (Victorian branch), vol. 8, pt. 1, 1890, p. 23.

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relics probably lost in the mid-nineteenth century have been found over the years. For instance, a fully loaded cap and ball revolver was found on a station in the Gulf country in about 1970,\textsuperscript{107} and many years ago a buffalo hunter found a double-barrelled, muzzle-loading pistol in the Adelaide River country.\textsuperscript{108} Yet, with the probable exception of the 'Leichhardt plate', Leichhardt's entire expedition and all its equipment disappeared.

Of course, if something was found today it could be difficult to know if it had belonged to Leichhardt or to someone else. One early account says that Leichhardt was meticulous and had all his equipment marked, but marked with what is not stated.\textsuperscript{109} The Leichhardt plate shows that he had at least one gun marked with his name, and it is known that before he set out he was given a pair of silver-mounted double-barrelled pistols with his initials and those of the donor engraved on them.\textsuperscript{110} Possessions being marked or otherwise, I believe that if Leichhardt's party perished anywhere that later became pastoral land, then with a century or more of stockmen, fencers, well-sinkers, police patrols, prospectors, 'doggers', station Aborigines on walkabout, and other people criss-crossing the country, something would have turned up by now. Therefore, I think it highly likely that Leichhardt's party must have perished in a region where Europeans never settled and which they seldom visit – one of the big desert areas.

A 'perish' in one the large deserts could also explain why only two animals that might have belonged to Leichhardt were ever found. The ability of livestock taken on droving trips to return many hundreds of kilometres along their outward track is well known.\textsuperscript{111} Indeed, at

\textsuperscript{107} Personal communication, Alan Andrews, who found this pistol on Wondoola station, south of Normanton.
\textsuperscript{110} R. Bennett, 'The Fate of Leichhardt', \textit{South Australian Register,} 26-1-1881. The donor was Richard Bennett and the guns had 'RB to LL' engraved on them.
\textsuperscript{111} For example, see S. Sydney, 'Proposed Search of Dr. Leichhardt's Missing Party'. \textit{Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London,} Session 1856-57, 1857, pp. 322-23.
least five mules and eleven bullocks that escaped from Leichhardt during his abortive second expedition returned more than 900 kilometres to the settled districts.\[112\]

The disappearance of all or almost all of Leichhardt’s animals suggests that few were ever turned loose through injury or managed to escape, and that he had killed most of them for food before he and his party perished, or that he had taken them too far for them to return and far enough that most of them had died before the tide of later exploration or settlement reached them. Of course, neither bullocks nor mules can have offspring to be found by the explorers and settlers who followed. The riding horses and mules would probably be the last animals to survive and if Leichhardt’s party died while trying to cross a desert area, their livestock is also likely to have perished. Bearing in mind Leichhardt’s stated intention to travel across the north in the general vicinity of the headwaters of the northern rivers, and taking into account McPhee’s story and the distances and locations involved, the following scenario may be what happened to Leichhardt:

The gun found by Harding’s Aboriginal assistant near the Gardiner/Musgrave Range was lost or discarded there by Leichhardt (or one of his men), who then continued on to Sturt Creek. Sturt Creek trends south-westerly and could have seemed to Leichhardt to be the headwaters of the river he hoped to find which would lead him to Swan River Settlement. Apart from Creswell Creek and one or two others, Sturt Creek is the only large inland-flowing stream in Northern Australia that trends west or south-west. He therefore followed it down, only to find that it terminated in a huge salt lake – bitter waters indeed!

Faced with desert country beyond the lake, he had several choices. He could return up Sturt Creek and seek another route to the west, or he could head back the way he had come, perhaps to try for a route towards Central Australia. Or, he could take his chances in the desert. I have pointed out that Leichhardt was cautious with respect to water, but at this point he was a lot closer to Swan River than to the Darling Downs, or any settled areas via

Central Australia. He also knew that a route into Central Australia would also take him into arid country, so he would probably be no better off. Almost certainly his party was very short of food and short of ammunition for their guns, and their riding horses or mules may have been weak. Perhaps there had been rain or there were storms about which encouraged them to move forward. Or perhaps Leichhardt himself was dead, and the survivors were not so cautious about water. Whoever it was from the original party, they decided to push on into the desert. How far they were able to penetrate would depend largely on the season. If it was the wet season the party could have followed surface waters a considerable distance into the desert, but such waters are very short-lived and could dry up behind the explorers. Wet season or otherwise, eventually their water gave out, and they and their horses all perished somewhere in one of the largest, harshest, most remote and now seldom visited of all Australia’s deserts.
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Privately-held collections of photographs and/or papers used in this thesis

John Bradshaw, Sydney. John is a descendant of Joe Bradshaw and possesses rare photographs of Joe and Fred Bradshaw, as well as family papers.

Bobbie Buchanan, Macclesfield, S.A. Bobbie is a great granddaughter of Nat Buchanan. She has an extensive collection of photos as well as interesting family papers, and is also the author of several books, including a biography of Nat.

Jan Cruickshank, Port Macquarie. Jan is a granddaughter of Jack Watson, the “Gulf Hero”. She possesses rare photographs of Jack and his brothers, and a number of relevant papers.

Ros Fraser, Nowra, N.S.W. Ros has family connections with the Farquharson brothers, the pioneers of Inverway station, and she has a collection of photos taken by two aunts who made a trip to Inverway in 1935.

Bob Johns, Adelaide. Bob’s father and uncle were Northern Territory mounted police in the period 1905-1910. His father left him an extensive collection of photographs and a memoir which form the basis of my book, “Patrolling the ‘Big Up’”.

*Patsy Garling, Darwin. Patsy’s father was the renowned prospector and cattle duffer, Jimmy Wickham, and she possesses a number of photographs, including one of Jimmy with his wife, Olive.

*John Graham, Brisbane. John’s father was Tom Graham, the manager of VRD from 1919 to 1926. John had a small collection of photos taken on VRD in the period 1910-1920.

*Jack Henry, Gladstone, Qld. Jack worked as the radio operator on Wave Hill station in 1926 and 1927, and while there he took a series of good quality photographs.

Joe Jamieson, Bogabri, N.S.W. In 1961 Joe worked on the survey for the upgrade of the Victoria Highway and he has photos that show the terrible state of the highway at that time.
Gwen Knox, Broome, W.A. Gwen’s father worked as a stockman on VRD from 1933 to 1938 and while there he amassed a collection of interesting photographs.

Maggie Lilly, Kununurra, W.A. Maggie, who is in her late ‘80s, has lived in the East Kimberley region all her life and possesses an extensive collection of photographs from the region.

Ian Littlejohn, Borambola, N.S.W. Ian’s father was a Northern Territory mounted policeman in the 1920s and 1930s and he left Ian a collection of photos.

*Dave Magoffin, Brisbane. Dave was a ringer on VRD in the late 1930s and has photographs from the period. These have since been sent to the Stockman’s Hall of Fame in Longreach.

Marie Mahood (nee Healy), Cattle Camp station via Nebo, Qld. Marie worked the store on VRD 1950 and later married a local stockman. At the time Marie was also a journalist working for Hoofs and Horns magazine and has many photographs of life in the region. She has since written several books on life in the outback.

Brian Manning, Darwin. Brian was a union organiser involved in the Aboriginal strikes of 1966-1972 and has a photographic record of the people involved.

Lesley Millner, Perth. Lesley’s father was a cattle station manager and she grew up on Victoria River district cattle stations in the 1930s-1950s.

*Lorna Moffatt, Melbourne. Lorna had an uncle who was a victim of the ‘Bradshaw massacre’ in 1905, and she possesses a small number of letters and photos.

John Nicolson, Halls Creek. John was a ringer on Coolibah and Bullo River stations in the 1960s, and part-owner of Bullo River in the 1970s. He has an extensive collection of photographs from his time on these stations.

Ernie Rayner, Atherton, Qld. Ernie was a ringer on Coolibah, VRD and Willeroo from the late 1950s, and later a Stock Inspector in the district. He has an extensive collection of photographs from his time in the district.

Pauline Rayner (nee Murray), Atherton, Qld. Her father Peter Murray owned Coolibah and Bradshaw stations from the mid-1950s to the mid 1960s. She has an extensive collection of photos from her time on these stations.

*Charlie Schultz, Yankalilla, S.A. Charlie went to Humbert River station in 1928 and left there in 1971, and during this time he amassed an extensive collection of photographs. He also had a number of early station diaries.

Veronica Schwarz, Indented Head, Victoria. Her grandfather Jack Roden worked on VRD from 1922 to 1949. Jack was an ardent photographer and left a collection of over 700 photographs taken on VRD during this time period. I was able to arrange for this collection to be sent to the Northern Territory Archives.

* signifies that these people have since died.
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Plate 8: First shooting lesson, c1954.

Plate 9: My father (left) and a fellow gun-collector examining antique firearms (Lewis collection).
Plate 10: An antique Alex-Henry rifle – a fascinating link to the early days (Lewis collection).

Plate 11: Collecting Aboriginal artefacts ploughed up on a local a farm paddock (Lewis collection).
Plate 12: A cow hide after the middle has been cut out to make a greenhide rope. The hide was first pegged out to dry in the sun and then, beginning in the centre, a spiral strip was cut to produce with the long strands necessary for a rope. I photographed this example on Rosewood station in 1971, but since then the technique has all but disappeared, and ropes are now synthetic and bought from stores (Lewis collection).
Plate 13: Remains of a cattle race at Poison Creek yard, VRD (Lewis collection).

Plate 14: Tudor Shadforth’s grave at the old Ord River homestead (Lewis collection).
Plate 15: A tree with a piece of wood removed for the manufacture of a boomerang, VRD (Lewis collection).

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Plate 18: Rock painting of a bovine with the VRD bullshead brand on the rump. This brand was introduced in 1909, a date which provides a maximum age for the painting (Lewis collection).
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Plate 20: A barite vein being mined on Kirkimbie station in 1971 (Bureau of Mineral Resources collection).
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Plate 22: The author with Charlie Schultz who owned and lived on Humbert River station from 1928 to 1971. He possessed a wide knowledge of the people and events of that time period, and also knew a great deal about earlier times (Lewis collection).
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Plate 24: Women collecting lily roots, VRD, c1925. Note the wooden coolamons floating near the women. The impact of cattle has made these lilies uncommon (Roden collection).
Plate 25: Aboriginal hunters in Wardaman territory, 1922 (Basedow collection).

Plate 26: A unique photo of a traditional stone fish-trap on the Victoria River at Wave Hill, 1932 (Schultz collection).
Plate 27: Tree at Forrest's Depot Pool, marked by Alexander Forrest's expedition on September 11th, 1879. It was at this pool that Forest left most of the expedition members while he made a dash to the telegraph line to secure assistance (Lewis collection).

Plate 28: The inscription on the tree at Forrest's Depot Pool. The inscribed section is now in the Northern Territory Museum (Lewis collection).
Plate 29: Nathaniel ‘Bluey’ Buchanan (Rouse-Thornton collection).

Plate 30: Captain Francis Cadell (*Adelaide Observer*, 2-2-1907).
Plate 31: Harry Stockdale (Mitchell Library).

Plate 32: Harry Ricketson (Mitchell Library).
Plate 33: Lindsay Crawford, manager of VRD for the first eleven years (Telecommunications Museum, Adelaide).
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Plate 35: Bradshaw station. This photo was published in 1906, but is likely to be much older as by this date there was already a substantial corrugated iron homestead. In addition, the location does not appear to be correct for 1906, but looks more like the location of the previous homestead (Pastoralists' Review, 15-2-1906, p. 945).
Plate 36: Wave Hill homestead as it was in 1883. The sketch was made by Charlie Flannigan who was on death row in Fannie Bay goal for the shooting of Sam Croker at Auvergne in 1892 (South Australian Museum).

Plate 37: A flagstone floor at the site of Stockyard Creek homestead, VRD (Lewis collection).
Plate 38: The government boat ‘Leichhardt’ at the Depot landing, c1912. In the background at right is the Depot store (Johns collection).

Plate 40: An East Kimberley bullock team, early 1900s (*Western Australian Pastoralist and Grazier*, 30-11-1925).

Plate 41: The VRD horse team, 1922 (Feast collection).
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Plate 43: VRD camel team crossing the Wickham River above VRD homestead, c1915 (Townshend collection, Mitchell Library).
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Plate 45: Burt Drew's donkey teams at VRD homestead, c1930 (Bovril collection).
Plate 46: Salt pan near the junction of Negri Creek and Ord River. Salt was gathered here for domestic use (Bovril collection).

Plate 47: Birrindudu homestead, 1934. A collection of ‘bough shades and iron huts’ (Northern Territory Pastoral Leases Investigation Committee collection).
Plate 48: The original Gordon Creek homestead, VRD (Roden collection).
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Plate 51: Broncoing in a stub yard near Moolooloo outstation, VRD, c1935. Because of the tremendous size of VRD very large numbers of cattle were often mustered. In this very large yard there are three bronco horses working at the one bronco panel (Schultz collection).
Plate 52: Cattle on VRD being counted over to a drover before being taken overland to Queensland, c1940 (Walkabout collection).

Plate 53: Humbert River cattle crossing VRD on their way to Queensland c1935 (Schultz collection).
Plate 54: Severe erosion on Limbunya station (Lewis collection).

Plate 55: The banks of the Wickham River collapsing during the big flood of March 1935 (Roden collection).
Plate 56: A wild bull attacking an Aboriginal stockman in a bronco yard, Montejinni outstation, c1930 (Buchanan collection).

Plate 57: VRD manager Scott McColl among wild bulls shot on VRD, 1953 (Frank Johnson collection, National Library).
Plate 58: An experimental Government road train that took supplies to VRD and other stations in the mid-1930s (Roden collection).

Plate 59: McLennan’s mail truck unloading at VRD, c1935 (Roden collection).
Plate 60: Roger Steele shooting donkeys and brumbies in a trap-yard at Crawford Spring, VRD, 1961 (Rayner collection).

Plate 61: No. 5 Bore on Wave Hill station, 1922 (Australian Investment Agency collection).
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Plate 63: Ground-level view of Bilimatjaru – a ‘sandstone sea’, Gordon Creek catchment, VRD (Lewis collection).
Plate 64: The grave of Tom Hardy, killed by Aborigines on Auvergne station in 1889 (Lewis collection).
Plate 65: The remains of the stone ‘fort’ at the site of the original Willeroo homestead (Lewis collection).

Plate 66: The ruins of Wave Hill homestead three years after it was destroyed by a huge flood in 1924 (Henry collection).
Plate 67: Remains of old Newry homestead, another ‘fortress’ of stone (Lewis collection).

Plate 68: Remains of Uindait homestead, ‘a little fortress of stone and ant-bed’, now on Limbunya station (Lewis collection).
Plate 69: Mounted Constables Wurmbrandt (seated at left) and Willshire, with trackers, c1890 (Adelaide Observer, 2-2-1907).

Plate 70: Aborigines not long in from the bush at Argyle station c1900 (Durack collection).
Plate 71: Wave Hill blacks’ camp, c1926. This is typical of the rough conditions of the early station camps (Apsley, *The Amateur Settlers*, 1926).

Plate 72: Aboriginal shelters made from paperbark and scraps of corrugated iron, VRD, c1930 (Roden collection).
Plate 73: Desert Aborigines photographed soon after they arrived at Wave Hill in 1928 (Bleakley Collection).

Plate 74: Aborigines butchering a beast at Wave Hill, 1927. The fact that one of the Aborigines is naked and wearing a traditional headband suggests that he is not long in from the bush (Henry collection).
Plate 75: Looking west along Jasper Gorge, viewed from the cliff-top above the narrowest section, 1953 (Frank Johnson collection, National Library).
Plate 76: Mrs Schultz (senior) coming out of the narrow part of Jasper Gorge, c1940 (Schultz collection).

Plate 77: Behind the car is the giant boulder that once made passage through Jasper Gorge difficult (Buchanan collection).
Plate 78: Jack Watson, the ‘Gulf Hero’, in bush garb (Watson family collection).

Plate 79: Jack Watson and his unnamed ‘boy’ (Watson family collection).
Plate 80: John Mulligan’s wagon at the Depot landing, Victoria River, 1891. The large bags are bales of wool and in the original photo it is possible to see that some are labelled ‘VRD’ (Foelsche collection, National Library).

Plate 81: Jack Watson’s spurs, held by Watson family descendants. These are not the Mexican spurs derided by Willshire, but are lengthened English spurs, and they demonstrate the validity of descriptions of Watson as being something of an exhibitionist (Lewis collection).
Plate 82: View north across Jasper Creek into TK Pocket. The teamsters were camped on a flat on the far side of the creek when they were attacked (Lewis collection).

Plate 83: L-R. Fred May, who took the wagons through to VRD after the attack on Mulligan and Ligar, is seated at the left. The other men are John Cleland (at left), Joe Cooper (seated), and Tom Pearce (Pastoral Review, 15-11-1941).
Plate 84: Bert Drew’s wagon bogged in Jasper Gorge in 1938 (Knox collection).

Plate 85: The Australian Inland Mission hospital at VRD, 1926-28. The people have been identified by Mildred Martin as Sisters Norman and Wood, and the Reverend Father Flynn (Bovril collection).
Plate 86: Captain Joe Bradshaw (Pastoral Review, 16-8-1916).

Plate 87: Captain Joe in bush attire (G. Young, Under the Coolibah Tree, 1953).
Plate 88: Fred Bradshaw (Bradshaw family collection).
Plate 89: Bradshaw homestead and outbuildings, c1912. The identity of the man is unknown but the date of the photo renders it possible that he is the manager, David Byers, who disappeared on Bradshaw in August 1921 (Donnison collection, Mitchell Library).

Plate 90: One of the boabs marked by Gregory, photographed in 1894. I have examined all the boabs in this area but this particular tree no longer exists (South Australian Parliamentary Papers, no. 82, vol 3, 1895).
Plate 91: The Yambarran Range above Bradshaw homestead, with the packhorse cutting visible in the cliff line (Lewis collection).

Plate 92: The packhorse cutting in the cliffs above Bradshaw homestead (Lewis collection).
Plate 93: Mosquito nets pitched Mairani outstation, Bradshaw station, c1912 (Roberts collection).
Plate 94: His Excellency George Le Hunte, Governor of South Australia (Adelaide Observer, 30-5-1903).

Plate 95: Early photo of ‘The Governor’s Bottle Tree’ (Adelaide Observer, 3-2-1912; see appendix A).
Plate 96: ‘On board the “Wunwullah,” Bradshaw’s launch. Bobby, the survivor in the recent tragedy, at the helm’ (Pastoralists’ Review, 15-2-1906).

Plate 97: The Wai Hoi (L.C.E. Gee, 1906).
Plate 99: The *Bolwarra* after the attack took place (*Adelaide Observer*, 5-5-1906).
Plate 100: The grave of Fred Bradshaw on a beach near Port Keats (Bradshaw collection).

Plate 101: 'Bradshaw’s Tomb'. Fred Bradshaw’s coffin was placed on top of the mountain at the right hand end (Lewis collection).
Plate 102: View along the Top of Bradshaw’s Tomb. Fred Bradshaw’s coffin was placed at the far end. The Victoria River and the well-known landmark, the Dome, are visible at the top, right (Lewis collection).

Plate 103: Fred Bradshaw’s coffin photographed about ten years after being placed on top of ‘Bradshaw’s Tomb (National Archives, Canberra).
Plate 104: Witnesses brought to Darwin to give evidence in the trial of Cumbit and Donah (Moffatt collection),
Plate 105: Mounted Constable Dempsey, 1911 (Johns collection).
Plate 106: A white man with rifles and pistols. Innesvale station (Lewis collection).

Plate 107: A white man with spurs, hat and pistol, Willeroo station (Lewis collection).
Plate 108: R.C. Cooper, original owner of Willeroo station (*Pastoral Review*, 15-4-1914).

Plate 109: W.S. Scott who was killed by the Aborigines in 1892 (Northern Territory Museum).
Plate 110: Drover Fred Mork on his horse beside the governor, 1934 (National Trust, NT, Alice Springs).
Plate 111: Rock paintings believed to represent sheep. This interpretation is based upon several features. First, many marsupials, the animals have legs of equal proportions, and the feet on the legs of these animals are rounded. A rounded form is the usual way that Aboriginal artists portray the hooves on rock paintings of horses and cattle. Second, and most importantly, the animals are tailless. No native animals are tailless (even bandicoots have a short tail), and the only European livestock that are tailless are sheep, their tails being removed soon after birth. Third, the animal at the left is shown with its front legs straddling the next animal, and in a flock a sheep will often briefly jump up on the sheep in front of it. Finally, the VRD sheep were shepherded, and the footprint is likely to represent the shepherd.
Plate 112: Jack Beasly, c1930 (Lilly collection).
Plate 113: W. F. Buchanan, brother of 'Bluey' Buchanan, and owner of Wave Hill and Delamere stations, and stations elsewhere in Australia (Pastoralists' Review, 15-5-1911).

Plate 114: The Depot store, c1911 (Johns collection).
Plate 115: Dog registration tags found on the site of Illawarra homestead - obverse side of one and reverse side of the other. They measure 3cm by 3cm and almost certainly belonged to the dogs that earlier had led Fleming and Martin to be fined for not having them registered (Lewis collection).

Plate 116: Jim Campbell's grave at Guion Point in Arnhem Land, c1914 (Spillet collection, Northern Territory Library).
Plate 117: The remains of Beasley and Patterson’s dwelling on the southern bank of Stirling Creek, Limbunya station (Lewis collection).
Plate 118: Walter Coley (seated), Jimmy Wickham, his wife Olive, and child Amy, c1912. Colley was Olive’s brother (Garling collection).
Plate 119: The Remains of Campbell Springs outstation on Limbunya station (Lewis collection).

Plate 120: Mounted Constable Holland at the doorway to Brigalow Bill’s hut during investigations into Brigalow’s murder, 1910 (Johns collection).
Plate 121: Prisoners and witnesses alleged to have been involved in the murder of Brigalow Bill Ward, being escorted by Mounted Constable Dempsey, 1910 (Northern Territory police collection).

Plate 122: Mounted Constable Dempsey with trackers and alleged murderers of Brigalow Bill. Aborigines today identify the man at the right as Madjela and the man second from the left as Fishook (Northern Territory Police collection).
Plate 123: Owen Cummins’ memorial plaque near the Wave Hill police station (Lewis collection).

Plate 124: Stockmen drinking at the Negri Races, 1950. Owen Cummins is the old man at top, right (Mahood collection).

Plate 126: Remains of Catfish outstation on the upper Victoria River, Wave Hill (Lewis collection).
Plate 127: View across the valley immediately above Neave Gorge. This is the place where Aborigines say that Willie was shot (Lewis collection).

Plate 128: At Ord River homestead, 1926. The man in the tall hat is J. Egan. From left to right the others are Alec Moray, a jackeroo, Cook and J. Hubly (A.I.A. collection).
Plate 129: Tom Laurie cooking a damper at Tanami (*Adelaide Observer*, 8-10-1910).
Plate 130: Wave Hill homestead on the Mitchell grass downs, 1927 (Henry collection).

Plate 131: No. 2 Well on the Tanami to Halls Creek road, 1926. This well and the one below are typical of those in the Northern Tanami early last century (E. Schultz collection).
Plate 132: Elijah Bickley's grave in the old Halls Creek cemetery (Lewis collection).
Plate 133: ‘Pedal set donated by a woman in Melbourne to the Flying Doctor Service, Victorian Section, to Mrs Hector Fuller of Newry Station…Photo taken by M. Traeger, 1939’ (Millner collection).

Plate 134: VRD Aborigines examining one of the first cars in the district, 1922 (Feast collection).
Plate 135: The packhorse mail at Scott Creek, on the road to the Victoria River stations, c1910 (Donnison collection).

Plate 136: Doris Roden and Flo Martin standing beside the first mail plane to arrive at VRD (Roden collection).
Plate 137: Thick bulldust on the Victoria Highway in 1961 (Jamieson collection).

Plate 138: The road from VRD homestead to Moolooloo in 1950 (Mahood collection).
Plate 139: Packhorse team about to cross the Ord River, c1938 (Magoffin collection).

Plate 140: Donkey team and Aboriginal teamsters, Humbert River station, c 1940 (Schultz collection).
Plate 141: Packsaddles about to be loaded onto a truck and taken to the edge of rough country on Coolibah station, 1961 (Nicolson collection).

Plate 142: A packmule loaded and ready to go, Coolibah station, 1961 (Nicolson collection).
Plate 143: Donkey team at Wave Hill, 1960-61 (Bower collection).

Plate 144: Some of the main men in the Wave Hill walk-off. Strike leader Tommy Vincent Linjiarri is standing in the middle, next to the signpost, 1966 (Manning collection).
Plate 145: More than fifty years after it was introduced, broncoing was still being used for handling cattle. This photo was taken on Bullo River station in 1961 (Nicolson collection).

Plate 146: The bronco system is now gone, replaced by mechanical crushes such as this one on Fitzroy station, N.T., 1997 (Lewis collection).
Plate 147: Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and Gurindji leader Tommy Vincent Linjiarri on the day that Whitlam handed back a large area of Gurindji traditional land (Lewis collection).

Plate 148: Typical shorthorn cattle on VRD c1920, descended from the founding herds with little new blood introduced for nearly a century (John Graham collection).
Plate 149: Today shorthorn cattle are all but gone from the Victoria River country, replaced with Brahman cattle. Camfield station, 2001 (Lewis collection).

Plate 150: Anzac Munnganyi at the grave of a ‘stockboy’, killed when thrown from a horse in the early days of VRD (Lewis collection).
Plate 151: Land council lawyers confronting the VRD manager at a locked gate, 1989 (Lewis collection).

Plate 152: Land Council anthropologist and lawyers being harassed by low-flying helicopter, on the road to Pigeon Hole, VRD, 1989 (Lewis collection).
Plate 153: A collapsed and rotting boab tree. This tree stood at the junction of Police Creek and Humbert River, and bore the names, dates and brands of many early whites, including the police who hunted the murderers of Brigalow Bill (Schultz collection).

Plate 154: Two boabs with carvings of animals, birds, tracks and serpentine lines, almost certainly done by Aborigines. Camballin Spring, Bradshaw station (Lewis collection).
Plate 155: A boab marked by Mounted Constable Cameron in 1916. Mosquito Flat, Bradshaw station (Lewis collection).

Plate 156: A boab felled and partially shaped into a canoe, and which has since taken root again. Blunder Bay, Spirit Hill Conservation Zone (Lewis collection).
Plate 157: Sheet metal ‘headstone’ nailed to Chambers’ Grave boab (Lewis collection).
Plate 158: Chambers’ grave boab, Desmonds Passage, Auvergne station (Lewis collection).

Plate 159: Humbert River workers and Charlie Schultz’s boab, Bullita homestead, c1965 (Schultz collection).
Plate 160: The Drovers Rest boab, upper East Baines River (Lewis collection).

Plate 161: Findlay's Grave boab, Victoria River, Bradshaw station (Lewis collection).
Plate 162: The ‘Gordon Shot’ boab on Peter Creek, Humbert River station, marked as a ‘memorial’ to an Aboriginal outlaw (Lewis collection).

Plate 163: Riley Young Winpilin at the ‘Gordon Shot’ boab. The arrow points upstream to where Gordon was shot in 1910 (Lewis collection).

Plate 165: A section of the inscriptions on Gregory’s boab (see fold-out on page 374; Lewis collection).
Plate 166: Boab marked by Hanson, a travelling builder on his way to Western Australia (Lewis collection).

Plate 167: The hollow 'My Water' boab, upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park (Lewis collection).
Plate 168: The words ‘Retribution Camp’ that give this boab its name. Auvergne station (Lewis collection).

Plate 169: Names and pictures on the Retribution Camp boab, including ‘David Bickley’, ‘Frayne’ and ‘JB’ (Lewis collection).
Plate 170: The massive Retribution Camp boab, Auvergne station (Lewis collection).
Plate 171: ‘The Diamond’ boab, Victoria River above Timber Creek (Lewis collection).

Plate 172: ‘The Governor’s Bottle Tree’, marked for the Governor in 1905. Timber Creek area (Lewis collection).
Plate 173: The Warnarwarnal boab, Jasper Creek, VRD (Lewis collection).

Plate 174: The plate found by Charles Harding. It is a thick piece of brass 15 cm long and somewhat roughly made. The letters have been stamped rather than engraved, and the result is definitely not of the quality normally produced by a gunsmith or professional engraver. It may have been done by a station blacksmith or station hand (Lewis collection).
Plate 175: Jun Gun, the ‘albino’ Aboriginal man located in the Great Sandy Desert by Alex McPhee in 1889 (National Library).
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