Kine, Kin and Country: The Victoria River District of the Northern Territory 1911-1966
KINE, KIN AND COUNTRY: 
THE VICTORIA RIVER DISTRICT OF THE 
NORTHERN TERRITORY 1911-1966 

by 

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Australian National University 
North Australia Research Unit 
Monograph 
1990
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Two and a half years ago when I was preparing my dissertation to present to James Cook University I wrote:

This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and support of many people during the years of research and more recently while it was being written (Riddett, 1988, iv)

I hope the many people I then went on to thank will not consider me churlish if I do not thank them again. They were many, and since then the list has been added to in the course of preparation of this monograph. For all that I am no less grateful for their generosity. Time has not diminished my gratitude.

This monograph is not my thesis in ways I shall now explain. Firstly, as is the nature of these things, it is shorter as a result of editing and of the deletion of Chapter 7 'The War'. Secondly there has been some rearrangement of the text in the interests of clarity and precision. In the last section, ie Chapters 8 and 9, quite a lot of the material on Vesteys has been deleted. I hope to eventually write a much longer work on Vesteys and the material will belong there.

None of this would have been possible without the good work of North Australia Research Unit. Yvonne Vander Weyden was patient and tirelessly in her preparation of the (too many?) drafts. I thank her. Peter Loveday shared his editorial skills with me and in the process showed me (and the text) how to work intelligently, respectfully and even affectionately with someone else's words. My admiration is as deep as my gratitude.

Kerry Glover, Institute of Technical and Further Education (Northern Territory University), while under pressure in his own work, recreated the maps he had produced for my thesis. I thank him.

Lys Ford has my gratitude for proof reading the penultimate draft.

Finally, I come to my children - Seirah, John Paul and Luke Woodward - they have been part of this work for nearly 20 years. I salute their courage and forbearance.
PREFACE

The Victoria River District of the Northern Territory (NT) exerts a strong attraction on the people who have lived and worked there. Despite the harshness of the District's climate, its remoteness from civilised facilities, its loneliness and its isolation, Europeans write of it with admiration and affection. Aborigines incorporate into their ritual song cycles descriptions of the country and its bounty. They acknowledge, understand, and work with the climate. Few people having had the experience of living in the District ever go away with a negative impression.

Those who write about it extol its virtues whether in government reports, personal diaries, family correspondence, travellers' tales, old timers' yarns or works of fiction. The writers comment on the stark beauty of the vast open plains and the deep river gorges, the Aborigines, the masterful white men and daring, courageous women and of course the cattle. Government reports, written in plainer language, bear witness to these same things, but with one important difference: of necessity the reports had to face the apparent failure of white settlement and economic development of the District.

Populating the north was a primary objective. But was there failure? Certainly there was little economic return to the cattle producers during the whole of the period. And the country was damaged by their ignorant and costly abuse of its natural resources. From time to time a cattle station would show a reasonable, even good margin of profit and hopes would rise to meet the already high expectations held for the industry. But the stations which were successful were few and displayed a discrete set of characteristics not shown by the many: they were relatively small, usually not bigger than 1,000 square miles, operated by the owner and his family, well fenced and well watered. On them cattle were worked carefully and generally the social and industrial relations between owner-manager and workers were honest, fair and based on mutual respect. However, most stations were large, too large to be run efficiently or profitably.

Pastoralism in the Victoria River District was so dominant that it had a lasting effect on all aspects of life: economic, political and social. On the stations, Europeans created a rigid hierarchical social system where status was defined by employment. It was a system dominated by, and tending to the needs of, European men. Aloofness and distance were two important markers of relationships between people from different strata of the society. People learnt to keep themselves separate from those not living on the same level. Divisions also occurred within a stratum. Because status was defined by employment European women who lived in the District as companions, wives and mothers depended for their status on their husband's or son's position. In this way women were usually in an inferior position to the men in the same stratum.

European women found common ground with Aboriginal women in their responsibility to bear and raise children. European and Aboriginal women, rarely friends with each other, had the burden of sustaining family life and both often carried that weight alone for their men were frequently away from home. At times the commonality of their experience helped draw the women from the two cultures together, but the bonds thus formed while perhaps being permanent were usually not strong.

Distance - was a distinctive marker of two other sets of relationships: most of the Europeans employed in the pastoral industry worked for two large British companies, Vesteys and Bovril, whose headquarters were in London and whose head offices in
Map 1: Victoria River District, Northern Territory
Australia were in Sydney and Perth respectively; settlement and development of the District were mainly the concern of the Commonwealth Government which was based first in Melbourne, then in Canberra, both thousands of miles away.

The physical distance of geography was reflected in the physical and social relationship between employer and employee: they rarely saw each other and rigid class structures, English and colonial, prevented people from developing close personal ties despite their apparent common purpose. Relationships were formal and proper, civil not cordial, and quite authoritarian.

Government, however, did involve itself physically in the District and there were many official visits by parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, secretaries of government departments, Royal Commissioners, lesser government officials, consultants and committees of inquiry. But the relationships formed as a result of these encounters were mostly superficial if cordial, and sometimes hostile. Government, despite its proclamations, pronouncements and policy statements about the need to settle and develop the North seemed at more pains to maintain good relations with British investors than with Australian settlers.

Two factors, a highly interventionist policy by the Australian government and the dominance of British interests, were major ones shaping the history of the area. Vestey's obstructionist tactics and their lack of commitment to development were among others that contributed to the unique set of social and political relationships which finally emerged during the 1960s. For ironically Vestey's greed and meanness helped create an interesting response: Aborigines denied access to proper living conditions and to the cash economy remained sufficiently outside of and independent from the settler mode of production to be able to take their dramatic step of going on strike in September 1966.

Other factors were also important. The very timing of the process of settlement and development was one, and so were geographical conditions and the strength and cohesiveness of Aboriginal traditional society throughout the whole area.

Throughout the District most Aborigines were subjected to harsh treatment, were worked hard over long hours for next to nothing in wages. In addition some of them had to suffer the pain of seeing parts of their country despoiled by ignorant mismanagement, and to face the inhumanity of having their children taken from them. Their story of the settlement by Europeans, maintained through an oral tradition, speaks of massacres of whole clans and dispersal of others. The eighty years of settlement from 1880 had been for them, painful, difficult and disruptive. Were they demoralised and debilitated by this impact on their society? In the main the answer has to be, No.

The Berndts (Berndt and Berndt 1987) and McGrath (1987) argue for the flexibility and forbearance of Aboriginal people on the pastoral frontier; the Berndts argue as well for their strength of character and traditional beliefs. Neither has canvassed the point that another contributing factor in their survival was the fact of having been excluded from participating in the cash economy.

Cash is not used in the pastoral industry in the Victoria River District in the same way as it is in more closely settled areas. Consumer goods and staple items are purchased on credit, on the 'book-up' system, from the station store of from suppliers in the service towns. In many respects this is a cashless society, and has been so since long before the credit cards and 'plastic money' of recent times in urban areas.
Aborigines in the Victoria River District, especially after the initial violent period of the first twenty years of settlement were over, were able to continue part of their lives within traditional modes of production. The evidence supports the contention that not only could they do so, they actually did. Further there is sufficient evidence to conclude that by maintaining their traditional patterns, and by refusing to be coerced into working in the pastoral industry, they were actually agents for change within the settler society. Some pastoralists went two or even three seasons without being able to turn off cattle because their Aboriginal employees had walked off the station.

The relationship between government and pastoralist in the Victoria River District was a partnership of sorts which after a period of heightened interest during the late 1920s, turned into a distant, aloof and often difficult affair. Vesteys and Bovril both tried to get Australian governments to move: to build railways, to extend leases; to offer subsidies. Bovril finally gave up and left, saying that the industry would never thrive (and in that assessment at least, they were accurate). Vesteys stayed and became embroiled in events during the 1960s when they and government were joined in a horrified response to Aboriginal radicalism.

There was one difficulty in the partnership which went to its core: each side was too absorbed elsewhere to make a real commitment to the District; each wanted to be the sleeping partner but neither would put up the capital to assist the industry to become economically viable. Government had a further problem. None of the various and many governments which administered the NT ever dealt effectively with one very important issue: despite the fact that many politicians knew that Vesteys, until the end of World War II, concentrated their energy on developing their Latin American interests, none ever seemed to incorporate the knowledge into an informed and intelligent assessment of Vesteys as a partner. Vesteys, on the other hand, did not seem to have any problem in working out exactly where the government stood. They rarely failed to use their advantage. Australia was shadow-boxing; Vesteys were fighting for real stakes. Vesteys won.

Serious questions can be raised, then, about the real purpose government had in mind in urging settlement and development of the Victoria River District. Undoubtedly there were strong strategic considerations, but until the bombing of the north in 1942 these were not compelling enough to force governments to make a strong commitment to northern development.

The settlers themselves, the people quite literally on the ground, as we shall see, had no doubts about why they went or why they stayed. They may have gone to the north in response to a government call for people to settle there, but they stayed because they came to love the country. Failure to achieve their goal of vast cattle enterprises did not deter them; their attachment to the country became reason enough for staying.

They might well have found a common bond with the traditional owners but mostly they did not. For while settlers could see, and admit to, the Aborigines' love and respect for their land; this fact made them not into comrades and fellows but into competitors for a valuable resource. The history of the Victoria River District is full of such ironies.

And yet, despite the settlers' deeply felt sense of belonging to and ownership of the country, a pattern of foreign and absentee ownership of leasehold title has persisted. In the years since 1970 leases have been held by individuals or companies from Brunei, Sabah, Sarawak, Israel, England and America. The problems created by earlier absentee ownership also persist.
The ironies of the District’s history continue however, and the failure of the beef industry has probably contributed to two rather important recent changes in land use. Because land is less valuable now to Europeans as an economic base, parts of the Jasper Gorge area have been reclaimed to create a national park, and Aboriginal communities have been reasonably successful in their claims for tracts of traditional country, only parts of which are being used to raise cattle. Overwhelmingly the history of the Victoria River District has been influenced and shaped by this one mediating factor: the country and how residents, both traditional owners and settlers, have used it. Every aspect of life is affected by it - by country and its uses.

On 19 April 1967 four Gurindji men wrote to Lord Casey, Governor General of Australia, thus reinvoking him, sixty years after his first contact, with the issue of settlement in the Victoria River District. The fight the community at Daguragu, and later the one at Yarralin on VRD Station made for their homelands was both historically significant in terms of race relations in Australia, and a rallying point for Aborigines from other parts of Australia. Their letter read:

_We, the leaders of the Gurindji people, write to you about our earnest desire to regain tenure of our tribal lands in the Wave Hill-Limbunya area of the Northern Territory, of which we were dispossessed in time past, and for which we received no recompense._

_Our people have lived here from time immemorial and our culture, myths, dreaming and sacred places have evolved in this land. Many of our forefathers were killed in the early days while trying to retain it. Therefore we feel that morally the land is ours and should be returned to us. Our very name, Aboriginal, acknowledges our prior claim. We have never ceased to say amongst ourselves that Vestey’s should go away and leave us to our land (McConvell and Hagen 1981, 109)._
Map 2: NT Pastoral Leases, Victoria River District
(as at 1977)
CHAPTER ONE

THE SETTING

From their very first point of contact with the Victoria River District Europeans wrote with absolute certainty about the economic potential of the area. Large open black soil plain country covered with Mitchell and Flinders grasses; permanent water holes in the Dry and full fast-flowing creeks and rivers during the Wet; these natural features were observed and noted. There was an abundance of wildlife: fish, birds, turtle, goanna, wallabies and crocodiles; all these also indicated the richness of the District's natural resources. People were convinced: this was good grazing country, good for carrying beef cattle. Those parts around what is now Wave Hill Station particularly attracted favourable comment from explorers and from settler families like the Duracks who passed through on their way to the Kimberleys. The Duracks, along with other settlers such as Nat Buchanan and his son Gordon, were prepared to overland thousands of head of cattle from the grazing lands of Queensland (Qld) and NSW to stock new cattle runs in this part of the NT and in the adjoining East Kimberley region. For some, the journey lasted years: the Duracks took two years to drive more than 7000 head from Thylungara on Coopers Creek to the Victoria River-Ord River, a distance of 5,000 kilometres.

In his history of the pastoral industry in the Kimberleys Geoffrey Bolton quoted a bushman who had been one of the overlanders:

The country was as fine as the best of Queensland; splendid old rivers of good fresh water everywhere, big timber, Leichhardt pine, gum and fig trees... There were several other kinds of fruit, currants and wild cherries. The banks of the rivers were covered with melon vines and edible grasses and wild cabbage which they call 'Prince of Wales' Feathers' (Bolton 1953, 32).

The country may well have been 'as fine as the best of Queensland', but its landform was very different and landform was to be an important feature in the economic and social development of the whole region. Mary Durack's family camped on the Victoria River close to its junction with the Wickham and she has culled her family's records to write of the country south and west of the camping spot:

This was strange country to the Queenslanders, for although the lush tropical growth of the coastal route modified as they turned south and west it nowhere reverted to the flat prairie lands of the other side. Vast plains there were, but broken by flat-topped ranges, folded and creviced and bathed in wild strong colour. Open, park-like vistas of white gums, boabs, bauhenias (sic), nutwoods and cork trees gave place to tea-tree thickets and bulwaddie scrub. Creeks and rivers, fringed with palms and spreading wild fig and Leichhardt pines twisted through rugged hills and ridges of broad volcanic valleys where the lava flows of ages past had left sandstone outcrops jutting like ancient ruins, or straight-topped, sheer-sloping island masses of spinifex covered rock above shining seas of grass (Durack 1981, 264-5).

There is something compelling and wonderful about the District, and since the days of the first Europeans - explorers and drovers - many have come to travel through and later write
of their experience. Travellers have included hawkers, missionaries, drovers, tourists, mailmen, carters, carriers and teamsters, parliamentarians, Royal Commissioners, pastoral inspectors, policemen and swaggies. The accounts they have left testify to the beauty of the place, which in some parts is starkly and simply beautiful and in others grand and sometimes frightening.

One traveller, Lady Apsley, was taken in 1925, through the country from Katherine south to Wave Hill Station and on out to the west. Her guide was Alex Moray, a Vesty's pastoral inspector. Relaxed in the company of her female companion, Lady Leighton and her expert guide, Lady Apsley observed the country with a fresh eye. In her account of the journey she noted changes in landform and vegetation. Leaving Delamere Station for Victoria River Downs (VRD) Station she observed that the scrub 'desert' of the coastal district 'gave way to open upland country which reminded [her] of a huge rough stubble field, or an inconceivably dry grouse moor'. This country gave way in its turn to what she described as 'a parklike country' and 'to rolling plains reminiscent of Dorset or Cotswold country extended a hundred fold' (Apsley c 1925, 95-6).

After a fortnight sojourn at Wave Hill Lady Apsley and her party continued westward to another Vesty's Station just over the Western Australia (WA) border, Gordon Downs Station. As she approached Inverway Station at the halfway point she noted that:

_We ran through scrub country, varied by rocks and patches of spinifex grass ... We passed reddish soil, several patches of blacklends, and at the crossings of the Swan River, saw rich, tropical like vegetation (130)._

In the mid 1930s, C Price Conigrave, who had been a public servant in the Northern Territory during the previous decade, made a sentimental return visit. He travelled through the Victoria River District from the west. His account of the approach to Inverway from the west highlighted a feature of that landscape: what appears to the traveller as a sudden shift in landform. From Nicholson Station in WA to a point a few miles inside the NT border he and his companions travelled over open black soil plains, then suddenly the vast plain underwent a remarkable change. He wrote:

_A belt of timber - sharp and clear like a low line of cliffs bordering the sea - showed up in the eastern distance. We had finished with the downs when we reached the trees, and rough tumbled ranges cut the skyline to the north (Conigrave 1938, 203)._

To the northeast of this part of the District lies the gorge country. Along the creeks and tributaries feeding into the mighty Victoria River itself there are many deep ravines and gorges: Seal Gorge on Wantee Creek, Jasper Gorge on the Victoria and Wickham Gorge described by Mary Durack in *Kings in Grass Castles*. During the two year long drove with their cattle the Durack party had to pass through this country as they crossed the Victoria-Ord River divide. Their chronicler has written:

_Of all the weird, wild stages they had travelled none was more fearful or memorable than that through the canyon cliffs of Wickham Gorge where rocks rose sheer from the winding river, leaving a narrow pass for the complaining herds. Hardened as the cattle were to rough going they were soon footsore from the broken stones on which they slipped and tumbled through the echoing ravine (Durack 1981, 265)._

Thirty years later, in 1914, a young Sydney-sider and his mate ventured as far as the Victoria River in their search for adventure, work and manhood. Bill Lavender wrote an
account of his experiences, *Young Bill's Happy Days*, many years later, but time had not faded his memory of their journey through Jasper Gorge with Bert Drew, the donkey teamster:

*Now Bert Drew, with donkey teams tackled the famous Jasper Creek Gorge, a nervous hazardous trip by any standard ... Jasper Creek ran through the gorge and eventually into the Victoria River, and it has to be crossed sometimes two or three times a mile. The track rose and fell away at the most frightening angles, and at times it seemed to Harry Jones and Young Bill at any rate, a wonder that the wagons didn't turn over ... At times the cliffs, hundreds of feet high, closed in as if they would envelope the very teams* (Woodley 1984, 2, 280-1).

Young Bill and his mate had earlier travelled up the Victoria River from its mouth to the Depot landing at Timber Creek, on board a small coastal steamer, the *Happy Family*. As they travelled, the captain, 'Kimberley Joe' pointed out features of the landscape and told yarns about the early days of pastoral settlement along the river's banks. Bill's memory was that:

*It was one of those thrilling mornings with the sun full out and the prospects of a fine day. The mates were off up the almost legendary (to southerners) Victoria River and would soon be amongst the big and famous cattle stations (243).*

After a day's good progress up the river, the party camped overnight; members of the crew were posted on watch as they feared attacks from myalls - 'wild black fellows'. Shortly after midnight they were surprised by a large hunting boomerang which came whirring through the night air and 'struck the deck ... with tremendous force'. All on board spent a panicky few minutes until they realised that there had been only one boomerang and that no-one had been hurt. Next morning a group of local Aborigines who had come up to the boat recognised the boomerang as belonging to 'a myall back at the camp'. It appeared that one 'Python', a 'number one larrkin Auvergne Station boy who had been quarrelling and making mischief in the camp had cleared out the night before after stealing spears and a boomerang from the myalls'. Having sorted out the situation, the captain made way again.

*And so for the next two days all the way to the Depot, the company travelled through those two tremendous areas, the river being the boundary between Bradshaw's run along the northern bank, the Auvergne along the southern. From this western Bradshaw boundary ... the run stretched eastward 'as the crow flies' about seventy miles, way beyond the Depot. It seemed there was no end to the vast area of these stations, and of course the new arrivals to the north were deeply impressed (256).*

Forty years later another 'new arrival' to the area, Paul Vandeleur, sent to the District by his father to help establish the new cattle station, Camfield, was also deeply impressed. A young man, only 19 at the time, Paul had been born and raised in the sugar cane country around Innisfail in north Queensland. He had been educated at a private boys' college in Brisbane. A typical east-coaster, he was not prepared by any of his previous experiences for the visual impact of the country around Camfield Station. His first view of the station, which was suffering drought, impressed him, but not favourably, and he cast a doubtful eye on the dried out native grasses and thought there was no goodness in them. His greatest difficulty was the vastness of the run and he found he 'could not relate to the expanse of the country' (Riddett 1982, 52).
In the years between Young Bill's arrival and Paul Vandeleur's many people cast an official eye on this same country with a view to assessing its economic potential. The reports they made while perhaps not so poetic as Lady Apsley's or the Duracks' or Young Bill's still were fulsome in praise of the country's possibilities. Numerous, and spread over three decades, the reports came into existence largely because the people who settled the District consistently failed to exploit the country's potential. The reasons for failure were complex; at no time, however, was it ever believed that the country of itself lacked anything.

FJS Wise (1929, 15; 16; 43), in his official report to Sir Charles Nathan in 1929 was convinced 'that the time is ripe for very large expansion of the cattle industry' and in his analysis of various soil types on NT cattle stations, made these comments about Auvergne and Leguna:

**Auvergne (Northern Territory).** This station has very large areas of rich black soil plain ... This is a very rich pastoral area ... There are several extensive plains richly covered with Flinders and Mitchell grass ...

**Leguna (Northern Territory).** This large area of richly grassed fattening land is without fresh water for the greater part of the year owing to the tides making the water brackish for many miles. There exists a natural rock bar at a spot 20 miles from the coast which if raised by a concrete wall would preserve the miles of beautiful reaches of water and render them available for stock at all times.

Wise wrote a confidential letter to Nathan in conjunction with his report in which he spoke frankly of the 'abuse of our rich pastoral areas'. He concluded the letter with the comment that the 'past receipts from any and all the runs are no indication of the capacity of the country, indeed it is a tribute to the land, if beef can be produced at a profit under present systems of working' (Wise to Nathan 15 August 1929, AA CRS A494 902/1/82).

Later reports on the carrying capacity of the country complemented Wise's. The 1933 Pastoral Inspection Committee (Investigation of Pastoral Leases in the Northern Territory, 1935, AA CRS F987) said of Rosewood, VRD and Wave Hill Stations:

**Rosewood Station.** The holding is made up of high basalt hills with large, open well grassed black soil plains between. Edible scrub is present in fair quantity and there are numerous creeks and gullies, the flats of good loam growing good stock grasses.

**Victoria River Downs (VRD).** The pasture varies from good quality grass, Flinders predominating, to the rank growth of the coastal belt, splendidly mixed. A large portion of the run comprises good fattening country but over the west and northwest there are rough sandstone belts of low grazing value. On the whole it is a fine property.

**Wave Hill.** There are large areas of good open downs in the north and northeast of the area, the balance is rough, stony country with small patches of good downs amongst it and a large area of tableland heavily wooded but growing inferior grasses. The best of the area, i.e., the downs, carry in normal seasons a heavy growth of good grasses, Mitchell and Flinders predominating. The sizes of the holdings should be asked: Rosewood 1073 sq miles; VRD 11,365 sq miles; Wave Hill 6414 sq miles.
At the time of resumptions of land from leases in the District during the late 1940s, the Commonwealth Government had a number of very detailed reports made by field officers of its Lands and Surveys Branch. A comprehensive report on three blocks to be resumed from VRD Station, ie, Killarney, Montejinnie and Camfield, was made by Field Officers DE Macinnis and RC McBride in June 1948 (Macinnis and McBride to Chief Clerk of Lands, 17 June 1948, AA CRS F630 PL 121N).

Camfield was regarded by the officers as the best of the three blocks and they analysed its potential thus: 65 per cent of the block as good pasture land carrying good Mitchell, Flinders, Crowfoot, Wallaby and Kangaroo grasses; ten per cent of medium quality; the remaining 25 per cent of poor quality. In their report they allocated Killarney 42 per cent good, 28 per cent medium and ten per cent poor, and Montejinnie 42 per cent, 20 per cent and 35 per cent respectively.

The Payne-Fletcher Report of 1937 provided a very good summary for the whole District.

*A considerable part of the area is of a basaltic nature. Generally the country may be classified as follows:-*

(i) Stony downs and plains broken by pebbly and stony ridges, with hills and mountains occurring here and there.
(ii) Extensive areas of open downs country.
(iii) Wide lightly grassed ridges with Mitchell grass plains or flats intervening.
(iv) A limited area of limestone country suitable for cattle breeding.
(vi) Forest spinifex country generally of little value (Payne-Fletcher 1939, 62)

It seems then that the Buchanans on Wave Hill, Fisher and Lyons who took the lease on VRD in the 1880s, the Duracks who followed them a few years later to lease Auvergne, Newry and Leguna and their relation Kilfoyle who took up Rosewood, had been justified in taking the risks they had in overlanding their mobs of cattle. They were followed in turn by the three Farquharson brothers who set up Inverway Station in the 1890s, and Bradshaw of Bradshaw's Run. By the 1910s some of these stations had begun changing hands: Bovril moved into the District and took the lease on VRD; and Vestey's began systematically buying leases which ran from WA through the Victoria River District and across the northern Barkly Tablelands, so that by the 1920s they had a chain of stations spanning the whole of the NT. By the 1910s a cattle industry of sorts had been established in the District.

Men would not have undertaken these journeys unless they had thought the going worthwhile. The seventy or so years after their adventures were to prove them wrong: the history of land use, of settlement and development in the Victoria River District is not a happy one. Like many histories of the pastoral frontier it contains many instances of courage, determination and suffering. But courage often led to death: of Aborigines defending their traditional country; of white women in childbirth; of dashing young white stockmen attempting feats of daring. Determination too, often became stubborn, bitter obstinacy and a refusal to yield to the land which exacted a harsh penalty, and which in its turn was often laid waste. Suffering became a universal condition shared by all the humans, newcomers and old stayers, who lived there.
CULINARY WISDOM

Have you an intelligent cook? If so, she will know the value of Bovril for preparing Delicious Soups, Rich Gravies, and Savoury Sauces. Bovril adds piquancy and real nourishment to Ragoûts, Croquettes, Rissoles, and all Entrées.

BOVRIL

Plate 1: Advertisement for Bovril.
In Senn, Herman C, 'Breakfast and Supper'
(C Arthur Pearson Ltd London c1900)
No vast riches were to be had from working cattle in the Victoria district; many went 'bust' trying to make a living. But the new settlers stayed and gradually many of them came to appreciate, even to love, this grand country of open plains, deep gorges and shaded waterholes. Some Europeans developed a deep attachment to the land; even coming finally to understand and respect both Aboriginal attachment to the country and their values. The country itself dominated the struggles for European settlement and development; the traditional owners reflected their respect for the land in the way they responded to the Europeans.

A modern day traveller can see this country from the air: an open land running from the red soil desert country of Lajamanu where the Victoria River rises, where spinifex grows (the dense green occurring only where small permanent water holes lie); the black soil grassed plains of Wave Hill, Cattle Creek, Inverway and Camfield fan out from the desert; vast plains with occasional runs of low, round, feminine hills, creeks here too, a ring of dark green trees circling water holes and springs; trees mark the banks of the creeks, signifying the line of water from both above and below for rain follows the creeks all the way. To the west, beyond Inverway, lie Kirkimbie and Limbuya, closed in country. Low flat-topped, steep sided hills, rocky and dangerous and too difficult for horses to climb have caves at the top, havens of safety reached by narrow paths.

North from there the Auvergne plateau, a great lava spill, rolls back toward the desert from the river mouth; red, brown and black rock crisscrossed with grids cut by rain; to the southeast of Auvergne the gorge country - Seal Gorge, Jasper Gorge, Wickham Gorge - where creeks and rivers race at speed during the Wet and become deep, permanent water holes in the Dry. Europeans call all these water holes one term, the Victoria River. Aborigines call the water holes by different names - Lawi, Kalgariji, Daguragu, Jarralin - all the names together making a whole. High in the gorges there are also caves, remote and quiet, places to go for protection.

Further east and north again lies the scrub country of Birrimbah and Delamere. The Victoria River runs through this country from the desert, across the plains, through gorges, gathering on its way tributaries - Wattie Creek and the Wickham, passing eventually into the sea, fresh at its source, salt and tidal at its mouth. Other, less grand rivers flow too, the King and the Dry.

From the air the country itself is dominant: the station buildings, settlements and bores appear insignificant. Wide bitumen roads crisscrossing winding animal pads feature more than fence lines; this is country to be moved through and if one is Aboriginal one will sing along the way, measuring distance by the time it takes to walk between two points, calling the country, conversing with it and handing the dialogue on to the next person as the boundary of tribal territory is reached. These songs are as true in the 1980s as they were in the 1880s; perhaps they are even stronger and truer today because they have survived the 'killing times' of early white settlement, the 'quietening' as the pastoral frontier spread slowly over the country bringing new relationships to be created with foreigners, the gardiya, with new beasts and with the country itself.

The years between 1911 and 1966 were hard. Europeans and Aborigines wrestled with each other and formed new relationships. Looking back, Europeans might feel some pleasure in having survived it and in the process learned some respect for the country and its people; Aborigines can take pride in having held their ground and helped to teach white Australians something about how important country is to all of us.
CHAPTER TWO
PARLIAMENT, POLICIES AND POLITICIANS

In his autobiography *Naught to Thirty-Three*, Randolph Bedford, Labor politician, mining promoter and writer, reflected on his vision of the Northern Territory (NT). The year was 1901.

*Henry Drysdale, who had been a director with me on the Melbourne United and to whom I told the joke of the window lift and companies like it, said, 'I have something good. Will you join me?'  
Tell me.'  
'Can't do it in half an hour. Dine with me tonight.'  
Dine we did, and I had all the story.  
'Fifteen million acres in north Australia. Southern boundary the Roper River, eastern boundary the Gulf of Carpentaria; northern boundary the Arafura sea; western boundary, the natural barrier of broken, mountainous country.'  
'Title?'  
'Government leasehold for forty-two years and renewal.'  
'Rental?'  
'Sixpence per square mile.'  
'Sixpence a year for 640 acres? That's cheap. Rainfall?'  
'Sixty inches.'  
'That's fine. No drought. And then?'  
'Buy a hundred thousand cattle; establish meat works. Go to London for a quarter of a million capital.'  
'Sounds good.'  
'Good! Think of it', said Drysdale, his thin face lighting with enthusiasm.  
'Big limestone plains - the ideal country for horse breeding. Sell army remounts ... And fine harbours and tremendous tides. And it will grow anything: copra, cotton, tobacco, jute, cinnamon, vanilla, tea, coffee.'  
My imagination had already put me into it.  
As we smoked, that quiet room seemed to open out, and I saw the wondrous north, just touched by the Portuguese 400 years ago, and then by the Dutch a century later, and then mismanaged and abandoned for forty years by the English, two centuries after the Dutchmen (Bedford 1934, p326).

Bedford continued to dream at length. Fortunately he seems to have enjoyed his fantasy enough not to be bothered by its ending: a month later Drysdale left for London, six months later he was still on the track of the elusive £250 000 pounds (328). Much of what happened in the development of the Territory was in that mode; the dreamers persevered and the notion of a white bastion on the northern frontier persisted well into the 1940s. The issues defined by the protagonists in 40 years of public debate reflected the realities of northern development. It is significant that the same questions were as relevant in the 1940s as in the 1910s. Should the north be settled? Should it be developed? Could, or ought, development and settlement be treated as separate issues? Or are they intrinsically linked? Who should develop and settle the north? Are there unique factors related to settlement in the tropics which indicate that questions of race should be given special consideration?
Finally, the debate highlighted deep differences of opinion about the best way to develop and settle tropical Australia. The participants in the public arena contended mainly with the problems attached to settlement. Governments were expected to deal with the broader issue of development.

At different times between the early 1900s and the mid 1940s one issue first, then another would dominate; at others the problem would be how to separate the issues so that they could be dealt with. Argument tended to be circular. Issues remained unresolved. Debate was often heated; certainly the language of the debate was florid and tempers often flared. The debate itself absorbed energy which should, perhaps, have been directed to the actual business of settling the North.

Some people (typified by Bedford) entered the debate committed to the development of the north while having no intention of settling there. Their view of success created a picture of a plantation economy supporting a small elite 'expatriate' society of European landholders and managers. Others, like John Dwyer, a Sydney-based socialist, worked tirelessly to spread a 'gospel' of opportunity in the north for the small man dedicated to raising a family on his own block. Some were ideologues, adept at making speeches and publishing pamphlets, who had no direct involvement of any kind in the NT, nor intended to have any. There were also those who had gone to the NT, settled there, raised families and then developed schemes to attract others to join them.

It does not seem to have mattered, however, whether a man was capitalist or socialist, pioneer, settler or developer, or all three; or just passionately interested in arguing about the NT. With few exceptions, the one thing they had in common was that each held a conviction that it was absolutely essential for Australia's security that there be a definite occupation of the north by Europeans.

John Dwyer, Secretary to the Northern Territory and North West Settlements Corporation in a letter to the Lord Mayor of Melbourne in February 1912 wrote:

*We are initiating a Movement for the Peopling of the Vast Areas of the Northern Territory and it is suggested that the Capital of the Commonwealth should be headquarters of the same.*

*I am to enquire if we can expect your kind cooperation in this direction.*

*(John Dwyer Papers, Mitchell Library, MS2184)*

That there was interest among non-Anglo-Saxons in settling the north is supported by evidence put forward in a speech in 1907 to the Australia Association for the Advancement of Science in Adelaide by Matthew Macfie. He referred to a group of British Indians resident in Australia who had sought redress for their grievances by forming themselves, at the beginning of 1903, into a body called the 'British and Indian Empire League of Australia'. The League petitioned the Indian Congress meeting in Madras in the same year to help them. In his speech Macfie quoted at length from the League's petition to the Congress. Members of the League asked that as loyal subjects of King Edward they should be allowed to migrate and settle in Australia so long as they respected the laws of the country and 'the rights of the fellow subjects of British origin'. In particular they felt that their unique physiological composition, and especially their dark complexion, made them suited for settlement in Australia's tropical north. They complained about the 'dog-in-the-manger policy of the Commonwealth restrictionists' and singled out those with white complexions who were unable to work in the tropics without
serious inconvenience and who insisted on 'prohibiting the Indian fellow-subjects from developing a vast British country, whose increased products would contribute to the convenience and comfort of the civilised world' (Macfie 1907, 15).

The idea of Indians being allowed to settle in any numbers in tropical Australia as free settlers was of course not likely to attract much support. Had the League members seen themselves in a subordinate role as paid labour they might have had a more positive response. Those who argued for the development and settlement of northern Australia as a defence against Asian invasion often included in their schemes some notion of using coloured labour. The Hon JM Creed expressed such an idea when he addressed the Royal Colonial Institute in 1912:

> With coloured labour it would be possible to so develop tropical Australia that a sufficient number of whites would be constantly there to hold it in the event of a hostile attack, or at all events to do so long enough to enable the military and naval forces of the Federal Government to come to their assistance (Creed 1912, 575).

C Price Conigrave expressed similar views more than 20 years later in his *North Australia*. In his opinion 'The gravest problem that overshadows Australia is its Empty North, and it is the greater problem by reason of the fact that within the past few years the possible storm centre of the world has swung from west to east' (Conigrave 1936, 247). He accurately predicted that a threat of invasion was posed by Japanese expansion in Asia.

Professor Ian Clunies Ross admitted in his 1938 article 'Blanks on the Map' that he had been:

> ... recently taken to task by a prominent Canadian educational authority in Japan for the greed and selfishness of his countrymen in jealously reserving for themselves a country which they were incapable of using (Clunies Ross 1938, 71).

Shades of the British and Indian Empire League of Australia, thirty five years earlier! But Clunies Ross did not rise to the bait, for he, like W Wynne Williams, former Deputy Chairman of the NT Land Board, had serious reservations about the potential of this so-called Empty North. Clunies Ross, while admitting the underpopulation of central and northern Australia, argued that little else could be expected because climatic factors inevitably imposed limitations not easily overcome.

Williams took a more novel approach and in his 1937 article 'Northern Australia, the Bogey of the Empty Spaces', he stated:

> Australia is fortunate in possessing such a worthless tropic territory fronting the populated East. No more effective barrier than this swamp-ridden and waterless interior could be devised to protect us. It is beyond comprehension for an invading army to land on the tropic coast to emerge on the interior plateau, where for at least a thousand miles, nearly every watering place can be destroyed, and two thousand miles of foodless territory must be traversed to reach the nearest wheat field. Japanese poachers have come into our preserves for trepang and shell and are making cultural contact with the sprinklings of coastal aborigines (sic). This can be prevented, not by the futile conception of populating the Northern Territory, but by efficient sea patrol (Williams 1937, 39).
The popular view, *ie*, populate the north, so scathingly dismissed by Williams persisted despite his efforts, and so the argument largely became centred on the other elements in the great debate. Who should settle the north? And how much do questions of race impinge on the question of who should settle? Once again the protagonists came from the sciences, the arts and politics. And once again the argument tended to run, if not exactly in a circle, then round and about certain predictable paths. Matters of biology, of genetics, of racial purity, of morality, of Christian values, became important to what was essentially a political and economic issue. What was certain was that the Commonwealth's preferred option for the NT, *ie*, colonisation and development by Anglo-Saxons, was a brave experiment, unique in the settlement and development of tropical areas. Could Anglo-Saxons carry the burden? Or was there something intrinsic to their biological makeup which would prevent them from achieving the government's goal? And, most importantly, were white women especially precluded by the very nature of their biology? The last issue became one of the most important: the presence or absence of European women in the NT became a central political issue in the debate. It remained so until the 1950s.

Matthew Macfie presented considerable evidence to support his contention that tropical and subtropical Australia could be effectively developed only by permitting controlled Asian immigration. He cited many 'experts' who supported his view that white people could not work in the tropics. In reply to those who feared an ' Asiatic deluge' he stated:

... *Protection from such an imaginary disaster could be effectually proved, as already stated, by legally restricting Asiatic immigrants to their own latitudes, and by having the management of large tropical and sub-tropical agricultural undertakings promoted by white capitalists and superintended by men of the same race* (19).

He analysed a document prepared by Dr Ramsay Smith who, after a four week visit to the NT, had come to the conclusion that 'there is nothing in the whole science and practice of medicine to show that white men, as individuals and races, cannot live in the tropics'. Smith was adamant that 'the question of white and black labour in the tropics [was] a commercial one, not a health one' (5-6). The doctor was among the audience during Macfie's address and would have heard the speakers present evidence from expert after expert to support his contention that Smith's document 'seems extraordinary from a strictly scientific point of view and is totally at variance with the collective testimony of numerous high authorities'.

In 1912 the Hon JM Creed addressed a meeting at the Royal Colonial Institute in London on the same issue. His presentation, 'The Settlement by 'Whites' of Tropical Australia' was chaired by the Duke of Marlborough KG and attended by such notables as HS (later Sir Henry) Gullett, a member of Nationalist and UAP Cabinets and the Hon John McCall, Agent General for Tasmania. Creed argued in favour of changes to what he called the Coloured Races Exclusion Act so that settlers in the NT could employ 'coloured workers'. His plan for settlement included resumption of 'all pastoral or other leases, the holders of which are not adequately working them and also of all alienated land not occupied, or which is not being made use of, paying the owners its market value'. A survey of NT lands would be instigated followed by subdivision into blocks of 'say, 320 acres'. Creed continued:

To ensure comfort to him [the settler] and a bearable life to his wife with such surroundings as would ensure the proper upbringing of his children, I should permit the employment of one or two coloured house servants, who would relieve his womenkind of labour that would often be impossible for them in the tropics. No thinking man who has proper feelings of humanity

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could desire to encourage a system of settlement under which men would quickly degenerate into neglected slovens, martyrs to indigestion consequent on ill-prepared, badly served food in a tropical climate; the women slatternly slaves; and the children, as the result of neglect which it would be impossible to avoid, little weak-constitutioned savages (574).

During discussion following the paper, the Bishop of North Queensland (Dr Frodsham) spoke at length about the difficulty of attempting tropical colonisation where the 'white colonists must do everything indoors and out for themselves'. He pointed out that 'all other attempts at tropical colonisation have been made in countries where there are large numbers of coloured people ready to do household and manual work'. Having said that the Bishop made another remark which showed that he believed nonetheless that settlement was possible. 'In Queensland, north of the tropic, the population is steadily increasing, in fact more than half the whole population of Queensland live in the tropics'. But, in his view, the far north would only be settled after the more congenial parts of the Australia had been developed (575, 576).

H Basedow MD PhD BSc, returned to the question of White Australia and its effect on white settlement in the NT in his address 'The Possibilities of the Northern Territory of Australia, with Special Reference to Development and Migration', on 3 March 1932. He was speaking to the Committees of the Empire Parliamentary Association which were studying the question of trade and immigration.

Basedow spoke on the 'White Australia' Policy:

No doubt the 'White Australia' policy is one of the finest policies that any European community could adopt, but we must not be blind to possible consequences. These consequences may arise from the proximity of our coastline to islands and alien countries harbouring millions upon millions of coloured people...

You must remember that from the eastern to the western boundary of the Northern Territory stretches a coastline of approximately a thousand miles; whereas, if you take the entire length of the north coast, you have at least four thousand miles. Along the whole line of country I doubt whether you could find more than 1,500 inhabitants!...

We in Australia may, therefore, at any time be called upon to make up our minds as to how best to handle this cherished doctrine of ours, in order to defend the dog-in-the-manger attitude we are adopting (Basedow 1932, 9-10).

In this address Basedow described the effect on Europeans of living in the tropic thus: 'the active rays of the sun are most severe, and ... they destroy the red cells in our blood, and ... this process bring with it reflex actions upon the nervous system, developing what is popularly called 'a tired feeling'; the tired feeling later becomes a form of neurasthenia and eventually melancholia. Women especially become very anaemic and feel fatigued from morning to night' (9). His last comment highlighted the dilemma facing government, planners and publicists: could there be successful settlement without white women, and if not, how could these women be cared for so as to lighten their special burden? Few doubted that white women had an especially difficult life in the tropics, despite cogent and statistically supported argument presented by medical experts like Dr RW Cilento, in his 1927 article 'The Settlement of Tropical Australia'. But Cilento was arguing in the face of popular opinion expressed scientifically by men like Clunies Ross, who wrote:
Before leaving the question of tropical agricultural settlement, it is of interest to consider the influence of temperature on the living conditions of white settlers. It will be seen that much of north and north western Australia has a mean annual temperature of 80 degrees F or over, while at Darwin and Wyndham this is associated for the whole of the summer with very high humidity (nine months in which wet-bulb readings are over 70 degrees F). Conditions are therefore most unsuitable for white settlers and particularly white women (1938, 82-83).

Cilento’s view, equally well stated and supported by analysis of statistics such as the 'Expectation of Life at Date of Birth', was never popularly endorsed. He wrote:

The next charge made against tropical Australia, is that even though men may possibly thrive, women do not do so, and that they are infertile in comparison with their sisters in other states...

This argument is ... fallacious and utterly opposed to facts and figures... (Cilento 1968, 236).

People preferred Clunies Ross’ simpler argument over the weight of evidence to the contrary provided by Cilento.

What was perhaps never in doubt was how important white women would be to settlement as wives, companions, civilisers and breeders of white children who would, in their turn, adapt to the unique physical conditions of the north. Once again the argument took on a circular pattern: white men would only come to the north and settle if white women came too; with settlement would come development; but white women could not be expected to come while the north remained undeveloped and until they came there could be no settlement...

In the 1920s, a writer in The Inlander, the journal of the Australian Inland Mission (AIM), saw the same problem and addressed it thus:

How can we hope to solve the supremely difficult problems of those lands with citizens reared in cities? Pioneers who have inherited their stern worth from parents hardened before them can alone supply the national service that is called for. In any case, is it likely that folk accustomed to city comforts would even dream of attempting life amid the far-off-winds of adversity?

If we do not provide for increasing number of bush-born conquerors over Nature, then others will press in from without; change the people: change the ideals: change the names: and blot out even the memories of us, who complacently call ourselves ‘Australians’ and who really are ‘clingers on the extreme corner of an empty land’ (The Inlander, 7,1, June 1922, 7).

Indeed, white men could not be expected to stay alone and live deprived of the comfort and companionship of a good white wife. What the north needed was families.

If thousands - it is a matter of thousands of our most virile and adventurous pioneers, comprising our A1 human stock - are allowed to remain celibate, sinking under the scythe of time without trace: and if the lands to Centre,
and North, and West, are thus allowed to remain practically void of real family life, that will indeed be the Funeral of Australia.

Cilento argued however, that not just any family would do, for it was his view that settlement of tropical north Queensland had been successful only because of three factors:

... these factors are undoubtedly those which essentially control the ability or otherwise of a white race to thrive in the tropics. They are: (1) the successful institution of adequate measures of preventative medicine; (2) the exclusion of races with lower standards of life and higher rates of disease and reproduction; and (3) the continual increase in locally born inhabitants (1968, 231).

It was generally conceded that white women who did come to settle in the frontier districts of the NT would need services to help them deal with the problems of loneliness and isolation. In the 1920s, the supporters of pastoral frontier settlers, organisations such as the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees Association (NTPLA) and settler families like the Duracks, defined health services as one of the major issues needing resolution. Their view was shared by the AIM which provided practical support in building a hospital, Wimmera Home, on VRD Station in the 1920s. The hospital was staffed by two trained nursing sisters who served two year terms at the remote outpost.

In the opinion of the NTPLA the nursing sisters provided an excellent service but more was needed. Members of the association, along with MP Durack and other pastoralists, attended a conference on Northern Development with Department of the Interior staff and Federal members of parliament in Canberra in July 1929. Prior to the meeting the NTPLA addressed the problem of medical services and made the following statement as one in a series of recommendations circulated for discussion.

As there are usually no medical men whatever in Central or North Australia, two travelling medical officers be appointed with headquarters at Alice Springs and Katherine who would visit the surrounding country more or less on schedule. They could also be inspectors of aboriginals. Absence of doctors is responsible for:

(a) loss of life of the present measurement (sic) inland population;
(b) loss of efficiency of the present measurement inland population;
(c) small number of white women which in its turn leads to grave social problems (Northern Territory Development Conference, Canberra 3 July 1929 AA CRS AI 29/210, p4).

And during the conference Alex Moray, Vestey's* NT Pastoral Inspector, developed this argument citing particular examples from the Victoria River District. In two cases women on Vestey's stations in isolated parts of the NT had died because they had been too far away from medical aid. The death of two women, a small number, he admitted, had been especially tragic because there were so few white women in the remote districts. Moray then addressed the social evils of a society which lacked the civilising presence of white women. In his opinion the absence was due to the failure of the government to provide families with adequate medical facilities:

* There are a number of verbal forms used to designate the Vestey family and its companies. In this text 'Vestey's' (one of the most common) is used. For uniformity no apostrophe has been used in the possessive case.
The men out there are men with red blood in their veins. Their manners may be rough and their morals loose, but they are very good for developmental work. I think the attendant evils that lead to grave social problems would be largely overcome by the provision of doctors (61).

The 'attendant evils' referred to by Moray were clearly matters related to miscegenation, the increasing numbers of part Aboriginal children being born to Aboriginal women and European men and widespread cases of serious venereal disease. By the late 1920s the problem, as it was seen, of the 'half-caste' was so serious that in 1928 the Commonwealth commissioned a study into the situation by JW Bleakley, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland. Questions of what to do with mixed race children, of how to maintain racial purity and how to breed out Aboriginality, were seen as intrinsic parts of the larger issues of settlement and development. Speakers in the public debate were not always happy about dealing with this issue, a sensitive one requiring tact and discretion. Dr Basedow however, met the question head on in the discussion following on from his paper presented in London in 1932.

Dr Basedow: What I would suggest is, at any rate to begin with, that we should protect the uncontaminated, primitive tribes. There are still a number of them living the lives of their happy hunting ancestors. It would certainly be useless to try our scheme on the demoralised and contaminated, semi-civilised people because I suppose every woman has been infected with some of the most loathsome germs of civilisation (gonorrhoea and syphilis) and become sterile. It would be absolutely hopeless and useless to try to redevelop such tribes. There remain about 50,000 primitive aborigines, but the half-caste element, of course, is enormous.

But there was one advantage of the half-caste question. Basedow referred to the 'remarkable circumstance' that over generations the colour of these people became more and more like an Anglo-Saxon and they 'never revert to colour'. Fortunately this meant that there would 'never be a throwback' and therefore there was 'never any risk in a subsequent generation of having a blackfellow born of a white woman' (Basedow 1932, 15-17).

So the list of problems to be solved in the NT went on: harsh climate, social evils, economic failure, population decline, distance, isolation, remoteness. And in every case the settlers who did stay and battle on, and the speakers in the public debate who stayed outside and watched, looked to the Commonwealth Government for solutions. Increasingly, from the 1920s onwards, the failure of settlement and development in the NT was seen as the fault of government. Some settlers saw government as quite literally too remote from the problem to be able to deal with it effectively.

In 1933 AJ Cotton, one of the pioneer settlers on the Barkly Tableland, proposed an alternative to government based development. *The Courier* (Brisbane) featured his proposal on 9 May:

*What is to be the future of Northern Australia? Many persons who have had no personal experience of that great territory hold the wholly erroneous view that it is a land of waste and wilderness, of sand and spinifex. Such a view is wholly wrong. For a distance of 200 miles from the coast it has an average rainfall of 30 to 40 inches a year, and in places much greater than that; there are many thousands of square miles of plateau covered with luscious Mitchell, Flinders and blue grass.*

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The very richness of Northern Australia makes it a danger to Australia while it remains unoccupied. Few men are better acquainted with its fertility and carrying capacity than Mr AJ Cotton, of Eva Downs (Barkly Tableland), and formerly owner of Brunette Downs. He knows its wealth, its handicaps, and its possibilities under proper management. He knows, as most of us do, that it cannot be developed under the administration of clerks in Canberra, 3000 miles away. Mr Cotton suggests that it should be developed by a chartered company, or as a Crown Colony, the area thus administered consisting of all that portion of Northern Australia and North-western Australia north of the 20th parallel (Courier 9 May 1933).

The Courier reported the Commonwealth response as:

'It is an excellent and practical scheme, and there is every reason to believe that it would meet with success' declared the Federal Minister for the Interior (Mr JA Perkins) (13 May 1933).

Ultimately the Cotton scheme was overtaken by a similar one initiated by the Commonwealth government. The Durack family, which had already spoken in favour of removing the State boundary between the Kimberley region and the NT at the 1929 Conference, spoke out in favour of the proposal.

I strongly favour the considering of North Australia latitudinally north of the 20th parallel, south latitude. This area, which eventually should become a new State would include northern western Australia from a point a little above Cossack. The Northern Territory and Queensland to a line down from Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The various Governments should co-operate, headed by the Imperial Government, to work along lines of leaving it to chartered companies to carry out the developmental work.

It should be strongly emphasised that the greatest freedom and support should be given to private enterprise, which would bring into the country all the desirable new capital, and would take its own risks (The Daily News 8 July 1933).

This latter scheme was in itself unsuccessful and its failure forced the government to instigate a number of enquiries into Northern Development which absorbed much of its energy during the 1930s. But the question of how much government should do, which MP Durack had raised at the 1929 conference, remained unanswered until 1937 when the Payne-Fletcher Report recommended strongly in favour of a more interventionist government policy.

The Duracks were in a good position to pose the question. For more than fifty years they worked tirelessly and unceasingly to develop the East Kimberley/Victoria River Districts. Like the Cotton family who pioneered settlement and the pastoral industry on the Barkly Tablelands, the Duracks were inspired as much by a deep love of the country as by their commitment to settling frontier. There was something compelling in it that made them want to share it with others of their kind. Despite this attachment to the country and their capacity to endure hardship and tragedy (many members of the family died of accident or were killed in the District) Durack obviously found the going almost too much at times.
At the 1929 conference he spoke of the difficulties his family had experienced and the negative effect the problems had caused;

*I have four sons, two just coming to manhood, and I can assure you that unless I see some prospect of something being done to improve conditions I am not going to induce them to go to North Australia* (AA CRS A1 29/210, 20).

The long term effect on the family perhaps led to their involvement in the late 1930s in negotiations to settle a community of Jewish refugees in the Wyndham hinterland. The scheme was ambitious. If it had succeeded it would have meant a dramatic increase in the population of the district where it received some support from the local people. In 1939, Alf Martin, manager of Bovril’s VRD Station and old friend of MP Durack, wrote to his chairman Lord Luke of Pavenham.

*I have seen many good settlers among the Germans in Australia and the Poles should make good settlers as they will work* (Bovril Estate Deposit, Martin to Luke 9 May 1939, ANU).

Martin referred in a more direct manner to the scheme a couple of months later:

[I] see Mr M.P. Durack has a Dr Syeinberg (sic) with him taking him over the Connor, Doherty and Durack properties. Think this man is working on behalf of a Jewish settlement in the Northern Territory or the Kimberleys and that Connor, Doherty and Duracks (sic) company would sell if they got their price (27 June 1939).

The scheme did not go ahead. There had been three years of discussions; between the Duracks and Steinberg; Duracks, Steinberg and the Western Australian Government; and all three parties with the Commonwealth Government. In his history of the pastoral industry in the Kimberleys, Geoff Bolton described the lobbying by Steinberg of the Western Australian Government on behalf of his scheme:

... Jewish settlers, he pointed out, had already made good the Jordan Valley in a climate rather worse than that of East Kimberley. Besides continuing pastoral pursuits, his settlers would engage in cotton growing and the culture of other tropical crops. He also envisaged the creation of irrigation settlements and villages, leading to the development of secondary industries... The thought of settlement and development in the empty North proved irresistible to the State Government. After an inspection tour by Steinberg in June 1939, they admitted the feasibility of the scheme, and by August had assented to Steinberg approaching the Federal Government to permit the entry of these migrants (Bolton 1953, 269).

World War II intervened, forcing the Commonwealth to deal with more pressing issues at an international level. In any case, during the war, the Commonwealth was more disposed to evacuating people from the Kimberley-Victoria River Districts than to settling migrants there.

Interest in the Northern Development from overseas had been a feature of the whole period from 1911 to the early 1940s. Lack of interest in the north was not the problem. Nor, if Dr Climento could be believed, was climate:
In the million square miles of tropical Australia there are enormous tracts open to settlement and colonization. There are, as yet, economic disadvantages, there are foci of tropical disease, there are all the barriers interposed by the primitive conditions which confront all pioneers, but climate alone presents no barrier (1968, 244).

Was this the case? Were the barriers in fact economic and the nature of settlement in a frontier society? Was the risk of tropical disease a real problem? Or were there other factors, such as lack of government commitment, as Durack had hinted in 1929. Price Conigrave had no difficulty in allocating blame when he wrote North Australia. He was able to point to the real source of the problem. Like the Duracks he stressed the need for government action based on clearly defined policies:

The man who is battling under pioneering conditions, in many instances, blames the Government for its unsympathetic treatment, and for the imposition of leasehold conditions which do not offer an attractive field for investment; furthermore, the Government to him is signified by an occasional visit to the territory of a political bird of passage in the person of the Minister for the time being in control of the country. Sometimes, doubtless with the best intentions, the Minister makes a genuine effort to become seized with the peculiar problems and difficulties of the North, but with a long procession of Ministers, due to the changing exigencies of party politics and Cabinet reconstruction and reshuffling, no part of the Commonwealth has been at a greater disadvantage than has North Australia by reason of the lack of continuity of land policy (1936, 297).

Conigrave went on to make the following point about the efficacy of government committees of enquiry. According to him, by the time a committee had completed its work:

... the present Federal Government in the political effluxion of time will have been driven from the Treasury Benches into Opposition, and a Labour Government, having other ideas regarding North Australia, will have become its official masters. The probability is that then, as has happened frequently on former occasions, whatever has been attempted by one political party, will be undone by the succeeding administration, and the territory, with all its inherent possibilities will still remain the Cinderella of Australia, and the expensive plaything of Australian party politics (303-304).

If the government was to be held ultimately responsible, what then was the role of government in the matter of developing and settling the north. How did the government go about its task? (And was Conigrave correct in pointing to the problems created by the lack of continuity of land policy?) Most importantly, how serious was the government's commitment to Northern Development? The history of government action or of its sometimes striking inaction, not surprisingly reflects the unresolved, often indeterminable nature of the years of debate in the popular arena.
CHAPTER THREE

SETTLEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT,
SCHEMES AND DREAMS
1911-37

The Labor government which took on responsibility for the NT in 1911 was not the same one which had begun negotiations for the transfer of the Territory from South Australia (SA). As Price Conigrave pointed out in 1936 this was to be a feature of the history of development and settlement of the NT well into the middle of the 20th century: one government would begin planning for a series of projects or developments in the NT and lose power before the schemes had been finished, or often before they had started. A government could come to office and discover that a commitment had been made to a particular course of action which would be politically unacceptable to itself and its supporters. There was little agreement about the NT, except that the place should not be left empty and that if it were to be filled it was best that settlement should be by Europeans of British stock.

The First World War was the first of many international events which took the attention and energy of government away from the NT and focussed them on the northern hemisphere. Two others were the Depression and World War II. The history of development and settlement in the NT not surprisingly reflects this: the NT was never important enough to the Commonwealth to demand its constant and single minded commitment.

Given the nature of what was being undertaken, that history is also confused and complicated, the arguments about if often circular and certainly circumlocutionary. Issues apparently resolved in 1912 would rise back to the surface and regenerate in the 1920s and could eventually be counted on to reappear in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s as well.

The most difficult problem that the various governments faced was how to deal with the allocation of land. Here they were perhaps too careful to not repeat old mistakes of colonial governments in the 19th century Australia, too anxious to do things differently. So they thrashed around, the politicians and bureaucrats, in the thorny undergrowth of land administration and made matters very difficult for themselves and the settlers. The situation was so bad by the late 1930s that the Payne-Fletcher Report commented in 1937 that many problems had been created by governments 'steeped too much in the old traditions of Australian land history'.

Land administration was only one of the difficulties. Governments were torn between deciding what should come first: development or settlement. They were vexed about who should provide capital for development: governments or settlers. They could not make up their minds about the political shape of the NT? Should there be no boundary between the north of WA and the NT; should the NT be divided horizontally for easier, perhaps more relevant, administration? They were never sure how much financial commitment a government should make; they constantly faced the problem of being accused of 'sending good money after bad'. At least one government attempted to give up altogether.

Certain issues remained constant. A pattern is just faintly discernible in the interminable twisting and turning of parliamentary debates, official reports, overseas delegations,
ministerial visits, conferences and public service correspondence. Even the issues which do stand out were never wholly separate from each other and often one had a habit of undergoing a change and becoming another in the manner of an Escher drawing. Any discussion of the history of the period must follow some order, however, and some categories and subheadings do suggest themselves as a means of bringing order to the confusion.

The major issues are these: administration of the NT, especially in the area of land administration; developmental projects; and overseas investment. They persist through three periods, the turbulent years of 1911 to 1937; the Second World War, an interregnum, when priorities shifted and the seeds were sown for change in economic, social and political structures in the NT; and the period of change after the war.

NT Land Administration can be described as being centralised (but not, as this discussion will show, necessarily uniform) complex, specialised and controversial. The Commonwealth Government assumed responsibility for Land Administration in the NT when it took over control from SA in 1911. Until 1912 land was occupied under the provisions of SA legislation and the Commonwealth 'took over existing freehold and leasehold tenures granted by the previous Administration'. Pastoral land 'continued to be held on the same terms as before. The Commonwealth did not attempt to alter the conditions under which the land was held'. The Commonwealth did introduce a change to the way in which urban land could be held in the future. Section 11 of the Northern Territory (Administration) Act, 1910 provided that 'No Crown Lands in the Territory shall be sold or disposed of for any estate of freehold except in pursuance of some contract entered into before the commencement of this Act'. There was, in that case a shift from freehold to leasehold tenure for all new urban leases (Inquiry into Land Tenures in the ACT and NT. Statement of Evidence for Presentation to the Royal Commission by the Department of the Northern Territory, June 1973, para 4.3, 4.61, 4.9).

The Commonwealth was committed to a system for the NT and the ACT which would 'avoid speculation and having the unearned increment gained from increasing land values pass entirely to the landowner' (4.9). As the debates in the two Houses of Parliament show, however, the matter was not allowed to rest there. During the whole of the period Land Administration, especially as a means of controlling and developing European settlement in the NT, was highly contentious.

From 1912 to 1915 the debate centred on the issue of freehold versus leasehold and largely followed party lines: speakers from the Labor Party were committed to leasehold, although some were prepared to consider variations to the system in order to assist landholders; Conservative members generally favoured freehold.

Parliamentary debates on NT Land Administration attracted a lot of attention. They were long and covered many days' sittings. In the 1912 Address in Reply Speeches the matter was raised on at least five days and speakers included the Minister for External Affairs who was then Minister responsible for the NT; and from the Opposition benches, Sir John Forrest. He was not impressed by the manner in which land laws were being introduced to the House:

*I complain that this House has not been fairly dealt with in respect of the law. We have a great problem before us in its settlement and it is only by Executive warrant that the land laws applicable to it have been framed. This is not right. The land laws to be enforced there should have been submitted to us for consideration ... and not merely gazetted by the Executive. I should like to know who amongst*
the Ministers and Chief Executive Officers of the Commonwealth knows anything about the Northern Territory; or the management of tropical lands (CPD, H of R, 4 July 1912, 481).

In the main, however, speakers focused on their support for or opposition to the two opposing land tenure systems. Labor members often took the opportunity to point out to their conservative colleagues on the Opposition benches that the SA Government had not achieved a great deal under the freehold system which it had administered in some areas of the NT.

Mr John Chanter (Member for the Riverina) for example complained:

The eyes of the country have been picked out, as they were originally picked out in Victoria and the other States, for the purpose of speculation. The freeholders of this land in the Northern Territory are simply sitting down, metaphorically, in London, waiting for the Commonwealth Government to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds, or it may be, millions, in placing settlers, the presence of whom will enhance the value of the holding (3 July 1912, 404-405).

In the same speech the Honourable Member maintained that 'no land should be disposed of by the Government except for the purpose of production; and that end will be attained under the Leasehold system (405).

Opposition members were opposed to leasehold in the NT because they saw a need to attract settlers to the north and believed that they would not be attracted by offers of leasehold. In his speech on 4 July 1912, Sir John Forrest stressed the need for settlement by Europeans. Referring particularly to the need for Anglo-Saxon settlers, he said:

Australia has been built up by men who came here from the Old Country, and established here new homes for themselves, and it is our desire that the Northern Territory, where there is plenty of land, and but few people, should be settled with people of our own race ... (482).

Mr Albert Palmer, (Member for Echuca, Victoria) aware that the population of Europeans of the NT was decreasing, put this question to the House:

What it is that induces men to leave more congenial situations to work under circumstances that are by no means so advantageous - to work where there are no social advantages, where everything is new and many hardships have to be endured? Is it not the hope that they will thus gain over and above that which they could anticipate making in more settled conditions? The only way in which we can induce people to settle in the Territory is to offer them a freehold tenure (11 July 1912, 664).

Later, responding to interjections from Mr Chanter, Palmer agreed that land could not be granted free of any conditions and said, 'I should insist on both residence and improvements' (664).

During the 1912 debate one of the speakers touched on a matter that was to continue to be a difficulty in the NT for a further twenty years. Mr WH Irvine, having expressed his concern that 'We have had no indication, save a sort of academic statement, that they propose to settle the Territory under the leasehold instead of the freehold system', wondered which lands were to be settled for pastoral occupation and which were to be
devoted to agricultural occupation. He asked a significant question: 'First of all, has the
Government even caused a survey to be made for such purposes?' (10 July 1912, 595).
Classification of land into specific landuse categories for the purpose of defining types of
settlement and economic development was not properly undertaken until the 1930s. The
matter of a survey remained a problem for at least a decade longer and the first major
surveys of pastoral lands, for instance, were not carried out until the late 1940s.

The understandable confusion about land classification had at least one interesting side
effect. In Sydney the Northern Territory and North West Settlements Corporation had
issued a prospectus which proposed 'to take full and immediate advantage of the Clauses
in Ordinance No 3 of 1912 of the Territory, giving perpetual lease and a twenty-one years'
free rental to the first 5000 applicants under the ordinance' (John Dwyer Papers).
Ordinance No 3 of 1912 did not, in fact, come into effect; it was superseded by Ordinance
No 8 of 1912.

The Directors of the Northern Territory and North West Settlements Corporation Limited
experienced difficulty at two levels. Despite the enthusiasm and drive of their very
energetic Secretary John Dwyer, meetings failed for lack of a quorum and members' contributions and donations did not meet the Corporation's cost. Notwithstanding its
internal difficulties, the Corporation might have reached a greater measure of success had
the Federal Government not been so muddled and unclear in its actions. The Corporation
cannot be blamed for what must have seemed to them to be dithering by Federal
parliamentarians.

On 6 March 1912, Atlee Hunt, Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, wrote to
Dwyer:

With respect to your proposals for obtaining land, I am to inform you that the Government do not intend to sell any of the land in the Territory. There is now in the course of preparation an ordinance stating the terms on which lands may be leased (Hunt to Dwyer, 6 March 1912).

Three weeks later, he wrote again:

... with further reference to your proposals for the encouragement of immigration to the Northern Territory, I have the honour, by direction, to inform you that no land will be available for leasing until it has been classified by the Board appointed for that purpose under the Lands Ordinance which has recently been passed. As soon as that is done advertisements will be issued specifying the areas available and the conditions that will be attached to their occupancy. I am forwarding herewith a copy of the Lands Ordinance (28 March 1912).

The Corporation appears to have been acting in response to this 28 March letter when it
issued its 1912 prospectus inviting the public to apply for Pioneer Shares at one pound
each in the venture to 'settle population in Northern Australia and thereby to bring into
useful occupation the vast areas of that country, and also to exploit its magnificent mineral
and other natural resources'. At about the same time they issued a second document on
behalf of the New North Committee which encouraged the 'opening up for Settlement and
Mining of the Victoria River District and adjacent country' (The New North, Prospectus).

Unfortunately, the Corporation had moved ahead of the Commonwealth and no leases
were made available. Frustrated by lack of Government response, Dwyer wrote to the
Minister for External Affairs again in September. He referred to his March
correspondence and requested a response to their application for land under Ordinance No 3. Atlee Hunt replied that he could not forward a copy of the Ordinance as its terms were being reconsidered by the government (27 September 1912). On 26 October 1912, having been pressed again by Dwyer, the Department wrote and emphasised points it had made during the earlier correspondence and informed Dwyer that he would be advised of land available for settlement as soon as land classification had been completed (26 October 1912).

These two major issues in respect of land, administration and settlement, continued to be unresolved for many years after this exchange of correspondence. It is significant that the issues remained unsettled for so long - while they were unresolved it was almost impossible for anyone, government, investor or settler, to proceed with the settlement of the NT much beyond a very basic or pioneering stage.

In 1915 the debate of leasehold versus freehold opened up again. Between 1912 and 1915 there had been two changes in government and parliamentary debates reflected these difficulties in a country only slowly coming to terms with nationhood. Time after time speakers came back to the point that the success of settlement in the north depended on the Government making the right choice for land tenure. Politicians were united in support for the idea of settlement in the NT, but continued to be divided on the principles of land tenure. Each side held its own opinion very strongly and debate was lively. Two speeches from the Estimates Debate, 10 June 1915, illustrate the difference.

Mr Sampson (Opposition Member for Wimmera) lead the debate:

*The Government are flying in the face of the world's experience by insisting on a land title that has failed wherever it has been tried. They have not truly endeavoured to develop settlement in the Northern Territory, and for that they should be condemned to everlasting obscurity. There is no excuse for their attitude, because they cannot point to any country in the world where the leasehold system has been a success. Australia, more than any other country, needs population, and should offer every inducement to settlement, because its position geographically is a perilous one. Unless the Government are prepared to alter the system of land tenure in the Northern Territory, ... the country will remain undeveloped, and will thus be a standing menace to the future integrity of the Commonwealth (CPD, H of R, 10 June 1913, 3904).*

Sampson's arguments were countered immediately by Mr Lynch, Member for Werriwa, from the government benches:

*If the honourable member for Wimmera had been speaking against instead of in favour of the freehold system, most people would endorse his statements, because no other system of land tenure has proved so inimical to human liberty as that ...* (3904).

Three speakers over the years suggested innovative proposals regarding implementation of the particular tenure system they supported. Their suggestions could be taken as a measure of their goodwill towards the settlement of the NT and its development; by suggesting flexibility and adjustments within their preferred system, they tried to provide a stile, a means for their opponents to get over the barrier of politics and ideology.

Mr Palmer suggested that freehold could be granted to a settler over a number of years, bearing in mind that the landholder would be subject to conditions of residence and of
improvements (CPD H of R, 11 July 1912, 644). Two further proposals whereby land would be converted from leasehold to freehold were made by Irvine in 1912 and Lynch in 1915. Under each proposal settlers would be assessed on their work in improving blocks, particularly in back country areas, and be allowed to purchase their land after a number of years (CPD H of R, 10 July 1912, 596; 10 June 1915, 3906).

Most speakers emphasised the importance of pastoralism, they placed their faith in the economic viability of sheep and cattle and they expected urban development would follow in the path of a successfully established grazing/pastoral industry. Indeed for the period 1912-1950 rural settlement and development were the major preoccupation of both politicians and administrators.

By the 1920s large British landholders, in particular Vestey's and Bovril, had begun to call the tune in these matters in the NT. Their interests soon dominated the debates. They preoccupied politicians on both sides of the parliament and administrators with demands for special consideration. Mr Lynch's interesting scheme was the last time for nearly thirty years that the interests of capable young men, presumably small landholders, received such imaginative attention.

A visit to Australia in 1922 by Sir Philip Proctor on behalf of the Vestey's group of companies resulted in some concessions by Senator George Pearce, Minister for Home and Territories. Pearce's conciliatory attitude to Sir Phillip was most likely in response to Vestey's criticism of the government's refusal to give the company a subsidy which would allow it to continue operating its Darwin meatworks.

The whole question of what caused the failure of Vestey's Darwin operation has remained open till the present time. At various times the blame has been attributed to the following: the North Australia Workers Union; the climate; poor needs assessment in the first place to establish whether the meatworks was necessary and viable (and Vestey's and government are variously held responsible for this strategic error); lack of commitment by Vestey's; lack of commitment by government. In 1922 Sir Philip Proctor was casting baleful looks at the government, in his view the government was not being as helpful as Vestey's would have liked.

He apparently conveyed this feeling to Senators Newland and Foll and Mr Jackson MHR and they made a note of Sir Phillip's comments in an undated memorandum to the Minister. Proctor among other things pressed for 'an early declaration by the Government of a policy for the development of the Northern Territory' (AA CRS A2124 512/3/7/1).

Vestey's response to the government offer can also be inferred from the following note sent by the Minister to the Secretary of the Home and Territories Department, dated 1 August 1922:

*On Friday last Sir Phillip Proctor and Mr Conacher saw me and said that they were not at present prepared to go any further with the agreement until Sir Phillip had returned to United Kingdom and consulted with his co-directors.*

*They would then submit their proposals. They suggested that Vestey's would probably ask for a subsidy.*

*They asked that when the conditions of the proposed new NT Land Ordinance had been approved by the Cabinet that they should be allowed to express their opinions on its terms and I promised to give them an*
opportunity to do so (AA CRS 2124 512/3/7/1, Minister to Secretary Department of Home and Territories 2 August 1922).

Pearce was referring to the first of two land bills debated in Federal Parliament in the 1920s, when members of parliament, taking note of the increasing role being played by companies like Vestey's in the Development of the NT, addressed what they saw as being an inevitable and regrettable consequence of that involvement; the risk of locking land into the control of land monopolists for long periods of time. The two land bills, the Northern Territory Crown Land Bill of 1924 and the North Australia Bill of 1926, were the subject of heated debate.

The first of these, when gazetted as the Crown Lands Ordinance 1924, complicated an existing lack of uniformity in land laws, particularly in respect of pastoral leasehold. Under this Ordinance, pastoral lessees could choose one of two options: they could carry forward their leases from the former SA Administration, i.e., until some time in the 1930s or 1940s; or they could negotiate new Commonwealth leases of 42 years term. Of the approximately 250 leaseholders affected, 53 (or one fifth) chose to remain with their current SA leases. In the main, the large landholders, in particular Vestey's, Bovril, Connor, Doherty and Durack - Victoria River District pastoralists - chose the new leases. In anticipation of that event, Labor Party Opposition speakers were very concerned that immense tracts of land would be locked up for a lengthy period. They were also disturbed by a possibility created under Clause 58 of the Schedule, for landholders to subdivide their leases in lieu of resumption.

One of the members, Mr O'Keefe, compared the situation in the NT with Tasmania his home state and argued: 'Unless we alter the clause we may create very grave dangers in the future by perpetuating a condition of land monopoly that has retarded the progress of every State of Australia' (CPD, H or R No 1 107 20 June 1924, 1516-16, 1520).

O'Keefe's prediction proved correct. The 1928 report of the North Australia Commission of Schemes for the Development of North Australia, stated:

The Commission deems it necessary to point out that, of the 160,860 square miles of country held under Pastoral Lease and Licence, 73,627 square miles - practically half - is held by only six lessees. The area so held equals over one-quarter of the whole area of North Australia (CPP No 28 1928, 6).

In summary then: By the mid 1930s and despite considerable legislative effort by Labor governments two decades before, the non-urban lands of the NT were locked up. Some of the company-held leases were eventually subdivided by the Labor government in the late 1940s after being resumed under Sections 49 to 51 of the Crown Land Ordinance of 1931. The land in question lay mainly within the Victoria River district and the resumptions and subsequent subdivision played an important part in the history of the District.

Once the Federal Government had settled on a system of land tenure for the NT, it began settling and developing it. No-one was able to hide from the fact that the task was going to be difficult - settlement of Europeans in the tropics was complicated and the settlement of the NT, particularly in the northern half, was not an exception. The Western Australian government had experienced the same difficulty in its quest to settle its East Kimberley region, the area immediately adjoining the Victoria River District, where families with pastoral properties in the Kimberleys also sometimes held leases. For this and for reasons related to the geographic unity of the two districts, the East Kimberley and Victoria River
Districts were often treated as a whole in the development schemes of the Commonwealth Government.

In recognition of the major differences in climate and landform between the tropical north of the NT and its more temperate south, the Commonwealth, in 1926, enacted legislation - the North Australia Bill, to divide the Territory into two separate administrative regions. Each region was to be administered separately and the North Australia Commission, supposedly based on an administrative centre in Darwin, was expected to be actively involved in development schemes for the northern half of the Territory.

At the same time the Commonwealth entered into discussions with the WA Government to take over control of the part of WA north of 26 degrees. In his history of the Kimberley pastoral industry, GC Bolton discussed these negotiations.

_This scheme was rejected by the Collier Government as too vague and indefinite, but, in subsequent debates, the members for the north showed interest in the suggestion that the Kimberley district should be handed over, perhaps on a temporary basis, to the Commonwealth... The Legislative Council passed a suggestion that the Commonwealth should administer Western Australia north of 20 degrees, which might be added to North Australia but the advice was not acted upon (1953, 228)._ 

In the event, nothing came of these negotiations, but, during a period of intense activity related to Northern Development in 1928-33, the matter was clearly regarded as an important factor if the north was to develop.

MP Durack, a Kimberley pastoralist, supported the idea when he spoke at the Conference between the Commonwealth and the NTPLA in 1929.

_When I speak of the North I want to forget that there is a boundary. I want to say emphatically that Northern Australia is not going to be developed unless we forget the boundary, and we cannot develop Western Australia unless we can get across to your side (AA CRS A1 29/210, vii)_

Later in the meeting, Durack moved a formal motion in support of his suggestions which was seconded by the Vesteys man, CWD Conacher. The motion also received support from WW Killen, whose interests lay on the Barkly Tableland on the eastern side of the NT.

It is not clear whether the idea of a united north emanated from pastoralists like Durack whose families had been in the District, on both sides of the boundary, for fifty years, or from Commonwealth Ministers. In any case the idea appears to have been born of Western Australian ingenuity. The main proponent of the scheme in the Government was Senator Sir George Pearce, a Western Australian member of the Federal Cabinet and the Minister for Home Affairs. Bolton, working from the diaries of Durack for the years 1926 and 1928, wrote:

_In March 1928, Sir George Pearce conferred with Sir Charles Nathan and MP Durack about the prospect of uniting North Australia and the Kimberleys, and attracting a chartered company to attempt the development of this combined province... Sir George suggested that Nathan and Durack should go to London to ascertain what would induce a capitalist to invest in the Ord Valley (1953, 230-31)._
Shortly after his meeting Sir Charles Nathan went to London alone and spent the period May to October 1928 there, following up the suggestions that had been discussed between Pearce, Durack and himself. Nathan's visit was an official one on behalf of the Australian Government in support of development proposals made by the North Australia Commission. During his stay in London Nathan was looked after by RG Casey, who 'was in London as Australian liaison officer attached to the Foreign Office' where 'his primary function was to improve the flow of information on international affairs to Australia' (Hudson and North 1980, vii-ix). Casey kept Bruce well informed on events in the UK. He first wrote of meeting Sir Charles Nathan in a letter dated 31 May 1928 and said 'I will do what I can to put him in touch with the people he wants to meet' (338). (Indeed Casey appears to have done so much that it caused him some inconvenience and in August he mentioned this to Bruce.)

One person with whom Casey was involved on Nathan's behalf was FC Goodenough, the Chairman of Barclay's Bank, and the three men dined together in July 1928. Goodenough made a suggestion that the proposals being discussed 'sounded like work suitable for a chartered company' but foresaw difficulties. One of these, that so much of the land had already been alienated, might make it impossible to give 'the company the necessary administrative and quasi-sovereign powers'. On another point, Goodenough suggested that there 'might also be domestic political opposition to the formation of an imperium in imperio. It was suggested also that a chartered company smelled of the Crown Colony' (379-380).

Casey's imagination seems to have been fired by his involvement in these discussions and he continued to have an interest in Northern development for many years. He suggested to Bruce that the problem of North Australian development was a matter of transport. His comments, in the form of advice to Bruce, on the development of the 'roadless train' quas the proposed 'big railway scheme' are most significant. It should be noted that part of Nathan's delegation was to discuss the effect of proposed railway developments with people like Sir George Lawson-Johnston, Chairman and Managing Director of Bovril Ltd. If Casey voiced to others, eg, Goodenough or Lawson-Johnston, the opinions he expressed to Bruce he may well have contributed to the general lack of enthusiasm shown in the UK for the Australian Government proposals for railway development. Casey's letter to Bruce reads:

> It occurs to me that the development of the 100-ton tracked roadless train is opportune and may be a distinct factor in the transport side of the question. Indeed, I think it will not be far from the truth to say that practically the whole problem of North Australian development is a transport one. The anticipated capital expenditure on the railways in North Australia is appalling and they will not pay a penny of even the interest charge for very many years, which will mean a big interest bill to offset against the development. The problem seems to me to represent a first-rate opportunity to develop the roadless train, which promises to be able to fulfil the transport requirements of the North for many years.

McDougall tells me that the Empire Marketing Board has today agreed to find £60,000 (one half) of the development cost of the roadless train. It will be, I expect, 2 or 3 years before the idea reaches a practical stage. All I want to suggest now is that we should not commit ourselves firmly to this big railway scheme until we know what the performance and the promise of the roadless trains are to be ...
I feel strongly that we should, if necessary, contribute substantially towards the development of the roadless train so as to expedite the practical stage of having a machine in Australia to experiment with. And, further, that we should have well in our minds the possibility of exploiting this roadless train scheme to the utmost, both in North Australia and elsewhere where developmental railways are needed to go in advance of settlement to encourage and promote it (376).

McDougall, an Australian Government representative in London, was also very interested in the question of transport and from 1927 represented the Government on the Mechanical Transport committee set up by the Empire Marketing Board. In July 1927 he included a comment on the Committee in a letter to Bruce:

I today attended the first meeting of the Mechanical Transport Committee set up by the Empire Marketing Board, particularly on the recommendations of the Colonial Office Conference ... it was decided to create a small Executive Committee with instructions to that Committee immediately to prepare a general plan of attack on the problems of mechanical transport in the less settled parts of the Empire...

I hope that, provided Australia is satisfied that a satisfactory plan of attack has been made out, there will be no difficulty about a financial contribution from the Commonwealth Government. I further hope that it may be possible to induce the Pastoralist Associations who should benefit very considerably by the success of such investigations also to contribute (Hudson and Way 1986, 398-6).

The committee faced problems in getting itself established and McDougall referred to it only irregularly until a year later when he wrote to Bruce again, as follows:

The Empire Marketing Board yesterday also considered the Mechanical Transport question and decided to make available £60,000, spread over five years, provided that assurances were forthcoming that the Overseas Governments would be prepared to make an equal sum available. In view, however, of the urgency of getting to work on the problem and the length of time that must necessarily elapse before Amery could have consulted the interested Dominions and Colonies, it was agreed that the Empire Marketing Board should find the whole cost of the first year’s work, namely £20,000, and therefore a lesser proportion of the expense than 50% during the other years.

It is difficult to say what sort of sum Australia ought to be prepared to find but everything depends on the number of Overseas Governments who will come into the scheme. I should think that Australia might contemplate an expenditure of (say) a maximum of one-sixth of the £60,000 which is required from overseas ...(623).

Nathan meanwhile continued on his round of discussions with the English. He also made a written record of his meetings in London, particularly of those with Bovril Chairman Sir George Lawson-Johnston. In his correspondence and notes, he made only passing references to Vestey’s, with whom he had also obviously had meetings; there appear in the files no detailed notes of those meetings.
It is clear, however, from Sir Charles' records that the Australian Government could not count on Bovril and Vestey's cooperating with each other in supporting Government plans for developing the north. In his notes for a meeting with Sir George Lawson-Johnston held on 4 September 1928, Nathan wrote:

_in the course of conversation, Sir George Lawson-Johnston stated that he did not think his company could work in close cooperation with Vestey's. The Bovril business was not competitive with Vestey's as Bovril was mainly concerned with the production of meat extract as the basis for their product. Bovril did not intend to go into the meat canning or freezing business (AA CRS 494 902/1/82, 2)._

And in his notes for the meeting on 11 September 1928, Sir Charles noted:

_Sir George re-iterated the previously expressed view that there were no possibilities for his Company working satisfactorily with Vestey's, besides which the Works situated at Darwin were unsuitable owing to the distance and the bad country over which the cattle had to travel (6)._

In the main Sir George was most interested in developing a meat extracting plant in conjunction with the Wyndham Meat Works.

_He asked for an expression of opinion as to whether the Government would be prepared to provide the additional facilities by erecting Extract Works and whether they would be prepared to lease the Works either to Bovril Limited or to a Company formed for the special purpose (6)._

After pointing out to Sir George that the Wyndham Meat Works was owned by the Western Australian Government, Nathan mentioned that 'negotiations were proceeding with a view to the Commonwealth taking over the Western Australian territory North of the 20th parallel' (7).

The discussions about railway developments in the north were most illuminating. In response to a question raised by Sir Charles about a proposed line from Wyndham in a southeasterly direction, that is, into the Victoria River District, the Bovril chairman said 'this was not essential to the cattle trade', (8) although he could see it would be desirable if the sheep industry were to develop. Sir Charles' notes on the railway proposal indicate that Bovril and Vestey's were in agreement at least on that matter:

_It was interesting to note that Sir George's viewpoint regarding railway development was very similar to that of Lord Vestey. Both laid stress upon the immense value of an extension from Daly Waters to Cammowal, pointing out that it would give access to what were unquestionably valuable meat markets, namely Queensland and New South Wales. Both were of the opinion that the construction of this line would give great impetus to the raising of cattle in the Northern Territory but neither of them was particularly interested in the development westward or even in the extension from Wyndham south east (9)._

In his _Survey of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry_ Bolton referred to the diary entries MP Durack made on Sir Charles' return from London. Sir Charles was obviously more forthright in conversation with his friend and colleague than he allowed himself to be in his formal reports, and reported that 'Vestey was unfavourable to any scheme unless where they would dominate....' Indeed Vestey opposed the construction of a railway out of
Wyndham which might help to bring more cattle into competition with his own interests (1953, 252).

Perhaps because of the nature of his mission, to sell the north in London, Sir Charles Nathan's notes show him being more optimistic than the situation warranted. He commented that 'There is no question but that Sir George is extremely interested in the whole project'; reading between the lines it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Bovril chairman did not much care what development took place so long as the company could continue to sell meat extract. This was no doubt a very proper concern for the Chairman and Managing Director of a large company, and it is clear that there was where Sir George's emphasis lay, not on patriotic feelings about northern development.

Sir George did not set out to mislead Nathan, however. In Nathan's own notes there is sufficient evidence to support the notion that aside from a politely civilised interest in Sir Charles' proposal, the English lord was concerned about the high cost of improvements on pastoral properties in the NT, and the low return on carcasses as compared with the Argentine market. He wrote to Nathan on 2 October 1928:

> Certainly I thought a great deal about our conversation as regards the Northern Territory, but I feel it very difficult to make any concrete suggestions before I actually see the conditions on the spot. One thing that seems very plain to me is this - that to get costs down per head at Wyndham, the important thing is to put 100,000 head of cattle through that Works each year. With all the advantages in Argentine it would not be possible to work at a profit in a works putting through only 20,000 to 30,000 animals per year. It makes the cost per head too great. If you could get a works in Northern Australia putting through 100,000 head a year between freezing, canning and extract, it would enable the works to pay a living price to those who raise the cattle (AA CRS A494 902/1/82, 3).

The two men met again on 4 October 1928, first at lunch with Sir George's colleagues of the Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company in the Company's Board Room and afterwards for a 'private chat'. At the second meeting the two men moved towards some final proposals resulting from their various discussions. Three alternative proposals were considered 'worth closely examining'. These were as follows:

1. **The complete scheme which embraced the taking over of the Wyndham Meat Works; the absorption of the Durack and Bovril properties, plus certain unalienated lands (totalling in all approximately 35,000 square miles); and the development of the cattle and sheep raising activities in certain defined areas.**

2. **The Wyndham Works, with a combination of the Durack and Bovril interests for the development of the cattle industry.**

3. **An extension of Bovril activities by the improvement of their own property and the leasing of the Wyndham Works.....**

In any of the activities contemplated, substantial extension of the leases would be necessary, as also the provision of water supplies along the stock routes, while the leasing of the Wyndham Works at a reasonable figure would be essential (3).
What emerges from an analysis of the relevant documents for the period 1926-1933 is that the major landholders in the NT, specifically the large British leaseholders of Victoria River pastoral runs, approached the problem of Northern Development from an entirely different perspective to that of the Australian Government. Vestey's and Bovril consistently couched their applications for assistance to the government in economic terms: tax concessions, freight subsidies, and extension of leasehold periods were their main thrust. The Government, on their other hand, spoke in political and ideological terms. Although government sought huge sums of money to invest in infrastructural projects such as railways and ports, their ventures into the world of finance were stimulated by political and electoral concerns rather than being based on sound economic judgement.

The one project the government backed that was of any relevance to the NT, the 'trackless train', was actually very successful. It is doubtful that the government would have committed its £12 000, however, without the urgings of Casey and McDougall and the UK government's insistence. Correspondence with W Easton, chairman of the North Australia Commission, and a member of the Australian Committee dealing with Mechanical Transport, indicates that pressure from the UK may have been strong.

Nevertheless the government could feel satisfied at having achieved at least one success in the troubled area of northern development. The first experimental road trains operated in 1934 and significantly their first loadings were to Wave Hill, a Vestey's station in the Victoria River District. By 1939 the government had committed itself to introducing a regular scheduled service; the last of the government-employed road train drivers was paid off in the early 1950s; by then private operators had begun their road freight services.

The main thrust of government planning and activity in the development of the north, however, was to seek capital from an overseas source. When Sir Charles Nathan went to London in 1928 he was participating in a pattern laid down by Australian governments in the earlier years of the 1920s. CB Schedvin, in his Australia and the Great Depression has described the situation thus:

"...The Australian economy in the 1920s was unusually dependent on overseas sources of capital. In the decade as a whole, about one-fifth of total investment was financed by overseas borrowing. In the last half of the decade, however, this proportion rose sharply to average one-quarter (Schedvin 1973, 3).

Significantly there was an 'unusually high demand for public capital formation' (4). Schedvin continues:

New and improved housing, extension of water and sewerage facilities, the creation of a sealed roads network, the provision of domestic and commercial electrical installations, telecommunications and extensive additions to education buildings were all among the social requirements which competed for finance; and all except housing depended on the public sector. In addition, about one-third of the government loan fund was required to improve railroad communications and a further proportion was used (with little benefit) for closer settlement on the land and rural diversification (5).

Against this background then, Sir Charles Nathan's visit to London takes on an added meaning. Clearly, if he had obtained support from Vestey's and Bovril for the
Government's plans for closer settlement and development in the North and particularly in the East Kimberley-Victoria River Districts, then it would have been easier for him to approach the UK Government and the Banks of the City for finance. The Australian Government quite understandably expected the British to support British involvement, a reasonable presumption given the high level of involvement of the UK, at political, diplomatic and bureaucratic levels, in the development and protection of British interests in the Argentine and Uruguay, where, of course, Vesteys were very active (MAF 40/86 c1935, PRO Kew).

Sir Charles had a number of problems to contend with and in some respects the worst was a certain naivety on the part of Australian Governments in dealing with City bankers and senior, often patronising, English civil servants. During the time between the two World Wars Australian Governments consistently, and in the face of considerable odds, attempted to change the nature of its relationship with the UK from supplicant colonial status to one of equal partnership in Dominion affairs.

The attempts largely failed because of entrenched UK attitudes about the status of Australia and because Australian did not sufficiently take into account those attitudes nor research the political and economic background to negotiations. This was particularly true in the field of UK-Australian trade relations and especially in the touchy area of meat export. Britain, for the most part, could not only rely on supplies from British owned companies in Latin America; in time of war they preferred to look to Latin America because it was closer to the UK and the shipping routes thereby more easily safeguarded. Even after the Ottawa Agreement in 1934, which was supposed to initiate a system of Dominion preference, the UK continued to purchase the bulk of its imported beef from Latin America: a fact not recognised by Australia (Butlin 1961; Millar 1978, 75 et seq; Riddett 1986).

Casey was aware that there were problems about raising loans in London and during Nathan's visit he wrote to Bruce to express his concern. In his letter of 4 July 1928, Casey conveyed to the Prime Minister criticisms of the Australian Government which had been put to him in very strong terms by Goodenough, the Barclay's man.

_The too consistent borrowings on the part of Australia was rather getting on the nerves of the 'market'. Whether our security was good or not was really not in question. The point was that we were tending to glut the market with our loans, and if we persisted we would undoubtedly suffer. He inferred that this situation would come about in spite of any propaganda that we might institute to prove the value of our securities (Hudson and North 1980, 380)._

Goodenough had not merely expressed criticism, however and Casey also passed on the banker's advice: 'His main solution was that we should keep off the money market, as a Government at least, for twelve months'. As well, he recommended that Australian Governments should vary their loan offerings 'from being the inevitable 'Commonwealth Loan' for an unspecified purpose, to loans definitely hypothecated for particular purposes, _ie_, Railway Loans, Land Development Loans, etc, specifying in each prospectus the exact purpose of the Loan and the potentialities of the district or public utility that was to be developed' (380).

In a very perceptive comment on Australian behaviour in relation to the UK money market, behaviour reflecting Australia's defensive response to being treated subserviently by the UK, Goodenough kept on repeating the statement that 'it was no use saying that the
London money market was 'wrong' in being critical. It was our place to satisfy the lender we were 'right'. Perhaps the most telling comment was that:

*He had a fair impression that there was a lack of soundness in our methods of conducting ourselves, in that we were trying to maintain an impossibly high standard of living and waste, and were bolstering up this position with loan money (380).*

Australian economists and economic advisors to Australian governments were not totally unaware of the problems raised by Goodenough and presumably the points he made, quoted by Casey, were noted and understood by members of Bruce's cabinet. Later, after the 'crash' of the late 1920s and subsequent World Depression, DP Copland (later Sir Douglas), Professor of Commerce and Dean of the Faculty of Commerce at Melbourne University, delivered a series of lectures at the University of Cambridge. Copland noted that Australia had exposed her economy to structural defects by participating so fully in the World boom of 1925 to 1929, but made it clear that these factors had not gone unnoticed in Australia. In Copland’s view 'Had no depression occurred, some modification of traditional policy was inevitable, and Australia was being prepared for this change by criticism and constructive argument, both at home and abroad' (Copland 1970, 22).

Changes of another kind had occurred in late 1928 and these also influenced the long term plans of the Australian Government for development and settlement in the North. Sir George Pearce who had been Minister for Home and Territories for many years and a strong supporter of development projects for the North, left this portfolio and took up the position of Vice-President of the Federal Executive Council. Pearce who had been a member of the Labor Party until the Conscription issue split the party in 1915-17, had followed WM Hughes into the Nationalist Party. According to his successor to the Home and Territories portfolio in 1928, CLA Abbott, Pearce took his Labor sentiments with him, and:

*Like all members of the Labour Party was inclined to work for closer settlement of the land before the stage for such development had been reached, but he had a genuine belief in the future of the Territory (Abbott 1950, 33).*

Hence Pearce's strong push for railways, for if Abbott was correct in his assessment of Pearce then the latter most likely belonged to that school of thought which saw railway networks as the forerunner of and not merely a support for, closer settlement. (Abbott's comment would help explain in part Pearce's close association with those two other supporters of closer settlement of the Wyndham hinterland - Nathan and Durack.) The absence of such a powerful and committed man from a direct involvement in NT affairs was bound to have an effect.

Senator Pearce left Abbott the legacy of the North Australia Commission for which he had introduced the legislation in the Senate in 1926. It was Abbott's view that the failure of the NAC to handle the task of development was caused by the failure of the Federal Government to support it. His criticism was as much a comment on the Bruce Government of which he was a member as about the shortlived Scullin Labor Government of the early 1930s. Most of his bitterness was, however, reserved for Scullin:

*It is true that a depression had spread over the world and was moving towards Australia and that the Government was forced to reduce expenditure. This compulsory economy was exercised first in the Northern*
Territory .... The doomed North Australia Commission staggered on to the completion of its five years term, by which time a Labour Government was in power. This Government repealed the North Australia Act and abolished the Commission, the separate administration of Central Australia was wiped out, and the administration of the Northern Territory was again placed under control of an Administrator whose headquarters were in Darwin. The Territory was back to where it had been five years previously (34-35).

Shortly after arriving back in Australia from London, Sir Charles Nathan wrote to the new Minister and mentioned issues he regarded as still current in the matter of northern development. The area still receiving most attention was the 'country around Wyndham, both in the Northern Territory and Western areas' and arrangements had been made for FJS Wise, an agricultural expert, to make an examination of those districts. Wise was expected to report on the suitability of the area for 'pasturage and the growing fodder'. Nathan also believed that Wise's investigations should be very valuable in negotiations with Sir George Lawson Johnston who was due to arrive in late July (AA CRS A4904 902/1/82, 19-22).

At this point, Nathan, at least, was persisting in his view that Bovril's presence was an important factor in developing the Victoria River/East Kimberley Districts. He made an arrangement for another report to be made on the possibility of sheep raising. In his view:

Such an authoritative report would be of extreme value, both in your negotiations with Sir George Lawson Johnson (sic) and in assisting him to create the necessary financial organisation in London to handle both the sheep and cattle raising industries (22).

Old hopes and plans obviously die hard and while it is possible to admire Nathan's endurance, it is difficult to see why he continued so persistently in the face of great odds.

Abbott was capable of forming his own views and two months later made a Ministerial visit to North and Central Australia. His itinerary took him by plane from Cloncurry north-west through the Barkly Tableland, leaving that type of country at Newcastle Waters, and thence via Wave Hill to VRD and to Wyndham (24). In Wyndham he inspected the meatworks and held a discussion with Messrs Lefroy and Evans, Western Australian pastoralists, who were making an independent survey of the western portion of North Australia. From Wyndham he flew to Darwin and from there followed the overland telegraph line to Alice Springs, thence via Oodnadatta and Maree to Adelaide (24).

The Minister was not impressed by what he saw. Admittedly a florid writer, he must have been very disturbed to allow himself to use the following words in an official document:

During the 12 days I was in the Territories, I landed twice each day. At practically every landing place or station lessees came to meet us, and I had the opportunity of talking with them and hearing their requirements. I may say that, with one exception, the meetings with these lessees depressed me. There were no young men, and the men I talked with were nearly all on the shady side of sixty. They had practically spent their life on their runs, in the main their families had remained south, and others had never married. It will be remembered that earlier in this report I stressed the fact that over 70 per cent of the cattle in these areas were owned by two companies, and I am also of the opinion that the majority of these small
lessees are under financial obligations to these companies and dependent on their good will (28).

Abbott obviously did not share in Nathan's rosy-eyed view of Vestey's and Bovril as developers of the NT. He described the Vestey's meatworks in Darwin as a 'gloomy spectacle' and sheeted home to Vestey's the full responsibility for the failure of the venture (30). In his view the whole future of the NT was 'dependent on the meat export trade' and his report continued:

To capture and hold the meat trade, Australian stock owners must be able to produce beef, which will hold its own with cattle from other countries such as the Argentine. At the present time, I have no hesitation in saying that the stock I saw in the Territory could not possibly do that (30).

The features of the cattle industry Abbott observed from the air were the same to receive repeated attention in Government investigations and surveys right up until the 1950s: no fences, very few yards, no bullock paddocks, no segregation of the sexes, inbreeding, no decent bulls, etc. Indeed in Abbott's words, 'the number of 'scrub bulls' on the stations must be prodigious'. And Abbott again was prepared to point to the culprits:

... In my opinion a great deal of the lack of development in the Territory has been due to the enormous areas of country held by certain large British companies. These two companies have practically over 50,000 square miles of the best of the country in North Australia, and run them with the least possible expenditure ...

I would point out that these big pastoral leases were extended in 1924 until 1965, with certain resumption clauses (31).

Meanwhile FJS Wise had completed his survey of the Victoria River and east Kimberley districts. The letter accompanying his report to Nathan in August 1929 echoed Abbott's words: appalling conditions on stations in the Victoria River District, incidents of incompetence, neglect and abuse (39). Wise made one comment which raises serious questions about Vestey's real intentions for developing the area - perhaps they meant only to keep the politicians and planners guessing!

I had an interesting conversation with Mr Conacher of Vestey's, whose opinion it is that a light railway extending 200 miles south of Wyndham would be justified. He considers that the wastage occurring by keeping cattle three and four weeks on the road after mustering would amount to over £1 per head. In addition to this the beef would be much better quality if placed in the works a day or so after mustering (40-41).

Mr Conacher must have had other things on his mind at the meeting he attended in Canberra on 30 July 1929 to discuss 'Proposals regarding the Northern Territory submitted by the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees' Association'. During the meeting chaired by CLA Abbott (only recently returned from his tour of inspection of the NT), Conacher did not speak at all during the discussion of Railways; he was, however, the main speaker on the agenda item 'Motor Haulage':

The question of transport and communication is always stressed when the Territory is being discussed. As I mentioned, previously in drafting our proposals to put before you, we tried to be as reasonable as we possibly
could. We did not ask you to build a railway across the Victoria River District or other branch lines, but we do suggest that you should do something to assist those people who are in areas not likely to be entered by the railways now being built to Alice Springs or the proposed railway from Daly Waters to Queensland (AA CRS A1 29/210, 45).

As he continued with his presentation, Conacher referred to the very high cost of freight and gave as an example the fact that 10 tons of cement for construction of cattle dips could be bought for £50 in Sydney but would cost a total of £350 delivered to the Station. Flour purchased at a cost of £10 per ton would cost 'another £30 before you get it to the Station' (45-46).

It is possible of course, that when he spoke to Wise about a 'light railway', Conacher expressed a personal rather than a company opinion, and perhaps he naively believed that that opinion would not be repeated in any official context. And it is possible Conacher did not speak during the discussion on railways during the 29 July meeting because the NTPLA had an order of the day which allocated certain items to particular delegates. It is also possible to read from the minutes that Conacher may have kept quiet because he was still smarting after an exchange with Abbott in the discussion on Pastoral Leases which left Vestey's looking mealy mouthed about its expenditure on improvements to their pastoral leases (28). At this point, whatever the real reasons for the conflicting opinions expressed by Conacher, it would be pertinent to remember that Sir Charles Nathan had told his friend and colleague, MP Durack that 'Vestey was unfavourable to any scheme, unless where they would dominate'.

Plate 3: CWD Conacher ready to leave station
Wave Hill Station 1922
(NTU Library, Australian Investment Agency Deposit)
The high hopes and intense activity of this 1928-29 period in the history of Northern Development were destined to come to nothing. Little could be hoped for in terms of overseas loans, direct investment or capital expenditure once the crash of 1929 had occurred, and things went quiet in the NT for a few years while Australia fought her way to economic recovery.

In the period between 1929-33 there were two changes of Government in the Federal Parliament and when the United Australia Party, under former Labor Minister, J. Lyons came into power in January 1932, there had been considerable changes in the ministerial line up on the Government benches. SM Bruce was in London, having resigned from politics after a short term in Lyon's cabinet. RG Casey was on the government benches in Canberra. The new Minister responsible for the NT was Archdale Parkhill, Minister for the Interior, a position he held for only a few months before being promoted to the position of Postmaster General. Parkhill was followed late in 1932 by JA Perkins.

Before he left the Interior portfolio, Parkhill made a tour of the NT, which occupied 28 days, and covered a distance of approximately 7000 miles. During the tour Parkhill met with 109 deputations and held a number of private interviews with residents of the Territory (AA CRS A1 34/34449, 1).

Parkhill was less gloomy than Abbott in his view of the Territory, perhaps thereby reflecting his own more pragmatic view of things rather than any radical change in the NT itself. He had lower expectations and was thus less disappointed. On one point of fact he differed quite noticeably from Abbott:

> Many men are met who have spent their whole lives in the Territory and have no desire to leave it. A considerable number of younger men are there - capable, virile men - whose energies, properly directed, are calculated to be of immense value in the development of the area (2).

Many of the young men, no doubt, had taken to the road and ventured as far as the NT because of the Depression and would later be employed there in fighting with the Australian Defence Forces during the Second World War. But this point of Parkhill's, and his subsequent comments, highlight a most significant feature of settlement in the North: a marked disparity in population figures for white men and for white women. The difference was exacerbated during the war when all European, Asian and part-Aboriginal women and children were evacuated from the Top End to southern parts of Australia.

Parkhill, who had been a party machine man in NSW for many years, emphasised important political issues in his report. He was probably the first Minister to officially acknowledge the political as well as economic factors in Northern development. Several of his points bear examination:

> The outlook of the people throughout Northern Australia from a political point of view is unsatisfactory. The Territory has been so long regarded as a liability to the Government that there is a feeling of contentment with, and resignation to this view. Consequently, there is a definite disinclination to initiate and do many things which might readily be done locally, but with regard to which requests are preferred to the Commonwealth Government (3).

He realised that the Government would not be in a position to spend the large sums necessary to develop roads and railways and said so quite plainly. 'The Territory', Parkhill wrote, 'requires the provision of markets, water, transport and general development. To do
this, capital is required. It seems obvious that the Government cannot, even if it desired, provide adequate funds to successfully develop the Territory. The capital required must consequently be provided by private enterprise, either within or outside the Commonwealth' (7-8) (Fitzhardinge 1979, 558).

Thirty years of experience as a party secretary and 'bag man' had taught Parkhill that investors would demand, indeed should be given, concessions; and he held no soft-headed ideas about the notion that 'trade followed the flag' (AA CRS A1 34/3449, 8). Before him was the example of Vestey's and Bovril and in an intelligent analysis of their actions he accurately assessed their situation vis-a-vis their Argentinian and Australian business ventures:

Thus it is largely because of opposition in the past to the foregoing view - that private enterprise be given an opportunity to develop the Territory - that British capital to the extent of £500,000,000 has been directed to investment in the Argentine. This investment of British capital is in turn a considerable opposition to the building up of the cattle industry in Northern Australia. Our national interest as well as our national safety, requires a change from past policy and the foregoing proposal, to afford private capital a chance with proper safeguards, is therefore urged (8).

Parkhill definitely did not support what Vestey's and Bovril had done with their Victoria River leases so far, and he spoke strongly against the extensions of these, because:

This would mean, in many instances, the holding of large areas of land at low rentals out of public use for a very long period. There seems to be no very sound reasons for this course as it would be maintaining a period of stagnation during that time, and would prevent offers being made to others who might endeavour to develop, with courage and enterprise, the lands of the Territory (11-12).

In other words, the Minister, while understanding how it had happened that Vestey's and Bovril had chosen to develop their Latin American interests instead of their Australian properties, was not prepared to condone any further concessions to these two companies. Parkhill was particularly critical of absentee landowners who held on to NT leases for speculative purposes or in reserve. He recommended that future offers be made to others who would settle and develop the country.

On 7 December 1932 Federal Cabinet received Parkhill's report and decided to adopt two recommendations inter alia and moved to implement them under the direction of the new Minister, JA Perkins.

(1) That efforts be made to create an overseas market to Great Britain and the East. To this end steps be taken to induce private enterprise, under adequate safeguards, to invest in the raising of cattle and other enterprises for which the area is suitable.

(2) That an enquiry be immediately instituted as to the way in which the conditions of existing leases are being carried out, and that the claims for concessions already made await such report (Canberra Times 8 December 1932, 28).

In March the following year Perkins announced the setting up of a three man committee to investigate pastoral leases in the NT. The committee membership was Mr Shepherd, Chief Surveyor of the NT, Mr Brackenregg, an officer of the Department of the Interior who had
considerable experience of stock work and leasing conditions, and Mr Smith, an engineer with the Department of the Interior (Sydney Morning Herald 25 March 1933).

The Committee's report of 1935 was neither tabled in the parliament nor published; a typescript of the document lies in the Australian Archives in Darwin. Perhaps Messrs Brackenrega and Shepherd were too sharp-eyed in their view of the NT: they held an unfavourable view of both Vestey's and Bovril, and on a matter very close to the heart of those companies, export of chilled beef from Wyndham, the Committee was very critical. In their opinion the quality of the cattle was so poor it was damaging to any prospects of an export trade from the area. Their report stated:

*Introduction of New Blood*

... the position in the Northern Territory is generally most unsatisfactory and, in our opinion, unless a decided change of management is made the cattle produced will not play a very helpful part in the chilled beef trade but must have a definitely adverse effect, and will also retard the progress of the industry in the Territory (Investigation of Pastoral Leases, AA CRS F987, 5).

VRD and Wave Hill Stations, owned by Bovril and Vestey's respectively, were especially singled out for comment.

In July of 1933 the Prime Minister, JA Lyons, announced the Government's intention to encourage the 'formation of one or more chartered companies' to develop the NT. A prospectus was issued which outlined the history and potential for development of the NT. Concessions the Government was prepared to offer and the areas the Government deemed most suitable for development, ie, Victoria River and Barkly Tablelands Districts. A map (Map 3) was made to accompany the prospectus.

Under the terms offered in the prospectus the government intended that 'two features inherent in the policy of Australia' (The Courier 1 July 1933) would be safeguarded. These were The White Australia Policy and The Australian Administrative Policy in Respect of the Native Aboriginal Population of the Area. The Government was prepared to offer concessions 'to secure agreement on a charter arrangement, and to facilitate profitable and effective execution of its terms in the interests of the nation and of the parties to the treaty...' (Memorandum by the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia on the Development and Settlement of North Australia, Prime Minister's Department, 1933, 4).

Concessions included, among others: favourable conditions in leases of 'Crown Lands not at present held under lease'; favourable conditions in construction of railways, tramways and wharves; special tariffs; and exemption from land and income tax. Despite these very generous conditions there was only one development proposal made to the Government: a group of businessmen were interested in developing a scheme for a port at Vanderlin Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria near Borroloola. The whole idea of an united Northern province, including those parts of WA north of 20 degrees, had turned sour. The grand plans which had first been mooted in the 1920s, supported by bankers like Goodenough in London, and by politicians and pastoralists throughout the North came to an absolute halt. Clearly there were no funds available from either private enterprise or governments to support the development schemes so cherished by the visionaries of the period.

Any expectation the government might have had about Vestey's putting up capital would have been unrealistic. The company had made it clear in the 1928 discussions with Nathan in London that they would only move capital into the NT when the government had made real concessions regarding leasehold tenures and provided infrastructural support like
Showing Bovril, Durack & Vestey's Holdings
based on the map produced by Survey Office,
North Australia Commission, Darwin, to
accompany Prospectus issued by Department
of the Prime Minister 1933.

SCALE 1 : 5 000 000

Pastoral Boundary ———— Road ————
NT/WA Border ———— River ————

Map 3: Victoria River - East Kimberley
Based on map produced to accompany Prospectus
Issued by the Department of the Prime Minister (1933)
railways. They were saying, in effect, that any move they made would be only after these developments had begun; they would not invest in the anticipation that something might happen.

In addition in the early 1930s, Vesteyes acted to protect their Argentine interests and led both the Argentinian and UK governments a merry dance in doing so (MAF40/89; Knightley 1981, 66-70). Latin America was where they saw their real interests lying; at the time the Ottawa Agreement was being negotiated in 1932, Vesteyes lobbied very forcefully against Dominion trade preferences and in favour of the South American beef producers (Vestey 1932).

When Vesteyes did bring more capital into Australia the money invested went just about everywhere except the NT! They bought a large control of beef production in both the primary and manufacturing sectors by convincing Sir William Angliss to sell to them the whole of the export interest of W Angliss & Co. (Aust) Pty Ltd. Angliss holdings included cattle stations and meat works in Queensland, and meat processing plants in Victoria and NSW. There were no Angliss interests in the NT (Lady Angliss undated, ch 16). The purchase by Lord and Sir William Vestey, old friends of Sir William Angliss, was made in the name of Weddel and Co. (Aust.) Pty Ltd and effectively gave Vesteyes the control of Australian beef exports under the Ottawa Agreement. Having failed in their effort to block the Agreement being signed, they took the next logical step: to control events after the signing. They obviously did not place very much value on the beef they were producing in the NT - they at least were realistic in their appraisal of the Territory’s beef export industry. Vesteyes displayed no interest in the Commonwealth Government’s chartered company scheme (‘Payne-Fletcher Report’ Australian Quarterly Vol 10 March 1938, 33-37).

The total failure of these long hoped-for dreams did not in fact mean the end of the Australian Government’s commitment to northern development; however the pace and intensity of commitment slowed and diminished considerably. Some aspects of the situation, closer settlement of the Victoria River District, for example, were taken up again after World War II and never satisfactorily resolved, but the NT had to wait until the 1960s for any dramatic changes to occur.

Two further attempts were made to address the issues: the Payne-Fletcher Inquiry in 1937 and the setting up of a North Australia Development Committee as part of the process of Post War Reconstruction by the Curtin Labor Government in 1942. The former provided much of the direction for the latter and was, perhaps, the most thorough and perceptive of the inquiries instigated by government.

Unlike their predecessors in the investigation business, Payne and Fletcher were quite complimentary in their remarks on the Vestey family. Where Brackenregg and Shepherd saw the British companies as perhaps even holding up progress, this Committee saw them as well-intentioned, active participants in northern development, thwarted by an unsympathetic, and even inept, administration. The Payne-Fletcher report took four pages to discuss the Darwin meatworks and some of the points they made are important in understanding how future governments dealt with Vesteyes. Certainly the company ended up very well treated in the period immediately following the report and well into the 1960s.

Basically the Report followed the arguments which Vesteyes representatives, including CWD Conacher, had placed before the Committee: i) Vesteyes move into the Territory in the 1910s had been ‘welcomed on every side’; ii) Vesteyes had undertaken the new venture particularly the Darwin meatworks, at some risk; iii) although the meatworks in
Plate 4: W McLean, VG Carrington, AE Moray, WL Payne, JE Fletcher, AM McGuigan
Wave Hill Station, 1930s
(NTU Library, Australian Investment Agency Deposit)
conjunction with their chain of large cattle stations had been a worthy one; iv) Vesteys should not be blamed; v) private companies could succeed in the NT only with government action and support; vi) Vesteys, and other companies, had experienced difficulty in getting 'sympathetic consideration from different Government Departments' (Payne-Fletcher 1937, 81-83).

Payne-Fletcher went on to recommend a reopening of the Darwin works under private enterprise but with government support designed so that 'private enterprise is given every opportunity to succeed'. They believed that 'a meatworks would be a great boon to the district, and enable the cattle industry to awaken from its present lethargic state' (84).

But an earlier comment set the seal on the pre-eminence of the British companies and highlighted official thinking about the role of private enterprise in developing the NT. No matter what the view of the public might be, the Commonwealth at this stage was committed to a course of action very dependent on private capital for development of the North. Payne-Fletcher issued a warning:

The failure and closing of the works, however, have done great damage to the Territory. Intending investors shudder when they hear of Vesteys' experience and proceed to find avenues for their energy and capital elsewhere. In our opinion it would now be extremely difficult to again interest capital in the Territory unless sweeping changes in policy were made as advocated throughout this report (62).

In December 1938, J McEwen, who was then Minister for the Interior, released details of the UAP Government plans for Northern Development. For the most part the Government proposed to implement the major recommendations of the Payne-Fletcher Report. On Friday 9 December 1938, the Sydney Morning Herald summarised the Ministerial Statement as follows:

Direct Government assistance will be given to settlers to encourage a vigorous land settlement policy... A vigourous programme of developmental road and stock route construction will be introduced.

Proposals for railway construction through the Territory will be more thoroughly examined.

Land transport charges will be substantially reduced by the provision of a co-ordinated sea, rail and road service...

Preliminary production will be free from Federal and Territorial taxation on income for 10 years.

Its five year plan for development included the scheduled road train services. The Darwin newspaper The Northern Standard carried this item in January 1939:

Motor transport is to play an important part in the five-year plan which was announced in Canberra last week for the development of the Northern Territory. The plan included a vigourous land settlement policy and embraces a far-reaching scheme of road and stock route development co-ordinated with road transport services.
The Federal authorities for the last four years have had a A.E.C. Diesel designed 24 wheel motor road train operating between Alice Springs and the Katherine River district ...

Under the new developmental scheme, this motor train is now to be used to maintain a regular scheduled service during the dry season serving all stations, etc, on the Barkly Tableland, the Victoria River District and portions of the Northern Territory. The service will greatly reduce the cost of transport of stores, etc for station owners (13 January 1939).

The Minister sounded a warning note that all the plans would be subject to constant review 'in the light of the current Budgetary position', and that a 'definite policy of resumption will be laid down and officers of the administration will commence at once a survey of all leases with a view to submitting recommendations as to which areas should be resumed so that they can be converted from cattle to sheep' (13 January 1939).

We are very familiar today with the expression 'cautious optimism' applied to economic statements by Governments dealing with structural changes to a weakened economy. The words are now commonplace enough to be almost a cliche, and yet, in the context of the late 1930s, could be appropriately applied to McEwen's statement. His announcement was one of the most sober and economically sound to be made by anyone in respect of northern development and settlement. And yet another commonplace expression, this time about the history of the period, has also come to be used as a comment on why so little was actually implemented: War intervened!

The Government had time, however, to introduce the Taxation Concession before the war, and because of the strategic importance of roads during the war, commenced a major road construction and maintenance program.

The history of northern development in the period 1925-40 is marked by a number of characteristic features: there was an emphasis on debates, investigations, surveys and negotiations but little actually happened in the way of development and settlement; there was a high degree of overseas involvement, and given how little was achieved in terms of settlement and development, the role of overseas investors, especially from the UK, was perhaps disproportionate; timing was a critical factor; there was not enough attention paid to the special features of the environment and climate of the Wet-Dry tropics.

Commonwealth governments became caught up in the politics of development. They created false expectations about the future of the NT and misled themselves and many others as well into believing that at any time the boom would come. All it would take would be more investment, more projects. Naively, they expected hard-nosed businessmen, like the Vesteys, to participate with them in the development fantasies they created. And they became bitter when the British investors would not join in the dance.

Payne-Fletcher understood this process and commented that because of the government's reaction against its own 'absurdly generous terms in respect of large areas ... it would be difficult now for lessees holding large areas to obtain a favourable recommendation for the Land Board for a longer lease ... no matter what development might be offered'(110), a comment true enough for the times and Payne-Fletcher were not to know, or guess at, the peculiar blight of amnesia which afflicted both Labor and Liberal politicians in the 1940s and after. The affliction allowed the politicians to forget the problems they had experienced with Vesteys and the latter came out of the negotiations on the Victoria River pastoral leases in the late 1940s very well indeed.
The point stands, however, that while Vesteys and Bovril did not lock out small leaseholders, the number of people wanting to settle in the NT was never great; they were able to control to a large extent the direction that the beef industry was to take. It could be said that rather than preventing settlement they blocked development. In effect the Commonwealth government let them do that, and may have had no choice, once having allowed absentee ownership of NT land on ridiculously generous terms. Once the process was set in motion, the government tended to watch helplessly from the sidelines, for despite the awareness of men like Abbott, Parkhill and McEwen, little was done to stop or change the process. Governments consistently made a very human mistake - once committed to a course of action they kept on, sometimes increasing the pace even though the action was known to be unproductive.

Three international events stand out in the development and settlement of the NT: two world wars and the World Depression. The Commonwealth, having decided on an interventionist policy in the NT, found that it could not continue to implement that policy during the periods of national and international political and economic crisis. Northern development, despite high sounding words and inflated phases, was just not important enough to justify special and separate attention during those times. Between 1911 and 1946 the Commonwealth had its attention turned to important issues elsewhere for more than 14 years. During part of that time, 1942-46, the government actually moved to depopulate the NT of its citizens, thereby creating another of those peculiar NT population statistics: civilian women and children were evacuated; and servicemen and women arrived.

It was also significant that in the period between the two wars and leading up to the Depression, the NT, like the rest of Australia, suffered from serious and prolonged drought. Vesteys and Bovril both pointed to this feature as a reason why they had carried out so little developmental work on the Victoria River district leases. They did not, however, move to destock their properties and thus caused considerable and irreparable damage to the country they leased.

The history of the pastoral industry in the Victoria River District then. is no mere microcosm of the actions being played out on the broader stage of NT development; what happened in the District was a key to the whole of the NT, a springboard for action elsewhere and very much the focus of national and international attention. What the Commonwealth did not do was focus very much of its attention on the original inhabitants and traditional owners of the land it sought to have developed.
CHAPTER FOUR

ABORIGINAL LAND SYSTEMS

In the period 1911-1966, the whole of the Victoria River District was affected by two systems of land tenure: a community based system governed by Aboriginal law and a territory system governed by European law. The two systems operated in the District during the whole of the period of European settlement. The situation bears some resemblance to the settler societies in Africa and pastoral colonisation of Latin America as described in literature on the subject of articulation of modes of production (Arrighi 1970; Baretta and Markhoff 1978; Geschiere 1978).

In the Victoria River District, unlike the Barkly Tablelands, the resemblance is superficial: the degree to which the Aboriginal mode was modified and changed to be able to articulate with the capitalist mode was not sufficient to cause the Aboriginal to be eventually subsumed into the capitalist. A simple application of this theoretical approach, as applied in the African and Latin American cases, to the Victoria River District would have to ignore, or avoid two essential issues: the capitalist mode itself underwent adaption and change in response to a complex range of factors including the environmental and Aboriginal religious and social practices; in 1966 at the time of the industrial action by Aborigines in the District and subsequent land rights fight, a distinct, if somewhat modified, Aboriginal mode of production, with clearly recognisable economic, social and political features, was still in operation (Riddett 1985). Not parallel exactly, nor fully articulated, the two modes, Aboriginal and capitalist, did however interlock at significant points and often conflicted. The key point of interaction was at the intersection of Aboriginal and European land systems.

Since the introduction of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act (1976) Aboriginal groups claiming title to traditional land have been able to avail themselves of expert professional support from linguists, historians and anthropologists in preparing their claim books. Before the mid-1970s they were often constrained to communicate complex and sophisticated arguments about their land and law in a foreign language. Now it is possible for Aborigines to speak their history confidently in their native tongue knowing that their works will be translated into standard English.

... All these dreamings have a song and business. Some white people reckon they know Aborigine's country. Can the whites run all this business? If he wants to take over this land, he can try to run the business. We know the white people were breeding their cattle and horses in the Aborigines' country, but we have a ceremony place and an important place all over the country. We just want to know: who really owns this country?

White people in Darwin made a decision about this land without us knowing; they didn't explain before they made a decision. Why do they make it hard for Aborigines to get this land for ever? White people are still trying to chase Aborigines out of their own country but they do not know themselves what's in the country (McConvell and Hagen 1981, 47).

The Aboriginal people of the Victoria River District comprised a number of groups: in the north, around the Keep River and stretching into what became known as Durack country, in the east Kimberley, lived the Mirriwong and Gadjenong people; to the south of them
and in the country around Auvergne and Bradshaw stations close to Timber Creek, were the Jaminjung, Nungali and Ngaliwurru people; to the south on stations like VRD were people of the Bilinara, Ngaliwurru, Ngarinman, Mudbara groupings within the Ngumbin language group; they took the law for the country from the Gurindji, who lived to the south and west in the areas now known as Wave Hill, Inverway and Lajamanu; to the south and to the west of these people again lay the country and dreaming tracks of the Nyinin and Djaru groups. Moving again north of the Mudbara, we come to the country of the Wardaman and Karranga people of whom only two very old people now remain (Map 4).

Many traditional owners of land in the Victoria River District are alive today. One of these people described the relationship between groups as follows:

One tribe used to take messages to another. The Gurindji would send word to the Bilinara, the Bilinara to the Mudbara and Ngarinman, the Mudbara to the Wardaman, and the Wardaman to the Ngaliwurru. They would call each other to the 'ring place' for initiations, to the 'business meeting' for sacred ceremonies and the 'Big School' (Kurangara). The old men used to teach the young men, and the Gurindji, Bilinara and Mudbara would learn from each other too (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 12).

The claimants for an area known as the Timber Creek commonage told Toni Bauman in 1982, how groups used to 'running together' can come to share a country.

TB Is this southern side of the Victoria River, from Yanturi. Nungali country?

DM Ngaliwurru and Nungali ... Nungali and Ngaliwurru.

TB Does it belong to Jaminjung?

DM Jaminjung country is closer to the south of the Victoria around Bradshaw Station. Ngaliwurru and Nungali share land here at Yanturi.

Darby Nungali and Ngaliwurru are similar languages. Billy Tinung is Jaminjung. Their country is not too far away from Big Horse Creek. My grandmother (classifactory mm) came from the same country as Billy Tinung.

TB This country here at Janturi, to whom does it belong?

DM This is Nungali country.

TB Is it Ngaliwurru country?

DM It's Ngaliwurru country but nobody speaks Nungali anymore.

The claimants assert that Nungali and Ngaliwurru share land within the claim area ('boxed up here'). Nungali and Ngaliwurru interests then find common expression in matters relating to the claim area. This perception of shared interests is a common factor uniting claimants.
**Map 4: Aboriginal Language Groups**

*Victoria River District*

Based on map produced by EP Milliken (1972)
They also say Nungali and Ngaliwurruru people 'we all company for this country'. A merging of population due to the effects of the historical process since the establishment of the Victoria River (Timber Creek) Depot in the late 1800s and the corresponding development of the pastoral industry has contributed significantly to such statements (Bauman, Ackerman and Palmer 1974, 30-1).

When the Mudbura people put forward their claim in 1980 for an area of their country called Yingawunarrri, known to Europeans as Old Top Springs, they brought forward evidence from their oral tradition to describe precontact and early contact days. One man described how 'old people', ie people from the old times, lived in and around Yingawunarrri:

Old people been living long that Old Top Springs (Yingawunarrri). Olden time people, old Aboriginal been living there, before cattle (puliki) and horse come longa this country - that mean (marlalukamalu karrinyarra) old people lived - they been all day kill’m crocodile (warrija), black water goanna (tjuangarnia), hill kangaroo (wanykurra) longa that sort of beef him been living early-day people (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 33).

In their traditional economic pattern the Mudbura, like other groups in the District, moved in a circuit which followed the permanent water holes in their area.

The old people who lived before our mothers, fathers and mother’s brothers and mother’s mother’s brothers used to go round all the springs hunting, to Pulanga, to Pinu, and turn back to water, to Takapulu, went back to Yingawunarrri went back to Yaya. They used to kill meat at all the springs, kangaroo, hill kangaroo, goanna, honey, bush seed for flour, grub, fish and crocodile. We own every place where the fathers been living (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 1-7).

Waterholes were to become a key point of interaction between Aborigines and Europeans. They did not only contend over the matter of land usage; there were deeper areas of conflict relating to how land is perceived.

Aborigines do not centralise their land systems in the same way as Europeans so although there are features of land law common to all Aboriginal groups, there are also important regional and local differences within the Aboriginal system. The features of law that are common to all Aboriginal systems are sometimes also found in the European system and might be seen as a natural human response to land ownership and usage.

Both systems allow for ownership of land and have devised means of separating parcels or pieces of land in such a way that discrete parts can be known and seen to belong to a particular group or person. In each system it is possible to make transfers in respect of land, yet what is transferred is not the same: in European systems titles to ownership can be transferred from one person to another; in Aboriginal systems the transfer is of the authority to act on behalf of the land, the responsibility to safeguard it, and the opportunity to exploit its natural resources.

Having first acknowledged that ownership is possible, the two systems then divide the humans related to the land into two distinct groups: owners and users. Beyond that division, however, the way in which owners and user/workers relate to the land begins to diverge in terms of what is expected of them and of how they meet those expectations. It is possible for instance, for the legal titleholder of a pastoral lease to delegate the
responsibility for management and usage of the land to another person or group of people. In this case the person to whom the management and usage are delegated answers for those actions to the leaseholder, not to the lessor, ie, the Government. The leaseholder retains the responsibility for the land and must in turn answer to the lessor. It is possible under this system for title holders to own land with which they have little or no direct involvement and from which they can be very distant physically. Their responsibility is to the lessor, the capital they have invested, their shareholders perhaps, but not to the land itself.

**Yingawunarrri—Mudbura Land Claim area — 135 sq km**

**Surrounding Station areas**
- Montejinni — 3149 sq km
- Victoria River Downs — 12,359 sq km
- Birrimba — 4854 sq km
- Delamere — 5289 sq km
- Humbert River — 5631 sq km
- Camfield — 2725 sq km
- Dungowan — 4367 sq km
- Murrenji — 4348 sq km
- Hidden Valley — 4087 sq km

**Plate 5: Yingawunarrri Land Claim**
**Land Rights News No.26 May 1979**
On this point the Aboriginal system is very different. As the precise meaning of owners/manager and users/workers can vary between Aboriginal groups the discussion that follows will largely be based on documents specifically related to the Victoria River District. There are, however, relevant and important general points about Aboriginal systems made by Nancy Williams in her discussion of *The Yolngu and their Land*. The Yolngu are Aboriginal people from a region in North East Arnhem Land. Williams states that:

*For Yolngu as well as other Aborigines, the charter that establishes and validates all categories of rights in land is first of all religious. It is also historic. Thus, for example, Yolngu may use past residence as an argument for continued residence or even stronger rights of tenure, along with, or even instead of a founding myth. The charter is also economic (Williams 1986, 18).*

In the documents Patrick McConvell prepared for the Gurindji Land Claim to Daguragu Station (formerly part of Wave Hill Station, south west Victoria River District) he pointed out that the Gurindji and Warlpiri concepts for the clan worker-member pair in traditional land ownership were different, *i.e.*, two adjoining Aboriginal groups employed subtly but recognisably different land ownership systems. The Gurindji 'recognise a connection between a particular local descent group and a defined area of land'. According to McConvell (McConvell and Hagan 1981, 33-4) there are two ways in which this relationship is formulated: one makes reference to the relationship between a patrilineal group...clan, and the estate. Locally this group is referred to in Pidgin as the 'owner' or 'boss'. The other group are uterine relations of clan members known in the local Pidgin as 'workers'. McConvell continues:

*While the clan members receive their rights from their father and father's father (kakunginji), the workers receive their rights through their mother and mother's father (jawijinginyi). Most people at Daguragu believe these two groups to hold equal but different responsibilities towards the estate.*

One difference in responsibility discussed by McConvell is that clan members are generally the actors in a ritual sequence while in some rituals 'the workers are perceived in the 'working' role their Pidgin name implies: they paint up the 'owners' in readiness for ritual dance and action, and perform many other important 'jobs'.

In the community life apart from the performance of ritual McConvell has noted that:

... the 'workers' may take on a major role of guardianship of the estate's sites, and also act as clan members' spokesman both in Aboriginal contexts and in contacts with Europeans. Both initiated clan members and workers may visit sacred areas in their own estate and when visiting 'dangerous' areas (mamurrung), it can be... the clan member(s) or worker(s) who exhort the spirit not to harm others who are visiting the site (McConvell and Hagan 1981, 43).

Palmer and McConvell describing the 'owners' and workers' of Mudbura country, a short way to the north of the Gurindji country, had this to say:

*The relationship of the 'workers' to the estate of the 'owners' is quite strong, in some respects as strong that of the 'owners' although of a different kind. They certainly have a full right to forage on the country and must*
take the initiative in organising ritual and aspects of care of the sites and country (McConnell and Palmer 1979, 41).

In both cases the Aborigines have chosen the word 'worker' rather than 'manager' (more commonly used in Arnhem Land) since Europeans living in the area occasionally use the latter synonymously with 'owners'. At Daguragu the term 'owner' was regarded as potentially confusing 'because of its identity with the English word 'owner' which has a different legal and common meaning' so the Gurindji Claim Book used the term 'clan members' instead.

The Aboriginal and European systems also share a common view that land has an economic value, and each system implies a commitment to exploitation of the resources existing in the land. Nancy Williams has pointed out that for the Yolngu as for other Aborigines 'religious', 'historic' and 'economic' are not mutually exclusive categories. They are complementary and reinforcing modes of perceiving and using land and natural resources'. How is to be exploited remains as much a contentious issue in the 1980s as it was during the period under discussion.

Indeed, Aboriginal land law is highly conservative, changed only very slowly and gradually by a consultative process, usually in response to a communal perception of change in economic, social and political factors. Their system is very stable, unlike the European one, particularly in the NT, which is changed often by the executive decision of government acting on behalf of the population.

Although the two systems were similar in so far as they allowed for the presence of managers distinct from users they differed in many other respects. The chief feature of difference lay in the fact that Europeans had a concept of land administration which centralised power to legislate, allocate and supervise on all matters related to land tenure in the hands of people who did not necessarily live on or near the land. Aboriginal people are bound by law, ritual and strong emotional and spiritual ties to their land; they remain in, or as close as possible to, traditional country whenever they can. The Ngaliwurrru and Nungali claimants for the Timber Creek Commonage presented the following as responsibilities for sites:

a) Imparting one's knowledge to other members of the local descent group and seeking such knowledge.

b) Performing ceremonies to spiritually maintain the country.

c) Correct ritual approach to and address of sites according to Aboriginal law.

d) Ensuring that no damage occurs to specific sites and taking appropriate action should damage occur.

e) Economic use of country incorporating traditional skills (Bauman, Ackerman and Palmer 1984, 58-9).

Two of these are of particular interest in that they demonstrate at a practical level the difference between Aborigines and Europeans in the way land is approached. The claim book states:

7.1.3 Correct ritual approach and address of sites according to Aboriginal Law

53
Some sites must be ritually addressed on approach. At Lirrimi (53), Big Mick Kankinang addressed the stone that constitutes the site, briefly asking it to 'lie quiet, lie down, we only looking'. At Yanturi (176) Maylinti called for fish: 'You fella come up now, your sons [Duncan Japata] and two Micks julumma are here now, don't you fella greedy Mutputula julumma. You fella give it me fish'.

7.1.4 Ensuring that no damage occurs to specific sites and taking appropriate action should such damage occur.

Old Mick was asked what action claimants would have to take in the event of damage to a site. He replied, 'Something go wrong, crook man, we got to find him'. He indicated he would tell 'the Government', expanding upon this to mean the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority and the Police. Payment is required of the offender: 'He got to pay for boomerangs'.

An Aboriginal land system while being both stable and conservative is not at the same time rigid and inflexible. Aboriginal law evolved over centuries, recognises the necessity of allowing people scope to work with the country: any constraints imposed by the law are designed to help maintain the country and not designed to restrict useful human economic activity. Maintenance of the country takes priority. Movement of humans over and through country is regulated from that perspective.

Land divisions made in Aboriginal law followed naturally occurring land surface features, but, as pointed out in the Mudbura Land Claim Book:

In the Victoria River area, Aborigines rarely spell out the boundaries of each clan's estate in the way that Europeans for instance trace a national or state border, or a station boundary. Instead they enumerate a set of places or sites which belong to a particular clan which are in the main distinguished from the set of any other clan. Once this is done it is clear that the majority of sites of each clan are contiguous and, from the European viewpoint, may be roughly enclosed by a boundary (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 26).

Compared with the Aboriginal land system, the European one is very static, despite its susceptibility to change. The changes envisaged by the protagonists in the thirty years of parliamentary debates were from one static, rigid system to another. For a European it is important to have fixed and defined boundaries, lines on a piece of paper abstractly attempting to define the objective and living reality of a whole countryside. Lines on a piece of paper help Europeans to decide where to put fences on the ground. The fences are necessary to warn others to keep out and in the case of the pastoral industry, to keep cattle in. In the Victoria River District the noticeable lack of fencing did nothing to deter leaseholders from arguing about boundaries and sizes of leases (perhaps it could be argued that their real interests lay in holding land, not using it!) Ownership of cattle, in any case, was defined by station brands and earmarking.

Europeans sit on land - sometimes moving to another piece only to sit again - we 'settle' on the land. Aboriginal people emphasise moving through country. In order to facilitate movement they have devised a system of boundaries and easements which is controlled by clan members. They also have maps.
Doolan (1979, 91-3), in an article on Aboriginal boundaries, made the point that the 'original map makers in the Aboriginal world were the mythological beings who travelled through the country and named the assemblage of scattered place names throughout the particular clan areas'. In addition to those mythological beings who moved, there were others who were stationary. Definition of a person's country, the clan estate, is arrived at by the interaction of the being who moves and the stationary one. 'The Aboriginal idea of the song sequence of the travelling creature in relation to the stationary creature is for the travelling one to bring back into line and include all those other dreamings scattered about the country.'

Because it is important in Aboriginal law to be able to move through the country for ritual, foraging/hunting and trade purposes, then it has been necessary for the people to develop a means of acknowledging ownership of an estate and from that a way of granting/obtaining permission to travel through. Doolan (1979, 163) described the process this way:

Easements
In the dreaming era, easements existed for the travelling mythological beings, e.g., the mythological dingo. As the dingo was unable to burrow, as a goanna could, or fly as a bird could, he was forced to travel along a narrow strip of country owned by Clan 'B', in passing from one area owned by Clan 'A' to another area owned by Clan 'A' - that is land owned by a patrilineal group of sub-sections... As the mythological being had this right granted to him, the human being of the same totem had similar rights. In addition, the relevant ceremony for area 'B' will also include Area 'A' songs, thus ensuring that Clan 'B' will share some of the benefits accruing from the presence of this mythological creature.

In the Victoria River District among Mudbura people 'the boundaries of each clan's territory are mainly defined... by reference to the ownership of songs... most importantly those recounting the stories of type (1) dreamings... [i.e. Travelling Dreamings]...' (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 45). Their neighbours, the Gurindji, follow a similar system and... like the Mudbura, Gurindji 'clan members are said to 'follow' or 'chase' (kayipanana) the dreaming and to 'hand it over' (jayingana) to the new clan when the last site is reached' (McConvell and Hagen 1981, 57). The Timber Creek claimants stated in their claim book:

The spiritual essence of the Fish Folk is said to permeate a section of the Victoria River Basin between Timber Creek and The Victoria River Crossing at Coolibah Station. Members of jula and japa father-son pair appear to have a particular relationship with the Barramundi since its subsection is jula. Similarly, members of the local descent group who belong to the jangala and japijin father-son pair have a particular relationship with the mythological Pirinni Japijin. Mutpurula (deceased) is said to have had barramundi as both warpiri and kuning; as is her son Darby. Common spiritual affiliations are identified in this way. As with the Fish Folk myth claimants along the Victoria river in an east west direction, the Wulkuru myth links people in a north south direction (Bauman, Ackerman and Palmer 1984, 65).

Consistently the emphasis is placed on regular acknowledgement of ownership and responsibility through ritual cycles based on moving through the country. There is a regular cyclical renewal of the law, and of human participation in the law and the reality, ie the country, it defines.
Evidence also exists which explains how Aboriginal law arranges transfer of 'ownership'; and adjustments to boundaries. The evidence relates to groups spread throughout the whole of northern Australia and while it will not be discussed in detail here, certain aspects require mention.

RM Berndt (1976, 142), in his discussion of a group in the southern Kimberleys, immediately adjoining the Victoria River District, noted that 'many areas were temporarily unallocated to living Aborigines'. Then he made the significant comment: 'However, empty spaces unallocated in human terms are not 'empty' in mythic terms and they are always potentially owned. Knowledge concerning them is not lost'.

Giving evidence before the Ranger Uranium Environment Inquiry, Dr N Peterson was cross-examined on a point of Aboriginal law in relation to delayed succession - the taking up of 'empty' or vacant land by a succeeding clan after a delay. The Commissioner's Report (Second Report 1987, 260) accepted evidence given by Peterson that:

The spiritual connections and the spiritual history of particular tracts of land are widely known beyond a single clan, because the religious life of clans is interconnected... It is not a matter of the traditions changing before people feel they are the new owners of an area... It means that primary spiritual responsibility for sites on the land of a clan which becomes extinct will pass to members of another clan which has had kinship and religious ties with the extinct clan. In this way, clan areas can become enlarged.

Finally, McConvell in the Gurindji Claim Book (McConvell and Hagen 1981, 57) referred to 'the role of workers in the succession' as follows:

When the clan members associated with an estate are few in number, absent from the area for a long period, senile, uninitiated or lacking in knowledge, the workers may take over the running of the relevant song cycle completely until such time as competent owners can be found or a new clan succeeds to ownership.

The significance of this aspect of Aboriginal land laws is highlighted by the presence of two facts of white settlement of land in the NT: it was based on a concept of settling, and populating, empty spaces; and where the spaces weren't quite empty enough of Aboriginal presence, measures were taken to clear the Aborigines out. Implicit in the act of clearing or flushing out Aborigines was a belief that if there were no Aborigines visible on the land then the land was empty and potentially available for settlement by Europeans. As the examples cited illustrate, in Aboriginal law this was certainly not the case. Land administration practices in the NT were not only based on an appalling ignorance of the country itself, they were compounded in their inappropriateness by an equally disastrous ignorance of Aboriginal law.

Two important questions emerge from the discussion of the differences and similarities between Aboriginal and European land systems: how much, if at all was each system aware of the other; and how did the awareness affect the respective systems?

In his speech in the House of Representative in July 1912, (482) Sir John Forrest made the following remarks:

As the question of land tenure, honourable members are aware that I favour the freehold system. In the case of the Papuan lands we were
confronted by a wholly different problem. There we had to deal with a large native population of whose habits we knew little, and whose rights had to be respected. We had to be careful in dealing with the land which this race had owned for ages; but the position in regard to the land of the Northern Territory - that uninhabited wilderness - is different. There we have, perhaps, not more than a couple of thousand aborigines, and there should be no difficulty in doing justice to them, while at the same time dealing with the land in a businesslike way.

Forrest accepted an Aboriginal presence but apparently assumed that a smaller population required less justice than a large one, so Aboriginal rights to land, unlike Papuan rights, could be treated summarily. This was not an unusual position. Most Europeans, while acknowledging an Aborigine's attachment to the land refused to see that this attachment constituted a reflection of a legal system which governed land ownership.

In the Preliminary Report on the Aboriginals of the Northern Territory made to the Parliament by Professor W Baldwin Spencer in 1912, the problem of dealing fairly with Aborigines was couched in these terms:

... He is far lower than the Papuan, the New Zealander, or the usual African native, all of whom have reached the agricultural stage and live in villages or compounds... The fact that the Australian Aboriginal has never of his own initiative cultivated a cereal or attempted to domesticate any animal as a food supply is one of fundamental importance and together with his nomadic instinct makes him much more difficult to deal with than the Papuan, African or New Zealander (37).

Nancy Williams has commented:

In this report, significant because it was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government to guide policies governing Aborigines, Spencer noted that Aborigines' relationship to land included notions of ownership, boundaries and trespass, but did not recommend that their land tenure system be recognised. Nor did he even recommend that it be investigated systematically (151).

A commonly-held white view of Aboriginal land rights has been expressed by TW Lavender who spent a few months working on VRD Station in his youth, in 1914. In Young Bill's Happy Days he reflected on the question of the conflict between Europeans and Aborigines in the Victoria River District:

... jungle law of the survival of the fittest was not frowned on nearly so much those times as it is today in the nineteen sixties. In the 'good old days' it was apparently considered just and proper to confiscate the Aboriginals' country and drive them out of it to lingering racial extermination and worse (275).

Individual Europeans did reach some point of understanding regarding Aboriginal land systems beyond the superficial acknowledgement of mere attachment, but there is no evidence to support the idea that Europeans as a group or community accepted that Aborigines had definite, specific and binding laws for the land. The European views of Aboriginal social behaviour and economic systems was not only ethnocentric. It was consistent with a European world view that conclusions could be reached about Aboriginal value systems based not on observation of actual events so much as on
assumptions about Aboriginal ways of life. It was characteristic of the European world view to arrive at an intellectual conception of an event, or series of events, from a basis of abstract ideas or opinions formed before the event. Aborigines were primitive and nomadic and therefore it was assumed they would not have legal systems that required European attention. Until Europeans began to question some of those basic assumptions they unfortunately limited their own capacity to understand Aboriginal law and may well have also limited their capacity to learn about the land.

Aboriginal culture did not deny Aborigines access to an understanding of European behaviour in respect of land, nor of the European economic exploitation of natural resources. They did, however, have to work from within their world view until they learnt enough from the contact experience to begin to modify their own system to incorporate some European modes of behaviour.

The Aboriginal view of Europeans was also ethnocentric but Aboriginal structures gave them an advantage Europeans did not have. In the Aboriginal world view law is integrated into the total of the religious, social and political systems; it is not a separate entity imposed from above by an external agent. Aboriginal people participate in their law.

In his work Nintiringu: The Role of Knowledge in Traditional Aboriginal Australia (1984), Mark De Graaf commented:

... the Dreamtime society was very much like pre-contact Aboriginal society, with all its compelling complexity but also with unavoidable and thus expected strains and tensions. In this sense, the Dreamtime code is all-embracing, leaving out very little of the realities of the social and physical environment, and what is not mentioned, is, in Aboriginal terms, not really worth considering. It is an all-pervasive world view, the Law, and its rituals, objects and places. The sheer complexity, diversity and mass of information in the total body of oral heritage places a tremendous intellectual burden on Aboriginal society. The strength of this belief system lies in its continuing relevance to the tradition-orientated Aboriginal people of today (38).

De Graaf has described Aboriginal knowledge as falling into two main bodies, 'an essential and unvarying knowledge of all kinds of sites, of waterhole locations'; a 'second kind of knowledge [which] covers aspects of continual but relatively predictable change, both social and ecological'. And it is this second kind which gave Aborigines an advantage in observing Europeans. In De Graaf's work this second kind of knowledge is analysed thus:

Where did the most recent rain fall? Where are certain foods ripening? What happened when two groups met and there was a big fight about alleged trespassing? Where has 'so-and-so's mob' moved to? Who has died? The second area of knowledge acts as a kind of an overlay on the body of fixed and essential knowledge. Impinging on both of them and linking them, is the power of interpretation. The position of a distant 'smoke' may mean that a group has moved to a particular waterhole or food area. 'Smokes' and tracks are interpreted many times daily as part of the constant process of updating. Such interpretations are tested against the actual situation when groups meet and discuss the latest 'news'. Interpretations of this kind of knowledge are limited to recognised
variables, which themselves are confined to a known range of variation (15).

The actions of individual Europeans in relation to the land would be perceived by Aborigines as an integral apart of the complex total system all Europeans followed. Aborigines would not normally view any single action as being isolated or cut off from that whole. If De Graaf's reasoning is applied, then it would be reasonable to conclude that Aborigines, in applying their 'second kind of knowledge', would regularly update their knowledge and understanding of European behaviour. Thus they were able to reach reasonable conclusions about the purpose of European behaviour and a quite accurate abstract notion of the intention and function of European law. In other words, the Aboriginal mode of perception enhanced their potential for arriving at a reasonably accurate view of European values and beliefs.

At least one anthropologist knew, by the mid 1940s, about the views held by Aborigines of the European occupation of Aboriginal land, although unfortunately he did not write about the situation until much later. Ronald Berndt collected evidence of Aboriginal perception of Europeans in the Victoria River and East Kimberley District in 1945. Berndt made some important observations in his 1981 article on land rights which highlight a gradually changing Aboriginal view of Europeans and their relationship to the land:

... the people there did not see themselves as having been divorced from their land. In their view, Europeans were merely utilising it, and it remained their own (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Newsletter No 16, September 1981, 7).

They had the traditional Aboriginal view of land. First, on the matter of direct ownership: that it was inalienable and nontransferable, specific local group territories held in trust by members of particular local descent groups (as land-possessing groups). Secondly, there was a matter of land use. People did not and could not stay in their own territories. They hunted and gathered food in the territories of members of other adjacent groups. This was more than a simple necessity. It was also an expression of the basic principle of cooperation.

When Europeans used the land the Aborigines expected cooperation on their part. In that, they were rapidly disillusioned. As far as Aborigines at Wave Hill, Limbutyna, Waterloo and Birrindudu were concerned, it was in keeping with their certainties about their relationship with their land (past, present and future) that their traditional ritual life continued, although with constant interruptions.

These views about the essential irrelevance of Europeans continued to exist virtually up to the present time, in some areas. In others, subject to intensive European settlement and land utilisation, the stark lesson was brought home to Aborigines that officially the land was not really theirs at all (Berndt 1981, 7-8).

A local pastoralist in the area where Berndt did his fieldwork also knew that Aborigines in the area were capable of expressing strong views on the presence of Europeans. This man, Tom Quilty, manager of Coolibah Station, was actually concerned about bush blacks causing trouble in the event of a Japanese invasion. In February 1943 he wrote to the Prime Minister, John Curtin, and raised the matter with him. In support of his contention he made this point:
In 1938 I took two boys from Bradshaw to Queensland. One boy told me the Japs were coming to this country to fight and take the country from the white man. Then the blackfellow would be boss (AA CRS F1 43/24).

One of the Mudura men claiming land at Yingawunarri gave an account of their response to the alienation of their land on VRD Station:

... the white man stole our fathers’ land from us. The fact that it was our fathers’ land didn’t matter to the white man when he came in from a far country and brought houses, horses and cattle. It wasn’t his land, but he’s still there, living on our land. First of all we just let him do it, we just watched what the white men were doing. Then the white men shot some of my grandfathers, some of my fathers, and some of my uncles, even though they were doing nothing wrong. Then they took away the women from the old men. Then they came for younger AboriginaIs and put them to work. The fact that we had not harmed them didn’t make any difference. They came looking for a fight and killed us, because they wanted our land. ‘We’ll have to speak them’, said the old men. They attacked the white men. The AboriginaIs threw the old fashioned spears with stone heads, but the white men fired guns back. They shot them down, poor things, and cleared the AboriginaIs off the land. When they had taken away the land, they called it their own land, just as if they had inherited from their fathers. They brought in their houses, horses, cattle and barbed wire. The land had belonged to the AboriginaIs, but now the white man thought the AboriginaIs’ land was theirs. They shot the AboriginaIs off their own land all along the Victoria River and at every spring, although the AboriginaIs were doing no wrong. They divided it up amongst themselves. ‘That’s mine’, the white men would say to each other, ‘That’s my block’ (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 93-94).

What did these white men do with the vast areas of country they alienated in order to raise cattle? How did the traditional owners respond? What were the patterns of relationships that developed between the two landowners? How did the two economic systems adapt and change to accommodate each other? There are two quite distinct periods discernible in the history of these events: 1911 to 1939; and 1950 to 1966. The period of the Second World War linking the two was a significant time of transition. Let us now look at the pastoral industry in the Victoria River District in the first period.
CHAPTER FIVE

PASTORALISM

The country of the Victoria River District was not only good potential cattle country, it had been, for thousands of years, the economic base for the Aborigines who lived there. As the travellers' tales and overlanders' diaries attested, the country was rich in native fauna, and there were many edible species of native flora recognisable even to an uneducated European eye. For centuries, economic exploitation and religious practice had been combined by the Aborigines in a distinctive mode of production which provided them with a stable physical, spiritual, and social environment.

FGG Rose (1987, 48-49), in his work on the traditional mode of production of Aborigines, has made the following comment:

There are a number of cases recorded where the Aborigines did indeed invest labour in its improvement, for example by the digging of tanks for conservation of water, building of dams and canals for catching eels, and the use of fire to clear land of dense scrub or forest, or the burning of dry grass to provide fresh green pastures to attract animals. Nevertheless, it is taken that the Aborigines did not consciously invest labour in the land on any significant scale for its improvement. This assumption is important as the productivity of the land can be regarded as its productivity under natural conditions, that is the availability of wild game, natural vegetation and minerals (for example flint, ochre). On this assumption, for all practical purposes the value of the land to the Aborigines as the main means of production can be equated with the natural products that the land provided and were used by the Aborigines.

It follows then that any sudden, rapid or radical change in the landscape which provided the base could have an equally dramatic effect on the lives of the traditional owners. The effect of pastoralism on the Victoria River District was all three: sudden, rapid and radical. In addition there was a cumulative effect on the environment which compounded the effect of rapid changes. This has been particularly true where soil erosion has occurred.

The effect of pastoralism on the lives of Aborigines was also both sudden and immediate on the one hand, long-term and pervasive on the other. It is important to note, however, that Aborigines were not a craven mass of humans at the mercy of a dominant technologically superior culture. At key points of articulation between the Aboriginal and European modes of production, it was the Aboriginal which dominated, forcing the other to adapt and change. Not surprisingly, given the strength and inherent adaptability of Aboriginal cultural values, a strength actually based on knowledge and understanding of the physical, material world, the point at which the two modes of production met and clashed, or adapted and changed, was country. They intersected at the point of land usage. Country, in the Aboriginal full sense, was the factor which mediated all relationships - economic, social and political.

Once again, two distinct overall periods of response are apparent in the history of the District: 1911-1939 and 1946-1966. And once again the period 1939-1946 provided a transition where a sudden change in the factors affecting European lives, a destabilising period for them of some magnitude, gave Aborigines an advantage for the following
twenty years. From the point of view of their own aspirations and goals, Europeans were consistently counterproductive in ignoring the reality of the Aboriginal response; they simply did not take Aborigines seriously. It was a foolish oversight.

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RAIN (Nguku)
Do you see that white cloud up there? That started from the Dreaming. Do you see that black cloud? The Dreaming made it. Do you see those streaks of rain falling like legs underneath the cloud? That is the rain which comes from the Rain Dreaming. That black rain which falls at night is not nothing. The Dreaming made it. Sometimes the rain moves away. We look around and see no rain, because the Dreaming has taken it away. It isn't us humans who made it, the rain follows the path of the Dreaming. The rain keeps us all alive, Aborigines, children, dogs, horses, Europeans, goannas, bluetongues, and so on and so on. If there were no rain, we would all die. Those birds which you hear singing would all die. All of us are only alive because of rain; if there had been none, we would all have died long ago (Albert Crowson - translated from Mudbura) (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 52).

Climate was one of the most significant factors in the complex that led to the virtual failure of the cattle industry. Only those pastoralists who read the country right and at the same time learned to live with the climatic conditions of a Wet-Dry tropical region stood any chance of running a profitable station. Some smaller, owner-managed stations did succeed, international and national political circumstances and adverse economic conditions notwithstanding. But they had to learn hard lessons about the 'periodicity of rainfall', withering temperatures and high humidity, drought and flood, before they could get properly started.

Pastoralists could not expect to affect, or change, climate as they did landform. Admittedly there are marked seasonal changes, and the weather pattern for one year may not exactly match the pattern of the year before, nor the year after. But people living in the Victoria River District should expect certain things to occur climatically on a cycle of five to ten years. The failure by Europeans to see clearly, acknowledge and eventually understand climate and weather contributed to their ignorant abuse of the land, and to its degradation.

A 1970 CSIRO report on the Lands of the Ord-Victoria Area, Western Australia and Northern Territory described the climate:

This predominantly semi-arid region, lying between latitudes 14 degrees and 19 degrees S, has a warm dry monsoonal climate characterized by a rainy season of 4-5 months and a dry period of virtually drought for the remainder of the year.

Day temperatures seldom fall below 84 degrees F and even in winter night temperatures remain sufficiently high to preclude frost occurrence in all but the most inland areas and parts of the highlands where frosts have occasionally been recorded.
Definite marked climatic trends are evident, due primarily to latitude and also to proximity to the coast of the northern portions of the region. In these areas there are higher total rainfall, less extreme temperatures, and a climate more generally humid than in the inland sections to the south (62).

The effect of this pattern on animals was understood in part by the pastoralists at least in so far as they appreciated when, and when not, to travel their stock. In his report to the parliament for the year 1912, the Administrator of the NT, Professor Gilruth, wrote:

The well-marked division of the seasons and the conditions of the country for travelling at the end of the dry season confine the time of the year when stock can be travelled without much loss of condition to a short period. The period is lengthened, according to stock-owners, by the lateness of the rains. All seem to agree that the travelling of stock during the wet season is next to impossible, and likely to induce conditions favourable to the production of outbreaks of disease (115).

His successor, FC Urquhart, in the report for the year ended 30 June 1924, mentioned some features of the weather pattern for the first six months of 1924; features that Europeans were having to learn to deal with in the Victoria River District:

On the 27th of February word was received of the destruction, by a flood of unprecedented height and severity, of buildings, yards and fences at Wave Hill Station, with the drowning of some live stock, but no loss of human life (6).

Yet the report contained this other, gloomy comment on the effect of a more persistent climatic feature:

Pastoralists have also had a hard time of it, as quite early in the year 1924 it became evident that a very dry season was before us, and expected losses of stock occurred later on various runs, and in some instances, were heavy (1).

The policeman stationed at Wave Hill in 1924, Mounted Constable HE Kemp, filed a comprehensive report on the flood to the Inspector of Police in Darwin. His is a good local account of the events:

It was evident that on the 9th and 10th inst., heavy rain fell on the outer environs of Wave Hill, more particular toward the head of Victoria River; but in my opinion a cloud burst in close proximity to the junction of the MacDonald and Victoria Rivers, to cause such a phenomenal rise in the river at this site (Police Station Bow Hills-Wave Hill Correspondence Book, NTAS).

The flood reached the police station by the afternoon of 11 February and MC Kemp and the tracker 'stacked everything well clear of the ground, locked the station doors and made camp for the night on a ridge a mile distant'. Wave Hill Station employees including Alex Moray, the pastoral manager, spent the night on the roof of the highest building. Bert Drew, the donkey teamster and some mates spent the night in a tree, 'up which the water was 14 ft'.

Thirteen years later, another mighty flood on the Victoria River was described by one of the Australian Inland Mission nursing sisters stationed at Wimmera Home on VRD
Station. The hospital was situated on the banks of the Wickham, a tributary of the Victoria, and the river 'rose 60 ft above stationary level' and came through the nurses' house. Sister V Stewart sent an account of the flood to AIM Head Office:

Once the river was over its banks, it rose at about 4 ins per hour, at its most rapid about 4 ft per hour. Being in a bend on the bank proper, the current was strong right to our door and the other side also ... the current speed we judged at 10-22 knots per hour. Nothing of equal severity can have happened for years because almost every tree is uprooted or swept away for 1/4 mile lengths where the full force caught them, and there were some very big old trees, paper barks, Leichhardt (sic) pines, wild figs, etc (Australian Inland Mission Correspondence Stewart to Head Office 19 January 1937, NLA MS5574, Box 108).

Sister Stewart's letter contained a significant comment on the change to landform brought about by the use of the land for cattle raising, a change which exacerbated the flood damage:

People who have been here for years tell us that the north side of the river bank has altered considerably since the station was erected. Dry years, wet years, and stock constantly coming in to water, have worn the surface away and encouraged deep breakaways at frequent intervals leading to the river.

Two years earlier, in April 1935, one of the sisters stationed at Wimmera Home wrote of the flood that year which was less severe, but which nonetheless caused quite considerable damage. Sister McKenzie wrote:

Altogether it has spoiled the river, as there has been several big land slides in the opposite bank since, but perhaps in time it will get its beauty back again (NLA MS5574, Box 108, MacKenzie to Head Office 1 April 1935).

Over the period of the 1930s, the sisters stationed at Wimmera Home were often very badly upset by severe dust storms during the Dry. Sister Langham commented in one of her letters in March 1936 that the 'dust is not quite so bad - the storms have been terrific - It would not be so bad if all the dust kept going on' (3 March 1936). In July she wrote again - 'weather pleasant but very dusty - the aerodrome is being repaired and the dust is blowing off that' (8 July 1936).

Thirteen months later, Sister Joyce Falconbridge kept a record in her diary over a period of days of the unpleasantness of the high winds and dust:

Tuesday Aug 3rd
Another beastly day, strong wind and everything just covered in dust...

Wednesday Aug 4th
We were to have played tennis today, but it has been such a dreadful day we did not go. At times we could not see the river for clouds of dust.

Thursday Aug 5th
Still horribly windy and dusty... (Falconbridge diary May 1937-May 1938).

After a fortnight of very hot but windless weather, the dust storms started again, and there were occasional willy-willies. Sister Falconbridge's colleague, Sister Dorothy Allen, later
felt that the chief cause of the dust problem was the large area of ground laid open for use as an aerodrome, and Sister Allen may have been correct in her assessment (personal conversation: Mrs D Hall and LA Riddett, Darwin 1986).

Sister Falconbridge’s diary entry for 11 September 1937 raises the issue of environmental damage on a much wider scale. No doubt the combination of drought and movement of cattle across the open country of Wave Hill, Cattle Creek and the Barkly Tableland were major contributing factors. The entry reads:

*Saturday Sept 11th*

Woke up this morning to find a thick dust haze over everything. The sun was shining through just like a bush fire. It was coming over from Camooweal, and extended as far as Wave Hill.

The country which was being so badly affected by mismanagement was, of course, Aboriginal land alienated from them by the process of European settlement. One place where the two groups came into direct conflict was at the waterholes. Cattle and horses introduced by whites put the essential life supply, water, under great stress. Europeans compounded the problem, both for themselves and the Aborigines, by failing to effectively manage this vital resource. As we shall see, misunderstanding and mismanagement of water resources was recognised by government advisors as early as the 1920s as a major contributing factor in the failure of the cattle industry; little of real practical economic value was done to remedy the situation until the 1940s. The impact of the cattle was in two stages; a short-term and immediate effect of draining the source early in the season and, by urinating and excreting in the water whilst drinking, making it unfit for human consumption; a long-term impact on the banks and the surrounding land which gradually became eroded dust bowls in the Dry, boggy useless soil in the Wet.

Just a short while before the flood of 1937, Sister Langham wrote to AIM head office and described the country which was suffering the impact of a prolonged Dry. She wrote of the cattle as well:

Some rain has fallen and the position has eased somewhat but rain is not general. There is a green shoot at the outstations which, if followed by more rain will be all alright but at the homestead it is as dry as possible. Hundreds of cattle have died - Many being bogged in shallow muddy waterholes animals too weak to extricate themselves after drinking. We actually have not seen much of it but the men have had some wearing, depressing times (NLA MS5574 Box 108 Langham to Head Office 27 November 1936).

McConvell (McConvell and Palmer 1979) in the Mudbura Claim Book for Yingawunari commented: 'recurrent spearing of cattle, without also exploiting them as a food source, could well be seen in terms of attempting to defend the waterholes from further destruction'. In other words Aborigines were responding to gross failure of the pastoralists to maintain and preserve economic resources.

By the 1930s, some of the cattle stations had become notorious for their neglect and abuse of the rich natural resources of the district. Vestey's Stations - Wave Hill, Waterloo and Limbunya - and Bovril's VRD were often singled out for comment in official reports of the period. There were, however, some smaller, owner-managed stations, of which Rosewood was most noteworthy, where humane treatment of staff was practised in combination with successful and economically sound exploitation of the country. The fact of the success of Rosewood was noted by the Brackenreg-Shepherd Committee in the
mid 1930s and by JH Kelly an advisor to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) which carried out another major survey of the NT pastoral industry in the late 1940s (Kelly 1966).

Two aspects of economic management can be used to illustrate the case in point regarding misuse of resources: the first and perhaps most important is how stations exploited water resources; the second relates to how stations managed livestock. A detailed report on these matters was incorporated in the Brackenregg-Shepherd Report, and again examples can be cited from three stations: Rosewood, VRD and Wave Hill. In the case of water resources the three stations drew somewhat similar comments. The report made some general comments on the whole district in Schedule (O) before going on to deal with each station separately.

The position regarding the watering of stock is somewhat different to that of the Tablelands and Alice Springs Districts for the reason of there being running rivers and streams and countless numbers of springs and permanent water holes throughout the district. However, it has its disadvantages as well as its advantages insofar as the development of the country is concerned for, with the exception of Wave Hill Station, practically no development is taking place off the water frontage (AA CRS F987, 2).

The more detailed comments on individual stations were as follows:

**Rosewood**
There is a fair supply of natural water but this could be increased with the aid of well-constructed dams in selected water courses. The supply is augmented by bores and wells (described in detail on attached schedule) with water at reasonably shallow levels. There is scope for further development in this connection and it is rather unfortunate that some of the capital placed in stock yards was not directed to water supply expenditure.

The committee was confident, however, that 'before very long this run will be fully equipped with bores and brought to its full carrying capacity'.

**Victoria River Downs**
The run is one of the best naturally watered in the Territory and the supply is augmented by a few bores mostly with water at shallow levels.... There is plenty of scope for extension in this connection.

With regard to the equipment of the few bores already established it is noted that several makes of windmills were represented which must result in additional maintenance costs and that comparatively small iron reservoirs were used instead of making use of earth tanks by which means considerably more water could be conserved at very little greater capital cost and certainly with a saving of upkeep (Victoria River Downs Station Report, 1).

**Wave Hill**
A considerable area is naturally watered and many sites exist where, with the aid of well constructed dams and excavations, quantities of surface water could be stored....

67
The water supply has been augmented by the provision of a few bores with water at comparatively shallow levels.

It is noted in this connection that the equipment is not standardised, there being many makes of mills, the result of which is a higher maintenance charge (Wave Hill Station Report, 1).

In respect of livestock management, the committee was very impressed by Rosewood Station and stated that they considered it 'to be one of the best managed runs visited'. The owner-manager, J Kilfoyle, son of the original leaseholder who had overlanded with the Duracks in the 1880s, was complimented on having introduced new bloodstock into herds on a regular basis.

They commented that 'the cattle are a nice even bred lot, comparatively few bad types and again management comes into it for we found almost a total absence of clean skin bulls' (Rosewood Station Report, 2-4).

There was also a good turn off of prime beef from Rosewood, as slaughtering figures from Wyndham Meat Works showed. On the whole, the committee was so favourably impressed by Rosewood that they recommended 'that the quarter withdrawal be waived and the lessee left in possession of the whole area until the next resumption period' (1-2).

VRD Station received sharp comment from the committee which saw the situation both from the point of view of stocking rates (and records of same) and introduction of new blood as 'deplorable' and foresaw that 'the remedy will be a difficult, expensive and lengthy undertaking'. They believed the manager had consistently overestimated the stock numbers since he had taken over in 1926, but they were prepared to concede that the problems of VRD were not caused solely by this one factor.

Plate 7: Gordon Creek Outstation of VRD 1937
(Donated by Mrs Joyce Fuller (nee Falconbridge))
In addition to the vast area of the run, insufficient staff and other factors mentioned, there are many other influences which indirectly add to the difficulties of any one man handling such a position:

(a) insufficient supply of suitable horses;
(b) lack of paddock accommodation;
(c) weaning is not practised;
(d) there are many thousand scrub bulls;
(e) the mortality in heifers in breeding too early;
(f) loss as a result of no segregation of males;
(g) the knocking about of cattle by a double must, each year;
(h) periodicity of rainfall and consequential greater loss in breeders and progeny;
(i) losses as a result of in-breeding and lack of control of bulls;
(k) losses as a result of storms and drying waters more pronounced in a large run of this nature (2-3).

The introduction of new blood had been negligible but was not the worst feature. The report continued:

for whilst the books disclose 1,260 branded bulls (we noted one during our casual 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 clean skin bulls would be a conservative estimate and that on part of the run they have been unmolested for years (3).

Of course, these are the same cattle that Aborigines in the area were being arrested for killing. It becomes difficult to escape the impression that Lord Luke's lack of enthusiasm in response to Sir Charles Nathan during their 1929 discussion was due to the Lord's total lack of real interest in Bovril's Australian holdings. The local staff, the Europeans, responded by not caring too much either except to make the occasional complaints about Aborigines being a menace to the cattle industry. Lack of investment capital for improvements and inadequate funds for maintenance of stock, plant and equipment produced some unusual animal husbandry procedures on VRD, as the committee pointed out:

The position is aggravated for the reasons that the number of stockmen employed are totally insufficient which means that a double must is necessary in each short season (at least 4 months of wet during which time operations must cease), and with insufficient horses the effect is that before the work is completed the horses are knocked up, work ceases for the year, branding in consequence is not completed and the result is unbranded calves and additions to the clean skin total (3).

The committee advised that 'the quarter resumptions be proceeded with in this case', and they made a similar recommendation in the case of Wave Hill where the situation was only marginally better. It is interesting to note that this large station, written of so often as an example of the best in frontier development, was regarded by Vestey's as a depot, 'through which the stock from the Western stations of the same interests pass on their way to the Eastern market' (Wave Hill Station Report, 8).

Wave Hill, according to the report was generally understocked, but there was from time to time, overstocking around waterholes. The report noted:
Plate 8: Wave Hill Station from the air, 1931
(NTU Library, Australian Investment Agency Deposit)
There is considerable room for improvement of water supply as very large areas of beautiful country are waterless and unstocked. It is understood from management that it is intended to proceed with the sinking of additional bores but the statement was made that it is very difficult to further improve the country in the light of the present depressed state of the cattle market. It was not explained, however, that when prices were good the country was allowed to remain in its undeveloped state using for the greater part only the country naturally watered (2).

As in the case of VRD at Wave Hill there was a combination of poor management of existing livestock and a failure to introduce adequate new blood. The points made by the committee applied 'equally to the whole of the stations in the Vesteyes interests' where there was:

(a) insufficient supply of stock horses;
(b) weaning is not practised;
(c) there are thousands of scrub bulls;
(d) mortality in heifers in breeding too early
(e) loss as a result of no segregation of males;
(f) knocking about of cattle by a double muster each year
(g) loss as a result of inbreeding and lack of control of bulls;
(h) periodicity of rainfall and consequential greater loss of breeders and progeny (2).

The committee's repeated use of the term 'periodicity of rainfall' not only has the charm of being a useful description of weather patterns in the District, it is also an indication that committee members understood something apparently not comprehended by Vesteyes managers. During the 1929 conference between the Commonwealth and the NTPLA, CWD Conacher made excuses for his company's lack of development of their NT properties, arguing that the stations had suffered years of drought. It is more likely that Vesteyes ignorantly failed to comprehend the precise nature of the periodicity of rainfall commented on by Brackenregg-Shepherd. Rainfall figures for Wave Hill, Waterloo and Limbunya bear out the fact that for a period of five years, ie, say 1929-1933, the rainfall figures may have varied marginally from year to year, but the pattern of rainfall was consistent. Heavy falls of rain occurred in the months December to March, lighter falls in April-May and September-November and none, as a general rule, of any consequence in June-August. The same pattern is true for Inverway and VRD. The only true differences lie in the annual averages for those stations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Average Rainfall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wave Hill</td>
<td>737 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria River Downs</td>
<td>618 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inverway</td>
<td>459 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Meteorological Bureau Darwin)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other words, the country gets drier towards the west and of course what is being shown by the figures is the effect of the NW Monsoon in a Wet-Dry Tropical region. The figures were available for the period under discussion; as a rule they were actually supplied to the Meteorological Bureau by the stations themselves. Not only did the managers neglect and abuse the country at their disposal, they seemed to have ignored the evidence they collected themselves about very important climatic patterns. Vesteyes in particular were prone to blaming everyone, especially Aborigines, and everything else for their failure to turn their Victoria River holdings into a viable economic cattle venture.
There were two separate and distinct Aboriginal responses to the presence of European settlers on their land, and as a result relationships between the two cultures developed along two paths: the first response was hostile, aggressive and often overtly belligerent: until the 1930s, Aborigines killed cattle openly and were prepared to kill Europeans as well if they believed the situation warranted it; and a second response which allowed for economic and social interdependence to develop. European reprisals for Aboriginal attacks on humans and cattle did a lot to condition the second level of Aboriginal response, ie submitting to a process they refer to as 'quietening', but as later discussion will show, did not entirely account for it.

The first response was made by Aboriginal people remaining outside and separate from the settler communities; the second was more an interactive one made by them when and if they came into, and remained, in contact with the cattle industry. Evidence suggests that Aborigines did not necessarily belong to one type of group or another; some appear to have easily alternated between the two kinds of activity, and it is clear that, until very recently, station Aborigines maintained close contact with 'myalls'. In the historical sequence of events the earlier period of settlement was understandably marked by the more overtly hostile and aggressive response. Aboriginal people speak of that period in the following ways.

Grant Ngabidi, a Gadjerong man, grew up on the Keep River, having been born in that country in 1904. According to an account of the period around the 1900s that he gave to Bruce Shaw in 1970, the Gadjerong, his own people, lived in the area on the Keep from the coast to Newry Station. He told Shaw:

There were all Gadjerong people along the coast until the white men shot them. Half of them died and some of the young boys were brought into the Stations to quieten them and to learn the horses, like me. All the Gadjerong were taken out of their country and put on the stations or were killed. There are no people left there now (Shaw 1981, 35).

He gives a vivid account of the time when white men came to punish his group because they had been killing and eating bullocks. The white men, Weakers from Ningbin Station, shot and killed many Gadjerong men in their camp and later rounded up the women and children and took them back to the Station. Grant said: 'Natbarria, my mother and I were taken back to Ningbin Station, where my sister became Billy Weaber's stud' (39).

Shaw also collected oral evidence from Jack Sullivan who was the son of an Aboriginal woman from the Djajumdjung group, and a European man. Jack was born in 1901 on Argyle Station, a Durack property on the Behn River a few miles inside WA and close to Rosewood Station (Shaw 1983, 7). In his account of settler activity in that area, most of the quietening had been done before he was born; there were however some incidents he witnessed as a boy on Lissadell and Argyle Stations: 'I saw them tied up at the post and then taken away the next morning and done in, the bush blacks' (65).

Sullivan's description of the way in which Europeans settled the country rings with echoes of invasion, resistance and counterattack. Again, like Ngabidi, his perception of events was that the Europeans were quietening or taming the people.

In the earlier days when they came in to get Australia the white feller had to fight his way. When they did get a bit of land to stand on they had to fight the blackfellers to keep it... They got a bit of ground, quietened the blackfellers, tamed them down and worked them. When they had been
made to understand the white man's ways they were helping him then and fighting the wild ones (65).

One of the men speaking to the Mudbura Claim for Yingawunari said:

The white man stole our fathers' land from us... It was not his land, but he's still there, living on our land. First of all we just let him do it, we just watched what the white men were doing. Then the white men shot some of my grandfathers, some of my fathers, and some of my uncles, even though they were doing nothing wrong... They came looking for a fight and killed us, because they wanted our land... They had shot the Aboriginals off their own land all along the Victoria River and at every spring, although the Aboriginals were doing no wrong (McConvell and Palmer 1979, 94).

Recently, Ruby Thoorrbiling, a Mirriwong traditional owner of country around Kununurra, told her story of pacification and settlement of people and country in the East Kimberley. Her story has been written down in a mixture of Kriol (with English spelling) and Mirriwong, and in part, says:

All the gardiya (white people) bin coming Auvergne side, Timber Creek - they bin coming in again; mate up from this side Western Australia and from Northern Territory side. They bin mate up all the gardiya.

... They never know that all the gardiya bin coming from Northern Territory side again. They bin meet em bullet there again - true!

... After that - when they bin shooting them now - finish. And after that they bin friend now. They bin settle down (Land Rights News June 1987, 24).

Ruby's story goes on to tell how the gardiya used the 'friendly' Aboriginals to contact 'bush blackfellas' in the mountain country and how after these people came in to the stations 'they bin learning one another. 'They bin 'police' and began to learn station work' (24). While Ruby's attempt to put the latter part of her account in a friendly spirit is admirable, the documentary evidence suggest that killing and reprisal continued for a very long time. The people in the mountains very skilfully used their knowledge of the gorge and sandstone country to evade capture, to maintain camps in the high places where horses could not go and to combine this knowledge of landform with an understanding of weather patterns in order to carry out repeated successful attacks on Europeans and cattle.

In Nintirringu De Graaf has vividly described the impact European settlement had on the web of Aboriginal knowledge.

With the emphasis in Aboriginal society on the central role of knowledge, in particular the exchange of knowledge in reciprocal situations, it can be expected that any major impact on this element would shake Aboriginal society to its very foundations... Two major kinds of events stand out against the rest in the dismal story. They were the loss of traditional land and the loss of significant numbers of people, the two critical relata of the Dreamtime concept... (81).

De Graaf argues that the killing of one individual by whites would have been no more nor less tragic than if that person had died in a tribal dispute. But in cases such as the Coniston massacre in 1928, where it is now estimated more than a hundred Aboriginals may have been killed, 'at least half a dozen estates would have been suddenly deprived of
senior custodians, some of all custodians, leaving the sites, objects and rituals uncared for. As a result of this, in his view 'many unique sets of knowledge would have disappeared leaving gaping tears in the knowledge network' (1984, 81-82).

The impact was as great on those groups who were driven off their land.

In the Victoria River District this effect of the pastoral frontier was modified by the inefficiency of white pastoralists. For the most part, they contented themselves with murder. Although pastoralists 'flushed out the country', they lacked the singleminded sense of purpose of their Queensland and WA forerunners and did not have a chain of government reserves and settlements to which Aborigines could be removed. An image derived from the cattle industry will explain the process: 'Aborigines were pushed into a mob'. Some Aborigines of their own accord travelled into the stations, and some settled there, mixed up with other tribal groups. De Graaf maintains:

Some of the groups that came into settled areas had travelled long distances in search of their relatives and at times the estates of not just one but two linguistic areas would be crossed... Trespassing rules had prevented this in traditional times. Now they were enabled to cross these boundaries by being guided across by a 'knowing' relative that had travelled to meet them and bring them in (83).

Anecdotal comments made by Aborigines at Daguragu in the early 1970s suggest that some people had come in specifically to gain the knowledge of the gardiya and their way of life, a process which was consistent with an Aboriginal practice of observing people and events as part of their overall knowledge systems.

Another account of why Aborigines moved great distance to get to the cattle stations was given by Engineer Jack Japaljarri to Peter Read in the 1970s. In this case the lure of 'white man tobacco' was so great that his people were prepared to enter into negotiations with traditional enemies, the Gurindji, for permission to travel through their territory to reach Wave Hill Station. The year was 1928.

Engineer Jack describes two separate 'peace' ceremonies held before the Kurinjji were satisfied. One was at a hill north of Hooker Creek, identified as Nyirripiwat, and one was at the station itself. Both occasions were preceded by 'marching Aboriginal way', and seem to have involved large-scale formal ceremonies (Read and Japaljarri 1978, 140-48).

The Mudbura, according to McConvell, moved into stations because they were forced to under threats of violence and death. He goes on to say, however, that:

As well as the foraging activities carried out by men and women while employed by Mountjinni Station, there has been a history of 'bush' Mudbura living a largely traditional life and only rarely coming into stations at least until the Second World War (McConvell and Plamer 1979, 110).

McConvell supported his assertion with evidence from a white man, Matt Savage, whose biography Boss Drovers was written by Keith Wiley in the early 1970s. In Savage's own words, during the 1930s:

[N] had a tribal brother named Robin, a real myall - a wild man - who had run away from the station years earlier after hitting another fellow on the
head with a shoeing rasp. Robin had never left the country. He evaded a series of police patrols until finally the authorities decided to leave him alone. So he continued to live in the bush, alone or with a few close relatives, and though he would occasionally sneak into the black's camp at night, he never ventured near the homestead (111).

Later, Robin's brother also went bush after a row with Savage and stayed there long after Savage left the Montejinnie outstation (112).

There is no doubt that where the white settlers could, they 'flushed the country out', cleaned it up of its Aboriginal presence. Along the Keep River, in river flats and on the open plain and rolling downs country of places like Wave Hill Station, the settlers forced Aboriginal people to either come into the stations or flee for protection to the sandstone country. Just as in Queensland in the 19th century and on the Barkly Tablelands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kimberley pastoralists did not want small bands of nomadic Aboriginals retaining their centuries-old access to traditional country.

The history of the industry in the Victoria River District shows however some remarkable and significant differences: settlers could not count on support in numbers from the NT mounted police; what might have been acceptable in the late 19th century, ie wholesale murder of Aborigines to suit European economic purposes, certainly was not in the early 20th century, at least not publicly acceptable. The two big British companies, Vesteyes and Bovril, who held a very large proportion of the country, did not pursue a relentless policy of development with their holdings and whole areas were left untouched at the expense of the well-watered sections; and the District as the show piece in the development plan of the Commonwealth Government was, as we have seen, very much in the eye of international financiers and political figures. Time, landform, politics, and an Aboriginal capacity to intelligently exploit the situation, all combined to produce a unique experience in NT frontier history: a continuing and forceful Aboriginal presence where customary law, indigenous languages and strong vestiges of traditional modes of production remained, and continue to be evident in the present.

Aboriginal resistance continued well into the 1950s. Contemporary records and later oral history accounts for the period 1920 to the late 1930s highlight the violence of the clashes in those times. There is no record of any European woman being attacked; all the cases are ones where European men were either ambushed, caught by surprise in their camps, or the victims of sudden and often vicious bursts of armed attack by myalls making forays into the more settled areas. In some instances the attacks were clearly carried out with the cooperation and explicit assistance of so-called quiet station Aborigines. Cattle killing probably still continues, but there was a period of concentrated activity between the time of first settlement in the 1880s to the late 1910s/early 1920s. Evidence that spearing continued beyond that time is provided by AS Bingle who was a Vesteyes pastoral manager in the NT from 1937 to 1956. In his autobiographical work This is Our Country, Bingle wrote: 'It was not infrequent to find a spearhead embodied in the lung of a carcass hanging on the meat rail destined for export overseas' (Bingle 1986, 69).

Jasper Gorge, or more precisely the entrances to it, was the site of many attacks on European men. As Young Bill and his mate sat around Bert Drew's campfire that night in 1914, they heard Bert's stories of some of these incidents. The most famous case was the well planned attack in 1895 on two teamsters, Ligar and Mulligan, by some myalls acting with the cooperation of the 'teamsters' boys'. Despite being outnumbered and badly injured, the white men survived the attack because they had guns and a good supply of ammunition. According to Young Bill:
By the darkness of night and shooting at anything and everything, they carried their saddles out of the 'stockade' and managed to secure two of their lighter draught horses... and in great pain rode some fifty miles or so to Auvergne Station (Woodley 1984, 279).

Noel Hall, a drover who later married Dorothy Allen, came to the area as a young man in the 1910s. Unlike Young Bill who only experienced the thrill and fear of attack vicariously through Bert Drew's camp fire yarns, Noel had first hand experience being both threatened himself and witnessing other Europeans under attack. His reminiscences, recorded by historian Ann McGrath in 1978, support an interesting feature of the Aboriginal mode of attack noted by Young Bill and Bert Drew; while Aborigines acted in an intimidating and threatening manner towards Europeans on their way through Jasper Gorge, they only ever attacked people in the areas 'just clear of the gorge at either end' (interview with Noel and Dorothy Hall, 28 August 1978 NTAS NTRS 228 TS230, 10 et seq). At this stage it is only a matter of conjecture why Aborigines avoided attacking or ambushing Europeans, while they were in the gorge, as it does not seem likely that they did not appreciate the strategic value of having Europeans trapped there. One possible explanation could relate to the deeply sacred nature of the gorge in traditional Aboriginal law: Aboriginal men may well have been motivated by respect for their law for the gorge and chose not to desecrate the site by killing.

The incident where Noel Hall was himself attacked happened while he was working on the Humbert River. He and Mrs Hall collaborated in telling Ann McGrath the story:

Noel: I laughed one time when I was on the Humbert. The police came up in a terrific hurry. I said, 'What's your trouble?' 'Well, he said, 'we just heard that you were wiped out; the blacks had killed you.' I said, 'They had a try'.

Interviewer: So, they heard it before it even happened?

Noel: No, other blacks had been talking to these fellas that were going to kill me, 'course they went through to the depot and got out of it. And of course they reckoned they'd wiped me out. They had another think coming!

Interviewer: What did they try to do?

Noel: Spear me.

Interviewer: Were these boys working for you?

Noel: No, come in out of the bush.

Mrs Hall: You see, that's up in the sandstone; it used to be bad in those day.

Interviewer: On the Victoria River?

Mrs Hall: On the Humbert. In that Victoria River area.

Noel: It runs into the Wickham River and that runs into the Victoria River (13).
During the period, there were two police stations in the Victoria River District, one at Wave Hill and the other at Timber Creek. Reports from the Wave Hill area up until the early 1920s came from the police station at Bow Hills. Mounted Constable MacDonald filed reports in June 1915 and September 1916 on patrols he made in the sandstone country in search of Aborigines who had been involved in cattle killing. He described these people as being 'still in their native state and ... very treacherous when coming into contact with them' (30 June 1915). In 1916 he made a ten day patrol 'through the sandstone country in the vicinity of Gordon Creek with the object of suppressing the cattle killing'. The patrol party comprised MacDonald, 'Trackers Les and Sambo and three private boys also 16 police horses and 6 private horses' (4 September 1916).

MacDonald returned to the police station with Rosewood Charlie and two lubras under arrest, but native Sandow escaped. The trackers came back into Wave Hill with Sandow about three weeks later 'having secured him on the head of Pingaira Creek after following his tracks 4 (sic) 19 days'. The report continued:

On Sept. 4 [19]16 Rosewood Charlie and Sandow were brought before the Court at Bow Hills on a charge of larceny on the Bovril Estates Ltd the case being tried under the provisions of the Minor Offences Act 69.70. Both prisoners being sentenced to 6 months Hard Labour (4 September 1916).

Prisoners sentenced were sent to gaol in Darwin and were sometimes released into an institution in Darwin rather than be allowed to return to their traditional country. Rosewood Charlie and Sandow may well have counted themselves fortunate to have been arrested and charged, they at least survived the ordeal. An Aboriginal man, Willie, alias 'Pitchel' was not so lucky: in 1925 a police party set out from Wave Hill to arrest him on a charge of 'cutting J Bickley's throat out near Granny's Soak, NT in the night of 26.9.23' (4 March 1924); the party caught up with Willie on Inverway Station and MC Heathcock's report of 12 December 1923 stated:

Attached is Coroner's Report in duplicate and necessary papers in connection with the death of Native Willie alias 'Pitchel' who was killed near Inverway Stn, in this District on Oct. 7th 23 by Police Party in execution of duty (12 December 1924).

In 1925 a firm of Melbourne solicitors, Fink, Best and Miller, who were executors for the estate of WH Miller, deceased, owner of Bradshaw's Run, NT, wrote to the Minister for Home and Territories offering the property for sale to the Government. They suggested in their letter, 2 December 1925, that Bradshaw would be a most suitable property as a station to provide food and a permanent home for local Aborigines. The idea was that Aborigines thus cared for would cease spearing cattle. They were not at all happy with the current situation and threatened to take action:

Hitherto we have gone out of our way to treat all blacks, both wild and civilised, with the greatest leniency but the time has now come when in our own interests we will have to vary that treatment. We will have to 'shake' the natives up. We are loath to do this but something will have to be done. The suggestion of establishing a station stocked with cattle for the purpose of feeding the wild blacks, at any rate, through the wet season, is we think a good one (Fink Best and Miller to Minister Home and Territories 2 December 1925 AA CRS AI 26/433).
The Chairman of the Northern Territory Land Board, WR Easton, wrote a long and detailed memorandum to the Secretary of the Home and Territories Department on 23 December 1925 in which he rejected the idea of a 'native' station. Easton's memorandum bears careful analysis not least because it contained a recognition of the 'aboriginal's right to live in his own country' based on his acceptance that 'one of the outstanding traits of the aboriginal is his love of his country, no matter how barren and desolate it may be, ...it is practically impossible to keep a bush native out of his own country'.

Easton did agree, however, 'that the natives are a severe menace to the pastoral industry', and he doubted whether the establishment of a station such as suggested would stop cattle killing. He believed that 'the native is a nomad, whose nature it is to hunt and kill... from sheer wantonness', and that Aborigines would continue to kill cattle and it 'would simply mean that the cattle killed on that particular station, would belong to the Government, instead of to private people, as at present'.

In addition to this Easton doubted the efficacy of gaoling which he said 'only acts as a deterrent while the native is in prison, and very often makes him cunning'. There was one way to prevent cattle killing:

*Drive the natives out of the country, or segregate, and place them behind a barricade - both of which courses are intolerable, and against the spirit of the Crown Lands Ordinance.*

That Aborigines continued to actively engage in cattle killing and other minor crimes against settler society is evident from the Timber Creek Police Station records for 1927-29, and from an incident described in her diary by Sister Joyce Falconbridge who nursed with Dorothy Hall (nee Allen) at Wimmera Home 1937-39. The incidents involved Aborigines who, in the main, lived on the periphery of station life and were still referred to in official records as 'Bush tribes'. Aborigines arrested by Mounted Constable Hemmings in 1928 were charged with and sentenced for various offences including unlawful possession of flour, unlawful possession of whisky, unlawful possession of beef, unlawfully carrying fire arms. Hemmings stated in the yearly report for 1928:

*One case of cattle killing was reported during the year. I believe this crime to be still very prevalent amongst the Bush tribes, but is rather a difficult crime to detect, by the various stock owners, as it is only when they are told of same by other aboriginals or when they ride upon the carcass (sic), and if it is any length of time after the killing has taken place the latter is not even possible (Police Station Timber Creek, NTAS).*

In that year Hemmings also reported that there were still about '50 warrants unexecuted on hand for Abos', and a warrant had also been taken out 'for the arrest of 3 abos for attempting to do grievous bodily harm to WA Brown'.

The Annual Report for 1929 described what appeared to be a deteriorating situation:

*The conduct of the bush aboriginals has still been far from satisfactory. Several cases of cattle killing were reported during the year. Seventeen head of cattle being found killed in one pocket on Humbert Station. These I understand all being definitely identified as being killed by aboriginals. Several cases were also reported later in the year from this station, and it appears to me that these aboriginals are still killing cattle on quite a large scale.*
It is difficult to know how much Aborigines understood the small print on the Northern Territory Land Administration documents, but if they had known of the official status of Humbert Station they may have felt quite justified in killing cattle there. In 1929 Humbert Station was in fact a gazetted Aboriginal Reserve with an annual grazing licence issued for its use to Mr Schultz. Aborigines broke into the station store on Humbert and stole flour, so questions might reasonably be asked why a building of that nature had been erected on Reserve Land by people with a licence only to graze the land a year at a time. Hemming's Report continued:

Aboriginals also attacked the crew of the 'Pat' in the Victoria River seriously injuring the crew and a mounted constable who was aboard. The bush aboriginals in the whole of the district appear to be practically out of hand...

Further evidence of a continued presence of 'bush blacks' in the District is provided by Sister Joyce Falconbridge's diary entry for 14 August 1937:

About 8 pm down came George and Frank Spencer to say they were going out to Gordon Creek to bring in a black boy who had been badly speared through the back by wild blacks. Got everything in readiness and the car came back at 10.4 pm plus Mr Fitzgerald [policeman stationed at Timber Creek]... It was one of his black police boys, and had saved Mr F's life by running in front and getting the spear. Put in 12 sutures and finally got to bed 1 am.

In another entry for later the same year, Joyce noted:

Saw Tas Fitzer go by about 11.30 am with some black prisoners, among them the famous Humbert Tommy, and several others caught cattle killing (15 November 1937).

A few months earlier, just a few days after she had arrived at Wimmera Home, Joyce had accompanied Sisters Langham and Stewart and her own partner, Dorothy Allen, on a motor trip to Gordon Creek outstation. Young Jim Martin, son of the manager of VRD went out with them. On the trip out to Gordon Creek an incident occurred which, while probably a commonplace event, may have been seen differently by Aborigines, who might have said, had they been asked, that there was some injustice in a system which punished them for cattle killing while allowing the following to occur:

Jim had brought his gun to shoot wallabies. They are there in hundreds, and as they are badly infested with 'tick' and so infect the cattle, they are counted as one of the biggest pests. I think Jim was sorry he had bought (sic) 4 women with him, he did not get a fair go, we begged a lot off, but others he just would not listen to our plea for mercy (23 May 1937).

Presumably in all cases the myall Aborigines, whilst not spearing people, killing cattle and stealing (and obviously these were not full-time occupations) were living within the parameters of traditional law, following the cycles of ritual and maintenance of sacred sites. They should not be seen as fugitives from the law living a life on the run, for even though there were warrants made out for their arrest, their 'crimes', misdemeanours in any case, were more in the nature of forays for food or attempts to keep waterholes clear than criminal acts. In the main it seems that the serious crimes, attacks on humans, were either acts of retaliation or in defiance of country.
It is a curious circumstance that Vesteyes, the biggest landholder in the district, was quite committed to keeping Aborigines in their native state. Admittedly the motive was economic: while Aborigines were able to live off the country and remain independent of the cash economy, Vesteyes could turn them off from the stations at the end of the muster and did not have to pay wages. In the long run Vesteyes policy turned back on them and in the period after World War II they were at the centre of a protest organised by Aborigines.

In most aspects of its management of both the local natural and human resources available in the Victoria River District, Vesteyes displayed a combination of both cutthroat and foolishly short-sighted approaches. By the late 1930s it was obvious they had been irresponsible in their management of the country, impractical in their development of station infrastructure and quite ruthless in denying their Aboriginal labour proper access to basic human rights, viz, a living wage and adequate, hygienic living conditions. They were not alone in these practices; Bovril, owners of VRD, shared the same criticism, but Vesteyes were probably the worst in treatment of Aboriginal labour and second only to Bovril in mismanagement of natural resources. Aborigines who, for one reason or another, ended up working in the pastoral industry, were subject to the tyranny of these conditions so long as they stayed on those stations. Some simply chose not to stay.

When in 1938, Dr Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of Aborigines, drafted his response to the Payne-Fletcher Report for use by the Administrator, he showed his mindfulness of how Aborigines were used by pastoralists. Cook was not favourably impressed by what Payne-Fletcher had to say. He was especially irritated by the suggestion that any consideration of Aboriginal welfare had to be at the expense of the pastoral industry. After all, the Aborigines were unpaid employees and therefore it was reasonable they should have some compensating privileges - one of which would have been retention of hunting and foraging rights in traditional country. 'That these compensating privileges are in conflict with the cupidity of the employer' continued Cook, 'would appear to be no reason for abandoning the very logical attitude of impartiality which the Committee struck earlier...'.

In his comments on Paragraph 445 which dealt with the problem as perceived by the pastoralists, of 'the depredations of migratory aboriginals' on station herds, Cook made the following illuminating statement about current policy:

> It is admitted that the present corrective expenditute is haphazard [allowing pastoralists to control the nomadic Aborigines by 'employing' as many of them as possible for no wages] but it is recognised that years must elapse before any other practical method can be evolved. Meantime, the policy of the Department is gradually to eradicate the nomadic tendency of the native (AA CRS F1 38/664).

An Aboriginal consciousness of their significance in the cattle industry had been developed for a long time. They had also developed ideas about what constituted good cattle management and were prepared to respond when they saw mismanagement. An account of life on VRD in the 1920s, given by Noel and Dorothy Hall to Ann McGrath, supports this view:

> Mrs Hall: It all depends on the person who is in charge. Everything seems to depend entirely on that; you know we've seen it so often over the years. Well, Noel's seen it on V.R.D. When he first went there they had a manager who was marvellous with
them. Wasn’t he? And they all knew where they were, and the boys were.

Noel: And they had all top notch ringers. And after when there was a change and they all walked off, oh lord, what a turnout. Just went to the pack.

Interviewer: They all walked off?

Noel: I think when the new manager come in, the last one might have been there six months. A white fella be in charge. They wouldn’t stand being messed about.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Mrs Hall: That would be ’22 or ’23. You know, right back in those days (NTAS NTRS226 TS230, 3).

There is evidence of strong Aboriginal responses to adverse situations on the stations scattered throughout the documents and anecdotes for the whole period 1911-60. But one or two from the mid and late 1930s will be sufficient to illustrate. On 1 May 1936 three Aborigines, Brunby, Bob and Fat Jack were involved in an incident on Willeroo Station in the northern corner of the District. They were subsequently charged with the attempted murder of the station overseer Roy Henry Bartlam, and appeared before Mr Justice Wells in the NT Supreme Court in July 1936. On 29 July they were sentenced by Judge Wells to three years imprisonment, but the matter did not rest there and in October 1936 Wells wrote to the Minister for the Interior.

The Judge argued that the convicted men should be released after serving twelve months of their sentences. He considered it essential ‘to the proper control of Aborigines and for their own good’ that they should understand the seriousness of attacking a white man, but in this case there were special circumstances. These were as follows: i) the difficulty of obtaining reliable evidence from Aborigines; ii) the way in which white witnesses will naturally favour a white man in cases where a white is in conflict with an Aborigine; iii) the character of Bartlam, ‘a man who is temperamentally unfitted to have control of natives’; iv) the reputation of Willeroo and Manbulloo natives ‘for quietness, good behaviour and industry’ (Wells to Minister for the Interior, 16 October 1936 AA CRS A1 36/5476).

From Wells’ letter it is clear that Aborigines were not prepared to put up with rough handling or unfair and harsh treatment, that they went ‘bush’ to get away from unpleasant or difficult situations, that they could live quite well off bush food, and if provoked would retaliate. Willeroo was a Vestey’s outstation of Manbulloo. These Aborigines did not show signs of being craven and downtrodden despite their hard life.

When pastoralists felt frustrated by the shortage of labour or dissatisfied with their lot, they often wrote to the ‘top’. Hector Fuller, who was manager of Newry Station in the late 1930s, and Tom Quilty, who was on Coolibah, took action along these lines when they had trouble getting workers. Neither man received much sympathy from local Protectors, ie the policeman at Timber Creek, or Darwin based civil servants.

Late in 1937 Fuller wrote to the Officer in Charge, Police Station, Timber Creek, complaining about the difficulties he was facing with ‘Bush blacks’. According to Fuller
the 'bush blacks' not only killed cattle to eat, they caused the deaths of other cattle during the hunt. At certain times of year when breeder cattle were low in condition they were especially susceptible to the adverse effect of being chased about by the blacks and their dogs' (Fuller to OIC Timber Creek Police Station 23 November 1937 AA CRS F1 39/593).

He went on to say that bush blacks were leprosy carriers and therefore a health risk and proposed that the Northern Territory Medical Department [sic]:

... should start by arranging an extensive systematic patrol through the outlying bush camps. If they do this they will gradually drive the blacks into the stations, where they would be under the observation of the station managers and the police, whereas now, as soon as boy or a lubra gets anything the matter with them they go bush, and into the most remote camps they can find.

Fuller assured the Officer in Charge, who was Tas Fitzer, that he would 'get the support of all the stations in the district, as the different managers with whom I have discussed the position think along the same lines as myself'.

In August 1938, apparently frustrated by the lack of official response, Fuller took up the matter again, this time directly with McEwen, Minister of the Interior. This time there was action. The memo of December 1938 forwarded by the Inspector of Police to the local policeman at Timber Creek covering the copy of Fuller's letter to McEwen contained the following questions:

1. Is Mr. Fuller genuine in his desire to assist the Police.
2. Are there many lepers in the District, as inferred by Mr. Fuller.
3. Does Mr. Fuller experience much difficulty in the way of Aboriginals absconding from employment.
4. Is one entitled to become suspicious that Mr. Fuller's main object is to intimidate the Aboriginals into returning to employment at Newry, rather than ridding the district of Lepers.

J.C. Lovegrove
INSPECTOR OF POLICE

(Lovegrove to OIC Timber Creek Police Station 27 December 1938)

Constable Fitzer's replies to these questions were short; he submitted a report as well:

1. Doubtful
2. No
3. Yes
4. Definitely yes

... The position is that for years past Mr. Fuller has had great trouble holding his employed blacks and a few years ago I loaned him about 12 blacks from this camp to help him over his muster as all his blacks had run away.
In fairness to Mr. Fuller I would say that this is no fault of his but he appears to be unfortunate that he is in a corner where drovers are passing and Rosewood station which adjoins him all pay wages to their Aboriginals and Fullers blacks leave to go with either party.

Then again Fuller allows his walk-about blacks to camp in the middle of his bullock paddock and naturally the bush blacks meet the stations blacks there and no doubt kill a beast occasionally and in so doing stir up the cattle. Then some of the stations Blacks clear off with the bush blacks and go elsewhere (Fitzer to Inspector of Police 20 January 1939).

CLA Abbott accepted this advice and in his letter to the Secretary of the Department of the Interior said: 'The trouble appears to be that Mr. Fuller does not get on very well with natives and they will not remain in his employment' (Abbott to Secretary Department of Interior 30 May 1939).

So a picture begins to emerge of Aborigines being cast as unreliable, not because they would not work, but because they chose to work where it suited them. The barely suppressed anger in some of the correspondence indicates how deeply the pastoralists were frustrated by a situation they could not control. Significantly many of the incidents referred to occurred either before, or in the very early stages of, the Second World War. The Aborigines' choice to withdraw labour did not come about only as a response to having learnt about better pay and conditions while working for the army, nor was their choice exercised only in a context of visible moral support from white sympathisers. They continued for the whole of the period from the early 1900s to the mid 1940s, to move in and out of the industry as it suited them and from station to station for work when that suited them. This was only one of the problems shared by all the white men in the district: despite an image of mastery, of white men being the big men of the north, dominating a big man's country, they were in fact at the mercy of many factors completely outside their control.
CHAPTER SIX

THE MEN

Money, Homes, Fame and Fortune
Be In It! And Be In Time!!
(John Dwyer Papers, Mitchell Library MS2184)

Thus read the flyer John Dwyer issued in 1912 on behalf of the New South Wales (NSW) Section of the New North Committee. It promised that:

By Enterprise and Initiative, A NEW STATE will probably be added to the Commonwealth (John Dwyer Papers).

And the committee offered the people of NSW a chance to be involved in the proposed opening up for settlement and mining of the Victoria River District. A fantastic 2000 square miles - a splendid area, was to be settled. The flyer urged people of NSW to get out of their rut and to take a hand to better things. The necessary requirements to take advantage of this fabulous offer, for surely myths were in the making here, were:

Brain, Brawn and Capital all
will get a deal in the NEW NORTH such as will break the records of this Continent (John Dwyer Papers)

John Dwyer got it all wrong: There were no new lands being opened up in the Victoria River District. By 1912 the Beef Barons had started moving in; 2000 square miles of country was only a medium sized station and a new State was still being debated 75 years later! The country he had in mind was already getting its reputation for being a 'Big Country', a big country for big men. He did at least get that right. Brain, brawn and capital were all very necessary parts of the mix a man needed to start with in the Victoria River District if he was to succeed.

A settler also needed courage, patience, endurance and practical skills. All settlers need those qualities if they wish to succeed. The NT, the Victoria River District, seemed to be calling out for more. Perhaps men needed imagination enough to help them see the possibilities and not too much to frighten them when they lay in their swags at night listening to the night noises of the Australian bush. They would have certainly needed a healthy dose of sense of adventure, enough at least to get them through a topsy-turvy cycle of seasons where it rained all summer and was dry all winter, enough to tide them through the bad times of illness and injury, to stick to a country where the locals, the Aborigines, apparently still felt very put out by the white man's presence and were prepared to do something about it.

For most of his life, a settler would be solitary, if not necessarily lonely; his companions would be his mates, other stockmen, perhaps the overseer, maybe the driller's offside; occasionally he would befriend an Aboriginal man but the relationship would never be easy; and he would perhaps form some kind of casual sexual liaison with an Aboriginal woman (or two) and if she bore him children, he might or might not acknowledge what others always did, that the child was his as well as hers. The country of the big men was really not very attractive to white women and it would be the 1950s before any numbers had settled on a permanent basis.
Many of the qualities the new settler needed were ones displayed, shared perhaps, by the traditional owners of this country. Aborigines also needed, and were trained from childhood until well into adult life in many practical skills which fitted them for life in this big country. They learnt navigation, tracking, botany and biology, so as to identify and know safe foods, how to find and how to preserve water, how to throw a spear and a boomerang and how to speak two or three dialects of their language. For the maintenance of rituals associated with the law they had to be poets, singers, musicians, painters and carvers. Occasionally when a relationship developed with one of the new settlers they taught these ancient pre-industrial skills to the newcomer. There was not a very even exchange of skills. Aborigines were rarely taught anything mechanical and much of what they learnt of horses and cattle and fencing they taught themselves by watching the white man at work.

The relationship between these two groups, Aboriginal and European, was marked in the main by mistrust and hostility, engendered in the former by the presence of Europeans in and on country they had no right to in Aboriginal law and provoked in the latter by the frustration at having to deal with a people who would neither give up and go away nor give in and submit to the new order. A growing interdependence over 70 years from the 1880s, led eventually to a more settled relationship, albeit one characteristically ambivalent and prone still to erupt into violence. Each group or community did eventually learn to recognise and sometimes appreciate the discrete qualities and values of the other - enough to lead to grudging, but mutual, respect.

In this country a man was expected to be tough, rough and strong, able to 'throw' a bullock by leaping from a galloping horse and grabbing and twisting its tail, to lay a man, any man, but especially an Aboriginal man, flat with one punch, to work sixteen hours a day seven days a week, for weeks on end, and show tiredness, but no sign of weakness or fear. A man should be able to swim a river in flood, to hold his grog, to be a loyal mate and show neither pain nor sadness. This was not a country in which a man could show the more subtle feelings, that he must, as any normal human, have felt. He was expected to be gallant and chivalrous to white women but to be discreet about displaying affection or tenderness. Anything that was not on a large scale had somehow to be hidden, kept away from the prying eyes and ribald tongues of his mates.

It is a wonder that humans survived at all under these stressful conditions, the self-imposed and community endorsed values of frontier society. People did survive because they were not always successful at repressing the softer, finer, more 'civilised' sides of their natures. The cost however, of conforming to the frontier image of the big man was high, and many of these men suffered lonely and violent deaths - suicide was not uncommon amongst Europeans although not at all understood by Aborigines; murder also was not uncommon. And both communities understood that a fall from a horse at some spot away from the station could be fatal. There were also serious diseases to be dealt with: malaria, dengue fever, beriberi, and that most terrible disease of frontier society, venereal disease. White people were mostly spared leprosy.

For all that the Victoria River District was a country for big men, it was also very much a country for young men, for youths. They were expected to accept and carry out very responsible positions within the two societies. Aboriginal society emphasises the authority and power of older men, but begins training its young men into the patterns of authority and power from their early days. In the early days of the 20th century, European society, while leaving decision- and law-making to older men, expected its young men to be very active in providing the toil which kept the society on its path to prosperity. This was particularly true in rural society. In each case, a young man began his path into
responsible adulthood in his early teen years. In the Victoria River District boys carried out the tasks of men - and thus a pattern of Australian rural life established in the 19th century persisted and became characteristic of pastoral communities in the North.

Young Bill Lavender left behind his middle class family in Sydney when he set out after adventure in 1910. He was 16 years old. When he began work on VRD in 1914 he had matured into a hardworking, thoughtful and courageous 20 year old. The work he and his mate were given on VRD was the tedious and difficult task of yard building. They were to be paid £5/10/- per week and told to ‘find your own tucker’, a system whereby the cost of any food or personal requirements supplied by the station was deducted from this wage. They were sent out to work on a block three days ride from the head station at Pigeon Hole outstation. Their destination lay 30 miles to the west, beyond the outstation proper and they were left there with an Aboriginal couple as offsiders, having to make do on the job with what was available in the way of bush timbers.

The lads very soon began to feel the intense isolation, and deliberately put in a long and generally hard working day. The black’s company was welcome and it was beginning to be understood why so many white men went completely ‘combo’ (living with the ‘Abos’ as one of them) (Woodley 1982, 300).

The two young men used their time well and the Aborigines appear to have trusted them. During their stint of work, the Aboriginal man ‘Richard’ told them many traditional stories about the country and recounted yarns about the white men who had been there before them.

Richard's descriptions in pidgin of the Dreamtime monster heroes were difficult to make sense of, but the lads realised that if they remained out these parts long enough to learn sufficient of the tribe’s dialects (and the difficulty was some dialects varied more or less, although some particular words were common to most of them), could the dialects be sufficiently mastered, a wonderful story of the Dreamtime creation, religion and mysticism of these people could be compiled (304).

By the time the two young men had finished their part in the way of yard building, Bill had collected quite a few of these stories and he and his mate got on so well with Richard and his wife, Ada, that the Aboriginal man made them a surprise present. Returning one afternoon from a three-day drinking spree on Wave Hill, hangover and despondent, the two lads were preparing for the evening meal cooked by Ada when they discovered their soap was missing. The soap had been borrowed by two Aboriginal girls, Njnjin women from the west, who were visiting the local Mudburra people. They had been advised by Richard to ‘bogey’ in anticipation of the diversion he was providing the young Europeans. Richard cunningly invited the young men to come and get the soap. ‘the girls giggling and laughing the meanwhile and it occurred to the lads it was pleasant enough to listen to' (326).

Young Bill's description of the relationship that developed between the young people is remarkable for its clarity and generosity of spirit - no sense of exploitation here, a healthy and reciprocal physical relationship between young men and women. As Ann McGrath in her account of Aborigines in the pastoral industry has pointed out, such relationships, while not commonplace, were not rare (McGrath 1987, 81-82). Both McGrath and Tom Ronan (Ronan 1954), who was another young man to come to the district, have highlighted the fact that these relationships shared the qualities common to all reasonable human contact, physical passion, affection, loyalty and bonding. They were, however,
subject to the stress of having to be lived in secrecy and in his *Vision Splendid* Ronan discussed the pain and tension that secrecy and guilt created for the men and women involved. Bill Lavender commented, remembering a youth’s response:

> Each knew they had both gone a step further toward becoming a regular died in the blood (sic) Territorian and they were happy enough about it too. Their short spell of depression was over and forgotten (Woodley 1982, 328).

Tom Ronan was also twenty when he came back to the Victoria River District to join his father on Skull Creek Station in the back country north-east of the Depot store at Timber Creek. He had first been there five years earlier and had been shocked and disillusioned by his first sight of the store which his father held in partnership with Mat Wilson.

The Depot store served a twofold purpose in the economy of the district. All the loading coming up stream for the cattle stations, particularly Victoria River District and Wave Hill, came over the Depot landing ‘and Mat received one pound per ton to handle and store it’. The Depot also supplied basic needs, tobacco, clothes, stock knives, foodstuffs and grog. It ‘was widely famed as the best place in the country for a booze up’ (Ronan 1964, 115). Ronan observed, as a young man, the excessive drinking of these white men coming into the Depot to go on a spree. Later, in his middle age, when he came to set down his experiences, he reflected on the issues inherent in this behaviour and came to some interesting conclusions. The Victoria River District has been fortunate that this chronicler of events there in the 1920s and 1930s retained enough awareness to write as he did in the 1960s. Ronan’s conclusions may not suit all, but at least they capture some sense of the rough and ready life of the stockmen of the era.

> The drunkenness common in the back country of my youth is looked on today with as much distaste as the drinkers of that age looked on sexual perversion. But the one question to which I have never been able to get a satisfactory answer is this: if the bushman didn’t get drunk what the hell was he to do with spare time and money? (118).

He goes on to describe the life in a stock camp on a station with good wages earned from hard work and little to spend them on and little to do in the way of recreation or leisure activities. In what could be construed as an *apologia pro vita sua* Ronan then says:

> His season’s work, with hours, food and living conditions tougher than any other that men under the British flag were forced to suffer, left him with a need for change which was mental as well as physical. His cheque, probably between sixty and a hundred pounds - would not have taken him far towards a southern holiday. In such towns as Wyndham and Darwin he got little more entertainment than he could find at the Depot. So he came down to old Mat for a booze up and perhaps a bit of a gin spree as well. For the ‘Black Velvet’ was a necessary and important component of outback existence. It had to be. There was no alternative. It’s main fault was that it was too easily come by (119).

As indeed were the consequences: alcoholism and venereal disease and the desperation of Aboriginal women whose children, born of these holidaying white men, were taken away from them by the Protector of Aborigines. These were the men Alex Moray was describing when he put in a plea for increased medical facilities for the NT at the 1929 Canberra conference.

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The men out there are men with red blood in their veins. Their manners may be rough and their morals loose, but they are very good for developmental work (Northern Territory Development Conference 1929 AA CRS A1 29/210, 61).

These young men were at the mercy of their own loneliness. There were very few white women in the district who could be courted as wives and companions; governments and settlers alike realised the problems created by this lack, but despite the polite speeches made by politicians about the need to bring white women to the north, the politicians and bureaucrats did not always give practical support when it was asked for. In 1937 CE Schultz, a worker at the wireless station on Wave Hill, wrote to his local member, McAlistair Blain, on 11 January 1937 and made the following request:

My object in writing to you is to find out whether you as our representative in parliament could see your way clear to starting the enactment of some legislation giving the power of performing marriages to J.P.'s or police or failing such a drastic step that power being given to certain specified Justices in cases that meet with the approval of the administrator. Something similar to this last is already law in Queensland.

Schultz cited the following as his reasons for writing: He was soon to be married himself and under the current policy would have to travel to Darwin, a distance of 500 miles, for the ceremony. In his view the government was being short-sighted by not providing this kind of service to settlers in remote areas. Surely the government meant to help people to settle in the north and raise their families there - why not do something practical and assist by licensing marriage celebrants for outback communities (CE Schultz to McAlistair Blain 11 January 1937, AA CRS A1 37/2857).

Schultz's letter was referred by the Department of the Interior to Darwin for action. On 17 April 1937 the Acting Administrator, LHA Giles, wrote an unsympathetic response, somewhat surprising given the Giles family's association with the pastoral industry. Giles quoted at length comments made by Nichols, the Registrar General. Nicholls was chiefly concerned that a situation might develop where marriages were 'performed between half-castes and aborigines (sic) with whites without the permission of the Chief Protector through ignorance on the part of the officiating person' to which Giles added:

At the same time the fact must not be lost sight of that the Northern Territory has managed without such an appointment during its past history and now that travel facilities have been improved to an extent undreamed of a few years ago, it would seem that the question has been raised just at a time when the real necessity for such an appointment is disappearing. I am inclined to agree with the Registrar-General that isolated cases, such as the one at Wave Hill, which might arise are not sufficient to warrant provision for legislation in the direction suggested by the Crown Law Officer (LHA Giles to Secretary Department of Interior, 20 April 1937, AA CRS A1 37/2857).

In his autobiographical work Once there was a Bagman, Tom Ronan wrote about the bleakness of the single man's life and in doing so expressed the gratitude bush men felt towards the AIM nursing sisters stationed at Wimmera Home on VRD Station.

Had it not been for the A.I.M. Sisters at the Wimmera Home, life would have been very dull indeed.
After weeks, perhaps months, of squatting on logs with a blackened
quarry pot of tea and a hunk of overland brownie, the sheer physical
satisfaction of sitting on a chair, sipping tea out of dainty china, nibbling at
some tasty delicacy, was something to relish. And a half hour’s general
chat with an intelligent woman - and the A.I.M. had room for no other sort
- was the only social interlude a bagman was ever likely to enjoy. No
matter who you were or what you were, all these bonny women asked of a
visitor was that he should be sober (Ronan 1966, 205-206).

Young Ronan came back to live in the District in 1927. This time he did not spend very
long at the Depot, he headed out to Skull Creek where he worked as a stockman alongside
his father. They lived in a primitive ‘single roomed, high gabled barn of a place, built of
bush timber and corrugated iron’. The two men looked after themselves. Jim Ronan was
quite a good baker with the assistance of Nellie who was, as Tom says,
‘housekeeper-in-chief; old, fat, cranky, but as honest and as loyal as any human being I’ve
ever known’. Tom was happy on Skull Creek and enjoyed the rough bush life working
alongside his father whose skills as a bushman he admired and respected. There was,
however, one drawback: ‘the absence of any companionship in my own age group’ (34-38).

Ronan was aware that he had been given responsibility in the stock work for which he was
not fully equipped. As was often the case in the District he was put in charge of
Aboriginal ‘boys’ in the stock camp, not because he was experienced, but because he was
both white and the owner’s son.

*I was still pretty useless but was learning fast. What I needed was a year
or so on a big station under a competent head stockman. But as it was I
was trying to lead a team of blacks, one of whom was willing but blind, one
competent but cowardly, one completely useless and the two half grown
youngsters, George and Pluto, game, active, but without the instinct which
tells the experienced stockman when to ride and when to pull off and let the
mob go (44).”

Kevin Graham was 17 years old when he and his brother left Nudgee College in Brisbane
and went up to VRD Station to join their family. His father had been a cattle buyer for
Vestey’s meatworks in Darwin and after it had closed, had gone back to his former
occupation, managing cattle stations. In the early 1920s, the Graham family, father,
mother, daughter Kathleen and two small boys were on VRD. Kevin and his brother
joined them there in 1921 and he was sent to work at the Mullaloo outstation. He recalled
life and work on the station in an interview in August 1981.

At Mullaloo there were ‘twenty black boys - head stockman and myself’, and from internal
evidence it appears that by the time Graham left, sometime in 1926, he had become the
head stockman. He described the living conditions at the outstation:

Kevin: We had a shed at Mullaloo - the one shed there. We had
swags - all of us - and we slept out in the open - slept on
the ground, there were no beds.

Interviewer: But the shed was used as a general store as well as your
living quarters?

But as he pointed out, the stockmen did not spend much time at the outstation, they'd be away mustering cattle; 'they'd only come back to the outstation for the 'Wet' season to recuperate ready for another year's work - get horses ready, change the horses - shoeing and the gear, repair the gear and all that' (21-22). During the 'Wet' they might also do some maintenance work on fences - 'Sometimes during the 'Wet' season you could get out on horseback with some wire and fencing pliers and axes' (27).

Another young man on VRD around the same time learned that a man who wanted to be in charge sometimes had to take strong physical action to make his point. Noel Hall's story reflects the violent way in which people on stations resolved their industrial problems. His account of an incident on VRD would find corresponding echoes from many men who worked these stations. He did not take the quieter, more peaceable approach of young Bill. Noel and his wife told Ann McGrath the story in 1978:

Noel: If you talk to any black fella, he's summing you up all the time. You might think he's a goat and this and that but he's taking you out of line. You've only got to watch 'em. I've been amongst them that long they take no notice of me! They talk in front of me.

Interviewer: Did they try you out?

Noel: Oh yes, you bet your life. I had a full work up.

Mrs Hall: You got tried out when you had a lot of cattle to brand when you first went there, didn't you?

Noel: Too right! And they got tried out too!

Interviewer: What did they do?

Noel: Nothing would go right. When you've got a couple of hundred calves to brand you can't mess about. I flattened them here, I flattened them there and I heard, go on, give [it] to them! It was the manager, who came up un-noticed outside. And the ones who were getting through the fence he was flattening them. I never had one bit of trouble after (Interview with Noel and Dorothy Hall, 28 August 1978, NTAS NTRS226 TS230, 5).

This story of Noel's about his experience as a young man on VRD does no more nor less than show his values were those which prevailed at the time. A man was admired for his capacity to manage 'black fellas' so long as his hardness was tempered by a dash of humanity.

In 1927 Tom Cole, aged 21 years, was given a job as head stockman at Number One Camp on Wave Hill Station. He was there six months working with '8 or 10 boys', holding cattle at what was a bullock camp, a depot for cattle walked over from Vestey's station further west.
They'd rest them a year at Wave Hill and as the drovers came along and dropped off their mob, the Number One Camp would receive the bullocks and count them, take delivery and would give them 1250 fresh bullocks that had been dropped off the year before. It was more or less a bullock camp and I don't think I put a branding iron in the fire all the time I was on Wave Hill (Interview with Tom Cole 18 August 1984 NTAS NTRS226 TS29, 5).

Cole is a bit of a yarn spinner, like Bill Lavender, and he gave some exciting accounts of 'paddy dodging' when he was interviewed in 1984. He also spoke about the grog situation on those western Victoria River properties during the late 1920s and early 1930s. According to Cole, and this is supported by Bill Lavender's story about the spree he attended at Wave Hill in 1915, the men in the bush 'would get a load of grog, sit down and drink it, that'd be the end then [they'd] get stuck into the work, [they] wouldn't get any more grog for the next month or two. Be no grog in the camp permanently. And of course stations banned it' (35).

The fact that stations banned grog didn't 'stop it from coming in because those mailmen, like Bob McLennan, he used to run out to Wave Hill; it was a very important part of his revenue, the grog he used to carry in the wet season. It was a pack horse mail and he'd always have one horse full of grog' (35). The grog run was so important that the mailman would make sure that the horses carrying the load were surefooted. They were especially selected for their tranquillity and river crossings were 'carefully selected according to the force of the current, the important thing being a gently shelving bank on the other side to facilitate landing the mail and gear and, of course the horses' (18-19).

Grog could be a problem for young men and notes from the diary Joyce Falconbridge kept at Wimbera Home in 1937-38 show how much a young man had to wrestle with alcoholism. As an important part of the sister's role was their welfare or social work, Sister Falconbridge was concerned that the young man, one of the five sons in the Martin family, should be able to keep to his Christmas Eve resolution to keep off the grog. In the weeks between Christmas and the time he left VRD on Monday 24 January 1938, Joyce noted from time to time on how he kept his contract. He had been given a dog by the sisters to keep on condition he kept his word. He seems to have managed it - an achievement at a time of the year when the men would have been imbibing a fair bit of Christmas and New Year cheer (Falconbridge Diary).

These five young men, the Martin boys, sons of the manager on VRD, led strange secluded lives. With few people their own age for company, they grew up on VRD, received most of their education from their mother and as soon as they finished their schooling began stock work. They were given the responsibility of managing Aboriginal stockmen who would have been older and generally much more experienced. None of the five sons received any formal training in a trade or craft and were dependent on the father's employment for their own - the station was not theirs, it was owned by Bovril, and unless they were outstanding in stock work must have realised they would be shifted on when their father retired. Three of them joined up during the Second World War and one of them, Ted, was killed in action at Milne Bay in 1942; another, Stan, was wounded in the same year. By then, however, the old order on VRD was passing and by the mid 1940s the Martins had gone (Bovril Estate Deposit 119/6 Martin to Lord Luke 21 December 1942, ANU).

The situation of these young men highlights something very important about life in the cattle industry in the Victoria River District. The work was physically demanding and required stamina and endurance. It was work for young men, but it required the leadership, experience and maturity of older men for success. While Europeans refused to
recognise the potential of their Aboriginal employees, while they continued to prefer youth and raw energy over maturity, while they handed responsibility over on the basis of kinship and class and most importantly, race, they were deepening the debilitating structural faults in the industry.

Jack Sullivan, a young man during the 1920s observed the patterns of family dominance on Durack stations. In his life story, recorded by Bruce Shaw in the 1970s, he described what he had observed:

_Old Durack had all Durack managers, cousins, uncles or something like that, on all the four stations, Argyle, Auvergne, Ivanhoe and Newry. Sometimes when they were short of relations they found a good manager, another white man, and put him on as a caretaker you might as well say, while they went for a holiday (Shaw 1983, 92-93)._ The situation however, was not a simple one of privilege for members of a ruling class. Station management on the big company stations was at the mercy of decisions made by company directors in boardrooms at Smithfield and on The Strand. While in the case of the Martin family, a superficial view might see Alf Martin as favouring and promoting his sons over better, well qualified, older Aboriginal men, the young men thus favoured were being deprived of essential freedoms necessary for their development as mature adults in European society. They were bound physically, emotionally and most importantly, economically, into tight and often unyielding family structures.

No wonder then that the men developed a style of existence which emphasised physical prowess, which allowed myths about feats of daring to emerge. Things had to be large, painted with a broad brush on a large scale. Men were admired for their riding, horse breaking and droving skills. The quieter occupations, bookkeeping and saddlery, were not high in their estimation. Mr Topham, Tom Ronan's main character in _Vision Splendid_, spent a lot of his time, whilst not bookkeeping, dreaming of the time when he could go droving. Young Bill and his mate left VRD when the chance came to go droving with some cattle being shifted along the Murranji. They were prepared to go along even though all the ringers jobs had been filled and the boss drover, Herb Cuthbert, could only offer them jobs as cook and horse tailor.

Excitement was the order of the day! And if none appeared likely, then it was up to the men to find it or make it. Some did that at the cost of their lives. Neal Durack, a popular young man liked and respected in the District, took an enormous risk in 1920 and paid the ultimate price. [His story has been fictionalised by Ronan in _Vision Splendid_ and included by Mary Durack in _Sons in the Saddle_.]

Full of the excitement of the picnic race meeting at Victoria River Depot, and carrying in his pockets cheques for the value of £500 won at the races, Neal dived into the flooded Ord River. Despite his swimming prowess he was pulled downstream by the racing waters and drowned (Durack 1983, 368).

Tributes in the Western Australian press stressed his horsemanship, his initiative and resourcefulness and his bushmanship; he had been highly regarded by his commanding officers during World War I. Colonel Olden, Commander of his regiment, was quoted as saying 'He always had a smile and kept everyone in good spirits'. Colonial Secretary and leader of the Legislative Council, HP Colebatch said of Neal: 'He was as fine a specimen of manhood as one would ever see and it is sad to think that one so well equipped for carrying on development in the Kimberleys should go in this way in his 30th year' (Durack 1983, 369).
Tom Cole, at one stage of his career in the NT, decided to go horse breaking, which was recognised on stations as one of the more prestigious jobs. There were other advantages. The pay was good, £6 or £7 a week which in the 1930s might be more than a manager on a smaller station could earn. 'You ... had your feet under the table at the head station ... you weren't camped out in the bush or anything like that, you see. You had cooks cooking for you and all this sort of thing, see' (Tom Cole Interview NTAS NTRS226 TS29, 14).

A man's reputation in the industry was more likely to be built on his ability as a horse breaker or bronco buster or brumby runner than for any skill in management. He might be respected for his skill in fence building or yard building, but he is more likely to be remembered, to be incorporated into the mythology, for the way he handled animals. The occupation of horse breaking was one where Aboriginal stockmen were acknowledged for their expertise. AS Bingle, in This is our Country, had this to say:

The services of a confident horsebreaker are undertaken. He personally makes the young horse sufficiently serviceable. He then hands over to members of the mustering camp who go on with the job of getting the horse tractable ... Usually it was the Aboriginal stockman who did the final work of breaking in a good stock horse (Bingle 1986, 53).

This was an area of common ground between the two races, and in the stock camp operation provided a man with a means of assessing the value or worth of other men. It allowed a man some access into a personal relationship with another where race was not a necessary limitation. Significantly, when Noel Hall and his wife wanted to express their criticism of Aboriginal stockmen they chose to talk about the way Aborigines handled horses. This was something which had an absolute value how a man handled horses gave you an idea of what he was like as a person. Mr and Mrs Hall, however, used horsemanship as a basis from which they extrapolated a racial stereotype:

Mrs Hall: They are no good at running cattle stations on their own. With a good person to show them the way, and that, they're very good, but they've bought cattle stations for them, and if they've got to manage them themselves, they just can't do it. You can be the best stockman under the earth, but after all, cattle stations are more than just running out after cattle. There's saddling and that, that's got to be done up. You know, the saddles have got to be done up. One station, Kildirk, that was bought for them; it was a very nice station that belonged to one of the Duracks, and it was bought for natives. Natives were running it and they had the saddles that way that they were cutting right down into the horses.

Noel: They had to shoot some of the horses.

Mrs Hall: When the stock inspector went out, they had to shoot some of the horses because their backs were cut that badly

Noel: Right to the spine. (NTAS NTRS TS230, 6).

Aborigines enjoyed this aspect of stock work and often returned to the stations during the wet, after they had had a spell in the bush, to muster horses and get them ready for the
next year's stock camp. This was the case on the East Kimberley-Victoria River stations owned by the Durack family and their close friend, Jack Kilfoyle. Jeff Djanama told Bruce Shaw his story about horsebreaking this way:

As soon as you had Christmas we shot straight back to the station, all the single boys ... We just came in and mustered the horses, fixing the bloke's gate or anything, the paddock, making up the hobbles, and then greasing up the pack saddles... Some blokes would be breaking in horses. There was no horse breaker just all the boys. Two boys might be up there breaking in the horses with the older boys (Shaw 1987, 107).

Although the term 'boys' is a generic term referring to any Aboriginal man working in the cattle industry in Jeff's account it also means young men, perhaps youths. Aboriginal men went into stock work when they were very young, sometimes before they had been 'cut' (circumcised) and put into their law.

Plate 9: Sevenoaks and Rebel
VRD Station Race Day 27 December 1937
[As is customary with many photographs of the period, the horses are named, not the riders]
(Donated by Mrs Joyce Fuller (nee Falconbridge))
Grant Ngabadj, whose family group had been all but wiped out by the Weabers in the incident at Grant Creek, went droving with his father when he was still very young. He was first taught to ride 'on a tame pony, a proper tiny pony from Auvergne' (Shaw 1981, 42).

Some of the boys were not as lucky as Grant and had to learn their skills under a much harsher regime. Mandi was introduced to horses by Jim Chrisp, head stockman on Ivanhoe 'till he went away from there and died. He was the bloke they killed out in the bush'. Chrisp's method was simple: put a young boy on a horse and if he fell off then hit him and make him get back on the horse again. Mandi's method of learning was equally straightforward: do as much by himself as possible so as to avoid the stock whip. He told it this way:

I learnt more, I learnt more. If I made a mistake, I was taught to do it. I didn't want him to come back and tell me. I did that my way (on my own) and if I couldn't take notice, he flogged me with the whip. He taught me from that idea (Shaw 1987, 38).

Jack Sullivan, whose mother was a member of the Djamindjong group used to 'go to the blackfeller law when [he] was a kid, but not much'. He was with his mother 'in the bush every holiday until [he] was brought up and over 20' then he 'went to the white side' (Shaw 1981, 75). His experiences as a young stockman on Durack stations are illuminating. They provide an insight into the two worlds, Aboriginal and European, from the perspective of one who moved between them. From the time he moved into the white man's world he found he was forced to leave the other behind.

Yes, once they took you off the blackfellers and put you with the whites you could not go back again. There was some reason to hate the blackfellers in my days. I had to work them same as the white men, I had to liven them up. When they did not do what you told them, bang you went, knocked them over and all that. I was a bad bugger when I was in my time ... In those days we white men and halfcastes treated the blackfeller like a dog. We could go in and belt him or take his stud away for a night. That was why some fellers were speared, some halfcastes too, through chasing the black girls (76-77).

Jack observed the levels of order within the structures of social relations on cattle stations. The order was established firmly along economic lines, and always had a white man at the top. The rules were strictly adhered to and although an Aboriginal man like Bulla, Jack's relation, might sometimes fill in as a head stockman, in Jack's words:

The head stockman had to be a white man or a halfcaste, that was where the line was drawn, but the head boy was the mainstay of the camp (92).

Implicit in Jack's story is a statement about the hierarchical structure that dominated social relations at the homestead, and which relaxed into a more fluid shape out in the stock camp. At the station the top person was not the most able horseman, or the best brumby runner, it was the manager and in descending order came the bookkeeper, the overseer, with the mechanic, blacksmith and saddler shouldering each other at a level lower down, then the head stockman and so on to the stockmen. Aborigines did not count at all in this order, although a part-Aboriginal man like Jack might ascend far enough up the pecking order to reach head stockman status. As Tom Cole said, the reason why he wanted to be horse breaker was that as a self-employed contractor, as a horse breaker 'you had your feet under the table at the head station'. The issue of who did, or did not, get to put his feet
under the table was defined as much by income as anything else. In this world, a man's
world, social position was very important. Values were defined and often rigidly imposed
by self-appointed social arbiters on the station. It was a strange enclosed society with
strongly defined social markers sometimes beggaring any definition that made sense. It is
in the nature of settler societies that these ambiguities and ambivalences exist: the
isolation of a frontier settlement brings people together, but the closeness is then
contradicted by the perceived need to maintain civilised standards. The hierarchical
structure of the pastoral industry kept people apart socially even while it brought them
together in the common goal of developing the North. Tom Ronan experienced this when
he was on the road in 1927 to join his father at Skull Creek.

Next day we made Wave Hill, the largest and, in those years, least friendly
establishment in the entire north. We pulled in during the afternoon and,
extcept for the biggest collection of lubras I'd ever seen, no one was in sight.
We drove through the operational area and pulled up at what looked like a
store or office. After a while Old Jim, wooden leg and all, hobbled within
and located some sort of minor dignitary, who emphasized that it was a
grievous breach of local custom to intrude on the privacy of the big house
even with the news that a lady - and one known personally to the occupants
of this ivory tower - was of our party.

The boss appeared in double quick time, greeted Sister most effusively,
acknowledged her introductions of Old Jim and myself with a cursory nod,
and bustled her and her suitcase within. We were left as disregarded as
before. It was my first taste of such treatment anywhere in the bush. As old
Jim Maloney put it: 'If we were alone we could go back to the police station
or along the road a mile or two and unroll our swags anywhere. But that
might make the Sister feel uncomfortable. We've just got to suffer it out.'

In time the bookkeeper reappeared, piloted us down to the exact spot in
Wave Hill's million acres where we would be permitted to park the truck: a
certain bay in the shed, not a foot to the right or a foot to the left.

'It looks untidy,' so he averred, 'having old trucks all over the place.'

Jim's was a brand new Chev (Ronan 1966, 47).

Young Bill tasted this same curious insistence on social niceties, even out bush in a
stockcamp, when he and his mate went droving with Herb Cuthbert:

The Mates found themselves in amiable company and realised the visitors
to the camp were appreciated. Of course the Wave crowd had heard all
about the new arrivals from the South, and the local Abos knew all about
'Roarer' and 'Didgee' and Herb Cuthbert was an old identity. Still, there
was even a little snobbery even in this outlandish camp, but the Lads were
realising there had to be in any camp, it could only level out at a minimum.
The whites congregated together, the bosses, Buck and Herb a little apart
(they had much to discuss), the half-castes (loosely referred to as such,
when the harsh phrase 'yellow blokes' was not used, both references
included all castes or coloured men other than full bloods); so half-castes
grouped a little to one side, and the full bloods quite apart. When
necessary each group had their own camp fires. This routine was very
elastic at times; it was the custom and worked smoothly enough (Woodley
1982, 343).
On VRD Station the same order applied and the regular Wednesday and Saturday afternoon tennis parties followed by supper and social chat were not attended by anyone lower in the social scale than the bookkeeper. Exceptions were made very occasionally, perhaps for Christmas, if the manager and his family had not already left for their annual holiday, or for a special party such as when there was a changeover of staff at the AIM hospital. Strangers passing though on a motoring holiday might be invited to come up to the big house, or the pilots of the air mail service, but not the packhorse mailman, nor the teamster, and certainly not the blacksmith or the saddler. Evidence suggests that the big company stations adhered to the rule whether European women were there or not.

So it was that men whose lives were already solitary enclosed themselves and shut out the company of other lesser mortals. Some developed eccentric habits which they found impossible to break even when wider social custom ordained they should act differently. The Reverend Chris Goy and his wife were once entertained by the Farquharson brothers in circumstances that would be amusing if it weren't for the way the incident demonstrated the effect of isolation. The Farquharsons, it should be noted, were known for their hospitality and many travellers' tales from people passing through credited the old men for their charm. The charm was, however, displayed on certain terms, ones set down by the Farquharsons.

One of the furthest outposts was Inverway Station, for beyond its boundaries lay the uninhabited Great Desert. It was owned by the Farquharson brothers - George, John and Hugh - all bachelors. Outside the shack in which they lived, stood three seats made of sawn off logs, each one exclusive to their owners. At sundown, after our evening meal, we sat forth to sit and yarn. They had supplemented the seating capacity by the addition of two kerosene cases. In my ignorance I assayed to sit on one of the stumps, but was smartly pulled up by the words - 'That's John's'. So I moved towards the second stump, again came the voice, 'That's George's'. Then it dawned on me, the seating arrangements for the... evening yarn were sacrosanct, and Irene and I made for the kerosene cases (Goy 1979, 117).

Men like the Farquharson brothers on Inverway and Bert Drew the donkey teamster emerge from the record of events, the official sources, the diary of a nursing sister, the autobiographies, as somehow a permanent part of the human landscape, especially between the 1910s and 1940s. And they seem old, very old, as indeed the Farquharsons undoubtedly were by the 1930s. Perhaps the situation of old men like them running the property from the head station while the very young men were out in the stock camps helped to create the strangely contradictory reports made by CLA Abbott and Archdale Parkhill. Abbott, in 1929, travelled by plane, landing at head station air strips and he was depressed by the fact, as he perceived it, that 'there were no young men' (Report on Visit to North Australia and Central Australia June 1929 by the Hon CLA Abbott Minister for Home Affairs AA CRS A4904 902/1/82, 27). Parkhill, in 1932, covered a distance of 700 miles by car in 28 days and he met 'a considerable number of young men' (Report of a Tour by the Honourable Archdale Parkhill MP Minister for the Interior, AA CRS A1 34/3449, 1). It is just possible that Parkhill, unlike Abbott, moved beyond the world of the homestead.

Whatever the reason for the difference in experience it would have been true of men like the Farquharsons that they spent practically their life on their runs, in the main their families had remained south and others had never married (AA CRS A494 902/1/82, 27). Despite the fact that the three brothers are mentioned in almost every traveller's tale told
for the District between 1910 and 1940 little detail is available about them and their lives. One exception is the description AS Bingle wrote in *This Is Our Country*. According to his account the Farquharsons, Archie, Harry and Hughie drove cattle from the Inverell district of northern NSW through Qld to the NT in the 1890s. The trip was reported to have taken two years and so their epic journey followed the path and the pattern of the journeys made by the Buchanans, the Duracks and the Kilfoyles (Bingle 1986, 34).

They stayed on the station and apparently led a quiet life. They do not feature in the records for any of the problems, misdemeanours or adventures that affected other white men in the district. At least one of these men had an Aboriginal wife and their son, Jack, was known and respected throughout the district as a good worker. He was called Farquharson and thereby acknowledged as the child of the union.

The station itself was primitive, as the various descriptions attest and even when the brothers wished to cater for the comfort of their visitors the very basic nature of their amenities prevailed and prevented them from doing so. According to Bingle the shower they offered his wife was 'a kerosene drum with holes in the bottom, hung up on a tree at the front of the house with no screen for anyone's nakedness' (35).

Supplies for the station came once a year by camel and the Rev Chris Goy and his wife were visiting on one occasion when the camels arrived. The year was 1937 or 1938.

*There was great excitement, when next morning, a long string of camels handled by Afghans, duly arrived bearing the annual supplies. It was incredible the huge weight of cargo these ships of the desert could carry. We left the Farquharsons busily unloading their year's supplies* (Goy 1979, 54).

In his 1936 tour of the NT, C Price Conigrave called on the Farquharsons, whom he spoke highly of as 'some of the greatest stockmen who have ever handled cattle on the run or over a dry stage'. He put their ages as nearing three score years and ten and he spoke admiringly of their physical agility. The year was a bad one and although they had been used to doing well, in 1936 they could not turn off any cattle - drought had dried up the water holes along the route to Wyndham meat works. Once they might have tried dry staging the cattle. According to Conigrave they had once taken cattle through a 125 mile dry stage, but 'these young-old men [had] no desire to repeat a performance that even yet is quoted by Territory cattlemen around their camp fires as being a wonderful feat of droving' (Conigrave 1938, 204).

In 1938 they turned off only 724 cattle, according to statistics compiled by BAE adviser, Jack Kelly in 1946 (AA CRS F1 46/661). In the same year Kilfoyle turned off 2327 from Rosewood, but Rosewood was an outstanding example of good management. Compared with other similar sized stations in the district, Inverway did not fare too badly (AA CRS F1 46/661). The income from this sale, however, could hardly have been adequate to support the brothers and maybe lack of income contributed to the fact that they rarely left the station - they simply could not afford to. AS Bingle commented:

*At one stage the northern Farquharsons said they had not moved off their property for 17 years, but one brother eventually decided to visit Perth and for the occasion discarded outback attire for a navy blue suit and bowler hat; he also carried a cane. Perhaps his smart appearance gave a false idea of life in the North to those who saw his photograph with newspaper accounts about the establishment of Inverway Station* (Bingle 1986, 35).
Bert Drew was another of the old men Abbott would have met and Bert was even more of a character than the three Farquharsons. His life was as peripatetic as theirs was static and he entered and left the lives of many people as he carried supplies to stations throughout the District. In 1954 Jack Sullivan reminded Bert Drew that when he had first seen Bert it had been on Argyle Station in 1906. Jack had been a ‘snipe’, only five years old (Shaw 1983, 40). Bert was there in 1914 when young Bill and Jonesy needed a lift from the Depot to VRD; he was there, this time up a tree, when flood waters came swirling through Wave Hill in 1924; he presented young Tom Ronan with an interesting challenge in the early 1930s; and he featured as the star in a tale of misadventure on VRD in 1937. Tom Ronan has done Bert (Burt) justice in his account of the incident in the early 1930s.

Burt sent a messenger down to me. One of his wagons had broken down at Potato Can Waterhole twenty miles up the road. The age was past when unattended loading could be left in safety. Would I please come up and camp with it until he could get back from the Wickham with a spare wheel (Ronan 1968, 152).

This occurred at Christmas time and as Ronan commented, it meant that he had a lonesome Christmas, but that was no novelty for him. The Wickham was the local name for VRD Station and its community.

Fortunately the wagon that had broken down was the one with Bert’s personal effects on board so the Martin children on VRD would not have missed out on their Christmas presents, nor that station, at least, its ‘Wet’ supplies. Tom was also comfortable, even if lonely:

There were four packing cases of books, and a case of beer ostentatiously open under the wagon. There was the widest variety of tinned foods that the Depot store could supply, carbide lamps, a draughts board with a book of problems set by champions, a rifle and ammunition. There was a dead bloodwood tree sixty yards away with enough wood for a month, water within two hundred yards and two light, four gallon tins and Chinese-style yoke to simplify the carrying (152-153).

All Tom had to do was sit it out within sight of the load and stay relatively sober until Bert got back. His sojourn lasted a fortnight. When Bert returned he had with him his all-Aboriginal crew of helpers and their families, offsiders and dogs. They did all of the work except for the very tricky negotiations of Jasper Gorge, while Bert supervised.

It was a great sight to see Burt on the road: a boy driving each team with whip and voice from the near side, a tribe of lubras, children and old pensioners with brushes, switches and dogs urging the beasts from the offside; Sunrise in the rear driving four or five horses and perhaps a hundred spare donkeys; Burt, grey-bearded, bespectacled, philosophical, sitting in front of the tabletop reading Carlyle, Milton or Ingersoll (154).

Bert was a special friend of the Australian Inland Mission. He served on the local committee that supported Wimmera Home and he kept an eye on the freight he carried in for the sisters. His arrival was always welcome and so the events of November 1937 recorded by Joyce Falconbridge in her diary were of quite dramatic proportions. Bert was due into the Wickham with the loading for the Wet and from early November people on the station were looking out for him.
Plate 10: Donkey teams in the gorge
Bert Drew's teams in Jasper Gorge, 1938
(Donated by Mrs Joyce Fuller (nee Falconbridge))

He was actually quite close to the head station when he bailed up in Jasper Gorge, but as Joyce's diary shows he ended up with another problem beside being bogged; he sought relief from his difficulties in the bottle and in the end the surfeit of alcohol turned out to be the bigger trouble. Joyce began noting Bert's imminent arrival on 9 November. She maintained her recording over the next two weeks as the story of Bert and the bogged team and the other problem filtered in to the AIM hospital via station workers who went out regularly to check Bert's progress.
Tuesday Nov. 9th
... Well, we have been expecting Bert Drew in since the 4th, and still no sign of him. We are hoping he comes soon, as we are down on our last of everything just about...

Wednesday Nov. 10th
... Still no sign of Bert Drew, he was seen in the gorge today, so should be here soon. He is running very late.

Thursday Nov. 11th
Still no sign of the donks, everyone is on tip-toe looking for him. We try to keep our minds off the jam and marmite and all the things we have not got. Our last tin of butter is being spun out like gold.

Friday Nov. 12th
... Still no sign of Bert Drew, everyone seems to have a different opinion and version of him being so late (Falconbridge Diary).

By the following Sunday Bert still had not arrived and Sister Falconbridge remarked that

Things are getting rather serious as to our larder, have very little left and the meat leaves a lot to be desired these days (Falconbridge Diary 14 November 1937).

A fact not to be wondered at: in November the mean maximum temperature at VRD is 38.3 degrees C, and the locals can expect at least 23 days of more than 35 degrees C (Bureau of Meteorology, Darwin). In temperatures of that degree and without refrigeration fresh meat can 'go off' in a matter of a few hours. The diary entry for Tuesday 16 November reads in part:

Have spent the day straining our eyes for signs of Bert Drew and Bob, but no luck again... The last of our butter has gone, so it's toast and dripping from now on. Cooking is a great problem, we haven't a thing to cook with (Falconbridge Diary 16 November 1937).

Bert's non-arrival continued to be a problem for quite a long time. On Wednesday 17 November the news was brought back that he was bogged and although one wagon had been freed it would take another three days to reach the station and had only sugar and flour on board. A station hand brought in some supplies on Friday 19 November, but the final delivery was not made until Saturday 27 November. By then Bert was quite ill and needed medical attention; Sister Falconbridge went out with Mr Roden, the station bookkeeper to get him on Thursday 25 November. On Friday she noted in her diary:

Had a dreadful night, neither of us (refers to Sister Falconbridge and her colleague Sister Dorothy Allen) had a wink of sleep. Mr Drew very ill, had the horrors well and truly (26 November 1937).

Bert was quite sick and debilitated for another fortnight and his slow recovery was watched by the sisters with help from men on the station during the early stages when he was in the grip of the DT's. Was it with conscious irony then, that Joyce noted in her diary:

Wednesday Dec. 21st
Seven months since we left home for the country of big brave men. Mr Drew OK now, just wants feeding up (21 December 1937).
The sisters discharged Bert on 16 December. His ordeal and theirs, had lasted a month. As he was still alive in 1954 he must have had a particularly strong constitution and although no actual records exist to show that he went through the trauma of withdrawal from alcohol ever again it is more than likely that he did. Bert gave up carrying goods in 1939. In an ironic twist the government-backed experimental road train forced this old pioneer of the pastoral frontier out of business. His going, and that of Bob McLennan the mailman, was noted in the *Northern Standard* on 17 February 1939:

*Word comes from the Victoria River that Mr. Bert Drew, who has been carrying for 26 years from the Victoria River Depot to the Bovril Estates with his donkey teams has finished up and will start as a fence and yard building contractor. Mr. Drew is being pushed off the road by the road train, which is to do the carrying at a rate of 6½ d per ton mile as against the old rate of 1½d per ton mile. The action of the Government in taking over this class of transport will also hit Mr. Bob McLennan, who has a large plant used for the transport of goods from the Katherine to Wave Hill and intermediate stations. The proprietor of the Victoria River Depot (Mr. L. James) will also feel the change over.*

Change, even for the better, can be difficult to accommodate, and if, like Alf Martin, you have been involved in doing something the one way for many years, it can be daunting. The late 1930s and early 1940s brought a lot of changes, and Alf Martin’s correspondence with the Bovril chairman show how depressed and disoriented he was becoming.

Martin’s position cannot have been very secure in any case: VRD Station had been criticised sharply a number of times during his period there as manager; his letters from 1939 onwards reflect a growing frustration and disillusionment and imply a lack of interest and support from Lord Luke in London; the old Lord Luke died in 1943 and was succeeded on the Bovril Board by his son. By 1944 Martin, sad, lonely and depressed, was witnessing the passing away of an old order; although he had been liked well enough as a person there were such a large number of complaints about his management that this factor, plus his age, were probably sufficient to justify his retirement in March 1945.

The letters he wrote to London are a mixture of business, local gossip and some personal news. It is obvious that Martin did little without the express permission of the Bovril chairman and although mail travelled quickly by air mail between London and VRD in peace time, it seems a slow, even ponderous way of running an enterprise. During the war there were long delays in mail delivery and some correspondence must surely have been lost altogether; in January 1944 Martin remarked that the last letter delivered from Lord Luke had been dated June 1943 and that ‘we are not sure if you have received all our letters’ (Bovril Estate Papers 119/6 Martin to Lord Luke 14 January 1944, ANU).

The Bovril Estates Deposit which contains this correspondence (oddly enough) has none of the letters written to Martin by Lord Luke. It is difficult then, to know what effect Martin’s letters had on the board members meeting at 152-166 Old Street, London, but some of Alf’s preoccupations must have appeared odd, perhaps even quaint, far away in England. He kept an eye on the Connor Doherty and Durack holdings and on the comings and goings of the Durack family. Two Durack properties, Ivanhoe and Avurgen, bordered on Bovril holdings and the old saying about ‘good fences making good neighbours’ was more than once put to the test. In reporting on some negotiations during 1939 Martin made it clear he would tell Mr Durack he was ‘not going to have all his own way’ (Bovril Estate, 11 June 1939).
As we have seen already, old MP Durack could be quite inventive in the matter of boundaries. One report by Martin about MP's idiosyncratic approach to fences and fence lines must surely have raised eyebrows at Old Street.

Mr Durack is a man over 70 years and age and seems to have funny ideas. He erected a fence on his Ivanhoe country. This fence starts from the river and runs out in a half circle and stops about 400 yards from our Carlton fence. Mr Durack contends that by not joining our fence he is not entitled to pay half the cost of the erection of the Carlton fence. Yet this Carlton fence has fenced all the north side of the Durack paddock (Bovril Estate 9 May 1939).

Martin sent a mud map of the fence along with his letter. The matter of fences took months to resolve and at one point MP and Alf met at View Point on the WA/NT border for discussions. Fencing disputes occupied a lot of Alf's time in 1939 and the issue dominated his correspondence. Alf and MP had been close associates, even friends, for a long time, however, and the fence line battle could well have been one of those contests old men engage in to test the mettle of an old mate. The Bovril directors could be excused for not taking the matter too seriously.

Correspondence to London early in 1942 started on a strong, positive note and Martin was pleased to have outsmarted AS Bingle. Events were, of course, to prove Alf's jubilation misplaced! At the very time he believed he had called Bingle's bluff and negotiated the sale of 10,000 head direct to the army for £5 per head plus droving costs, the government was receiving a recommendation from JA Beasley, Minister for Supply and Development in Curtin's War Cabinet, to put Vesteys in charge of purchasing beef in the NT. By May 1942 Alf had the message! He attended a meeting in Sydney and reported back to Lord Luke:

In opening the Conference, Mr Davis stressed the importance that all supplies of Beef be made available and he suggested that the Conference be held by the following members to discuss the plan to submit to the Commonwealth Government Messrs Fisher, Brodie, Ross Grant, Bowater, Bingle and Farrell - these were the men that drew up the plan. We do not know Mr Fisher but Bowater, Bingle Ross Grant and Farrell we know and it looks to us as though it were a Vestys (sic) meeting from the start.

We do not mind the contract being cancelled but what we do not like about it is that we cannot sell to the military authorities unless through Vesteys (Bovril Estate 13 May 1942).

Martin's letter of 11 June 1942 discussed the overlanding of the Kimberley cattle and he was skeptical about sending coastal cattle inland. He predicted big losses, which, when they occurred, Bingle explained away, much later, as having been caused by the drought conditions in the interior. This letter contains one sad note: 'All the women and children have left VRD'. Alf's life began to be a very lonely one: his wife evacuated, three of his five sons on active service; his bookkeeper, Roden sent to Melbourne by the Army for a month's training in guerilla warfare; and he was finding it increasingly difficult to get European stockmen.

Progressively over the next two years his letters became more hostile towards Vesteys until finally, in 1944, he appeared resigned to something he could not change and over which he had obviously no control. In the meantime he had been embroiled in bitter
disputes with Bingle over the supply of cattle. He realised slowly that he alone could do little in matters where Vesteys were concerned. In his view they had all things sewn up.

The letter he wrote in July 1942 showed his growing sense of a conspiracy:

*Anyhow, Vestys (sic) will not have it all their own way. The powers up this way will want to know why the Authorities did not Gazette the Contract they let to Vestys. No one in Western Australia knew anything about this contract until after Vestys had reported it. The Chairman of the N.T.P.L. Association, who was also the Chairman of the committee that put the cattle sale up to the Minister for Food Control, said that Vestys was the only one in the Northern Territory that could handle the 26,000 for the Army. This Mr. Brodie is a stock and station agent in Sydney and is in my opinion, all in favour of Vestys and the N.T.P.L.A. is nothing but a Vesty party from start to finish. That is the party that got the contract to supply the Army in the N.T. and made it so that no other grower could sell to the Military only through Vestys (Bovril Estate 23 September 1943).*

By September 1943, things had come to such a pass that it became necessary for the dispute between Bovril and Vestys to be referred for arbitration to their respective head offices in London. It is hard to know how a young Lord Luke may have assessed this old man out in Australia. He had not met him and if Alf’s letter of 23 September is any indication of the reality Lord Luke may have preferred a resolution that favoured peace between the British companies over a fair decision in favour of the ageing manager:

*Mr. Bingle said he was prepared to let London Office arbitrate on this matter so we have our case which we are enclosing for your perusal and if you think it would be worth while putting this up to Vestys (sic) in London. We think our case is fair and that this Company should receive the extra 10l. The late Lord Luke said some time ago that Vestys were very friendly with the Bovril in London but they do not seem to act friendly out this way. Mr. Bingle and Mr. Bowater we like very much and they are always friendly to meet personally but when it comes to Vestys interests they are all self first (Bovril Estate 23 September 1943).*

When Alf Martin drove out of VRD Station in a truck on Friday 4 May 1945 (Bovril Estate Paper, VRD Station Diary) he could well have been alone; European women, including his wife, were still sitting out the war ‘down south’. He was leaving 19 years of work, not always well done, behind him and some old colleagues like John Roden who among other things had for years typed Alf’s letters to Lord Luke. He had worked in the District since 1901, he had married and raised a family there, he and his brothers had worked the country from Carlton Station on the Ord in the west, all the way through to the eastern borders of VRD Station. He had, according to his lights, served the country well and had been very involved in its affairs for more than forty years; he had been a magistrate, a reasonable boss, a supporter of Northern Development and a tireless correspondent. But Alf had been a manager, not an owner, and so when he finished his job on VRD he had to leave and make a home elsewhere. He and his wife retired to Katherine.

Alf’s departure very much marked the end of an era. In his letters to London he had begun to talk about the Labor Government plans for closer settlement in the north and he wondered what might happen to VRD Station in the quarterly resumptions due in the mid 1940s. A lot of what Alf might have taken for granted as being correct social and political behaviour was being challenged in the 1940s, not least by the very young men who had
come to the District to defend it. In no instance in any of his letters had Alf referred to any Aboriginal person by name. The Aborigines were part of the economy of the station and an essential part but somehow not real people with proper names. It is not likely he ever developed a close bond with an Aboriginal person; the mores of his society did not allow for that. It was rare for any white person to develop a friendship with an Aborigine. Some women from this period did, however, learn to work with Aboriginal women within the domestic confines of the household; most remained aloof from the traditional owners in the same way that Alf and his peers would have done. The lives of many white women would be permanently marked by the distance they kept from Aboriginal women and by the loss of an opportunity to learn something of the country.
CHAPTER 7

THE WOMEN

Interviewer: How many women were there about?
Tom Cole: Women?
Interviewer: Yes.
TC: Oh, hundreds.
Interviewer: There were?
TC: Yes.
Interviewer: It wasn’t unusual to see a woman.
TC: Black.
Interviewer: I didn’t ...
TC: Well, they were women.
Interviewer: Yes, plenty of black women, yes. Sorry, no I meant white women actually.
TC: No.
Interviewer: Not many?
TC: Well, I suppose just from memory, from Katherine to Billy Crook’s place there wouldn’t be any. See, there was nothing at Daly Waters at that time; Old Bill Pearce came there with a wife later on (Interview with Tom Cole 18 August 1984, NTAS NTRS226 29, 11).

White women were civilisers. Single or married, their job was to bring to the North, European standards: good manners, chaste and modest behaviour, learning, education and domesticity. They helped maintain standards, and the distinction between those ‘in’ and those ‘out’ of the social scale in this ostensibly egalitarian society. Their status was governed by employment: rank in the society either depended on their own jobs, as in the case of the nursing sister, or on their husband’s occupation. Those who bore the children of the North set about the task of raising, caring and schooling them; had they but acknowledged it, they could have seen that in this sphere of their lives they shared a common ground with Aboriginal women. The visible signs of their maintenance work, their solid contribution to settlement of the frontier were in the clothes they wore, their children, their domestic and social accomplishments: tea parties, games nights, Christmas festivities, river bank picnics. They, like Aboriginal women, were also keepers of health and nurser of the sick and injured.

With rare exception these women did not live the gracious leisured lives of the rich squatter families of the south-eastern parts of Australia. These were not the lovely long ladies in gossamer white muslin draped elegantly around cane furniture on wide shaded verandahs; not for them languid afternoons listening as the ‘pock’ of tennis balls, ‘puck’ of croquet mallets drifted in on the cool afternoon breeze. Nor were they the centre of cheery family life, seated comfortably, companionably around roaring log fires on chill winter nights. The men of these families most often did not come home from work in the evenings; they were camped miles away in a stock camp, sometimes for weeks at a time. And often when the women had settled down to a quiet time in the afternoon, after a morning of hard physical labour, they would have to rise again and close the house off to another dust storm, the work of cleaning up after the storm an essential task before any
work surface could be used again. In the build-up time, before the monsoon, sweat and
dust would combine to make muddy red streaks on face and forearms.

Some of these women, wives of managers of stations and outstations owned by the large
overseas companies, were not even truly mistresses of their own households. They were
subject to petty tyrannies imposed by men eking out their own bleak lives as station
storekeepers and cooks. A woman might have to ask permission of the storekeeper to
have aspirin for a sick Aboriginal housemaid. Audrey Reynolds, young, English, new to
the country and with a young baby to care for, was woken early at 5.30 am each morning
by the cook so she could eat the breakfast he had cooked. She and he were the only ones
at the outstation; everyone else was out working in stock camps. Audrey had to be there
to eat breakfast when the cook prepared it; she could neither complain nor go into the
kitchen to prepare her own food. The cook would probably have left if she had.
Companies did not approve of their managers' wives interfering in station arrangements.
Eventually she was spared these indignities and the oppression of enforced idleness when
the company dismissed the cook.

Ironically one of the worst problems these women faced was the frustrating and often
embittering experience of not having enough productive work to do. They felt most
keenly this enforced idleness, and the ones who were worst off were those married to the
non-itinerant, non-managerial staff, like the saddler or the blacksmith. Managers' wives
generally enjoyed a holiday during the Wet; wives of itinerant workers either lived in
town all the time or were able to share the variety of bush work during the working season
and the comparative luxury of town life during the off season.

In her last long letter back to AIM Head Office in May 1939, Dorothy Allen wrote:

With no nursing work and little welfare work the sisters are condemned to
a lonely, idle and practically useless life fraught with temptations peculiar
to this country and no matter how carefully you choose your sisters you
may still have the tragedy of a good sister ruined through lack of the
inland's only compensation, good, hard interesting work (Sister Allen to
AIM Headquarters 1 May 1939, NLA MS 5574

For women the long months of the Wet were very difficult. Caught in the economy that
g geared its productive months to the dry (April to November) the women would be left
idle, isolated and lonely during the monsoon months. Once the Christmas Day
celebrations were over, there was nothing else for it but to wait out the time until the
Manager's family returned, the Aboriginal families began to drift in from their annual
religious ceremonies, and the white stockmen and contract teams started to move back
through the drying-off green country in preparation for the year's work. The cattle
industry was the economic base of white settlement in the area and the white women
would not have come to this country if it had not been for cattle. And so their lives and
rhythms had to be bent and shaped to the time-frame dictated by cattle raising.

For women like the AIM sisters, the English bride and young Eileen Thompson, the
saddler's wife, this would have been a time of great stress. Pity the white women who had
an infant to care for. At this time no vegetables grow in the waterlogged soil, food very
quickly goes mouldy and without refrigeration fresh beef can go bad in a matter of hours.

The one thing all these women had in common was their loneliness and isolation; their
separation from family and friends and each other. Some also shared the experience of
bearing and raising children. Three of them gave birth to children on cattle stations in the
district.
Sarah Feeney went back to Pine Creek for the birth of her third child, but by the time she was due to be confined with her fourth, the sisters had started the AIM hospital on VRD. Sarah described the two events in an interview she made in 1980. Her account of the moments leading up to the birth of her fourth resonates with the dryness of outback irony:

**Interviewer:** Where did you have the fourth child?

**Sarah:** The fourth child was born at Victoria River Downs.

**Interviewer:** In any sort of hospital?

**Sarah:** Yes, the AIM hospital. It wasn't finished, I was the first patient in it. Sister King and Sister Grey were there. I walked down and I got down in the gully and I was holding my tummy and said to my hubby, wait a bit, and he said, come on for God's sake! anyway, I got up - struggled up - and the sisters were just going to bed and he yelled out, are you awake? Well, here's a job here for you!

**Interviewer:** So you must have walked half to three-quarters of a mile?

**Sarah:** Yes. We left an old chap at home at the cottage with the other three (Interview with Sarah Feeney, September 1980 NTAS NTRS226 TS 202-1, 23-25).

When Sarah Fogarty accompanied her husband Ted out to Delamere Station from Katherine in 1923, she was also pregnant with her fourth child. Sarah’s first three children had been born in town: Ann and Dave at Cloncurry in September 1917 and April 1919; and Mardie in Darwin Hospital in June 1922. The fourth Fogarty child was born at Delamere not long after the family arrived. Unfortunately Sarah’s granddaughter, Pearl Ogden who has written an account of her family’s history, has not explained why Sarah and her children did not stay behind in Katherine until after her confinement. Her journey to Delamere, pregnant and with a small child still in arms cannot have been very comfortable for Sarah, but she seems to have become used to the rough life of a settler’s wife. Delamere was a rough posting for the young family and health problems set in almost immediately they settled in. It was one of the stations in the district frequently left without a manager; and although trusted Aboriginal families were left in charge when there was no manager, they were expected to do no more than merely caretake the property. Consequently some of the features of more settled cattle stations were lacking. There was, for example. no vegetable or fruit garden. “There was very little hope of getting anything delivered to the station,” wrote Pearl Ogden. “The only local fresh nutriment would have been beef, and milk from the station’s herd of goats. The whole family broke out in boils... and soon they all had fever” (Ogden 1983, 9).

Malaria was one of the diseases common in the area and there had been a severe outbreak two years earlier causing a number of deaths. Sarah must have feared her family were suffering malaria and she dosed them with quinine hoping the fever would pass; unfortunately she overdosed herself and went into labour a month early. Ted and Sarah had made an arrangement with Sister King at Wimmera Home for her to come to Delamere a week before Sarah was due to be confined and to assist at the birth. The quinine overdose had upset those plans and Ted had to make a hurried trip to fetch Sister

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Meanwhile Ted junior arrived. Sarah sent the aboriginal who delivered the mail to find Ted and Sister King and advise them that the baby had arrived. After she had delivered the child, Sarah called the aboriginal servant to bring some water to wash him... Harry Huddleston... Ted's head stockman on the station... knowing his boss had left... told the cook to go in and ask Mrs Fogarty if she would like a drink or something to eat. Harry knew that all the Aboriginal women were frightened and were on the verge of running away. He realised that he and cook would have to help the Missus, and she was about to give birth without any assistance. The cook then became upset, because he felt the head stockman was giving him orders. Ted and the Sister arrived to find trouble in the homestead - and that the baby had arrived twenty four hours earlier (9-10).

With our recently acquired understanding of Aboriginal medicine and health practices we can now look back at Sarah's predicament and sympathise with her for having no Aboriginal companion. Aboriginal women are expert in these matters and might have done much to ease Sarah's mind and body. The conditions however which governed social and race relations in the NT in the 1920s were so strong that Sarah would have found little support from within her own community had she formed a friendship with an Aboriginal woman. As with most women in the bush during that period she was therefore left without any female support at a time when she needed it most.

Two and a half years later on Waterloo Station, many miles further to the west of Delamere, another European woman, May Cockburn-Campbell, was due to give birth to her fourth child. May had had a difficult pregnancy but despite her husband's remonstrations she refused to leave the station and go to Wyndham, the closest town, for her confinement. During the hot and humid months of December, January and February she became ill and increasingly weaker, she was forced to spend most of her time in bed. Unlike Sarah Fogarty, May was fortunate in having with her all through this difficult period an Aboriginal companion, Alice, who had been her friend from the time of their childhood on Springvale Station, near Katherine. Her oldest son, Thomas, himself now an old man, has written an account of those days in early 1926.

One afternoon I was allowed into mother's room... She was panting and Alice was fanning her, and putting wet sponges on. I thought it unusual. Mother was never like this. Besides, she had two bung eyes from the flies... (Cockburn-Campbell 1985, 74).

The next day the distraught husband sent Alice, on horseback, to Wyndham to fetch the doctor - a round trip of 700 km, at a time of most extreme weather conditions, the north-west monsoon. Alice and the doctor rode back into the station two weeks later. Young Thomas understood that by sending Alice on this errand his father had perhaps acted out of fear and distress, but not very wisely: 'Lily was to fill in for Alice. She was sympathetic and did the best she could but she lacked the enthusiasm of Alice. It just wasn't the same' (75-75).

May Cockburn-Campbell probably would not have survived her ordeal even if Alice had stayed, and by the time the doctor arrived it was too late to save her life. The young Thomas listened through the closed door:
'Bloody hell, you must do something.'
'I'm sorry Sir Alex, there's nothing I can do. I wanted her to come down earlier but she said it would be all right.'
'Well, it's not all right. Do something.'
'Sorry, I can't. She won't last more than two days at the most.'
'For God's sake, man, can't you take it away from her?'
'No, she is past that. Had it been earlier, with care and attention, maybe yes.'
'You can't let her go like that, you have to do something. There must be some way.'
'I'm sorry, but I assure you there is nothing I can do.'
'For God's sake, nothing at all?'
'No, Sir Alex, nothing at all.' (75).

May died on 12 February 1926, aged thirty four years.

Plate 12: Maude (May) Cockburn-Campbell (nee Giles)
Manbulloo Station, May 1924
(NTU Library, Australian Investment Agency Deposit)
By 1923, however, the nursing sisters at Wimmera Home were available to assist if they could be called in time, or if station women lived close enough to go to them. May Cockburn-Campbell’s case was one of the tragic ones: she was too far from help and too far into her illness for medical assistance, when it came, to be of any use. Between 1923 and 1939 the AIM hospital was able to assist many others; the work of the sisters and their contribution to white settlement in the district deserves attention.

Sisters were sent to the Victoria River District for two years at a time, to care for the sick, to introduce social programs which would create a good environment for single men on the stations, to monitor the general physical and mental health of the people of the District and to administer the affairs of the hospital. They had to acquire additional skills necessary for their task: transmission of telegrams by Morse Code; dentistry, at least in the area of teeth pulling; and basic diagnostic skills so they could discriminate between the more, or less serious cases and decide which needed referral to a doctor. Having to decide about cases needing a doctor’s care created problems for the sisters as some cases were not obviously critical at the time a patient first came for treatment. In 1937 one of the nursing sisters incurred the wrath of Dr Clyde Fenton, the Air Medical Service physician based in Katherine, and the case caused enough controversy to require conciliation from John McEwen, the Minister for the Interior at the time. In effect the sister was exonerated but not before months of quite bitter wrangling had caused her and her colleague considerable distress (NL A MS5574 Various correspondence; personal conversation D Hall and L A Riddett, July 1986).

Mrs Dorothy Hall (nee Allen), forty years after she had left the AIM service, recalled another skill she and her colleague had to acquire.

> Now with the regard to medicines, we had to do our own dispensing. We had prescriptions which we made up for treatment of malaria and various other things. We didn’t know too much about dispensing although we’d had a lesson before we left Melbourne, but we did the best we could. We had our little scales that we measured everything up, but we were rather nervous about dispensing to begin with, and my friend and I always saw to it that we took a dose of our own medicine because we felt that if we poisoned anyone we’d rather be dead than face the consequences (Interview with Dorothy Hall May 1981 NTAS NTRS226 TS228, 18).

AIM sisters were a professional group of people specifically trained to be observant and to respond to requests for aid; they knew to not intervene unless asked. These attributes stood them in good stead in the cross-cultural world of the cattle station. Practical and down to earth for the most part, the women were well equipped to deal with emergencies, hardship and sheer hard work.

They obviously enjoyed what they did. The only unhappy note in the correspondence creeps in towards the end of the 1930s. By the mid-1930s malaria had been largely controlled; the government aerial medical service had been properly established; and single men were no longer in the District in the numbers they had been during the 1920s and the early 1930s - many were enlisting to fight in the war, and others, discouraged by management from camping on the drovers’ commons near the stations, were taking their ‘spell’ in the towns. The sisters’ work, medical and social, was not needed as much as it had been, and amid some unpleasant local political cross-fire the hospital was closed. Not all the sisters left the District however, some married local men, mostly drovers, and settled down themselves to raising families in the bush.
At any one time the AIM sisters were the only two nurses in a very large district where near neighbours might be two hundred kilometres away and where weather conditions could isolate a family for months at a time. It was not possible then, for a family to rely on the sisters, simply because their help, while always valuable, was not always available. Mothers of families on these remote cattle properties had to learn many basic nursing skills as well as acquire an understanding of sound preventative health practices. At a time when families probably relied more on home cures and folk remedies than we are inclined to do, the cattle station women had to extend that basic knowledge to cover strange ailments and often serious injuries. European and Aboriginal women alike were preservers and maintainers of health and healers of at least minor ailments. In both societies at the time it was men who dealt with the more serious cases, something the two societies had in common when so much else separated them.

In 1924 when Lady Apsley passed through VRD on her way to Wave Hill Station she met the AIM sisters, McKenzie and McBain, who had replaced the two pioneering sisters, Grey and King. In her view the two women were doing 'great practical work by making it possible for a married man to take his wife to live on these lonely stations'. Perhaps she was echoing sentiments expressed by Alex Moray, her guide and Vesteys pastoral manager, but she sounds sincere in saying:

Moreover the social addition of two charming, unmarried white women fresh from town life is enormously appreciated by every man in the Territory who sometimes never sees a white woman from one year's end to another (Apsley c 1925, 100).

The sisters provided where possible the professional aspect of what was essential to the role of all bush women: preserving health and providing healing. All station women appreciated the importance of providing fresh fruit and vegetables for their families and understood the basic principles of diet: that it must be balanced, palatable and contain a good variety of foods. Whenever they could, they started kitchen gardens on the stations, close to the station house, and often a woman would remember a station her family had worked on, by the quality of the garden produce. Women made an effort to provide their families with as much fresh produce as possible. In 1920, Mrs Graham, the manager's wife, noted the following in the VRS station diary:

27/3/20  Mrs Graham started to work separator herself, making small lot of butter each day.

15/4/20  Jumbo got new milker in, making sixteen altogether.

16/4/20  Good supply of milk for first time. Broke in four new cows. New fowls settled down (Bovril Estate Papers 119/687/6(1) VRD Station Diary ANU).

Sarah Fogarty's children remember that, while the family was on Hodgson Downs Station in the 1930s, conditions there were quite reasonable and that Sarah was able to have a good vegetable patch. She was able to send 'a supply of these things to the convent in Darwin, where her daughter was at school' (Ogden 1983, 32).

Some stations planted fruit trees - mango, orange, sometimes pawpaw and bananas - but the ravages of termites and grasshoppers and the difficulty of keeping up a good supply of water during the Dry more often than not defeated their purpose. Sister Allen wrote to the Head Office staff in August 1938 describing the difficulties they had in keeping a garden:
Our garden has not been too good this season. We planted five dozen little trees - such a smart shrubbery we intended to have, but the white ants finished our hopes for us and we just had to go round and fill in the holes. We had such hopes for our little trees. There were mangoes, five corners, guavas, Ceylon oaks, tamarands (sic), acacias, polyantheas, ixoras and diva-divas (Sister D Allen to AIM Headquarters 11 August 1938 NLA MS5574 Box 109).

Of this list of trees, the first three - mangoes, five corners and guavas, would have produced edible fruits had they survived. Each year the sisters planted out seedlings, vegetables and flowers, and each year their letters back to Sydney record the loss of their plants. It is easy then, to understand why the gift of some fresh grapes from a family in Wyndham, and a few weeks later some apples from the same people, pleased sisters Langham and Stewart so much that they wrote of it in a letter sent south (Sister J Langham to AIM Headquarters 5 May 1936, NLA MS5574 Box 108). The importance of fresh food was understood so well by the bush people that they shared readily what fresh produce they had, even as in the case of the grapes and apples, with friends more than 400 km away!
Audrey Reynolds formed a close friendship with these two nursing sisters and their successors, Sisters Dorothy Allen and Joyce Falconbridge. A young woman, she preferred their company to the older women on VRD, the manager's wife, Mrs A Martin, and the bookkeeper's wife, Mrs Roden, and often stayed at Wimmera Home when she came in from the outstation. Photographs of Audrey taken by Joyce at lazy afternoon picnics on the river bank show her as a pleasant, attractive woman with a flair for stylish clothes. She and young West were good company for the sisters who made an effort to help with the baby's development.

Although it was not customary for the sisters to assist in the birth of Aboriginal babies they did keep in touch with the Aboriginal mothers and babies and tended to the general health needs of the Aboriginal community. One significant feature of the sisters' attitude towards Aboriginal women was the respect they showed for traditional Aboriginal ways, particularly in respect of childbirth and child-rearing practices. The nurses appear to have felt that their role was to assist if asked and to respect the fact of not being asked if that was the case. Their training and their professional code of ethics provided them with a very sound base for relating to people in the complex cross-cultural setting of the bush.

The relationship between white women and Aboriginal women however is something that comes through only obliquely from contemporary records and later reminiscences. A characteristic feature of the general picture built up from these sources is the deep ambivalence expressed by white women. Aboriginal women for their part appear to express their views and feelings in relation to specific white women and do not as a rule make generalised statements.

One of the difficulties inherent in the situation is the imbalance between the two groups. White women, for all their hard work, patience and endurance, were interlopers, living an isolated life in a household dominated by the needs of the cattle industry. Except for occasional picnics they were remote from the 'country' and bound into a very constricted social life narrowly defined by often self-imposed rules and standards that added to their isolation. Aboriginal women, on the other hand, were generally living in or very close to clan country and in an extended family system that was, as it had been before white settlement, supportive.

Aboriginal women moved between white society and their own. They saw white couples in the intimacy of domestic relationships and thus gained an edge as information gatherers; raised, even wet-nursed white children; and often bore children to white men (based on conversations with Aboriginal women during fieldwork, Daguragu 1970-1973). The price they paid was to have each working day cut about into alien sections of time corresponding to white eating and ablution habits. Potentially this limited their access to 'country' beyond the station homestead except when they joined stock camps as drovers and cooks and during the Wet when stations released them from duties. They were restricted in a way their men, who worked the country, were not. There is evidence that suggests however, that while this might have been frustrating, no actual conflict existed for the women and that if their law demanded they should participate in ceremonies they would arrange for another woman to take their place at the station.

Many Aboriginal women, however, paid another, very cruel price for their involvement in the white settlement of the District. The Commonwealth Government, for more than forty years from the mid-1910s, followed a socially questionable and morally unsupportable policy of removing children born of an Aboriginal mother and non-Aboriginal father from their mothers and institutionalising them in the ill-founded belief that this would be in the best interests of the children. There were cases where women hid their babies only to have them taken away when the child was older and others where women pleaded to be
able to keep their babies at least until had been weaned. So great was Aboriginal women's fear of baby-snatching that many mothers of children born of Aboriginal fathers held their infants over a smoking fire to 'smoke' them in order to temporarily darken the natural light colour of the newborn (Fieldwork, Daguragu 1970-1973).

For European women the relationship between European men and Aboriginal women was often a point of confrontation and conflict. Occasionally white women who held positions of authority on stations acted to keep their 'girls' away from white men by locking the women in at night. In Vision Splendid Tom Ronan wrote a fictional account of what was not an exceptional practice.

Ellen Johnston matured and became more used to the ways of the bush and her attitude to the sexual relationships between Aboriginal and European changed and mellowed.

*And you can imagine, me, a young girl, and somebody told me that one of the men that sat at my dinner table was going down to the camp at night - that's how horrified you'd be. But they'd tell you. And Dad used to say to me, don't you ever listen to anything they tell you because they only tell you something to please you, or they tell you lies, when I first went there. Because he knew, but I didn't know, I was too young and innocent, and didn't think anything like that ever happened to people like that. But after I was there for a good number of years, I used to entice my lubras away - get them away at night. And decent young men! Really decent! But then, now I'm old, I realise that was part of human nature too! They had no way of having any other women, so that was the only way they had of relieving their feelings too. But I was young then, didn't think it could happen (Interview with Mr and Mrs C.A.Y. Johnston May 1981, NTAS NTRS226 TS250, 61).*

Other women, like Sarah Fogarty, entrusted their children to the care of the 'gins' who in their turn accepted the charge. One of the Aboriginal women later told Sarah's granddaughter: 'I bin raise those two, Eddie and Mardie'. White children appeared to have enjoyed the life of the black's camp with its emphasis on personal freedom and bush education. The Fogarty children were taught 'how to make tracks in the sand, how to track, and how to light fires by rubbing two sticks together' (Ogden 1983, 31). In spite of her trust of the Aboriginal women, Sarah appears to have had a strict view of how far Aborigines might be involved in the Fogarty household and would 'not allow an Aboriginal to sleep under her roof' (37).

Aboriginal women have expressed a clear understanding of their role in the settler economy even if some of the actions of white people were perplexing. Speaking of her work on Inverway Station, one woman said: 'We diggim hole, plantim tree. You see that airstrip there. We bin make that. All of us women and kids, pickim up stones, makim smooth' (personal conversation Aboriginal woman and LA Riddett 1973). The hole referred to was deeper than her height and household refuse was dumped there to create compost before the trees were planted.

The same woman was, however, disturbed when she was told to wean her child and put it in a 'nursery' at the station house so she could work for this missus and help rear the white children. Perceiving some lack of logic in the arrangement, she asked, 'What she bin do that for?' (personal conversation, Aboriginal woman and LA Riddett 1973).

During the Depression of the 1930s many men took to the road looking for work and in some cases they were accompanied by their wives and children. Bill Harney spent almost
a year in the western part of the Victoria River District. His wife, Linda, and their two children were with him. Linda was very ill with a fatal disease of which she died shortly after the family returned to Katherine. The times were hard and stations had many calls made on their hospitality; the treatment meted out to Harney and family, especially given the special circumstances created by Linda's illness, was particularly harsh. The fact that Linda was not European, was in fact part-Aboriginal, was the motive underlying people's offensive behaviour according to Harney who was advised by an old hand, 'Yer best bet is the Blacks out there... Colour clings to colour'. Indeed it was Aboriginal women who did help Linda (Harney 1976, 66).

One of the women told the Harneys an appalling story of the time a white woman turned the station dogs on her husband when he intervened to save another Aboriginal woman from being beaten with a stick (40). One can only conjecture on how much the white woman's rage was an expression of her frustration and alienation in this strange isolated place.

Letters from the AIM sisters however, show that they had a different kind of relationship with Aboriginal women. Perhaps in trying to please Head Office they were inclined to put things in a good light, although it would have been unusual for them to have done so. In the main, the correspondence is remarkable for alert observation and candour. It is reasonable then, to suggest that the views they expressed and anecdotes they told about Aboriginal women represented their true feelings.

Nursing staff at Wimmera Home employed three Aboriginal domestic staff, two women and one man. For at least four years of the 1930s the women were Nora and Topsy, the man Paddy. Between these five people a relationship of sorts developed and the Aboriginal staff began to emerge as real people in the sisters' letters and Joyce's diary. Sister Stewart wrote this about their Aboriginal staff:

Our 'staff as we call them are on 'walk about'. Nora returned after her month off, her temper slightly on edge, but that happens with Whites sometimes, too! And Topsy' has gone off all smiles - We're all sisters under the skin (Sister V Stewart to AIM Headquarters 1 February 1936, NLA MS5574 Box 108).

In the same letter she commented on the arrival of the young English bride, Audrey Reynolds, and reflected on how she must feel coming to the Australian outback:

... Poor little soul. It was 110 degrees when they arrived at Ord River and much the same here - naturally she is feeling it. The aboriginal help must seem strange to her, it took us some time to become used to seeing little black hands handling our china etc, ironing our clean nighties and them holding them up against themselves to admire (50).

In the privacy of her diary, Joyce Falconbridge was able to be more candid. Her accounts of the washday tussles with Topsy, the red dust and the wind bear witness to the frustrations of learning to handle a new situation. It is fascinating, fifty years later to see all this in the terse descriptions of Monday mornings at the wash tub.

Monday June 21st
Topsy and I at the washtubs again and my patience was worn very thin by the time we finished. However we got them all dry and in and damped down before we went upstairs for our siesta.
Plate 14: The Departure
Maggie, Topsy, Paddy, Sisters Stewart and Langham
Wimmera Home VRD, 1937
(Donated by Mrs Joyce Fuller (nee Falconbridge))
Monday June 28th
...I went to see what was not burnt to an atom of the dinner and Dorothy rushed to see how many things Topsy had ruined in the wash tub. Found a minimum of tragedy (sic) in both cases so were much relieved.

Monday July 5th
Tops piddled on doing the washing, only had two copperfuls but took all morning to do it. A rotten day for washing, had to almost sit and hold the pegs on the line to prevent the clothes floating down the Wickham.

Monday August 16th
Washing day today and Tops had the very devil in her, the washing was just awful, worse than when she started. Both felt like screwing the whole staff's necks.

Monday September 27th
Lost a few pints in the washtub this morning, perspiration just poured off me and fell into the tub. Tops and I washed harmoniously together and got the washing done in record time (Falconbridge Diary 1937).

Tuesdays were ironing days, Maggie's job, and attended by much the same problems, but the Aboriginal staff obviously did care for the sisters.

Tuesday August 31st
...Maggie busy with ironing today. Dorothy nearly burnt herself to death with the petrol iron. It was very pathetic to see old Tops beating out the flames with her bare hands and making a crooning noise over her burnt hair (Falconbridge Diary 1937).

Maybe they all cared for each other and were, as Sister Stewart had said, 'all sisters under the skin'.

Clothes were an important marker of the civilising process white women supplied to frontier settlement. Both Sisters Langham and Stewart were fastidious; they were sticklers, perhaps even too hard on themselves; they always wore full nursing uniforms when on duty - khaki dresses, full veil, lisle stockings and regulation shoes, just as they had at Royal Melbourne Hospital where they had trained. When Sister Stewart wrote her description of the January '37 flood she made the following comments:

We always walk to and from the station, though if weather permits, they come for us per car. During the flood times we had everyone else walked barefooted, the track soon dries but is capable of being boggy. (As soon as we got the to Station, we of course resumed our footwear there - we did it because it just seemed the obvious and sensible thing to do for the time being.) (Sister J Langham to AIM Headquarters 24 January 1937, NLA MS5574 Box 108).

Sisters Allen and Falconbridge approached the same matter in a different way and after they had been at Wimmera Home for a while decided they could do without stockings and full veil (personal conversation D Hall and LA Riddett July 1986). One thing most women, black and white, and men seemed to agree on: it was not really acceptable to wear slacks or trousers when there were men about. Sister Stewart was, however, pleased with her riding trousers, tailored by a Chinese tailor in Darwin: 'They fit quite well though he only measured us where we stood in the shop. I was rather afraid they might be the same shape as their own' (Sister V Stewart to AIM Headquarters 5 May 1935 NLA MS5574 Box 108).
Ellen Johnston who came to VRD during the 1950s had spent the early days of her marriage to Cay Johnston in the 1920s living on Alexandria Station on the Barkly Tableland. She knew the rules:

**Interviewer:** And what did you wear, Mrs Johnston?
**EJ:** Oh, we wore just our ordinary clothes. There were no such things as slacks. I wouldn’t be seen in a pair of trousers on the property where the men were. You have to remain a woman. So it’s a different era isn’t it? But I had to dress modestly and always stockings on and shoes. Everything like that.

**Interviewer:** Even when you were going with your husband to the outstations.

**EJ:** Yes. The children always had their clothes on too. My children, they were always dressed, they were never allowed to run around like little niggers (Johnston interview NTAS NTRS226 TS250, 51).

In September 1936 Sister Stewart wrote to Head Office about a very daring young Mildred Martin: 'It was funny. She went to 'Pidgeon (sic) Hole Camp' with George one day wearing shorts - the lubras asked 'if Missus him dress longa hurry bin forgettim dress?' (Sister V Stewart to AIM Headquarters 14 September 1936 NLA MS3574 Box 108). And the Farquharson brothers made it clear that they thought the wearing of shorts was going too far in the way of casual dress. One of them commented about it to the Bingles when they called at Inverway:

Harry, in spite of his 80 years of age, asked my wife in his squeaky voice: 'Mrs Bingle, did you see that nice looking young woman who went past here this morning? What do you think of her' My wife replied, 'She looked very nice.' after a pause, Harry went on, 'She would have to be very careful with the kangaroo grass seed'. He did not enlarge on his remark (Bingle 1986, 35-36).

**Plate 15: Pigeon Hole Outstation of Victoria River Downs (NTAS NTRS 341 CE Schultz Collection)**
The sisters felt the isolation from their homes, friends and the activities of the south. Sometimes they asked, as Langham did in May 1936:

Are there any singers or violinists in Sydney lately? What is the latest picture and play? Where are the ladies wearing their hats? Have you seen many of those brown velour hats in Sydney - picture on outside of David Jones Catalogue because 213 of female population of VRD have sent for them (Sister J Langham to AIM Headquarters 5 May 1936 NLA MSS574 Box 108).

Being stylish, or fashionable, was not a simple matter of keeping up with the times, it was more a matter of maintaining morale and being an example to others; dress and fashion were often a matter for comment.

An Indian Hawker came through some time back, we had a lovely time looking at all the pretty things - they were well picked over as he was on the return journey but we each got a dress length. Mine is a blue and brown muslin, the other red and white crepe-de-chene (sic) so we will be quite gay - 'Nora' will not need to be ashamed of us then, she told the Snr. lubras that we wore 'all the same all the time no more pretty red and blue dress'. She doesn't appreciate the simplicity of our uniforms (Sister V Stewart to AIM Headquarters 14 September 1936 NLA MSS574 Box 108).

One hot October night in 1937 Dorothy Allen and Joyce Falconbridge responded to an invitation from Mrs Roden and went up to join her for supper. Later, when Joyce wrote up her diary for that day she noted: 'Sat talking and listening to wireless and then had supper after which we sat and had a great time at David Jones and Farmers, spent about £100 each (Falconbridge Diary 4 September 1937). To spend nearly a years salary on clothes was a companionable fantasy which helped pass the long hot nights of the build up!

Some women were not so lucky however, and many, like Sarah Fogarty, would have had to make do with whatever was at hand, a skill many women developed in respect of a whole range of domestic crafts including dressmaking: 'Clothes were often made from flour bags which were unpicked and bleached. Station Turkey Red was a bright cotton material which was also used, and everything was made by hand' (Ogden 1983, 38).

Sarah's life in the bush was a good indicator of the way a white woman's status and personal comfort was mostly defined by the work her husband performed in the station economy. Her life as the wife of Ted, contract musterer, fencer, brumby runner and sometime manager, was as itinerant as his and stands in stark contrast to what can be gleaned of the life of Mrs Alf Martin. Alf managed VRD for over twenty years and Mrs Martin managed the domestic affairs at the station house. She commanded the respect, if not necessarily the affection, of those who knew her. Both women were known as strong, very family minded and admired for their capacity for hard work. Neither had any significant mention in the station records of the period, although the VRD diary does occasionally note when Mrs Martin accompanied Mr Martin on a trip away from the station.

Mrs Fogarty's status as a bush wife shifted on the social scale as her husband's position shifted between overseer, acting manager, brumby runner and peanut farmer. The constants in her life were provided by her need to feed and clothe her family and to arrange for or supervise her children's education.
Although isolation was an immense problem for the European women who did stay in the District, many of them, ironically, chose the bush over the town for family reasons. Sarah, like a number of white women, knew that whilst town life would be better for her children's health and education, the long-term effects of easy access to grog for her husband could be, and often were, disastrous for the whole family. In 1928 one of Sarah's sons, Dave, suffered permanent damage and many months of pain as a result of a motor vehicle accident on a lonely stretch of bush road near Newry Station. A contributing factor to the accident was the hangover her husband was nursing after a night of heavy drinking. Dave himself described his damaged legs which had needed 26 stitches in one and 18 in the other: I was very lucky that the bone wasn't broken. The flesh was torn, so the leg was bandaged and dressed continually. Had the leg been broken, I'd have lost the leg for sure (16).

After two weeks of treatment at Wyndham hospital the damaged flesh turned black and the doctors wanted to remove the leg. The family then faced the prospect of raising a male child, who would not have been able to do bush work. Sarah, by now alone with her children in Wyndham, refused to give permission for the amputation. She looked for help from many sources and was advised by a Chinese doctor from a foreign ship in Wyndham port that daily baths in salt water would help, but he insisted that the child really needed to be taken away from the tropics. Finally Sarah accepted the inevitability of this last piece of advice and arranged for her other children to be cared for in Wyndham while she took Dave on a long journey to Derby by road and then by ship to Brisbane. Pearl Ogden writes:

_There were many crises over the years with which she had to cope. Surely the most difficult thing Sarah had to cope with was an accident her eldest son had. It must have taken great courage for Sarah to sit with Dave while he begged her not to let the doctors remove his leg. Mardie said they could hear him crying in the hospital at Wyndham when his mother was visiting him (48)._

Sarah is remembered as having been a tough woman, a battler with a biting tongue and an uncomfortable habit of telling home truths. Her experiences as a young woman in the bush no doubt helped to create this side of her character. Sarah faced up to many difficult decisions without the comfort and support of other women; understandably those decisions would sometimes affect her life and her family's ever after. Some of the decisions required a special courage and fortitude as the story of young Dave shows.

One obvious difference between Sarah's life and Mrs Martin's is that Sarah's was not a settled one. Her granddaughter's account of Sarah's years as wife and mother in the bush indicates that two consecutive years spent in one place would have been a long time for the Fogarty family. This would have been the case, too, with Mrs Gorey, wife of a contract driller and Kitty Bernhard, married to a contract fencer.

Mrs Gorey worked with her husband out in the bush providing support by cooking for him and his offiders and educating the younger children not yet 'gone away to school'. Women worked hard to get 'money together to send their children away to school - there was no help from the Government in those days' (personal conversation D Hall and LA Riddett July 1986). The Goreys travelled with a transportable home and a herd of goats, and goat herding became one of 16 year-old Alice Gorey's jobs when she came back from school in WA and joined her family in the Victoria River District. Alice also helped with the education of her younger brothers and sisters before she married Peter Sinclair on Wave Hill Station in 1937 (Sister D Allen to AIM Headquarters 4 November 1937, NLA MS5574 Box 108).
In 1937 the Reverend Chris Goy made a tour of inspection through the NT and Kimberleys in his role of travelling padre for the AIM. On their way back through the Victoria River District, Chris and Mrs Goy stopped off at Nicholson Station, Inverway, where they met the Farquharsons, then went on to Wave Hill. Rev Goy wrote in his report:

"On the way we went off the track to visit a family who live in a boring camp. The youngest son had fallen off the rigging and broken his leg a few days previously. Dr Fenton flew out and took him to the Katherine Hospital. Mrs Gorie (sic) was naturally anxious about her son and expressed a wish that she might catch the mail car at Wave Hill to take her to Katherine. I volunteered to take her to Wave Hill (97 miles) and she jumped at the opportunity (Rev C Goy to AIM Headquarters 22 October 1937 NLA MS5574 Box 108)."

So the Gorey family lived far from the station community on Wave Hill. They were a small community of themselves and Mr Gorey's offsiders, living in the dry waterless and consequently practically treeless plains between Wave Hill and Inverway - for drilling rigs go to find subterranean water and you would never expect to see them where there was surface water available. The best the family might hope for in the way of shade would be a solitary eucalypt standing in a dry creek bed. A harsh, difficult environment for raising children. School lessons must surely have been a test of commitment and endurance.

Kitty Bernhard, wife of an itinerant worker, was mentioned in a station diary. She was one of the few women working on VRD Station to be mentioned. The station diary noted the following:

13/10/20
Jack Bernhard starts £6/-/-
16/10/20
Mr and Mrs Bernhard moved into cottage
4/11/20
J.W. Bernhard and Mrs B. together with 7 men started for Killarney Boundary Fence
10/11/20
Mrs Bernhard starts work as cook, Fencers Camp at £4/-/- per week (Bovril Estate Papers VRD Station Diary 119/6/87/6/1 ANU).

Hot, steamy, uncomfortable days to be working: mean maximum temperature of 38.3 degrees C and mean minimum of 23.5 degrees C; and humidity levels between 66 per cent maximum and 30 per cent minimum (Bureau of Meteorology Darwin) Kitty's wage was good in comparison with her husband's, and she would have worked hard and long to earn it. Pearl Ogden has commented on Kitty's cooking:

"Kitty always enjoyed her cooking and apart from the times when she had someone like Mrs Brumby to cook for her, she always did it herself. After her retirement, when she had her own home, she still continued to cook, but always on an open fire. She never used a stove (Ogden 1983, 40)."

While the politicians, planners and publicists were arguing about whether this was white woman's country, Mrs Gorey and Kitty Bernhard were out there showing it was.

The wives of permanent station staff generally led a much more settled life than those women who married itinerant or contract workers who undertook fencing and drilling.

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Mrs Martin raised her seven children on the station living in the comparative comfort of the big house with its wide verandas and cool garden of large shade trees. The Martin children, two girls and five boys, received most their schooling at home, being taught by their mother. All of them worked on VRD for varying lengths of time, and the daughters appear to have been good companions to their mother. Each year Mrs Martin left the station for a period over the hot humid days of December/January to spend holidays with friends in Darwin, with family in the south and on at least one occasion accompanied Mr Martin to Singapore.

Mrs Martin was also hostess to official and family visitors to the station which was a stopping off point on the road through the NT from WA and often a landing stage for aircraft travelling through to Darwin, Wyndham or overseas ports. Her life was both varied and interesting and although she played no direct role in station management she was obviously very much an essential person in the overall management. She is remembered as a strong spirited woman who had a clear sense of her authority and of her role as a leader among station women.

Mrs Martin invited the nursing sisters to join the family for regular tennis and supper parties on Wednesday and Saturday evenings. Events which did not as a rule include young Eileen Thompson, the saddler's wife.

Joyce Falconbridge's diary contains a number of references to these pleasant interludes in their busy lives. Obviously the sisters welcomed the chance to walk up to the station in the cooler late afternoon; they played some sets of tennis, met visitors to VRD, and chatted with the family. In September '37 they were invited to meet three women who were motoring around Australia, Mrs and Miss Griegson and Miss Sayle. On this day they 'played tennis with the two girls and then after a wash and brush up, sat on the verandah and drank sherry and lemonade until supper' (Falconbridge Diary 4 September 1937).

Although Mrs Martin was kind to the sisters, sending them down gifts of fresh fruit from time to time, she obviously kept herself aloof from their home environment. Once, in July 1937, she bent her rules. Joyce Falconbridge wrote in her diary:

**Sunday July 11th**
Mr Bell .... is giving his lantern lecture in the ward this evening... Had an early tea and after cutting the sandwiches and getting the supper all ready awaited our guests... Then Jim came down with Mrs Roden in the truck and imagine our surprise when Mrs Martin got out too, the Wimmera Home rose 2 feet on its foundations, it was a victory for us.

Mrs Martin was also perhaps a little too indomitable in spirit for young Audrey Reynolds; she preferred to stay with the AIM sisters when she came into the main station for visits. The older woman may have noticed the deflection, but could not have been too upset as her own life was so busy and varied.

During the Martin's time on VRD there was another long-term employee and his wife on the station: Mrs Roden and her husband John came to VRD Station as a young married couple around 1925. He was the station bookkeeper until they left there twenty years later. Mrs Roden was another of the 'invisible women'. Well liked and respected by other white women and regarded as a good homemaker, she played no direct role in the station economy. Dorothy Hall comments: 'Mrs Roden only kept house. There was no work on the stations for white women in those days. She kept herself busy with her home duties. She was a very good cook and kept her home beautifully, made curtains and cushions and
cared for her husband. When I was there she had a little fox terrier dog that she lavished much care on' (personal correspondence D Hall to LA Riddett 18 July 1988).

In letters written back to the AIM Head Office during 1937-39 Mrs Hall (then Sister Allen) mentioned Mrs Roden as did other AIM nursing sisters at Wimmera Home. In 1935 Sister Stewart mentioned that she and Sister Langham had been on '2 or 3 short motor rides with Mr and Mrs Roden' (Sister V Stewart to AIM Headquarters 1 October 1935 NLA MS5574 Box 108) and in her account of the AIM Christmas party at the Home, 'Mrs Roden was the other woman present and the party totalled 24' (Sister V Stewart to AIM Headquarters 1 February 1936 NLA MS5574 Box 108). Joyce Falconbridge made many references to her and her kindnesses over the year that she kept her diary.

Plate 17: Joyce Falconbridge, Dorothy Allen, Audrey Reynolds, 'Westie' Stan Martin
Outside Wimmera Home 1938
(Donated by Mrs Joyce Fuller (nee Falconbridge))

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And so Mrs Roden slipped in and out of the record other women kept of life on the station. One is aware that she was there helping the sisters, swelling the number of women at social functions, running her house, remembered by Dorothy Hall as a quiet woman lavishing care on her little fox terrier dog. For all that she must have been a person of considerable strength and determination, with a remarkable degree of self-control and sense of purpose to have sustained more than 20 years of bush life in one of the most remote and isolated areas of this continent.

These then were the women of the Victoria River District. Thrown together by the economic and political imperatives of Northern Development they lived not always very comfortably with each other. Although some of the European women developed lifelong friendships with each other, in the main they lived isolated and lonely lives, knowing they could not necessarily count on the support of other women. Separated by geography from other white women and by language and cultural values from Aboriginal women, the Europeans lived in a community of interest rather than in a close-knit community of shared experiences and companionship.

The settler women who appear to have survived the experience best were those who stayed in touch with the 'country', making adjustments to climate and a new landscape, who found work for themselves and who did not restrict their relationships by notions of race and culture.

For Aboriginal women the greatest challenge lay in finding ways of adjusting to the alien values of the settler society without compromising traditional law. They suffered hardship and loss when they came into too close contact with the homestead and its economy and many learnt to remain aloof and watchful.

The hard irony of settlement in the District is that by 1940 women and children were beginning to settle there in increasing numbers, and the services necessary to support them were being developed; then world war broke out for the second time. Almost every European woman and child, with certain stoic exceptions, was evacuated from the Top End of the NT because of perceived risk to their lives from an enemy invasion.

After the war, when the new stations carved off the large runs like VRD, started up in the 1950s, quite a few of the European women who came to settle them were returning to the District. Their earlier contact had been as wives of contract musters, drovers, fencers and drillers - the men now chose to settle in the country. These families faced, to a very large degree, the same problems and hardship that they and their sisters had struggled with in the 1920s and 1930s. Women returning to established stations mostly came back to improved services. Aboriginal women and their communities had begun moving steadily forward towards a period of political and economic struggle not matched by anything since the beginning of white settlement in the late 19th century.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CHANGE BEGINS

Early one morning in September 1966, a Gurindji woman sat in the garden of the police station at Wave Hill Settlement. The woman, a Narwula 'skin', was waiting for her husband who was getting his instructions for the day's duties from the policeman. She sat facing the south east. Something glinting and flashing in the distance caught her eye and as she focussed on the area where the lights came from she realised they were slowly coming closer. They were coming towards the Settlement at walking pace. Figures began to emerge and become clearer as she continued to watch. A large group of people were coming from the direction of Libanangu (old Wave Hill Station): men, women and children, walking slowly with swags and new billy cans. The sun had been catching the shiny, still charcoal free, new billycans and the light went on ahead and gave the word to the people sitting at Wave Hill Settlement. The old man, Julama, had brought the mob out on strike at Wave Hill and they were now in the second or third stage of their 'track' to Daguragu (Wattie Creek).

Narwula, whose sister was married to the old man, had been waiting and now here they all were, tracking towards Daguragu. Sometime early in the next year, after the Wet, she and her husband would also go to live at Daguragu. Her life would be changed utterly by the events of these few days and like her sisters and their husbands, her brothers and their wives, who were the solid base of the community about to form at Daguragu, she would see develop a whole new way of relating to the gardiya. She would bear witness to the events of that morning in September 1966.

In the time between the strike in 1966 and a change in Government in Canberra six years later the Gurindji families at Daguragu would speak about their aspirations for formal title to their land to a Governor General, a brace of prime ministers, cabinet ministers, secretaries of government departments, bishops, union leaders, school children - they spoke to the whole of Australia and had their message carried for them around the world. They had waited years, many years, for the gardiya to act, to keep promises, to show understanding of what had been said by them, and when at last the Gurindji people saw that the gardiya would do nothing they acted. Over the years they had taken counsel among themselves and with many other communities of Aboriginal people to the west, to the north, to the south and had finally come to an agreement: for a long time now they had been moving towards the white man and his ways, now it was time for them to stop and for the gardiya to move towards the Aboriginal way. To help the gardiya in this process they had also decided to tell many things they had previously not shared with outsiders. The Gurindji would talk about the land, about country, and the law. In the mind of the old man who led the strike: It's the only way Australia can be saved.

The Wave Hill strike magnetised the interest and goodwill of student bodies, unions and civil liberties groups around Australia. As a result of their action in walking off Wave Hill and settling at Daguragu, the Gurindji opened up the possibility of a new way for the gardiya to relate to Aborigines. Many white Australians from every part of Australia, ranging in age from newborn to 70 or more years, and from every socioeconomic group, came to Daguragu to visit. Some stayed to live alongside the traditional owners, sharing the uncomfortable and often harsh conditions at Daguragu.
For years there was inadequate food; water had to be carried in four gallon drums on a yoke up the steep side of the creek to the camps on the high ground; and essential items like firewood gradually became scarce as the people exhausted supplies in the immediate camping area. The Gurindji and their white friends were harassed by police and welfare officers and denied access to the outside world: mail was checked at Wave Hill Settlement before being delivered, sometimes it was not delivered at all, the radio telephone was often not available for their use. For months at a time the people at Daguragu went without food and precious 'tea-leaf' and tobacco. To their credit, and to the shame of white bureaucrats and politicians who refused to see and understand what was going on, the Gurindji did not yield. Their voice in fact became firmer, stronger; eventually the gardiya began to listen and finally heard what was being said. The issue was land - country - and the Gurindji were determined to have that issue dealt with and resolved. Having waited eighty years for justice they were prepared to wait for just a few more. Some events in the previous twenty had shown them that change was possible, while others had convinced them it was absolutely necessary. This time while they waited they were doing it on their own terms, secure in a community situated on and near important dreaming sites. The waiting this time would be hard but productive.
Plate 19: Aboriginal Housing
Daguragu (Wattie Creek) 1970s
(Collection: Lyn A Riddett)

Nothing could ever stay the same after the great crisis of World War II. Too many people, black and white, had seen what was happening in the NT. Black and white alike expected change, a better life, and at least some justice. This last hope was shared by indigenous people in the whole of the colonial world. The events at Wave Hill in 1966 were not merely localised incidents involving a small isolated group of Aborigines; they were part of a pattern of response to colonialism by indigenous people in many parts of Australia and throughout the Third World. There were however some aspects of events in the Victoria River District which were, when experienced as a whole, quite specific to the NT. They were as well unique within the Territory.

In the period 1946-1966 Narwula and her family had witnessed, had been part of, had responded to events and issues which in a way repeated patterns established in the first 60 years of white settlement. The story of the years 44-46 falls into two complementary parts: first there was the recurring and still unresolved issue of northern development with the old problems of land administration and settlement; the second part related to Aboriginal employment and welfare.

At a national level, Australian governments still argued and worried over northern development, a matter made more urgent because of the Japanese bombing in the Top End. The issue still was: development or settlement, or both? The questions asked in the debate in the 1920s were still present: Should the large pastoral properties be subdivided? What was the role of the big UK companies? Was the pastoral industry viable? What infrastructure should government commit itself to providing? Would white women ever settle, or resettle, in any numbers? What should, and what could, be done about the status of Aboriginal employees in the pastoral industry? The significant difference between the earlier debate and the postwar discussion was that after the war there was an increase in the rate of growth and development in the North, and governments generally followed a
more interventionist policy. There was an intensification of the energy gathering around the central issues: land, land usage, country. A cyclone was forming. Land was the focal point for all the activity.

From 1942 when John Curtin established the Postwar Reconstruction Commission, the issue of northern development received some attention from the economists, geographers, anthropologists and planners involved in helping to create the 'new Jerusalem' in Australian society so ardently desired by a people exhausted and saddened by the years of world depression and world war. That attention was, however, sporadic. In the opinion of one of the government's chief economic advisers, Dr HC Coombs, the north did not warrant much consideration. He told Prime Minister Curtin:

The North is far from being a rich tropical zone ripe for development... It is difficult to imagine expansion... without heavy investment and other direct and indirect forms of assistance (Coombs 1981, 71).

Coombs and his colleagues in the Postwar Reconstruction Department concluded that development could be justified only by defence considerations, but Curtin did not heed them. He set up a Federal Committee, the North Australia Development Commission (NADC), under Coombs' chairmanship, which was to 'examine and initiate proposals to increase the population, advance the welfare of native inhabitants, increase production and effectively use the land and other resources'. Coombs later remarked with a note of regret: 'Nothing was done about Aboriginal welfare....' (71).

Coombs' statement is a fair comment on the work done by the NADC but in fact Aboriginal welfare later became a dominant feature in the business of NT postwar administration. Changes in Aboriginal welfare policy and practice, however, came about largely in reaction to criticisms expressed by citizens groups and lobby organisations formed as part of growing worldwide concern about the welfare of indigenous people. A lot of what was done in the area of Aboriginal welfare was ad hoc. The area in which the Labor government of the 1940s attempted planned reforms was land administration, and once again attention was focussed in the Victoria River District.

Although the questions about developing the North remained as unresolved as ever, one point was clear, and the Japanese bombing of the north and occupation of Indonesia had apparently proved it: there was an Asian interest in Northern Australia. People again took up the cry: Populate the North. A group of Territorians living in Alice Springs were very concerned that life in the whole of the Territory should be resumed on an ordinary level as soon as possible after the war. They formed a Northern Territory Development League; their president was EJ Connellan, long term resident and aviation pioneer. In July 1944 at a General Meeting of the League held in Alice Springs, Connellan delivered a presidential address. He spoke at length and covered many issues: geographical boundaries, administration, transport and land policy and immigration. On the matter of immigration Connellan urged that the NT should be developed and populated by our own Australian and British immigrants. One of the reasons given by Connellan reflected the still present fear of invasion:

The north of Australia being our first line of Defence, should be populated by people certain to remain free from the possibility of fifth elements in time of war; even if all the foreign immigrants remained loyal, their presence in the North would provide a shield for enemy agents introduced into the country, by rendering the recognition of these agents more difficult (Connellan c 1944, 19).
Distances from Wyndham shown in miles, based on map drawn for F. Rose, Secretary to the North Australia Development Commission, by the Regional Planning Division of the Post-War Reconstruction. February 1949.

SCALE 1 : 4 000 000 (approx)

Map 5: Pastoral Stations Supplying Wyndham Meat Works
East Kimberley - Victoria River Districts
Based on map produced by North Australia Development Commission, 1949
Connellan also favoured settlement and development of the whole of the NT plus that portion of WA north of the 20th parallel of South Latitude and he acknowledged the role of the Durack patriarch in first mooting the proposal nearly 50 years before in the West Australian Parliament.

Three years later, in May 1947, RG Casey picked up some of these themes in a series of articles written for *The Age*. His articles were subsequently published in his book *Double or Quit: Some Views on Australian Development and Relations*. Casey posed the following questions:

*Why should we - the people of Australia - bother about the Northern Territory at all. Why should we not let it be developed - or not developed - by people who want to do that sort of thing, in their own time - just the same as any other part of Australia?* (Casey 1949, 23).

The fact that these questions should still go begging in the late 1940s was important and highlighted the state of suspended animation the NT was often left to suffer, but of more importance were the answers Casey found for his own rhetorical questions. He echoed what had been said for over fifty years, something which had been given urgency by the repeated bombings of the NT and the Kimberleys by the Japanese during World War II. The most consistent and compelling reason anyone was able to put forward for settling and developing the tropical north was this: if white Australians did not, then others, foreigners, would.

Casey reinforced another commonly held concept of the Territory in *The Age* on 9 May 1947:

*It is not a small man's country. Closer settlement, in the sense that the term is used elsewhere in Australia, has no meaning in the North. Anyone with less than say £15,000 would be unwise to consider taking up land in the territory - and even his would be perilously small capital with which to face the exigencies and uncertainties of the territory.*

He continued in his imagery about the north as a man's country and compared the Australian tropics with what he had known in India. 'The Australian bush' he wrote, 'even in the tropical North, shows but little tropical lushness and jungle. It is a masculine country - as distinct from the soft femininity of the jungle of India and other, hot, moist tropical countries'. What this environment was best suited for was cattle and he held that the NT was potentially a great cattle breeding area, but there were still, as there had been for decades, many problems to overcome before the potential could be realised. Casey emphasised the need for capital investment and his final words in the 9 May article carried this message:

*The Northern Territory is not an Eldorado or a Utopia. It is by no means a wonderful country. There are those who believe that it is not an economic area for other than a very few thousand white people and a relatively small production and that even for this modest usefulness, it has to have permanent taxation privileges at the expense of the rest of Australia. The Territory has cost Australia something like £20,000,000 up to date, apart from war expenditure, and it will cost us a million or so a year in budgetary deficits alone for many years to come. But I believe we have no option but to press on and do our utmost to overcome the inherent difficulties by the use of the greatest fertiliser in the world - well-spent money. I would believe that in, say, 10 years we might get over the hump and make the Territory self-supporting* (The Age 9 May 1947).
A year later, in a commemorative article to celebrate the Coral Sea Battle, the Centralian Advocate took up the issues of northern development and beef cattle production. The writer linked these with the victory in the Coral Sea in an ingenious way:

_The results of the Coral Sea battle prompts this article not so much regarding industrial development as its beef production and the absorption of many cattlemen and cattlemen's sons returned from the scene of war in the industry they know so much about. Territorians are cattle-minded, hard and wiry, and some of the best stockmen in the world, and it would be a genuine gesture if many of the sub-tropical areas were thrown open to them to lease, not as individual blocks, but in a large scale settlement scheme, properly controlled and financed. The areas referred to are the Victoria River and Barkly Tableland districts._

_...The argument for subdivision of the Victoria River district shows a decided positive side when it is considered that with 'no taxation' and every country overseas crying for beef, this area of good production and fattening land is permitted to remain stagnant through lack of 'putting a little back of what is taken off'._

_...The Victoria River district is admirably suited for soldier settlement blocks and should be resumed immediately with that in view (Centralian Advocate Friday 28 May 1948)._  

In fact resumptions were due in the Victoria River District under the terms of pastoral leases taken up in the mid-1920s and the government had already begun negotiation with the two major landholders, Vestey's and Bovril. The question of land being made available for returned servicemen had also been under consideration for some time. Casey's 1947 and the Centralian Advocate's 1948 articles highlighted the major issues: massive capital investment over a medium term of at least 10 years was necessary to get the industry going; leaseholders needed to put something back into their properties, and improvements like fences, bores and yards were essential; leases should be subdivided in the interests of better rangeland management; and the Commonwealth should back the pastoralist with tax concessions and infrastructural improvements in areas like roads and transport. Neither Casey nor the Alice Springs journalist addressed another important issue: markets. Both writers worked from the assumption that because there was a worldwide demand for beef the NT would become a major supplier, meeting that demand. Governments and pastoralists also worked from this premise. Their failure to properly test the assumption was a major weakness in the strategies developed, over the twenty years from 1946, to get the pastoral industry to an economically viable position.

During the 1940s and 1950s the atmosphere in the industry was one of high hopes and expectations. No-one, least of all the 'new' cattle station owners, denied the necessity for hard work. All expected to reap the benefit of that labour; most were to be bitterly disappointed. One man, despite his enthusiasm for the prospects for beef cattle production in the NT, particularly the Victoria River District, was clear-sighted enough to see that a major restructuring of the industry was a necessary prerequisite. At this point, that man, JH (Jack) Kelly, became an important part of this story.

Kelly and J (later Sir John) Crawford, head of the BAE, first became involved with the northern beef cattle industry during the mid 1940s. Together they undertook field work in the brigalow country in the Dawson Valley in Queensland. Their project, in collaboration with the Queensland State Land Settlement Committee, was to survey the country and
prepare a report on its suitability for development as a soldier settlement scheme. The Commonwealth government would not accept Kelly's advice about the appropriate size of blocks to be developed, a matter in which Kelly was both experienced and well-informed, having been actively involved in a similar scheme after World War I, and in 1947 he relinquished his war service land settlement assignment. He was called back into the field by Crawford in 1948 to undertake the BAE survey of the pastoral industry in the NT where the problem of the size of a holding was of an entirely different dimension. Kelly recognised the problem previously noted by Brackenegg-Shepherd and Payne-Fletcher: in the NT most pastoral leases were too large, not too small, to form an efficient productive unit.

At the time that Crawford asked Kelly to go to the NT the former was one of the chief negotiators for the Australian government with UK Ministry of Food officials who were writing in terms for the UK-Australia Meat Agreement - a 15 year agreement finally settled in 1949 and which ran from 1952 to 1967. The need for increased beef production in Australia to meet the projected Meat Agreement requirements was given as a major reason for sending Kelly to the north. Other reasons were: the need to establish some firm proposals for reform in the industry in the Territory; and the need for the Commonwealth to be seen doing something in the NT. During the early stages of Kelly's work it was also assumed in the NT that some pastoral lease lands might be opened up for a Soldier Settlement Scheme.

Kelly's projected survey of the pastoral industry was not universally acclaimed: he ran into considerable opposition in the early stages of his work from some officers of the NT Administration who had been involved in setting up developmental programs within the beef cattle industry. One of these was Colonel Lionel Rose, Chief Veterinary Officer, who had been conducting trials in movement of live cattle by road transport between Barkly Tableland stations and the railhead at Alice Springs (AL Rose to Chairman of Australian Meat Board, AA CRS F1 48/76 Part II 4 October 1948). In 1947 Rose's officers had also investigated the cause of massive stock losses on the Muranji Stock Route (Northern Standard 26 December 1947) and he had backed the reopening of exports of live cattle to the Philippines (Northern Standard 22 August, 29 August, 5 September, 17 October 1947).

One of Kelly's major concerns was with the efficient productive unit. He was appalled by what he saw in the Territory and realised that the whole industry needed restructuring. His most important recommendation related to his concept of a 'Minimum Economic Unit'. He defined the concept thus:

*The area of land related to cattle herd size which, when adequately improved, efficiently managed and used for the purpose to which it is best suited, is sufficient to constitute an efficient production unit, capable of producing an adequate average return to the managerial skill and invested capital of a bona fide resident owner (Kelly 1952, 93).*

Applying this to the Victoria River District Kelly reached the following conclusions (77, 108).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Victoria River</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential carrying capacity</td>
<td>442,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present cattle population</td>
<td>305,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of herd size (head)</td>
<td>8,000-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential average herd size</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average per square mile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He supported his case with additional information regarding potential number of holdings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Victoria River</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usable</td>
<td>51,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrying capacity</td>
<td>15 to 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>range per square mile (head)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx herd size range (head)</td>
<td>8,000-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average herd size approx</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx area size range square miles</td>
<td>550 to 2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx area size square miles</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx number of holdings</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the while he stressed the essential importance of land owners being resident on the property. The NT did not measure up well in this respect and he concluded this section of his report with the following remarks. The potential numbers of resident holders based on his recommendations were as follows:

- Alice Springs District: 85
- Barkly Tableland District: 85
- Victoria River District: 50
- Darwin Gulf District: 30

This potential obviously could not be realised without a major restructuring of the pastoral industry.

Significantly, the two major lease holders in the Victoria River District-Vesteys, holding over 10,000 square miles, and Bovril were involved with the government in negotiating resumptions and subdivision of their leases during the time of Kelly’s survey. Land resumed from VRD (over 5,000 square miles) was used to create three new pastoral leases, each of which had strict development conditions attached. In 1965 Paul Vandeleur, resident owner representing the family company which leased one of these, Camfield, gave evidence to the Public Works Committee of Inquiry on the Wave Hill/Top Springs Road. His statement demonstrated that the carrying capacity of each of the new stations, Camfield, Killarney and Montejinnie, had realised Kelly’s predictions. But there was no major restructuring in the industry and by the time Kelly’s report had been published the Liberal government had begun to further extend existing leasehold arrangements for another 50 years.

If Kelly’s recommendations had been implemented in full the Menzies Government would have had to reverse a well established pattern of de facto support for the large pastoral companies in preference to support for the smaller holdings. The Chifley Labor Government had been reluctant to fully commit itself to such a move in the late 1940s, it was highly unlikely that the Menzies Liberal Government would be any less generous to the British companies.

Vesteys and Bovril continued to be powerful influences on both government policy development and policy administration. Two sets of events during the late 1940s and early 1950s proved how powerful they could be. In Vesteys case the game was played out in the arena of land resumption; Bovril’s lasted for a number of years in the development of the Katherine meat works. Perhaps their greatest achievements were the way in which they were successfully able to block change and stall development by absorbing the attention and energy of politicians and bureaucrats in an endless round of negotiations and discussion. One difference in the ultimate results was noteworthy: Vesteys stayed in the
NT and continued to influence matters; Bovril, after nearly 50 years of involvement, pulled out.

It was the NTPLA which first raised the matter of the 1945 resumptions in a letter to the Minister for the Interior, dated 25 September 1941. The General Secretary, JW Allen, wrote as follows:

*I am desired by my Executive Committee to ask whether the Government is going to exercise its resumption rights immediately or is it proposed to enable present holders to retain resumable areas for a term.*

*The question arises because the present holders are anxious to carry out improvement work if they are in fact to be enabled to retain the areas concerned (JW Allen to Minister for the Interior 25 September 1943, AA CRS F1 44/182).*

The last piece of correspondence in this matter was drafted by the Administrator of the NT, FJS Wise, in January 1954.

Wise wrote to Mr Vestey who had met with the Administrator and the Minister, Hon P Hasluck in Sydney on Saturday 23 January. At the meeting Vestey, representing the family company, had sought permission to surrender pastoral leases held in the NT in exchange for new leases under Section 48D of the Northern Territory Crown Lands Ordinance. As he would be shortly returning to England, Vestey asked as well that the company's request be expedited.

With the consent of the Minister Wise then outlined what Vesteyes could expect as a result of a formal application once the relevant legislation had been passed. The actual area of Vestey leases would more than double!

*...Summary of the Crown proposals are that the Vestey Holding Companies will Surrender or relinquish (sic) possession of approximately 8205 square miles of land at present held under pastoral leases and other areas held under grazing licences and will receive in exchange approximately 16,913 square miles of land in New pastoral leases, for 50 years as specified, and subject to the improvement conditions set out in this letter (FJS Wise to R Vestey, undated draft 1954, NTAS NTRS F1099 A3735).*

No reference was made to the long and complex negotiations that had taken place over the preceding six or seven years. Negotiations which had involved first a Labor, then a Liberal Government, Lord Vestey, two other Administrators, CLA Abbott and AR Driver, several Territory public servants including H Barclay, a most enlightened Director of Lands, and the Director of Welfare, F Moy. The proceedings had been watched with interest, and debated energetically, by members of the newly constituted Legislative Council in the NT. There were two major points of debate: Vesteyes were keen to hold on to as much land as possible in areas of most value to them and the government needed to act to free land for closer settlement; the government had decided on the basis of reports and recommendations made by Native Welfare Patrol Officers, in particular G Sweeney and B Harney, to set up an Aboriginal reserve in the southern part of the Victoria River District and Vesteyes were not at all impressed with that plan and tried to block it. After making some small concessions Vesteyes won the first battle, but they lost the second.
HV Johnson, Minister for the Interior in the Chifley Government tried too hard to please all the parties with an interest in the negotiations. On 16 December 1947 he met with Lord Vestey and Messrs Bingle, Holland and Melville and together they discussed the matter of the pastoral industry in the NT. In a memorandum to the Administrator, Driver, dated 17 December 1947, JA Carrodus, Secretary to the Department, noted the following points which had been discussed the previous day:

Vesteys had excused the lack of development in the NT on the war and because they had had to spend the earlier years 'gaining experience'! They were ready now to proceed with full development but there were drawbacks the chief of which was the lack of a rail link between the western portion of the NT and Wyndham. Lord Vestey also made a number of proposals including longer leases, government assistance to lessees in obtaining materials for improvements and a railway from 'Queensland to Newcastle Waters to enable fat stock to be transported out of the Territory'. Johnson had agreed apparently to consider these proposals but pointed out 'that in his opinion many of the leases were already much too large to be developed by one company' (JA Carrodus to FJS Wise 17 December 1947 AA CRS F1 48/76 Part I).

On 19 December the Northern Standard carried a front page article, 'Minister's Blunt Criticism of Vestey Monopoly', obviously based on a press release from the Minister's office. Johnson was probably doing little more than sabre-rattling when he stated:

Before the Government would consider matters raised by Lord Vestey, it would require the company to submit a concrete plan, including subdivision, the installation of more homes, buildings and cattle yards, as well as more managers and the development of water supply, the Minister said.

He indicated that Lord Vestey had agreed to submit soon, concrete proposals for the development of the company's holdings in Northern Australia (Northern Standard 19 December 1947).

The same edition carried news of the election results for the Northern Territory Legislative Council which, when it sat in 1948, would have to deal with amendments to the Crown Lands Ordinance. Carrodus' memorandum had also mentioned the amendments and implied that the Minister, in effect, was setting himself up to give way to Vesteys:

11 The Minister would be glad to have the views of yourself and the Director of Lands on the proposal made by Lord Vestey, particularly the one in regard to cancelling the existing leases, which terminate in 1965, and granting long term leases subject to definite conditions of improvement.

12 In the latter connection it is pointed out that the draft Ordinance to amend the Crown Lands Ordinance makes provision for the granting of developmental leases up to a period of fifty years.

13 The Minister is of the opinion that, if long leases are granted to the Vestey Companies, it does not necessarily follow that they should be over the same country covered by the existing leases. It may be desirable to have some adjustment of boundaries (JA Carrodus to FJS Wise 17 December 1947 AA CRS F1 48/76 Part I).
It is worthwhile noting that when adjustments of boundaries were made, these were usually in favour of Vesteyes. When the amendments came before the Council in mid 1948 four elected members of the Council, led by Dick Ward, member for Alice Springs, telegraphed the Minister, protesting against what appeared to be preferential treatment for the Vestey and Bovril companies. The Northern Standard reported the move and quoted from the text of the telegram:

In view of the 1948 amendment to the ordinance limiting one person’s holding to 5,000 square miles, we cannot understand the Government treating with single individuals like Lords Luke and Vestey, for a result entirely opposed to the purpose of the amendment....

On past experience Vesteyes and Bovril have not justified differential treatment, since their lands generally are insufficiently improved and are running numerous wild cattle involving despoilation of large areas of fertile lands (Northern Standard 2 July 1948).

The Councillors directed the Minister’s attention to a statement made by Hugh Barclay, Director of Lands, to the Council in February that year. Barclay had stated that while governments had been compelled to follow an open range policy in the early stages of development in the cattle industry, the time had come to modify that policy and the pastoralists would be expected now to provide more paddocks (Northern Standard 2 July 1948).

And Driver had also made a statement to the Council in February which seemed to support the view that governments now would enforce stricter conditions on pastoral leaseholders, including Vesteyes. In response to a question from J Nelson (Member for Stuart) he had said:

The only statement I can make is that Lord Vestey interviewed the Minister for the Interior, then again interviewed him when I was present.

The drift of the discussion was such that Lord Vestey was told to prepare a definite proposal of lands desired and conditions to be applied. The Department wanted an assurance that only portion of the land now held was to be requested - the whole area to be cut up into holdings and living areas, fenced, and buildings erected for married managers (Northern Standard 27 February 1948).

Debate on the Ordinance, which allowed for the extension of leases due for resumption in 1965, was conducted in the NT Legislative Council in August 1948. Under the terms proposed by the government for new Pastoral Development Leases, leaseholders were to be given special assistance to develop these leases for only a limited period, at the end of which time the leases would be subdivided into smaller blocks (Northern Standard 6 August 1948).

Ward proposed a number of amendments to the ordinance, one of which restricted to 5,000 square miles the land available to the big companies for use as a Pastoral Development Lease. Another would have transferred the power to grant leases from the Administrator to the Land Board which would in future conduct hearings in public. Ward said he wanted to test whether or not the ordinance proposed by the government was a ‘Vestey benefit law’ (Minutes of Proceedings Legislative Council of NT 11 August 1948).
Hugh Barclay who had put the ordinance forward agreed to accept Ward's amendment concerning the Land Board hearings but would not accept the one regarding the size of leases. The four elected members of the Council agreed to Barclay's compromise and the legislation was passed on Friday 13 August 1948 (Northern Standard 13 August 1948). The ordinance never came into effect, however, because the regulations were not gazetted (Rose 1954, 16).

During the debate officers of the NTA who were appointed members of the Council denied special consideration was being given to Vestey's and Bovril. A statement made by Johnson in the House of Representatives in September 1948 suggests however, the government was:

_The Minister said the urgency of obtaining more meat for Britain had led to the Vestey and Bovril interests opening negotiations for extension of tenure of their leases._

_Mr Johnson said that because of shortage of Crown land it was considered necessary that one of the conditions of extension of tenure should be surrender by Vestey's of certain leases which could be developed by individual settlers._

_Other conditions were that a programme of improvements in leases should be prepared and stud stock should be introduced_ (Northern Standard 17 September 1948).

Correspondence between Vestey's and the government also shows that the government did not get much in the way of assurances but received a lot of proposals. Vestey's were skilled in making short, to the point, and assertive statements. They wrote to Carrodus in June 1948 after discussions between the Minister and the Administrator and _inter alia_ stated:

_We are willing to surrender 'Maryfield' station (area 1,883 square miles) but on condition that you give us back lease no. 386 which you have recently taken away from us on 'Nutwood' Station covering a total area of 327 sq miles..._

_We regret that we find it quite impossible to give up any of 'Gordon Downs' Station (EJ Bowater to JA Carrodus 29 June 1948, NTAS NTRS F1099 3735)._ They lost the fight on Gordon Downs, but eventually won the major battle over maintaining an almost continuous string of leases across the Territory from west to east. These leases afforded them a capacity to move store cattle in stages from their western leases to good fattening country in Queensland.

Ward's main complaint, that Vestey's and Bovril were receiving differential treatment, was supported by another event. June 1948 was a busy time for the parties involved in negotiations over the NT leases and before Johnson met with Vestey's representatives on 24 June he had attended a meeting of a special subcommittee of the Cabinet. The subcommittee met on 21 June and included Prime Minister Chifley as a member. A memorandum to the NT Administrator, 22 June, minuted the meeting as follows:
VESTEYS LEASES, NORTHERN TERRITORY

A sub-committee of Cabinet consisting of -

The PRIME MINISTER (Right Honourable J.B. Chifley);
The MINISTER for the INTERIOR (Honourable H.V. Johnson);
The MINISTER for COMMERCE and AGRICULTURE (Honourable R.T. Pollard);
The MINISTER for WORKS and HOUSING (Honourable Nelson Lemmon),

met at Parliament House on 21st June, 1948, to discuss the proposals made by Mr. Bowater, on behalf of Vestey's, as set out in the attached memorandum.

Mr J.A. CARRODUS, Secretary, Department of the Interior and Mr. P.W. NETTE, of Department of the Treasury, were present.

The MINISTER for the INTERIOR pointed out that the Vestey interests at present held about 23,000 sq. miles of country. He considered that if they are to be granted long term leases they should surrender quite an appreciable amount of that country. The offer they have made involves only about 5,000 sq. miles and he did not consider that was adequate.

The MINISTER pointed out that Willeroo (Delamere) was fair country, Manbulloo was not good and Marakai was used only for buffalo shooting.

The PRIME MINISTER said that he appreciated the fact that the Company would want to work its western leases conjointly, because they had large areas in Western Australia adjoining the Territory. That, however, did not mean that they should be allowed to retain the whole of the leases in that area. He added that the cost of constructing a railway from the east would be enormous, and in any case it would be used only for a few months in the year. The position probably could be met by the construction of good roads and use of motor vehicles.

After discussion, it was decided that Vestey's be informed that if they desired to have their leases converted into long tenure, the following properties should be surrendered:

Gordon Downs
Willeroo (Delamere)
Maryfield
Marakai.

If the Company was not prepared to make those surrenders the leases should be allowed to expire by effluxion of time in 1965 (NTAS NTRS F1099 3735).
Negotiations continued until October 1948, when an agreement was drawn up after a Conference in Darwin attended by Messrs Holland, Drabble, and Bingle representing the Vestey group and the Administrator and Director of Lands for the NTA. A schedule attached to the minutes of the conference indicates that Vesteyes actually ended up securing more land than they surrendered (information supplied by VT O'Brien Darwin 1985). In any case the whole matter was left to rest because the 1948 Ordinance was not gazetted. In 1949 after Labor lost power and RG Menzies had become Prime Minister, Vesteyes began negotiating again and, as Wise's 1954 letter shows, came out victorious, having once more received special treatment. The concessions the government demanded of Vesteyes, the surrender of leases, were never effectively obtained. By 1953 new Ordinances had been introduced which gave leaseholders a fifty-year lease on their properties and Vesteyes had created a number of subsidiary companies in time to take advantage of the new legislation. One of the officers of the Lands Branch commented acidly: 'It is extremely galling to see Vesteyes adopting our ideas regarding subdivision and blandly expecting us to fall into line...'(H Barclay to Administrator 10 September 1947, AA CRS F630 PL111N). The required boundary adjustments mentioned earlier occurred not entirely in the way the Labor government had proposed!

The 1953 Ordinance did not have an easy passage through the Legislative Council. Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories in the Menzies Government, angered members of the Council by leaving the bill aside for comment, and some alleged that Hasluck had allowed the NTPLA to recommend amendments to the legislation before it was presented in the Council in Darwin (Rose 1954, 165-167). The allegation was substantiated by Wise's letter of January 1954 which showed clearly that the Minister was prepared to give the big British companies special consideration and privileged treatment. Later when it came time for the leases to be signed, Hasluck had the Director of Lands fly to Perth to present the lease documents in person to Vesteyes representative for his signature (NTAS NTRS F1099 A3735).

Bovril had also been negotiating with the government over the matter of pastoral leases. They had discussed as well Bovril's plans to develop the Katherine meatworks, but the proposal came to nothing despite years of negotiations. In 1950 Bovril announced it was pulling out of the meatworks, and as a result lost the right to renegotiate their pastoral leases. Bovril left the Victoria River Downs District. The Katherine meatworks story is a curious one. Two senior NTA officials, AL Rose, the chief Veterinary Officer and Hugh Barclay, each made a summary of correspondence and events related to the matter. Rose referred to the correspondence as 'extraordinary!' (AL Rose to Administrator 7 December 1950 AA CRS F1 S1/646). Barclay commented:

*Victoria River Downs, which is the principal property held by the Bovril interests has, over the last twenty years, been one of the worst-run properties in the Northern Territory, and the history of the Katherine Meatworks, outlined above, does not hold out much hope that future operations of Bovril's will be an improvement on the past.*

*All construction work on the Meatworks has ceased twice in three years, which would appear to indicate that either -

(a) the Company did make a proper estimate of the number of cattle available, even on its own leases, before commencing this project; or*
Map 6: Pastoral Leases and Grazing Licences
Victoria River District
Based on map produced by Department of Interior (c1950)
(b) Bovril’s only purchased the Army Meatworks at Manbulloo to prevent Vestey's from obtaining it; or

(c) the Company is taking a leaf out of Vestey’s book and is attempting to keep other interests out of the field by leaving a half-finished Meatworks in Katherine as an indication that meatworks are economically impossible in this area. At the same time it has tied up all available machinery suitable for such a project in the Northern Territory (H Barclay to Administrator 8 January 1951, AA CRS F1 S1/646).

At one stage during discussions Lord Luke visited Australia. In May 1948 he interviewed the Administrator, inspected Vestey's meatworks and subsequently visited VRD. In June, Lord Luke proceeded to Canberra to discuss the question of extension of Pastoral Leases with the Minister.

Lord Luke's meeting with the Minister and the Secretary to the Department was held on 21 June 1948, the same day the cabinet subcommittee had met to discuss Vestey's resumptions, and three days before the meeting between the Minister and Mr Bowater, a Vestey's representative. June was indeed a busy time. After he had visited VRD and before meeting with Johnson, Lord Luke wrote to the Administrator:

I feel I must write you a letter after my visit to Victoria River Downs to let you know how impressed I have been with the Station and how convinced I am that with proper organisation (which it is now getting) we can make it a model Station in the N.T.

...I hope to meet you again down in Sydney - I shall be preparing a statement to take with me when I go to Canberra, setting out how we hope to assist the government by our future programme for Victoria River Downs and Katherine Meatworks (Lord Luke to Administrator 8 June 1948, AA CRS F1 S1/646).

Yet the company positively dithered in getting its program going. The two NTA officers Rose and Barclay were prepared to be very tough with Bovril and perhaps had they been left to handle negotiations the situation may never have dragged on as it did and the result might have been a more positive one for the NT. Certainly this had been the view expressed by Hugh Barclay in his letter of 8 January 1951:

Had the Company's original proposals, or the later proposals submitted by Lord Luke to the Minister, been submitted for critical examination by the Northern Territory Administration, which is in full possession of available facts and figures concerning conditions in the pastoral industry in the Northern Territory, I think that there would have been modifications both in the agreement between the Government and Bovril's re the extension to Pastoral Leases, and in the Company's plans for the construction of Meatworks at Katherine (H Barclay to Administrator 8 January 1951 AA CRS F1 S1/646).

Changes were taking place in the Victoria River District despite Vestey's attempts to block them. The resumption of land from VRD and Wave Hill went ahead and new areas of development opened up. Two areas of land resumption, one from Vestey's in the southern part of the Wave Hill lease and the other from VRD which was subdivided into three new
stations, helped create a new arena for change in the pastoral industry, and the life of every person in the District was affected. The government, perhaps unwittingly, provided the catalyst by opening up possibilities for reform in land administration at the same time as it began to implement new policies in the area of Aboriginal welfare.
CHAPTER NINE

THE PEOPLE MOVE

The 1945 land resumptions in the Victoria River District provided the government with an opportunity to bring about reform in two areas of contention:

(a) Aboriginal welfare; and
(b) White settlement and economic development.

Public servants in Darwin employed in the Native Welfare and Lands Branches of the NTA were pleased to exploit the opportunity. Although they were mostly part motivated by very good intentions they were not always successful in achieving their goals. They did, however, manage to beat Vesteys at their own game in the matter of Pastoral Lease 411 which expired in June 1945 and which the government decided would not be made available again for leasehold.

It was a block of country which was of little economic value to Vesteys and which the government intended to use to establish an Aboriginal reserve - Catfish Reserve. In this matter which was related to Aboriginal welfare and employment, Vesteys made it clear in their correspondence with NTA officials that they expected to be able to control any Aboriginal reserve set up in the area. They also made statements about Ronald and Catherine Berndt indicating that in the company view the anthropologists were Vesteys employees, or at least, the company's agents. In a telling turn of phrase which showed they may not have understood the academic side of the Berndts' work they referred to them as 'our anthropologists' as if somehow they owned them.

The problem to be dealt with in the case of Catfish Reserve was Aboriginal employment: from Vesteys point of view the issue was the supply and retention of labour; the Administration was concerned with more than that - patrol officers were very concerned about conditions on stations in the Victoria River District, particularly Wave Hill and Birrindudu. Two reports from 1945 brought serious criticisms about conditions on the stations to the attention of the Director of Native Welfare and through him to the Administrator.

Gordon Sweeney wrote his report to the Director of Native Affairs on 9 April 1945. Sweeney wrote in emotional yet clear terms about conditions on stations in the District.

... In many cases the native camp is in a position exposed to the cold winds, the crude humpies or wind breaks are made of scraps of iron, bag, etc. No ablutions or lavatories are provided for the camp. The camp is an eye-sore and kept out of view of the station and is seldom visited by any of the station staff.

The cattle stations are unable or unwilling to bear the full responsibility for the dependant women and children, and the old people on the station. The station job is to run cattle and not natives; to make profits and not to be a welfare institution.
The results of their policy has been a decreasing native population and stagnation for the natives that remain on the holdings (Patrol Officer Sweeney Report 9 April 1945, AA CRS F1 45/157).

Bill Harney filed his report on Wave Hill and Birrindudu Stations to the Director on 24 May 1945 and corroborated what Sweeney had written six weeks earlier. In another letter of the same date headed 'Inspection Catfish Area' Harney spoke very positively of the area as an appropriate place to develop as a 'native cattle station' (Patrol Officer Harney Report 24 May 1945, AA CRS F1 45/157). He wrote again on 29 June making a full report on his tour of inspection of the western stations, a journey which covered 1,358 miles (Patrol Officer Harney Report 29 June 1945, CRS AAF1 42/275). In his June letter Harney wrote of conditions on the stations; he was very critical of the Vesteyes stations:

... What is urgently required is correct supervision of natives on stations, or failing that, wages to be paid all employees with good houses provided and their dependants gathered to suitable reserves and their welfare assured. Such a place is the Catfish with its big water holes and shady trees.

In that place all young native women and girls could be protected, not as today where the young women are regarded as part of the wages paid to keep men on the stations. It is an old native saying in the bush that native women can retain their virtue only by having the speed of Costle the sprinter and the endurance of Nurmi, long distance runner. Supervision of natives on reserves or the stations is the answer to native welfare and this must be forced on the people who employ natives, not as a useful help but as a means of profit (Report 29 June 1945).

The NT Administration moved with surprising speed on these reports and although it was three years before Frank Moy, the Director of Native Affairs could write to Professor Elkin that 'Ryan and Evans have just moved the first batch of northern Walibiris (sic) from Yuendumu to Catfish' (FH Moy to Professor Elkin 4 November 1948, AA CRS F1 52/570) the matter of Catfish Reserve was treated more expeditiously than most. In this case the evidence supporting the need for a reserve was too strong to ignore and the fact of PL 411 expiring on 30 June 1945 presented an opportunity too good to miss. It was, as well, one way of making a point to Vesteyes; it was also one of the few cases in which Vesteyes did not get their way. At first, however, company officials obviously felt confident about being in control of the situation, on 7 September 1945, AS Bingle wrote to CLA Abbott, the Administrator:

We briefly outlined to you when you saw Mr Bowater and myself here in Sydney some weeks ago, that it was our intention to try and recruit additional native labour for the stations from the walkabout tribes that were in fairly large numbers in various parts of the Territory, particularly in the area to the south of Wave Hill...

We thought of establishing a settlement on the upper reaches of the Victoria River, Wave Hill, where perhaps we could establish a vegetable garden and a primitive tannery, giving the blacks that would be working in the area adequate rations for themselves and their dependants. I am informed that the Native Affairs Department now intend themselves to establish such a settlement or compound using that short term lease which is to the south of the Catfish area, Wave Hill (AS Bingle to Administration 7 September 1945, AA CRS F1 45/157).
He wrote again in similar vein to the Director of Native Affairs on 11 January 1946:

*Some time ago Mr. Quirk and the writer interviewed Mr. Chinnery concerning the proposed compound which is likely to be established in the Catfish area on Wave Hill Station....*

...We have pointed out to you that on many of our stations we are very short of native labour. We have had our anthropologists Mr. and Mrs. Berndt, making a survey on the possibility of picking up the right class of native labour and generally settling native families on those stations encouraging the natives to breed and generally content themselves. We, of course, know that the nomadic habits of many of the tribes, are somewhat against them settling for long in one place. We feel that with proper treatment we can expect to encourage the natives to settle down somewhere in a convenient place with the existing natives that are now on our station properties (AS Bingle to FH Moy 11 January 1946 AA CRS F1 45/157).

In the same letter Bingle outlined plans which Vestey's had to improve the living conditions of their Aboriginal employees, not from a sense of justice but from a desire to civilise them as far as possible. And it was to these proposals that Carrington, Acting Director of Native Affairs responded, not to the suggestions about Catfish which Vestey's were forced to raise again in March 1946 (FH Bingle to Administrator 27 March 1946 AA CRS F1 45/157).

Native Affairs and Lands officials were meanwhile steadily moving towards setting up Catfish. Harney and Cadet Patrol Officer Gubbins made another patrol of the area after the wet in May 1947. In June Mr Bingle, accompanied by Mr Quirk, saw the Government Secretary and complained 'of the proposal to establish a native affairs settlement at Catfish Waterhole' (Minute of Meeting 10 June 1947, AA CRS F1 45/157). Bingle mentioned that when this project was first mooted several years previously, he had discussed it with the Minister for the Interior and the then Administrator, Mr Abbott, both of whom gave him a passing verbal assurance that the settlement would not be established unless upon establishment it was placed under the control of the adjacent Vestey's station.

Bingle added that he was particularly concerned that the settlement would have its own herd, and he anticipated interference by the settlement Aborigines with the station labour, pollution of watering places and other difficulties. He confirmed his objections in a letter dated the same day, 10 June 1947, addressed to the Government Secretary. On 12 June Bingle and Quirk called on Frank Moy to discuss the Catfish proposals, a fact which Moy reported immediately to the Government Secretary.

The Moy minute of 12 June is a fascinating document: a clear statement by Moy strongly recommending the declaration of Catfish as an Aboriginal Reserve was commented on by both the Government Secretary and the Administrator, Driver (and in both cases the comments are legible!). The Government Secretary when referring to Moy's correspondence to Driver wrote:

_I do not think Mr Bingle's objections have much substance, but you will note he claims to have received an assurance in the matter from the previous Administrator and the then Minister (Memorandum FH Moy to Government Secretary 12 January 1947 AA CRS F1 45/157)._

The Administrator directed the matter on to the Chief Clerk of Lands and asked for a memorandum to be drafted proclaiming an Aboriginal Reserve.
Vesteys did not let the matter lie and the file contains correspondence dated 8 July '47 from AS Singh, a Director of Wave Hill Pastoral Company Limited; 17 September from AS Bingle; and 26 September '47 from S Ick-Hewins, Secretary of the NTPLA. All objected to or tried to stall action on Catfish Reserve, but unsuccessfully. On 9 September 1947 Driver wrote to the Secretary, Department of the Interior:

I do not consider that the objections put forward by the Wave Hill Pastoral Company have any real substance. The native establishment would not be within the boundaries of any station; it would have its own boundaries, two of which, the north and east, would be common with Wave Hill and the western boundary in common with Inverway Station; the land on the proposed southern boundary is held under grazing licence.

If this objection were upheld, every pastoralist in the Territory whose holdings abutted on native reserves would have grounds for complaint.

After careful enquiry, it is considered that the existence of the settlement would not in any way prejudice the management and control of Wave Hill Station.

I forward herewith draft proclamation of the proposed reserve for necessary action (Administrator to Secretary Department of Interior 9 September 1947).

In January '48 HA Barrenger, Acting Secretary of the Department, wrote and told Driver that the proclamation setting aside the Catfish Aboriginal Reserve appeared in Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. 5 dated 8 January 1948' (HA Barrenger to Administrator 22 January 1948, AA CRS F1 45/157). No small wonder then that Moy wrote as an additional comment in his letter to Elkin, 'I do not think Mr Bingle likes the idea at all' (FH Moy to Professor Elkin 4 November 1948 AA CRS F1 52/570).

Unfortunately the history of Catfish, most of which was later incorporated into the new Hooker Creek Reserve has not been altogether happy. One of the chief difficulties lay in the way that superintendents, patrol officers and other government officials intervened in the lives of Aboriginal people in an attempt to civilise and to assimilate them into white society. The period after World War II was a time of much intervention: the more governments responded to calls from welfare organisations, Aboriginal rights leagues and the general public for improved conditions for Aborigines, the more government officials entered the lives of Aborigines. In moving towards justice and citizenship, Aborigines were forced to deal with considerable pressure to yield traditional beliefs and practices. On the one hand, they were constrained to accept constant interference in their lives from well-intentioned but not always clear-sighted welfare officers and on the other, to see and accept the increasing presence of whites in the Victoria River District as the new settlers moved on to their 'new' cattle stations. These were two pressures on vital points in their lives: country and kin.

One gardiya at least was concerned enough to raise the issue of country with the NTA. The man, Professor AE Elkin, chose a most significant phrase when he wrote to Frank Moy in 1947; he spoke of 'land and citizenship rights'. He wrote on behalf of a committee of three set up by ANZAAS in 1946 (of which EW Chinnery and Professor Strehlow were the other two members) to advise Moy that the committee was investigating 'the alleged exclusion of Australian Aborigines from normal land and citizenship rights'. The committee would be recommending among other things that immediate legislation be
enacted to give 'natives an inalienable title to the lands reserved for their use' (Professor Elkin to FH Moy 27 June 1947 AA CRS F1 52/570).

Moy's reply, 17 July 1947, is equally significant in that it sets out in clear detail the feeling of the government on matters raised by Elkin:

The only direct reference to aboriginals obtaining a lease of Crown Lands in the Northern Territory is covered by Section 112 of the Crown Lands Ordinance which provides that - The Governor-General may grant to any aboriginal native, or the descendant of any aboriginal native, a lease of any Crown Lands, not exceeding one hundred and sixty acres in area, for any term of years and upon such terms and conditions as he thinks fit'.

...There are no full blood aboriginals holding land under the provisions of the Crown Lands Ordinance. I do not think that any have reached a stage where they could do so but there is nothing in the Ordinance which can be read to preclude them from so doing.

I would assume that an aboriginal can apply for a lease of land in the same manner as any other citizen and his application would be treated on its merits.

So far as reserves are concerned these remain inviolate and I am constantly on the watch for suitable land to be set aside for this use.

...Until we can get the aboriginal to be really land and property conscious so that he will put land to full economic use I feel there is no need for special legislation so far as the Northern Territory is concerned (FH Moy to Professor Elkin 17 July 1947 AA CRS F1 52/570).

When the Chifley Government talked of closer settlement in the Victoria River District it meant, of course, settlement by Europeans, the gardiya. In fact, the number of new settlers was small, only a few families came, some of whom, like the Crowsons who took up the lease on Montejinnie Station, had lived and worked in the District before the war. The new and the returning settlers brought sound ideas about how to use the country: they became owner-managers, resident on the property; they had the example of Kilfoyle on Rosewood before them. They also had to conform to strict conditions imposed on them by the government. The combination of these factors provided a good base for development, and despite short term hardships these 'new' stations, in particular Montejinnie, Camfield and Killarney, were successful both in terms of cattle turn off and of land management.

Generally the new settlers were easier in their social and work relations with Aborigines than older style pastoralists like Alf Martin. So, while they contributed to a further alienation of Aboriginal land, they also helped to change the old patterns of black-white relations. Men like Bill Crowson, Paul Vandeleur and Bill Tapp developed a reputation for giving Aborigines a 'fair go' and their wives became directly involved in the welfare of the Aboriginal families working on the station. Even on these stations, however, there were flashpoints of conflict, signs of stress imposed by harsh conditions and by changing patterns in relationships.

Conditions were harsh; the situation on Camfield and Killarney, in particular, was extremely hard. Two of the settler families, Vandeleurs who took up Camfield and Izods who were the original holders of the Killarney block, have clear memories of how difficult the early days were. For these families starting up on a cattle station in the District in the
1950s was very like the way things had been for the original settlers in the 1880s. Neither Camfield nor Killarney had any worthwhile improvement, little in the way of fences and yards and no proper accommodation. The country was nevertheless regarded by NTA Lands Branch inspectors as good cattle country: Field Officers DE Macinnis and RC McBride reported on 17 June 1948 that they believed the stations could carry 9,000 -9,500 head each. The problem Macinnis and McBride anticipated was how the new owners could provide sufficient watering places to allow the runs to develop to their full potential (Inspection Report 17 June 1948 AA CRS F630 PL 121N). To meet this problem and to force development in the pastoral industry, the government placed stringent conditions on the leaseholders of the three new blocks, conditions they had not been prepared to place on Vestey's and Bovril in respect of their leases. The conditions, determined under the 1953 Crown Lands Ordinance by the Administrator, were rigorously enforced by the Lands Branch.

Paul Vandeleur remembers that on Camfield they had 10 years to complete: all boundaries fence; 80 miles of internal fencing at a cost of £100 per mile; a cattle yard large enough to work 1,000 head; eight bores; a homestead valued at £10,000. They also had to introduce breeding cattle so that the stocking would achieve a rate of ten head to the square mile. Similar conditions were applied to Killarney and Montejinnie. The pastoralists were faced with having to find substantial investment capital and a means of creating a cash flow (personal conversation Paul and Betty Vandeleur and LA Riddett 1982).

Izods ran a number of car sales yards and garages in the NT which were slowly milked dry to establish Killarney Station and keep it going. The family lasted only a few short years on Killarney. In the late 1950s they sold out to Bill Tapp who had started off in the District in partnership with Crowsons on Montejinnie. Vandeleurs had successful businesses in far north Qld which provided the capital to get them going on Camfield. Shortly after they took up the lease they began a number of small business ventures to provide the working capital: they bought Mataranka Station; acquired a grazing licence for Buffalo Springs near the Timber Creek depot; and purchased a butcher shop in Katherine. They purchased store bullocks for £7 a head, kept the best on Mataranka for fattening for sale at £15-18 a head and sold the rest to Angliss (Vestey's) in Darwin. With Mick Vandeleur on Camfield, Paul on Mataranka and Jack Grimmelt running the butcher shop they managed to get Camfield started. Paul, only 19 years old, thus gained experience he would need when he eventually took over Camfield.

Between the time they came onto Camfield in 1953 and the early 1960s, the Vandeleurs, who had no previous experience with beef cattle, experimented with a number of ideas to increase their sales. Some of the measures were unsuccessful, but the young men persevered, pioneering new management and marketing techniques. In 1961 Paul took cattle by truck to Katherine, the first time road transport was used to shift cattle from so far to the west. The venture was not really successful; the 230 mile journey took 30 hours; the truck could hold only 22 head; and the cattle sustained bad bruising Paul had, however, been correct in his assessment and movement of cattle by road train became established practice in the District by the late 1960s. In 1962 he presented a case for a beef road to service Camfield, and the other new leases, in evidence before the Public Works Committee hearings and successfully argued against the proposed route of the new road to be constructed in the District. The original plan would have placed Camfield 30 miles away from the bitumen. In his evidence he said:

*It appears now that the new proposed road would serve Wave Hill only to the fullest advantage... However, if you consider the extent of Wave Hill, which is 6,225 square miles, the turn-off on average from Wave Hill is a shade over a beast a mile taken year in and year out. The turn off of cattle*
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Plate 20: Camfield Station
Sale Poster 1970s
(used with permission of Elders GM, Katherine, NT)
from Camfield which is 1,050 square miles would be nearly a beast to half a square mile. Montiejinnie would do even better than that. In 1962 the three resumption blocks of Victoria River Downs, Camfield, Montiejinnie and Killarney turned off 6,400 head from 3,500 square miles against 7,119 from Wave Hill with its 6,225 square miles. So I would not say that Wave Hill is any more densely populated with cattle than either of the other three places (CPP Minutes of Evidence Relating to the Proposed Construction of the Top Springs to Wave Hill Road, NT 1962-63, 48).

The most persistent worry during the early years on Camfield and Killarney was water. Like the 19th century pioneers in the District the new settlers had to deal with the 'specificity of rainfall' and with problems associated with sinking bores. Rain often fell at the wrong time: one year on Camfield there was a fall of 11 inches over two days which flooded creeks and rivers at a time when native grasses could not respond. The result was bogged cattle, two miles of fence line washed away and none of the fresh green 'pick' pastoralists expect after rain. Betty Vandeleur, Paul's wife, recalled the early days thus:

*Every year we used to watch the rain in the desert, follow the desert all the way - Hooker Creek, Cattle Creek, Limbunya, Montiejinnie, Killarney. Unless the river ran in October from storm rains in the desert we didn't have any water supply. Every Christmas during the 50s and 60s I'd look at the cattle and think, 'what are they eating?' Our first green Christmas was 1970 (personal conversation 1982).*

The answer, as the field officers and Jack Kelly had remarked, lay in provision of permanent water for the cattle by sinking bores. Under the terms of the lease the government was required to drill two bores, the cost of which had to repaid by the leaseholder. Only one bore on Camfield, Farquharson Bore, was successfully drilled under this scheme. The government eventually made a subsidy available in the 1960s but until then the Vandeleurs and other newcomers had to put up the cost and cope with many failures.

Until the rotary drill rigs were introduced in the late 60s, drilling using the percussion bit was a long and difficult task. It was also both expensive and frustrating. Paul Vandeleur's experience was that the drillers would leave the job as soon as they hit a basalt layer which the percussion drill could not break up. On one occasion, after five unsuccessful attempts to get water, they called on the services of a water diviner, Harry McCuller, and were able to get water where he said they would. Another bore on Camfield was named Hoodoo because three or four holes were drilled and tools lost down each one; the drill on this bore took nine months. Yet another pumped at a rate of 3,000 gallons per hour for 12 months and dried up completely. When the Vandeleurs built their house in the late 1950s they had a problem getting a year round supply of water. For years during the late months of the Dry as the Camfield River dried back the pump drawing water for the house sucked fish up into the storage tank. This situation was finally alleviated when the introduction of rotary drills allowed them to drill into the stony land on which the house stood.

An incident on Killarney in the mid 1950s highlighted the fact that lack of water could be dangerous. It also brought into sharp focus for Marlene O'Neil-Izod the isolation white women suffered in the harsh world of the cattle industry. Marlene, young mother of one child and six months pregnant with her second, was the victim of a set of circumstances which brought terror into her life and brought her close to death (personal conversation M Izod and LA Riddett, October 1987).
The Izods, Marlene and her husband Leo, had gone down to Killarney late in 1955 to supervise operations on the station for Leo's father, Eric Izod. Leo had been down to the station the year before and had come back to Darwin ill because of under nourishment and suffering barcoo rot. Marlene, despite the difficulty of being pregnant and having a nine month old infant to care for, decided to accompany Leo to provide him with companionship and basic domestic support. At the time there were virtually no improvements on Killarney but they believed there was a house at Mayvale Bore and that is where they headed. The house turned out to be a shed, 72' x 72', consisting of steel uprights, a corrugated iron roof and no external walls. In the middle of the shed was an enclosed area with walls of arcmesh which the Izods used as a kitchen and sleeping quarters. Uncomfortable as it was, the shed provided cover; the Izods' real difficulty was that Mayvale Bore had stopped pumping water and there were thirsty cattle in the area.

The cattle, perishing for water, became agitated and belligerent; they began fighting and the bulls began going the weaker cattle. Leo decided to shift operations to Gallagher's Bore where there was less in the way of improvement but a good supply of water. He asked Marlene to wait at Mayvale for one day and one night, while he and the men shifted gear to the new site. Marlene agreed because she could see his point of view that there was really no room for her and their little boy on the truck. What neither of them anticipated was that the thirst crazed cattle, smelling water stored at the 'house' would attack it in their push to get a drink.

Realising herself a possible victim of the attack, Marlene first tried to deflect the beasts. She remembered an old cattleman's tale that cattle are frightened by something white, will keep away or even run away from a white object. The household supply of toilet paper was brought into play as a defensive weapon; Marlene draped long streamers of paper around the steel uprights of the shed. But the measure was ineffectual. Bellowing, agitated cattle moved into the shed area and began 'hooking' the arcmesh in an attempt to get to water. Marlene picked up her child and began to move downhill to the protection of the iron clad bush lavatory. Some of the cattle followed. As she began to run they came after her. From inside the flimsy shelter she could hear them surrounding the small building. And then they began butting and horning the corrugated iron walls.

When Leo drove back to Mayvale the first thing he saw was the decoration of long streamers fluttering from the shed posts. At first he did not see the cattle down the hill surrounding the lavatory, but as soon as he did, he realised that Marlene and his son were in grave danger. He had arrived in time to save them. He scared the cattle off, put his family in the truck and took them to Gallagher's Bore.

Marlene's experience of what was said to her when she and Leo arrived safely at Gallagher's speaks to the core of human relations in the cattle country: be calm, do not show emotion, get on with the job. Without knowing what had happened back at Mayvale the men at the camp understood from her appearance that she had suffered an ordeal. They settled her down and she tried to communicate her story and some of her fear. She knew that if she had not had her little boy to look after she would have gone berserk. She was not really prepared for the casual, almost offhand comments from the men. One of them said:

*You don't have to worry about them bulls, missus, never heard of one goring a white woman before... There was a gin gored not long back, but they were looking for water. C'mon missus, have a cup of tea! (personal conversation Marlene O'Neill-Izod and LA Riddett 1987).*
Killarney Station 1955

Red hot dust
   Rasps my teeth,
      Grits my toes,
         Clumps my hair,
Sawing it short with a skinning knife
It hurts
   Long black tresses,
      Matted red,
         Lying in the dirt
Discarded,
   Like my youth.

'Poor Bugga' sat under a tree
   Sipped his tea encrusted with flies
      Sipped,
And delicately blew the fly-tide,
   And sipped.
The new life within me, horrified,
   Moved,
I spewed.
   My son, my son, clapped his hands
      And cheered.

'Poor Bugga' rested his bloated knee,
   Bound in puss cemented rags,
      I soaked it gently,
         Made fresh bandages,
            Dusted penicillin,
The patient old man
   Kindly smiled.
      Politely waited,
         And when I left
Replaced the dressing with
   'Good stuff
      And a song.

Marlene O'Neill-Izod
[Original poem written in 1954]
The conditions at Gallagher's were worse than at Mayvale, with this one exception: there was plenty of bore water. Marlene had to face the long days of strong sunlight and heat with little comfort. Gallagher's was on an almost treeless black soil plain, there was a meagre shade area constructed of a 'bit of iron at one end of an unfinished bough shade' where the camp food and cooking utensils were stored. The men from the camp were out all day working cattle and Marlene spent her time trying to keep her little boy cool. She had the company of a young Aboriginal woman and she has said that she tried to understand how this woman coped, hoping perhaps for some clues about how to live in the harsh environment.

Conditions on Delamere were nearly as primitive as those on Killarney. Beryl Spreadborough (nee Finlay) went there as a six year-old with her parents in the mid 1950s. Her father, Wray, managed the station for the new owners who took up the lease resumed from Vestey's. This block, like Camfield, was considered 'virgin territory', with negligible improvements, a shed with a cement floor which the Finlays used as a kitchen, few yards, no bores; and scrub cattle, unbranded bullocks, proving Vestey's failure to develop and work the property. Wray Finlay saw the property as a challenge and in typically Territory style set about meeting it. The results were rough but adequate shelters constructed of bush timber uprights, the roofs were a thatch of spinifex grass and the floors crushed and stamped down ant bed. Everyone, the family, the men and the Aborigines, lived in these bough sheds, all shared the same food to eat, salt beef, pickles, bread, raw onion, and hot black tea. Five meals a day were eaten - three main meals and two 'smokos'. There were social markers, however, even on Delamere and Aborigines were given the tea left over from the family breakfast, with extra cold water added and reheated. At lunch they got the left over smoko tea, and so on.

Consistent with a practice common on other stations in the area before the war, the Aboriginal women were not allowed in the big house. They did no work inside. They washed clothes and baked bread in outhouses. The Finlay children, like the Fogarty children 30 years before, were taught bush skills by the Aborigines: how to track; how to find bush tucker, wild gooseberries, bush bananas, nuts, waterlily roots. Beryl and her brother mixed easily with the Aborigines in the bush, in the stock camps, at the drafting yard, but never in the family home. That was where a line was drawn (personal conversation B Spreadborough and D May June 1982).

On VRD the situation was different. Natalie Walker and her sister Alexa Simmons (nee Gurr) remember that they used to dress for dinner when they were invited to a meal at the main house. They were served at table by a part Afghan girl who was dressed in starched white linen. On VRD all the domestic chores, inside and outside, were done by Aboriginal staff, but this did not mean they were necessarily well treated. Aboriginal staff employed by families like the Fogartys and Finlays were probably more humanely treated than those employed on the big stations. Nat and Lex recall that on VRD in the late 1940s-early 1950s Aborigines were cheated by the storekeeper and at least one policeman, and treated rather contemptuously by Magnussen the manager (interview with Nat Walker and Lex Simmons 6 April 1984 NTAS NTRS 226 TS349).

There was one incident in the District, an incident of appalling inhumanity, which both Beryl Spreadborough and Lex Simmons have recalled. Beryl was told the story by the man who actually committed the act. Her memory of his story was as follows:

*Now old Wason Byers would tell you some yarns - this is even about the earlier days, and he was on some place. He had a mob of gins and the gins wouldn't do what he wanted them to do, so he'd sit'em on the top of the hot tin roof with no pants on, and every time they'd stand up he'd chuck rocks*
at 'em and make 'em sit down. Oh, he was a cruel old bugger! (personal conversation 1982).

In 1972 Alexa Simmons (under her former married name of Bates) gave a series of interviews about her early days on VRD to the Northern Territory News. An article published on 27 October that year quoted Lex's version of the Wason Byer's story:

Alexa was very concerned about the way the Aborigines were treated. There was no Native Affairs Department then and the Aborigines were treated worse than dogs, she said. One instance in particular remains vivid in her memories. 'Some of the girls had left the tap running on the tank and all the rainwater had run away', she said. 'As punishment they were made to strip and spend a whole day up on the tin roof. When they had sat on one spot long enough to cool it they were moved on with a stockwhip' (Northern Territory News 27 October 1972).

Tom Cole gave another account of the incident in his interview with Helen Wilson in 1984. Cole fixed the story as having occurred on Lower Sturt, a Vesteys station in the east Kimberley area, and at some time before the war (interview with Tom Cole 18 August 1984 NTAS NTRS 226 TS29).

The story has become one of the legends of the Victoria River District, an established part of the oral tradition among whites who have lived there. No record exists of how the Aboriginal women tell the story, just as there is little record of how they felt about possibly the worst aspect of their lives on cattle stations; the loss of their part Aboriginal children to institutional care in places remote from their country. The infamous practice of 'baby snatching' lasted from about 1912 to the 1960s, but in this District there was a period of intense activity during the late 1940s and early 1950s brought about by an increased concern about the welfare of Aboriginal people! The postwar policy of assimilation had an enormous impact on the lives of station Aborigines.

There was a great deal of controversy within the bureaucracy about the practice of removing the children, a certain amount of ducking for cover in official correspondence and for one welfare officer, Ted Evans, some soul searching about his own involvement. Byers' action was an act of cruelty perpetrated by an individual; it caused Evans much concern that as a welfare officer he was caught in a system of institutionalised cruelty.

Both actions had a clear racial basis, but baby snatching was initiated and then supported by government, and rather than being decried, as Byers' act had been, was justified on the grounds that it was in the best interests of the children concerned.

Ted Evans had a major part in the dramatic events played out in the lives of the Aboriginal communities, and when, in 1949, he baulked at playing his part to the letter he caused an upheaval in the NTA. In 1981 he gave an address at a dinner to honour Bishop JP O'Loughlin in Darwin in which he reminisced about the role he had taken in bringing about changes to the practice of removing 'half caste' children from their mothers. Documentary evidence culled from official files for the 1950s indicates that 30 years after the event Ted glossed over some incidents and that he may have forgotten some details. In any case the notes from his 1981 speech help to set the scene for the earlier events:

Also at about the same time [early 1950s] I played what I hope was a significant role in bringing about the cessation of the policy of removing half-caste children from pastoral properties and placing them in Institutions.
... In 1950 I was given written instructions to remove a total of seven such children, mainly from Wave Hill and neighbouring stations. Despite my efforts to assuage the fears of both mothers and children, the final attempt at separation was accompanied by such heart-rending scenes that I officially refused to continue to obey such future instructions, expressing my views on the practice in the strongest terms. My report came to the notice of the Minister - I suspect a 'leak' - and instructions were given from Canberra that the practice was to stop and that in future half-caste children were to be removed only at the request and with the full consent of the mothers. This in effect was the death-knell of the heartless practice (Evans 1981, 6).

Late in 1947, Ted, as a cadet patrol officer accompanied Gordon Sweeney on a patrol of stations in the Timber Creek and Wave Hill Districts. It was probably his first patrol. The report mentioned that they had travelled 1,260 miles, that 17 stations had been visited and at each a count was made of the Aboriginal population. Special mention was made of the number of half-caste children and where they lived: there were four in the native camp on Willeroo; two at Delamere; one at Timber Creek Police Station camp; one at Newry; three on Rosewood; at Limbunya there was one; at Wave Hill there were seven and around these children the later controversy raged. On VRD Station there were four half-caste children in the camp at the head station; three at Pigeon Hole outstation; one at Mt Sandford outstation; and one at Gordon Creek outstation. On Humbert River, Charlie and Hessie Schultz had taken on the responsibility for raising the one half-caste child there, 13 year old Leslie Humbert. In 1947 Leslie was taking correspondence lessons under Mrs Schultz's supervision and was being trained in stock work. His mother was dead (Patrol Report September-October 1947, AA CRS F315 49/393A Part 1).

Sweeney's report also mentioned another population statistic that had been causing concern for some time. and which Evans also would later ponder over: low birth rates coupled with high infant mortality rates:

**Infant mortality is high.**

*On V.R.D. the largest station in the Northern Territory, there have been only 7 births of full blood children in the last 3 years.*

*On Limbunya Station there have been 2 births in this period.*

*On each of Rosewood, Waterloo, Mistake Creek and Birrindudu there has only been one full blood child born in the last 3 years.*

*On Humbert River there have been no births.*

*The above figures are for children who have lived and do not take into account infant mortality.*

*The stations are becoming anxious as to their future labor supply. They are slow to recognize that the health, nutrition and welfare of the women and children is the key to their problem (15-16).*

On 23 December 1949 Evans, then a Patrol Officer, reported to the Acting Director of Native Affairs on his Wave Hill-Timber Creek patrol for that year. This was the report he
later referred to in 1981 and the particular paragraph which caused consternation in government circles read:

_The removal of the children from Wave Hill by MacRobertson Miller aircraft was accompanied by distressing scenes the like of which I wish never to experience again. The engines of the plane are not stopped at Wave Hill and the noise combined with the strangeness of an aircraft only accentuated the grief and fear of the children, resulting in near-hysteria in two of them. I am quite convinced that news of my action at Wave Hill preceded me to the other stations, resulting in the children being taken away prior to my arrival (Patrol Officer’s Report AA CRS F315 49/393 A Part III, 3-4)._ 

Despite his deep concern and his obvious humanity Ted was at heart, a reformer, not a revolutionary and his subsequent comment and his recommendations bear witness to this conflict: how to carry out his job and at the same time avoid causing these poor women and their children such shocking distress.

_I endeavoured to assuage the grief of the mothers by taking photographs of each of the children prior to their departure and these have been distributed among them. Also a dress length each was given the five mothers. Gifts of sweets to the children helped to break down a lot of their fear and I feel that removal by vehicle would have been effected without any fuss._

(1) _I accordingly recommend that only in extreme cases is removal of part-aboriginal children effected by aircraft._

(2) _That if possible the children be left with their mothers until they are at least six years of age. At this age they are beginning to free themselves of maternal ties and are at the same time at a suitable age to begin their education. The alternative to this is that they be removed at the age of twelve months which, for obvious reason, would involve complications beyond the scope of a Patrol Officer._

He recommended also the appointment of 'an itinerant female welfare worker to assist mothers on cattle stations and to help in the gentler removal of part-Aboriginal children' (4-5).

In the station-by-station section of the same report however Ted reported the birth of more part-Aboriginal children. About Wave Hill Station he had this to say:

_Here the management is showing an improved attitude which is being reflected in the conduct of the natives. The large staff of European stockmen at this station, however, has created a problem of cohabitation which is difficult to locate and eradicate. It is carried on with the consent and, in some cases, the approval of the native girl and her husband. Two half-caste children have been born recently... (7)._ 

In 1950 his report on Wave Hill mentioned that the number of part Aboriginal children was again up to five (four girls and one boy).

On Waterloo Station Evans noted that 'Shamus, aged 5, half caste son of Lizzie Lurung-Nuri had been 'taken bush' immediately following [his] arrival and was not seen by [him]
during [his] stay. He also counted a number of half-caste children still living on VRD and its outstations. One of Alice Na-Dja-Mooloo's three children. Mildred aged four years, received particular mention:

I understand that Mrs. Bates, wife of the head-stockman has intimated her intention to educate and rear Mildred Wise, but I do not recommend that this be permitted. I have already explained to Mildred's mother the desirability of sending Mildred to school and on my return to Katherine I may arrange for Mildred and, if necessary, her mother to be at Wave Hill where I will pick them up and bring them on to Darwin. Constable Edwards has promised his co-operation (Patrol Officer's Report VRD Station, 7, AA CRS F1 52/602).

Three adolescent boys, Sandy Shaw (14 years), Ringer Ah Li (12) and Ted Cooper (15) also came to Ted's notice and in an enthusiastic burst of bureaucratic zeal he recommended their removal from the area altogether. This part of Ted's report shows again his one notable weakness: a capacity to see and describe a situation very accurately, and humanely, and then fail to draw the logical conclusion: to leave well alone. He was still trying to reform situations and people and he did not appear to understand that what he saw and the way he described things put him entirely at cross-purposes with the policy of assimilation he was trying to carry out. The boys appeared happy and well integrated into life in the Aboriginal camp which Evans himself said was composed of a 'compact group of Mudburas'.

... I confess I am at a loss to know how to now attract them away from their native environment... If there were a white camp at Pigeon Hole we could insist on these boys living with and as the whites, but there is only one European at Pigeon Hole (apart from a care-taker) and he is the head stockman, Mr. J. MacDonald, whose mode of life when not out mustering would not be a very strong counter-attraction to the native camp life. The only thing remaining then is to remove them (forcibly if necessary) to a locality remote from Pigeon Hole where they will still be able to continue their stock-work and at the same time live a life divorced from the native camp (7-8).

The 1949 report had by now been 'leaked' and its effect felt in both Canberra and Darwin. Administrator Wise found he was being called on to give an account of what was happening to 'partly coloured children'. He wrote to the Secretary, Department of Territories, on 28 February 1952 referring to official correspondence dated 7 and 21 November 1951, and gave an account of the history of the practice of removing children, four case histories, and a lengthy discussion of the implications of the situation. Wise would have acted on advice from the officers in the Native Welfare Branch. Although he endorsed their ideas by signing the letter it is important to remember that it was most likely drafted by those officers.

He noted that although he could trace mention in Annual Reports of the Chief Protector of Aborigines as far back as 1929 he could find no record of Ministerial approval of the policy. Wise wanted to secure that approval now; he put forward no argument to stop the practice.

Wise's argument in favour of retaining the practice was based on the government's policy of gradual assimilation of 'coloured people into the Australian community'. In his opinion persons of mixed blood would be most easily assimilated; the assimilation of full bloods would be difficult and slow. Even those partly coloured children born in Aboriginal
camps and under nomadic conditions had inherited qualities and instincts which, if given a chance to develop in a proper environment, would help them to assimilate relatively easily and quickly. When these children were left in the camp they became, according to Wise, a cause of constant trouble; they were apt to break laws and customs, particularly those of marriage, which turned them into misfits. Unless they were taken in and at an early age, the partly coloured person 'is destined to become an outcast from all communities, acceptable neither to the black nor to the white'. A fiction created by Wise's imagination, it was not born out in fact, as even Evans' reports could testify.

The Administrator addressed the very delicate question of the mother's feelings when her child was taken from her.

The aboriginal mother is notably devoted to her child, irrespective of his colour, during the first five years of his life but the attachment weakens as the child grows older. There is likely, therefore, to be much strong opposition to the removal of the children under 4 or 5 years of age.

The whole question is a difficult and delicate one but it seems clear that partly coloured children should continue to be removed. It is essential, however, that the removal be effected in such a way as to cause a minimum of distress and hardship.

... When a partly coloured child is found in a native camp, a Patrol Officer is directed to prepare the mother for eventual separation. This is done over a period of time, which may be as much as two years, by explaining to the mother and the tribal husband the advantages to be gained by removal of the child and the disadvantage of allowing him to remain in the camp. If the parents are reluctant to surrender the child, he is left undisturbed and the explanations are resumed at the next visit of the Patrol Officer. The parents' confidence is thus gradually strengthened until the child is willingly handed over.

It is not unusual for aborigines to express a wish for their children to be educated and on a number of occasions aboriginal mothers have, without prompting, surrendered their partly coloured children into the care of the Native Affairs Branch.

All mothers surrendering their children are given the opportunity of accompanying them to Darwin and Alice Springs, so that they may see for themselves the conditions under which the children will be reared. This offer is sometimes accepted and the mother invariably returns to her country satisfied (FJS Wise to Secretary Department of Interior 28 February 1952 AA CRS F1 52/250).

Wise's nine recommendations (which were largely based on Evan's advice) were in effect adopted by the Department with a few amendments, one of which was particularly ruthless:

Recommendation (d) No age limit need be stated. The younger the child is at the time of removal the better for the child (AA CRS F1 52/250).

During December 1952 Evans reported on that year's patrol and noted that two more children had been removed from Wave Hill and one from Katherine. There were twenty-two part-Aboriginal children in the area under the age of five years and he had begun
'educating the mothers to the advantage to be derived by the child with admission to an institution' (Patrol Officer's Report, Wave Hill Station 5 November 1952, AA CRS F1 3/352).

With perhaps unconscious irony he added in the general comments:

*The fact that there were no half-caste children born on Wave Hill during the past year may be an indication of the lessening of the incidence of co-habitation which has always constituted a serious menace on this station... In this regard it is apparent that the natives themselves are adopting a better attitude to this problem and although I am not foolish enough to consider that co-habitation on Wave Hill will be stamped out at an early date, I am nevertheless confident that the incidence is lessening (6).*

The practice of removing part-Aboriginal children which now had official Ministerial approval continued until the 1960s. Throughout this turbulent and painful period Ted Evans often commented on the problem of a low rate of Aboriginal births in the Victoria River District. At times in his written reports he came close to understanding that perhaps he was witnessing a process of Aboriginal resistance to white colonisation, and then having glimpsed that side of the reality, he backed away; he may have been more candid in private conversation. To have accepted that Aboriginal communities might be deliberately restricting the birth rate would have meant also having to face the real implications of the government's assimilation policy - and not many white people would have supported Ted had he given weight to his own suspicions. In his 1952 report he mentioned the matter twice, once in respect of Waterloo Station and the other in respect of Limbunya; both were Vestey stations. By canvassing reasons for the problem Ted showed that he did have an inkling of what was happening, but he suppressed the idea quickly. His comments on Waterloo were that:

*Again it is difficult to attribute the low birth rate to any particular cause and as Waterloo has been happily managed by sympathetic managers for the past five years it cannot be attributed to a feeling of insecurity or insufficiency in the diet. It is also apparent from conversation with the natives themselves that they too are concerned with the position but offer no reason for it (Patrol Officer's Report Waterloo Station 24 November 1952, 4, AA CRS F1 53/352).*

About Limbunya he said:

*The birth rate on this station has always been low, the last birth having occurred almost two years ago. It is difficult to ascribe this to any particular cause as the same condition is found on other stations in my patrol area. I do not think it is a matter of diet affecting fertility nor do I consider it to be willfully brought by the people themselves (Patrol Officer's Report Limbunya Station 21 November 1952, 27, AA CRS F1 53/352).*

But as Evans knew very well, there was widespread and deep discontent among Aborigines in the District; that he raised the question at all was sufficient indication of what he knew to be true. The situation in the pastoral industry was generally very bad for Aboriginal employees.
The period immediately post war was a time of very unsettled labour relations and there were a number of incidents which showed the Aborigines were becoming very tired of poor conditions and bad treatment. All three patrol officers involved in inspecting the District, Gordon Sweeney, Syd Kyle-Little and Ted Evans remarked frequently on the employment and living conditions. Evans in particular tried many times to get matters between the pastoralists and Aborigines righted. He was remembered by Aboriginal people living at Daguragu in the 1970s with affection and frustration - he made promises he could not keep. Little changed despite the good intentions of welfare officers: Aborigines were still being treated like dogs in the mid 1960s when the Gurindji tracked off Wave Hill Station.

There were problems on Coolibah, Wave Hill, VRD, Montejinnie, Birrindudu during the six or seven years 1947-1954. At the same time the Schutzes on Humbert, Duracks and Ronan on Auvergne, Newry and later Kildurk, and the Hamills who managed Inverway for the Leahy brothers after the lease passed to them from the Farquharsons, all showed that they understood the nexus between contented staff and satisfactory labour output. During the first few years of this period Mr and Mrs W Grimster, Bill and Ina, were busy setting up the settlement at Hooker Creek (previously known as Catfish); some of the disgruntled Aborigines on Wave Hill went there from time to time to get out of the way of things unpleasant on the station. It was a period of increased awareness among Aborigines, and whether wittingly or not, men like Ted Evans and Gordon Sweeney helped speed up the process.

Coolibah Station received quite a lot of attention from them. In their 1947 patrol report they described a situation where water was raised by hand pump from a permanent water hole in the Victoria River. The hand pump was worked by two Aborigines from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week with time off for meals. Sweeney, who wrote the report, continued:

Mr Quilty is still having trouble with his working natives running away from the station. Two of the natives on the hand pumps were under punishment for going walkabout without the manager's permission. Two lubras were shut up each night in a store building and not permitted to camp with their husbands in the camp because they had previously run away from the station. Constable Stott had recently returned one boy to the station who had left the station (AA CRS F1 43/393 Part 1).

On 17 October 1947 Frank Moy, Director of Native Affairs Branch, wrote to Tom Quilty and drew his attention to what he called 'the unsatisfactory state of affairs at Coolibah Station'. Early in November Quilty called on Moy to discuss the matter. He gave an undertaking to install a motor and pump to provide a water supply; and while he denied that the pumping job was used as a disciplinary measure he did admit that it was boring and tiresome and required long hours. Quilty also admitted that he had locked up the two women who had run away. Moy warned Quilty of 'the gravity of his action in depriving persons of their liberty' (Minute from FH Moy to Government Secretary 11 May 1948, AA CRS F1 148/208).

Two Aboriginal men had left Coolibah at the end of October, complaining that they did not receive sufficient food. As Moy pointed out in his minute to the Government Secretary, events like that had been occurring at Coolibah for years and always, when investigated, the Aboriginal stockmen were vindicated. None of them appeared to be shirking work; they usually went to another station for employment. The two involved in the October '47 case went to Fitzroy Station (later incorporated into the Coolibah Lease after Quilty left) to work for Wason Byers.
As Moy's minute was in response to an official complaint about Sweeney made by the NTPLA he addressed the point of the complaint and said:

This movement of natives from places of employment will not be checked until all properties adopt standard treatment and standard conditions, and employers must enter into an honour system regarding other Station employees. We cannot force any native to remain in any particular employment, but that is what the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees' Association would like us to do.

It will be seen from the foregoing that conditions at Coolibah Station are not all that could be desired, and it is strange that had Patrol Officer Sweeney preached the propaganda alleged, more complaints have not been received. The only complainant is Mr. Quilty, and I consider that the criticism... is unjust (AA CRS F1 148/208).

Later, in 1952, after Coolibah had come under the control of Kenna and Byers, Evans wrote:

The natives interviewed by Patrol Officer Ryan and myself had no complaints to make and Byers, in spite of his reputation, obviously demands some form of loyalty from his aboriginal employees (Patrol Officer's Report Coolibah Station 6 December 1952, AA CRS F1 52/741).

And in that comment lies a key to what it was the Aboriginal stockmen were responding to when they walked off stations: they accepted a man like Byers because although he could be cruel he was for the most part a fair boss who looked after his employees and their dependents. He was also a battler, a small man taking on heavy odds, and he was obviously not making a fortune - Aborigines could see that and counted it in his favour.

The question of Aborigines walking off stations was raised by Mr H Magnussen, manager of VRD when Sweeney and Evans visited there in 1947. Sweeney told Magnussen that 'the natives were free agents and if stations did not fulfil their obligations the native was within his rights in seeking better conditions elsewhere but each case should be investigated as frequently the trouble is over native women in the camp' (53).

Ted Evans had a disquieting conversation with Mr C McKechnie, Travelling Manager for Bovril Australian Estates Ltd, during his 1950 patrol. He wrote he had expected a more reasonable attitude towards native employment and its attendant problems from McKechnie, but he was to be disappointed. The report stated:

Replying to my appeal for co-operation in the matter of the new regulations, Mr. McKechnie said, 'You can rest assured that we will cooperate 100% with this Government', which, to my mind, typifies the attitude of Bovril Estate to the Australian Aborigines - he is merely an economic asset whose labour is a commodity the price of which is determined, not by humane standards but rather by regulations which, like price-fixing regulations may vary with the policy of the government in power (Patrol Officer's Report VRD Station November 1950, AA CRS F1 52/602).

Because of McKechnie's presence Evans found he could not get to speak to Magnussen and from that point of view found the visit unsatisfactory. He resolved to go back to VRD
on his way home to Darwin. In the general comments covering his report Evans remarked:

... There are several respects of employment on V.R.D. which are not quite satisfactory. I am unable to gauge the sincerity of the Manager (Mr. Magnussen) chiefly because of exceptionally heavy rains I was unable to make a second visit. I strongly recommend that he be requested to indicate at an early date his intentions regarding the part-aboriginal employees and that my ultimatum to him regarding the carrying of water by lubras be confirmed in writing. Mr. Magnussen’s attitude, not only to natives but also to his white employees, is to say the least, unusual, and his manner to officials such as myself does not engender a spirit of co-operation (AA CRS F1 52/602).

There was one very typical Aboriginal response to bad conditions and harsh treatment during this period: they walked off the offending station. There were many references to this practice in the patrol officers' reports. As well as the incident already cited at Coolibah Station the following accounts show how Evans dealt with this matter. His first mention of it was in 1949 in a report on Hooker Creek:

Following upon receipt of instructions that ‘migration of natives from Wave Hill is to be discouraged’, Mr. Grimster has been returning all natives from Wave Hill by truck to the Station. This is opposed to what I considered was the accepted principle that natives are free agents and were at liberty to leave their place of employment. I explained to Mr. Grimster that my interpretations of the instruction is that if there is no work for an emigrant from Wave Hill he is not to be fed and is to be encouraged to seek work elsewhere but not necessarily on Wave Hill Station. Perhaps a further elucidation of the instruction could be furnished to M. Grimster (Patrol Officer’s Report Hooker Creek Settlement 7 September 1949, 2, AA CRS F315 49/393 A Part II).

In 1952 Evans noted that a considerable number of Aborigines had left Wave Hill during the last walkabout period and gone to visit Mt Sandford and Pigeon Hole outstations on VRD. Quite a few of these people had not returned. After receiving a complaint from Quirk, Evans decided to investigate, having first advised Quirk that he would not bring any pressure to bear on those Aborigines who chose to stay away. He noted that some did return to Wave Hill where he observed they were not given any employment; others told him that they wished to stay on at Pigeon Hole and Mt Sandford (Patrol Officer’s Report Kimberley District 1952, AA CRS F1 53/352). He also commented in the report that during 1952, a very severe drought year, Wave Hill was the only station to stand down native employees because of shortage of work; in September 40 boys were put off the Wave Hill pay roll. After the matter was taken up with Quirk, Vesteys agreed to fully maintain the men until the end of November, the normal time for station walkabout.

There had been an earlier incident on Montejinnie Outstation (VRD) in August 1948, which clearly demonstrated that Aborigines used a range of responses to express their discontent. Patrol Officer Sid Kyle-Little was asked to investigate the matter which involved two Aboriginal men who had allegedly used station horses illegally. His report mentioned among other things, the following points: At smoko time on 31 August the two men, Monday and Sambo, refused to go back to work and told the head stockman Mr Dann, they were giving notice; Dann ordered them to roll their swags and walk back to the station, a distance of eight miles; next morning Dann saw the boys approaching the horse plant with bridles and in response to his questioning told him they were taking horses to

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ride back to the station. During this exchange, according to Dann, the men admitted they knew they shouldn't take the horses and would be in trouble if they did. They continued, nevertheless, to saddle up. The camp cook, Mr Friend, having seen this, approached Dann to check if the men had permission to use the horses. Dann told him they had not, asked Friend to give the men some rations and tell them to leave the horses alone. The cook followed Dann’s instructions. Kyle-Little's report continues:

This warning they completely ignored, cutting out approximately 20 head of horses and driving them to the station where they unsaddled and let the horses go.

With the loss of this plant from the stock camp Mr. Dann had to finish work that day and make his way back to the station as best he could with the few remaining horses.

Both natives admitted that they had taken the horses and the reason they gave was that they wished to show the Head Stockman that he could not do without them. The previous Head Stockman of Montejinnie Station had resigned only a few weeks before because a similar incident had occurred to him.

The native Monday was implicated in this incident and appears to be the ringleader of all stock-boys at Montejinnie Station (Report on Monday and Sambo 24 September 1948, AA CRS F315 49/3934A Part I).

Monday and Sambo were arrested on 17 September 1948 by Sergeant Riley and appeared before Justice of the Peace, Mr Willick, manager of Wave Hill Station. Riley prosecuted and Kyle-Little appeared on behalf of the accused; he first pleaded not guilty but changed the plea to guilty on hearing evidence presented by the prosecution. The men were convicted and sentenced to three months hard labour. They were taken to Darwin.

Frank Moy directed Patrol Officer Sweeney to interrogate the men and to try and ascertain if ‘their action was prompted by an AIM octoroon, Quinn, who travels around the area’. Sweeney’s note, written at the bottom of Kyle-Little’s report on the incident stated:

I interrogated Monday and Sambo on 28.9.48. Monday and Sambo say they have seen Quinn at Newcastle Waters but Quinn has not talked to either of them. They have never heard Quinn making trouble among the natives (AA CRS F315 49/3934A Part I).

So Moy, who would eventually have to deal with considerable industrial unrest among Aborigines employed in Darwin, (Rowley 1971, 292-296) had begun to wonder if perhaps the Aboriginal resistance in the pastoral districts was an organised one. There is no doubt that Aborigines knew what they were doing and understood the implications of their refusal to work. Monday and Sambo acted specifically to hold up work in the stock camp and the previous head stockman had resigned only a few weeks before because a similar incident had occurred to him’. Given the consequences of their action, which apparently both Monday and Sambo admitted they understood, the matter was serious. Although Kyle-Little’s report implied there was an escalation in the events on the morning of 1 September, the two men were apparently aware of what they were doing. Theirs was no impulsive act born of hopelessness, they acted deliberately and with clear intention.

Europeans, patrol officers, pastoralists and bureaucrats seemed to miss the point of what the Aborigines were doing. Even the most enlightened whites continued to underestimate
the capacity Aborigines had to both intelligently assess situations and to plan a response. Moy, who did seem to understand something of what was going on, tried to ascribe blame or responsibility to an outsider, and when the big strikes occurred in 1966 on Newcastle Waters and Wave Hill Stations his successors in the administration did likewise. It was almost as if they could excuse themselves for their inhumanity, their failure to actually look to the welfare of Aborigines, their oppressive intervention in people's lives, so long as the objects of the assimilation policy, the Aborigines, could be shown to not mind or not care. If the only objectors, the only resistors, were isolated dissidents responding to propaganda, or only 'white stirrers from South', then officers acting under the banner of assimilation could continue with a clear conscience.

Plate 21: Aboriginal woman watering a vegetable garden
Daguragu (Wattie Creek) 1970s
(Collection: Lyn A Riddett)

Reports for the period 1947-54 were a curious mixture; on the one hand recognising and acknowledging that Aborigines were justifiably discontented; on the other full of hopeful, statements that everything was all right. Ted Evans' reports consistently moved between these two poles, as he tried to resolve what must have been for him a very confusing and conflict-ridden situation. He unwittingly helped the process of Aboriginal consultation and decision making by promoting Native Affairs Branch support for Aborigines wishing to attend the annual race meeting at the Negri on Nicholson Station. Not once did Ted show he understood the political importance of these meetings to Aborigines. He acted out of a genuine desire to provide Aborigines with a treat, some form of recreation, and he went to a lot of trouble to achieve that. In 1949, in his Hooker Creek Report, he wrote:

Disappointment was freely expressed by the natives that they were unable to go to the Negri Races. This is the only event in the year which provides a diversion for the natives in the district and is accordingly awaited with great anticipation. The Manager at Wave Hill provided two three-ton
trucks for the transport of his native employees and, as would be expected, these were loaded to capacity with natives from the Station.

I recommend that in future transport be provided from Hookers (sic) Creek to Negri for a limited number of natives (Patrol Officer's Report Hooker Creek Settlement 7 September 1949, AA CRS F315 49/393A Part II).

Fourteen months later he wrote enthusiastically that the Negri race meeting had been 'the mecca of every person for hundreds of miles around'. Of the 500 natives he estimated had attended, Evans reckoned that approximately 230 were from NT stations. He continued:

The meeting was a great success, but there were not sufficient events for natives, I have already taken the matter up with the Secretary who has assured me that the second day will in future be devoted almost entirely to native events. I have seen my way clear to donate the trophy for the principal event for natives - a small attempt at reciprocal co-operation. The Hookers Creek contingent thoroughly enjoyed themselves and were well behaved. I arranged for them to be given a special issue of pannicas, plates and spoons and wherever necessary, their clothing was replaced if it did not come up to a reasonable standard of tidiness (General Comment on 1950 Station Patrol 31 October 1950, 3, AA CRS F1 52/602).

In 1952 the Negri race meeting was abandoned because of the drought, but Aborigines from Waterloo, Auvergne, Newry, Rosewood and Mistake Creek Stations went to the Wyndham races. Aborigines on Leguna asked Evans to organise transport for them to go to Wyndham races in 1953 and he was able to get assurances that this would happen (General Patrol Report, Kimberley District, 4 December 1952, 3, AA CRS F1 53/353).

Aborigines used the opportunities provided by the large gatherings at Negri and Wyndham to achieve a number of important tasks: they discussed aspects of traditional law; they traded song and dance cycles; they arranged marriages; they discussed conditions on the pastoral properties and took counsel among themselves about appropriate action. A man, a Janama 'skin', who was involved in the strike on Wave Hill in 1966, in giving the story of the strike to Patrick McConvell used the annual trip to Negri as a time marker in his story. The man, a brother to the husband of Narwula who watched from outside the police station in 1966, also expressed the group's frustration with men like Evans who made promises that were never kept.

Aboriginal people are generally very clear about what they do not like, or what they find hardest to come to terms with, in others: they do not like a person who, as they say, thinks one thing in the front of his head and another thing at the back; they become irritated with people who have 'the understand' and then do not act on it; but probably one of the worst things they can say of another is the person is ngalking (greedy). Bearing these in mind the following account of the Wave Hill Strike given by Janama to Patrick McConvell takes on added dimension:

Translation

1. In 1966, we went on strike from the White man.

2. What made us do that?

3. They never gave us enough food and that kind of thing, and no money.
4. They treated us like dogs, the older people, my fathers and my mother's brothers.

5-6. We younger ones got angry about that. We younger ones made this (strike).

7. The Whites used to come, but they were cheating.

8. (They said) 'All that, houses, money, you Aboriginals will get them level with the Whites'.

9-10. As for that, (we got) nothing just the same. Lies they used to tell us all the time, lies.

11. Then Ted Evans, Greenfield, who's that other White man? It was those welfare men who used to come, sort of Patrol Officers.

12. (They made) promise to the Aboriginals 'next year we'll improve your conditions and help you'.

13. Then, (we were) looking out, but nothing (turned up).

14. Then we Aboriginals ourselves had a talk.

15. (We said) 'We're making big money for the whites, but we get nothing.'

16. 'We must go away and leave the Whites.'

17. Then we stayed at work, and said 'we'll watch out, next year (something might happen)'.

18. Then we watched out, but no, still the same way.

19. We said, 'I don't think we'll get anything'.

20. 'We must leave them.'

21-22. Then (we said) 'We'll go west to the races and see if they give us big money when we get back'. We went west for the races, and came back.

23. We watched the White man: 'where is it, where is it, where is it?, but there was nothing.

24. Next year we started camp again. (We said) 'no more lies, everybody on all the camps, we must all leave them right now this time all together.'

25. We must go away down to the river carrying all the children and whatever else under our arms'.

26. West to the races (again), we had the races in the west.
27. 'When we get back we'll leave them straight away' (we said).
28. 'Yes, (when we went for our pay, we said).
29. 'What happened to that big pay, what happened this one is the same again'.
30. 'Let them stay, sorry we're finished, we had a promise seven years ago but you didn't try to do anything for us'.
31. 'Me and all of us we're going away, children, women and dogs (too).'
32. 'With our swags on our shoulders (we went) from up there (Wave Hill Station) on this road all the way.
33. By the river downstream from the police station we made camp, we camped two nights then an aeroplane came up with a big mob of White men, the owner Peter Morris, Cecil Watts and Tom Fisher.
34. 'We have our heads full with you' (we said).
35. 'You told us lies when we were young fellows, now we have white hairs.'
36. 'We will not go back, not for anything.'
37. 'What about if we put up your wages, and shoot two killers for you today?' (the White men said).
38. 'We will not go back.'
39. Whatever happens, whoever tells us to go back, we won't listen' (we said).
40-42. 'What about you giving me twenty men, you might give us them?' (they said). 'No, you White men do the work, you White men do the work yourselves' (we said). 'You never gave us a fair go, now it's our turn.'
43. Three of us went downstream on an aeroplane, me, V... and P... [P is the speaker's brother and husband of Narwula.]
44. Downstream in Darwin we had a talk with the government (Hercus and Sutton, 1986 308-310).

For years they had waited for promises to be kept and for justice; they were tired of making money for Vesteyes. They wanted a just wage, good living conditions and fair treatment. The greed and insensitivity of Vesteyes had endured for too long. They also wanted to be on their own land and perhaps run a few cattle there, but mostly they wanted recognition of their status as the traditional owners of the country. For 80 years they had waited, at first in fear for their lives and later on in half hope of recognition as humans who had given much to help the white men get a start. They had watched their
country being abused and their people killed, kidnapped and humiliated. At times they offered friendship, a helping hand, but gradually they learned to remain aloof, detached, watchful. For 80 years they had waited and watched and had had nothing and perhaps the last 20 years had been the worst; tantalised by promises; frustrated by seeing pastoral land resumed, subdivided and then leased again to other gardiya; felt the pain and loss of having their children taken from them; for nothing. The waiting time was over; it was time to act.

A Napurrula 'skin' woman living at Lajamanu (Hooker Creek) told her story of the strike. It has been translated from Warlipiri into English by Valerie Patterson, also a Warlipiri woman and a precis made. Napurrurla has said:

When old L... Jupurrurla came back from Katherine hospital he got all the Gurindji people together and told them that they had to leave the station, leave their jobs and go and find another place. So the people wasted no time and started to get their things. Then the manager came and asked them what they were up to and the people told him that they were going out of that station and not coming back. The manager asked them not to go. But the people didn't listen to him and just started to walk. It was a long walk for them. Some old people were walking very slowly because of the heat of the sun... They were carrying swags, babies in coolamons, and other things, like spears, boomerangs. Some older kids were walking too. After a few hours of walking in the sun they came to a creek called Janarni (Gordy Creek) where they rested and drank water. The creek was dry at that time so they had to dig for water. After a few hours some of them started off again at evening time when it was cooler. They were heading towards Libanangga (as it was first called before Wave Hill). When they got there they made camp and waited for the others to come. When the others arrived old L... Jupurrurla the leader of the people told them that they had to stay there for a few nights. The policeman who was staying there, gave them food. After a few days old L... went out hunting north to where Watt Creek (sic) is now. As he was out hunting he noticed that the land there had good soil so he grabbed a handful and took it back to the people and showed it to them and pointed the direction where he brought the soil from and then told the people to leave Libanangga and move to that new place. And so the people all agreed and got their things and started to walk again till they got to that place and then L... named it Daguragu (Watti Creek) (sic). And told the people they would have to stay there forever and live in that place. So the people did. They went hunting out bush and collected bush tucker... went fishing down the river and caught fish, turtle and crocodile and... collected crocodile eggs. They were very happy in that place called Daguragu. They lived there for a long time until the houses were built for them... today the people are still there. They never move out from Daguragu (Watti Creek) (Gordon 1986).
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