

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

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

<sup>14</sup> I. Nesdale (eds), *The Shackle: A Story of the Far North Australian Bush*, Lynton Publications, Adelaide, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> F. Bauer, *Historical geography of white settlement in part of the Northern Territory, Part 2. The Katherine-Darwin region*, CSIRO Division of Land Research & Regional Survey, Divisional Report No. 64/1. Canberra, 1964, pp. 79, 86-87.

<sup>16</sup> B. Buchanan, *In the Tracks of Old Bluey*, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 1997, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> P. Forrest, *Springvale's Story and Early Years at the Katherine*, Murrniji Press, Darwin, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> A. Giles, *Exploring in the 'Seventies and the Construction of the Overland Telegraph Line*, Friends of the State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, p. 144-45, 150-51 (originally published by W.K. Thomas & Co. [*The Register*] Printers, Adelaide).

<sup>19</sup> 'The Murder by Natives', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 21-11-1873. The Howley was a mine about sixty kilometres north-west of Pine Creek (see map in T. Jones, *Pegging the Territory: A history of mining in the Northern Territory of Australia, 1873-1946*, Northern Territory Government Printer, Darwin, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> The location was 'Granite Crossing' and the precise location was provided by the Office of the Placenames Committee in Darwin.

<sup>21</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 2-2-1878; Telegram from Government Resident Edward Price to the Minister of Education, 26-1-1878. State Records of South Australia, Northern Territory "Department" Incoming Correspondence (Outgoing Correspondence), 87/1878.

repeater stations at regular intervals, including at Katherine River, Elsey Creek, Daly Waters and Powells Creek,<sup>22</sup> and Aborigines living on the eastern side of the Victoria River valley were only a 'spears' throw' away. In fact, the territories of two tribes – the Mudburra and the Wardaman – extend from within the Victoria River catchment to within fifty kilometres of the telegraph line.<sup>23</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>22</sup> I. Nesdale (ed.), *The Shackle*, 1975.

<sup>23</sup> P. Sutton, L. Coltheart and A. McGrath, *The Mudbura Land Claim*, Northern Land Council, Darwin, 1983. pp. 73-75; N. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra 1974, p. 232, and boundaries map, N.W. Sheet; F. Merlan, *A Grammar of Wardaman: A Language of the Northern Territory of Australia*, Mouton de Gruyter, New York, 1994.

in a letter Lindsay Crawford sent to the Government Resident about a year after VRD was established. In this letter Crawford commented that, 'Natives are numerous on Victoria and Ord, and are very treacherous; a very fine race, and very independent.'<sup>24</sup>

Previous conflict is also implicit in the reaction of Aborigines met by the starving land-seekers, Harry Stockdale and Henry Ricketson as they travelled across Victoria River Downs in December 1884 (see Chapter 2). By chance, the two men rode along Gordon Creek which runs through 'Bilimatjaru', a great 'sandstone sea' and an area which was to become a major refuge area for Aborigines for many years (see plates 62, 63). Ricketson observed that 'the blacks are in large tribes about here,' and that they 'seemed very frightened of us'.<sup>25</sup> Twice the two men tried to parley with groups they met, but 'in both cases they were so frightened of us that they ran clean out of sight...[and] ...were tumbling over each other in their haste to get away.'<sup>26</sup> This was less than fifteen months after VRD and Wave Hill were formed.

Initially, at least, Aborigines probably did not realise that the settlers had come to stay, and would gradually take over all their country – they knew the whites had 'camps' at one or two places, but the rest of the country was theirs to use as of old.<sup>27</sup> They probably came into contact and conflict with the settlers by accident in the course of their traditional hunting and gathering activities, or while travelling to and from or attending ceremonial gatherings. They soon learnt that such contact could be extremely dangerous and that they had to be able to get into rough country to escape armed horsemen. Most groups had areas of rough country within their territory to which they could flee; those few who did not were at a great disadvantage and highly vulnerable.<sup>28</sup> An extreme case was the Karangpurru who

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<sup>24</sup> Government Resident J.L. Parson's 'Quarterly Report on Northern Territory', 1-1-1885. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol., 3, no. 53, 1885, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> James Henry Ricketson, *Journal of an expedition to Cambridge Gulf, the North-west of Western Australia, and a ride through the Northern Territory of South Australia, 1884-1885*, Mitchell Library, Mss 1783, Item 2, p. 263.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> The key role topography played in the period of conflict following settlement was noted in the nineteenth century by Curr, cited in H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 50.

inhabited the plains and rolling downs in the north-eastern part of VRD<sup>29</sup> (see maps 3, 4). The early overland track from Katherine to Western Australia passed through the middle of their country. The fight Tom Kilfoyle and his men are said to have had with Aborigines on Battle Creek was in Karangpurru country, and during 1886 the track was used by hundreds of miners heading for the Kimberley goldfield.

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

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<sup>29</sup> D. Rose and D. Lewis, *Kidman Springs-Jasper Gorge Land Claim*, Northern Land Council, Darwin, 1986, Figures 7-12, and associated land claim sites map.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines Bill, 1899: Minutes of Evidence and Appendices’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 77, 1899, W. Griffiths’ answer to question 2352; see also M. Costello, *Life of John Costello*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 2002, p. 159 (originally published by Dymocks, Sydney, 1930).

<sup>31</sup> P. Elder, entry on Charles Dashwood in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 1, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1990. pp. 75-78.

<sup>32</sup> C. Dashwood, ‘Justice in the Northern Territory’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 60, 1900, p. 2; For information on Paddy Cahill see M. Clinch, entry on Paddy Cahill in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, vol. 1, 1990, p.49; D. Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines Bill, 1899: Minutes of Evidence and Appendices’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 77, 1899, C. Dashwood’s answer to question 516.

<sup>34</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning: Being Facts Gleaned from Cannibals in the Australian Stone Age*, WK Thomas & Co., Printers, Adelaide, 1896, pp. 85-86.

<sup>35</sup> See map on page xx in D. Lewis, “*They Meet Up At Bilinara*”: *Rock Art in the Victoria River Valley*, unpublished masters thesis, ANU, 1990.

<sup>36</sup> D. Rose and D. Lewis, *Kidman Springs/Jasper Gorge Land Claim*, 1986, pp. 9-10; D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 1991, pp. 75-78.

Whatever may have happened during the first few years of settlement, by 1889 the 'wild blacks' were 'in large numbers among the ranges in the Sandstone Country'.<sup>37</sup> There are many patches of rough terrain scattered across the region, some large and some small, but among the greatest are the Yambarran Range, the Pinkerton (Ballyangle) Range, the Pumuntu sandstone on the headwaters of the West Baines River, the Stokes Range north of VRD and west of Delamere station, and the Gordon Creek sandstone. The latter area, located in the central-west part of Victoria River Downs, was described in 1895 as consisting of,

enormous columns of sandstone cleft and piled one on the other, gullies, Gorges, tunnels, and caves, comprise hundreds of square miles of sandstone country where it would be impossible for even 20 Trackers to get a passing glimpse of blacks running about in it.<sup>38</sup>

One observer noted that the blacks came out of the ranges to 'kill down on the good flats & take the meat into the sandstone ranges to cook it',<sup>39</sup> while another complained that the blacks were 'most troublesome, particularly in setting fire to the grass, which in the months from June to October burns both night & day.'<sup>40</sup> Walter Rees, a stockman on VRD from 1887 to about 1897,<sup>41</sup> could see that the Aborigines were 'losing more of their game-producing country as the settlers stock the land, and have to be content with the roughest of the country, where they obtain but a poor living.'<sup>42</sup> The Aborigines were anything but content, and the blocks and patches of 'roughest country' became natural fortresses from

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<sup>37</sup> B. Blair to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 24-10-1889. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.

<sup>38</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 17-4-1895. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid: 15-8-1894.

<sup>40</sup> B. Blair to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 24-10-1889, Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.

<sup>41</sup> Rees was interviewed in 1950 by Helen West (nee Healy). Helen wrote various details in a notebook and she gave me this notebook in the 1990s; W.A. Rees to A. Martin, 12-7-1945. This is a letter in which Rees provides details of his time on VRD. It is unprovenanced; I was given a copy of the document by an amateur historian about twenty years ago.

<sup>42</sup> W. Rees, cited in W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 99.

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

The stealing of European goods by Aborigines began almost as soon as Europeans arrived in the district. Gregory's expedition suffered occasional thefts or attempted thefts, in one instance almost leading to serious violence (see Chapter 2). The arrival of the settlers greatly increased the amount and variety of European goods, and the opportunities for Aborigines to steal them, and they quickly came to appreciate tobacco, iron axes, wire, billycans, cloth, sugar, flour, tea and other items.<sup>43</sup> In the Aboriginal camps on Gordon Creek in 1884, Ricketson and Stockdale noted billycans made from discarded food tins. A decade later the Government Geologist passed through the district and remarked that,

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

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

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<sup>43</sup> An early example of this problem was highlighted in the *South Australian Chronicle* which reported on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1873, that Aborigines 'possess many tomahawks belonging to the Overland Telegraph'.

<sup>44</sup> H.Y.L. Brown, 'Government Geologist's Report on Explorations in the Northern Territory. Fountain Head to Victoria Downs Station'. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 82, 1895, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> G. Buchanan, *Packhorse and Waterhole: With the First Overlanders to the Kimberleys*, Angus & Robertson Limited, Sydney, 1933, pp. 71-72, 164-65.

<sup>46</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-12-1895.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 87.

After the initial resistance to the settlers when they first appeared in the region, there was a relatively peaceful interlude of several years, a pattern that has been noted elsewhere in the north.<sup>48</sup> However, in 1886 there was a dramatic upsurge in attacks against the settlers. In April 1886 William Jackson, a bullock driver employed to carry stores from the Victoria River Depot to VRD, was struck in the neck with a stone-headed spear. The spear went 'right through the base of the tongue and out at the other side',<sup>49</sup> and nearly severed his windpipe,<sup>50</sup> but amazingly he survived the wound. This attack occurred east of Jasper Gorge, and led to the naming of a watercourse in the area as Surprise Creek.<sup>51</sup>

At the end of May a white station hand and his Aboriginal assistant were speared and wounded on Willeroo<sup>52</sup> (see Chapter 7), and in June there were several attacks on a team building a road through Jasper Gorge<sup>53</sup> (see Chapter 5). Early in August a man known as 'Spanish Charley' (Charles Antonio)<sup>54</sup> was attacked on the Victoria River near the Depot. Charley was employed as a caretaker for goods unloaded at the Depot, and had been on friendly terms with local Aborigines. On this occasion he rowed his dinghy across the river to speak with some Aborigines, but before he could land a number of spears were thrown at him. Fortunately for him he was unhurt, though one spear hit his boat.<sup>55</sup>

In September Matt Cahill, a brother of Paddy Cahill, and a Melbourne man named Fred Williams were travelling to the Kimberley goldfield with Fox's teams. They camped on the upper reaches of Gregory Creek and while fishing in a nearby waterhole were surprised by the blacks. Cahill was wounded in the back but Williams was speared through the neck and died instantly,<sup>56</sup> and became the first white man killed on the Victoria River frontier.<sup>57</sup> A

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<sup>48</sup> G. Byrne, *Tom & Jack*, 2003, p. 85.

<sup>49</sup> J.E. Tennyson-Woods, 'A Trip to the Victoria River', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28-5-1887; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 1-5-1886.

<sup>50</sup> *The North Australian*, 9-7-1886.

<sup>51</sup> W.A. Rees to A. Martin, 12-7-1945.

<sup>52</sup> *The North Australian*, 4-6-1886.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Contributor. "Troublesome Aborigines"', *Adelaide Observer*, 11-1-1896.

<sup>54</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-7-1886.

<sup>55</sup> *The North Australian*, 14-8-1886.

<sup>56</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 'Katherine Notes. Katherine River', 28-8-1886; 'Victoria River', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 2-10-1886.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*: 2-10-1886.

few months later 'Big Johnny' Durack was murdered on Rosewood station and when a party led by the police went out to bury the body they found that it had been 'jobbed full of spear holes, quite 80 or 90 holes having been made',<sup>58</sup> a circumstance which suggests extreme fear and/or hatred on the part of the Aborigines.

The events of 1886 beg the question: After nearly three years with virtually no reported attacks, and certainly no severe woundings or killings of whites, why were there were so many attacks across the region in 1886? Was it merely coincidence, or was it part of a deliberate and coordinated campaign against the whites? While this is impossible to answer with certainty, as explained above, Aboriginal groups across the region were not isolated from each other. News travelled from group to group very quickly and there were regular ceremonial gatherings when various issues could be discussed. The appearance of the cattlemen and overlanders, and their behaviour towards the Aborigines, undoubtedly would have been the foremost topic at such gatherings. Rather than being mere coincidence it is likely that a collective decision had been made to try and drive the whites away, that the Aborigines were not merely reactive, but took the fight to the whites in an organised way. Examples of such collective decisions are known from other frontier areas, with Reynolds citing an example from Queensland where a gathering of over a dozen tribes discussed the poisoning of fifty or so Aborigines, became very angry, and swore to have vengeance.<sup>59</sup>

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

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

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<sup>58</sup> 'Murder of John Durack by natives at Kimberley', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 11-12-1886.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 69.

convinced of the power of the white man to protect his life and goods, and avenge murder and theft.<sup>60</sup>

The settlers did their best to 'convince' the Aborigines. After the spearing of teamster Jackson it was reported that the offenders, 'were followed up with the aid of some blacks from Palmerston, and severely punished',<sup>61</sup> and following the murder of 'Big Johnny' Durack the Wyndham police and 'a party of sixteen men (some volunteers) had started out for the purpose of settling accounts with the natives.'<sup>62</sup> I have not found any official or other contemporary account of this punitive expedition, but according to a later source the name of Waterloo station derives from what local bushmen called 'the Aborigine's Waterloo', a reference to the 'unrestrained slaughter' of local Aborigines after this spearing.<sup>63</sup>

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

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<sup>60</sup> Government Resident J.L. Parson's 'Half-Yearly Report on Northern Territory to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1886', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 53, 1888, 'Populations and Special Legislation', p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> J.E. Tennyson-Woods, 'A Trip to the Victoria River', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28-5-1887.

<sup>62</sup> 'Murder of John Durack by Natives at Kimberley', *The North Australian*, 10-12-1886.

<sup>63</sup> J. Pollard, J. *The Horse Tamer: The Story of Lance Skuthorpe*, Pollard Publishing Company, Woolstoncraft (NSW), 1970, p. 30. Lance Skuthorpe's uncle Amos was owner of Waterloo from roughly 1908 to 1916, and was in the Victoria River district for some time earlier. The same event is referred to in two other sources, one of which claims that a fight occurred between the white party and about 100 Aborigines (M. Terry, Notebook 14. 'No. 1, Port Hedland-Melbourne, 1928', C62, Tuesday October 30th 1928, S.A. Museum Archives; D. Moore, *Memoirs*, Battye Library, Acc 3829A MN 1237).

<sup>64</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 63.

There were no reports of attacks or murders by Aborigines during the next two years, though in 1887 the Goldsbrough Mort agent in Darwin, H.W.H. Stevens, reported that, 'The Blacks have been very troublesome both on the River & the Depot road. They are a bad lot and require constant watching on all parts of the run'.<sup>65</sup> However, the killing of whites began again in 1889. Tom Hardy, the overseer on Auvergne, was one settler who tried to make friends with the Aborigines. Nevertheless, near the homestead in September he was speared in the right breast. He barricaded himself in the hut and held off the blacks by shooting through cracks in the walls. Three days later the station musterers returned and broke the siege, and although Hardy believed he would survive his wounds and begged for a boat to be sent to take him to Darwin, his mates considered it hopeless. No boat came and Hardy died ten days after being speared (see plate 64).<sup>66</sup> In 1890 a traveller named William Manton was killed on the West Baines River,<sup>67</sup> and an Aboriginal named Bob, 'The best & most valuable native we ever had on the runs',<sup>68</sup> was speared only ten miles from VRD homestead.<sup>69</sup> According to the *Northern Territory Times*,

The recent murder of Mr. Crawford's blackboy Bob was most cruelly perpetrated. He, in company with two other station natives, were out after horses, and when going through a ravine, with Bob in the lead, a spear was thrown from above which entered behind the shoulder and went through his body, the point coming out in front below the abdomen. Bob pluckily pulled the spear out and walked back to the other boys, and shortly afterwards died.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> H.W.H. Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., 11-7-1887. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.

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

<sup>67</sup> 'Another Murder by Victoria River Blacks', *The North Australian*, 28-2-1890.

<sup>68</sup> H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager of Goldsbrough Mort & Co. 3-3-1890, pp. 7-8. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel . Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.

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

<sup>70</sup> Ibid: 3-4-1891. 'Bob' was probably a 'blackboy' listed on a paysheet for May 1891 as 'Bob Herbert' (Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archive, Australian National University, 2/876/22). Because it was common for Aborigines to be given the name of the station or district where they came from, Bob may have come from the Herbert River district in Queensland.

Once again there were attempts to retaliate. Two troopers were sent from Darwin to try and arrest the Aborigines who speared Hardy, but the offenders had retreated into the mountain wall of the Pinkerton Range and could not be followed up.<sup>71</sup> Mounted Constables Brooks and Holdaway searched for Manton's killers, but apparently were unsuccessful,<sup>72</sup> and the Aborigines who speared Bob were followed 'some 60 miles into some large gorges', but escaped.<sup>73</sup> The *Northern Territory Times* was of the opinion that, 'It is becoming more evident every day that the blacks of the Victoria River require a very severe lesson to keep them in check', and seemed to be advocating retaliation by the settlers by adding that, 'the isolated situation of the locality is dead against any salutary work being done under police superintendence.'<sup>74</sup>

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

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<sup>71</sup> Inspector P. Foelsche to Government Resident J. Parsons, 3-10-1889. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia), Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 1085; 'The Victoria River Outrage', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-11-1889.

<sup>72</sup> 'The Victoria River Outrage', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-11-1889.

<sup>73</sup> H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager of Goldsbrough Mort & Co., 3-3-1890, pp. 7-8. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876.

<sup>74</sup> 'The Victoria River Outrage', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-3-1891.

<sup>75</sup> 'Government Resident's trip to the Victoria River' (Diary of Charles Dashwood, entry for 14-12-1895). Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6891.

<sup>76</sup> D. Lewis, *In Western Wilds: A Survey of Historic Sites in the Western Victoria River District*, 1993, vol 1, pp. 74-76, 110-118, 130-31, vol. 2, pp. 49-53, 89-98, 106-107. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (NT); D. Lewis, *The Final Muster: A Survey of Previously Undocumented Sites throughout the Victoria River District*, 2000, vol. 1, pp. 33-35, 42-47. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (N.T.).

<sup>77</sup> E. Hill, *The Territory*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 399.

until then they had not known existed.<sup>78</sup> Ricketson provides a graphic description of the scene:

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>80</sup> B. Beckett, *Lipstick, Swag and Sweatrag. Memoirs of a Patrol Padre's Wife*, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 1998, pp. 64-5.

<sup>81</sup> *In Northern Seas* (W.K. Thomas, 1905), *In Australian Tropics* (George Robinson & Co., London, 1909), *By Flood and Field* (Keagan Paul, Trench and Trubner, London, 1912).

<sup>82</sup> 'A Treacherous Tribe. Interview with Mr. Searcy', *The Register* [Adelaide], 18-12-1905.

<sup>83</sup> For example, see M. Mallison, 'Adventures on the Murrnji Track: Droving and Spear-throwing'. Based on an interview with Billy Linklater (alias Billy Miller). *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27-6-1942.

For some whites, having to deal with hostile Aborigines placed a great strain on their nerves. In 1890 or 1891 Auvergne station was being managed by Barney Flynn.<sup>84</sup> When M.P. Durack visited the station Flynn confided in him 'a number of extraordinary hallucinations', among which was that every night the homestead was surrounded by wild blacks and that he was doomed to die by a spear. Durack described how, 'About midnight, when all were asleep, he [Flynn] leaped from his bunk and yelling like a maniac ran into the yard where he discharged the contents of his revolver. A most nerve wracking experience.'<sup>85</sup> Flynn eventually left Auvergne because of his nerves and the bad reputation of the place as regards attacks by blacks.<sup>86</sup> He went buffalo shooting on Melville Island with Joe Cooper, and in spite of the fact that several times he was nearly speared there, he apparently found the Melville Island Aborigines tame by comparison with the Auvergne blacks.<sup>87</sup> Eventually he succumbed to snakebite.<sup>88</sup>

Another who suffered psychological problems was Hugh Young, a stockman and sometime manager on Bradshaw station for a decade after it was founded.<sup>89</sup> According to old Territory identity Tom Pearce, Young was involved in the massacre and burning of Aborigines on Bradshaw. As the bodies were burning the heat caused one to contract and 'sit up' in the flames, and Young was so unnerved that he took to drink and was never the same again.<sup>90</sup>

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

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<sup>84</sup> M. Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles*, 1986, p. 333; Flynn's Christian name appears to have been James, but he was also known as Barney (W. Linklater and L. Tapp, *Gather No Moss*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1997, p. 50 (first published by the Macmillan Company, 1968).

<sup>85</sup> M. Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles*, 1986, p. 333.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 7-6-1895; 'Spearing of J. Cooper on Melville Island', 28-6-1895; 'As Other See Us', 20-1-1899; 'In the Northern Territory Buffalo Country', 24-2-1899; See also A. Briggs, entry on Joe Cooper in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, vol. 1, 1990, pp. 61-62.

<sup>88</sup> 'Country News. Death of James Flynn', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 13-2-1903.

<sup>89</sup> Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entries for January 1894 and 5-7-1900, (and throughout). Northern Territory Archives, Darwin, NTRS 2261.

<sup>90</sup> Tom Pearce to Billy Linklater, 9-10-1948. Mitchell Library, A1 10/26.

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

<sup>91</sup> The *Times* went on to say that,

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

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

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

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

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<sup>91</sup> 'Victoria River Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 3-4-1891.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> H.W.H. Stevens to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, citing letter from Lindsay Crawford, 30-12-1892. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5151.

<sup>94</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 91.

Requests for police protection in the Victoria River district and elsewhere began in the immediate aftermath of the Daly River 'Coppermine massacre' of September 1884 in which four European miners were killed by Aborigines.<sup>95</sup> Representations were made to the South Australian Government for a detachment of native police on a similar footing to the Queensland police to be stationed on the Macarthur River, at the head of the Roper River at Elsey Creek, and on the Victoria River.<sup>96</sup> As a result, a force of six native police was recruited in northern South Australia and Central Australia,<sup>97</sup> and stationed first at Pine Creek (February 1885),<sup>98</sup> then at Elsey and lastly on the Roper River.<sup>99</sup> The troupe was disbanded in 1886 and two of the trackers were sent to the newly established Borroloola police station,<sup>100</sup> but no police were sent to the Victoria River and the Government Resident commented that 'no number of trackers or of police that could be organised can prevent outrages over the immense area of country which is now being stocked.'<sup>101</sup>

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

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

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<sup>95</sup> 'The Daly River Murders', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 13-9-1884.

<sup>96</sup> 'Native Outrages', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 13-9-1884.

<sup>97</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 10-1-1885.

<sup>98</sup> 'News and Notes', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 17-1-1885.

<sup>99</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 18-4-1885.

<sup>100</sup> T. Roberts, *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900*. In press, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.

<sup>101</sup> Government Resident J.L. Parson's 'Quarterly Report on Northern Territory', 1-1-1885. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol., 3, no. 53, 1885, 'Aboriginals and Settlement', p. 10.

System of being able to protect the property entrusted to the Charge of the Station hands.<sup>102</sup>

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

RETRIBUTION  
Camp <sup>104</sup>

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

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

<sup>102</sup> H.W.H. Stevens to General Manager of Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Lt., 19-12-1891. Correspondence, pp. 8-9. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876.

<sup>103</sup> Personal communication, Big Mick Kangkinang. A similar event is said to have happened on Auvergne station (personal communication, Bobby Wititpuru). See D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 1991, pp. 95-96.

<sup>104</sup> The inscription on the 'Retribution Camp' boab, located on Retribution Creek, Auvergne station (see Appendix A).

<sup>105</sup> 'Murder of a Blackfellow', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-3-1891.

<sup>106</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 15-10-1892.

When Syd Scott, the manager of Willeroo, was killed by Aborigines in October 1892 (see Chapter 7) the *Northern Territory Times* again addressed the problem and voiced the ‘general opinion’ of the settlers that, ‘authority should be given to volunteers to follow the murderers for the purpose of bringing them to justice.’<sup>107</sup> It was probably the spearing of Scott that prompted H.W.H. Stevens to write to Goldsbrough Mort again about the need for a police presence, but with a warning that it would require, ‘very stringent measures to be taken to do any good at all’.<sup>108</sup> He pointed out that as the situation stood, ‘the settler is worse than helpless, as he is entirely without any Kind of protection from the Government & is hardly allowed the Exercise of his discretion even when his own life is in daily jeopardy.’ Stevens suggested that an arrangement be sought,

to place not less than two good Mounted Troopers and six Black Trackers on the Victoria River country for a period of say six months, during which there would be ample time to get hold of some of the worst characters amongst the Blacks, some of whom are Known to the station hands.<sup>109</sup>

Still nothing eventuated. In 1893 the Prices Creek homestead and yards were burnt by Aborigines,<sup>110</sup> and reports came in that on ‘Buchanan Downs’ (Wave Hill) and Argyle the ‘natives have been killing cattle with a vengeance. On one occasion lately some natives were surprised roasting a bullock, and it was seen that each one of them was proprietor of a cow’s tail, which was being used to keep the mosquitoes on the wing.’ This report went on to say that, ‘The blacks are fast creating a reign of terror out west, and nothing but a firm hand and plenty of it will do the slightest good.’<sup>111</sup> On the western side of the district Constable Collins, a Western Australian trooper, was speared during a raid on an Aboriginal camp on the eastern side of Rosewood in September 1893. As soon as Collins

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid: 11-3-1892.

<sup>108</sup> H.W.H. Stevens to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 30-12-1892: Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 5151.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> ‘The Government Resident’s [Charles Dashwood] Trip Up Country’ (his trip began on 27-10-1893). Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F829, item 6050.

<sup>111</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 3-2-1893.

was hit the men with him opened fire on the Aborigines and shot twenty-three dead before the battle was over.<sup>112</sup> How many got away and died later or were maimed for life is unknown, and remarkably, the police were not satisfied with the number killed because there was a follow-up 'punitive expedition'.<sup>113</sup>

The main objection the government had to establishing a police station on the Victoria was expense, but this obstacle was finally overcome in February 1894 when Goldsbrough Mort offered to 'find quarters, meat and paddocking free, Rations at cost price and to make a gift to the department of 15 suitable horses for the work'.<sup>114</sup> This proposal was strongly supported by Inspector Paul Foelsche and as a result, in May 1894 Mounted Constable W.H. Willshire arrived on VRD and moved into a hut on Gordon Creek, sixty kilometres south of VRD homestead.<sup>115</sup>

I will discuss Constable Willshire in greater depth in Chapter 5 (Jasper Gorge). At this point it is sufficient to note that he is today the most notorious policeman in Northern Territory (and possibly Australian) history. He was based in Central Australia in the 1880s, a time of severe conflict there between the Aborigines and settlers, and in 1891 he was charged with the murder of a number of Aborigines. In spite of strong evidence against him he was found not guilty (plate 69). He did not return to Central Australia, but after several short-term postings elsewhere he was sent to another region where severe problems with Aborigines existed – the Victoria River district.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Constable A. Lucanus to Sub-Inspector Drewry, 7-10-1893. Wyndham Occurrence Book, ACC 741/1, Battye Library.

<sup>113</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 10-11-1893.

<sup>114</sup> Government Resident's [Charles Dashwood] notes of interview with H.W.H. Stevens, 26-2-1894. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6004.

<sup>115</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 14-5-1894. This hut was on the site of the homestead that Stockdale and Ricketson came to by chance at the beginning of 1885 (see Chapter 3). Within a few years of their visit the homestead was shifted to Stockyard Creek, and then shifted again to its present location in the Wickham River in 1889.

<sup>116</sup> R. Kimber, entry on W.H. Willshire in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1990, vol. 1, pp. 317-320.

Willshire was at Gordon Creek for only sixteen months and spent most of his time patrolling between the Victoria River Depot and Wave Hill, and especially in and around the sandstone country on Gordon Creek, the country of the Bilinara Aborigines. He did not patrol west of Wave Hill, VRD or Auvergne and consequently the western parts of the district remained effectively without a police presence. In his police journal entries Willshire rarely mentions firing a shot for any reason, and in most cases when he came across Aborigines in the bush he claims they were friendly,<sup>117</sup> or that they saw him coming and fled.<sup>118</sup> It would appear that after the traumatic experience of being tried for murder he was extraordinarily careful to avoid providing evidence that might lead to a similar experience in future. However, while he was on VRD he wrote a book in which he describes five violent encounters with groups of Aborigines.<sup>119</sup> Willshire provides dates for some of these encounters and it is possible to compare them with his official journal entries.

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

camped amongst rocks of enormous magnitude and long dry grass...they scattered in all directions, setting fire to the grass on each side of us, throwing occasional spears, and yelling at us. It's no use mincing matters – the Martini-Henry carbines at this critical moment were talking English in the silent majesty of those great eternal rocks.<sup>120</sup>

In the equivalent journal entry there is absolutely no hint of a fight occurring. Willshire states that when he found the camp on the upper Wickham the Aborigines, 'soon cleared out when they espied us', and after destroying a heap of spears he 'went on day after day on the tracks of other cattle Killers on the sandstone ridges,' but eventually returned to his station, apparently without making further contact.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 18-7-1895.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid: 26-6-1894, 3-12-1894, 17-4-1895.

<sup>119</sup> W.H. Willshire, *The Land of the Dawning*, 1896, pp. 6, 40-41, 43, 46, 61.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid: 40-41.

<sup>121</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1894.

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

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

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<sup>122</sup> In the 1980s old Aborigines I spoke with named a number of places in the Gordon Creek sandstone (Bilinara country) and on the upper Wickham River (Ngarinman country) where they said the police had shot people.

<sup>123</sup> D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 1991, p. 117.

<sup>124</sup> L. Crauford [sic], cited by Professor Edward Stirling in 'Victoria River Downs Station, Northern Territory, South Australia', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 24, 1895, p. 180.

to learn from these women if there were any Europeans in the area, and when their attempts to communicate in English failed Ricketson related how,

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

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

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

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<sup>125</sup> H. Ricketson, entry for 1-1-1885. Mitchell Library, Mss 1783, Item 1.

<sup>126</sup> H. Stockdale, nd. Exploration in the far north-west of Australia, 1884-85. Mitchell Library, MLA 1580, CY reel 2112, entry for December 31st, 1884.

<sup>127</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, pp. 57-58, 140-141; see Sullivan, Patrick *All free man now: culture, community and politics in the Kimberley region, north-western Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1996.

<sup>128</sup> W.H. Willshire, *The Land of the Dawning*, 1896, pp. 41, 61-62, 70-71.

control them, and their young men cattle Killers.<sup>129</sup> Willshire began to obtain intelligence from these people and it was probably one or more of these who helped him communicate with a large number of Aboriginal men, women and children who came to the station in June 1895.<sup>130</sup> From this time on local Aboriginal placenames and the names of Aboriginal offenders began to appear in the police journal.<sup>131</sup>

By 1895 Aborigines in Jasper Gorge knew the name of the teamster Mulligan<sup>132</sup> and by 1896 Wardaman people were able to swear very well (see Chapter 7). Certainly by early 1895 a number of local Aborigines were working for station whites. In March of that year three Aborigines employed on VRD cleared into the bush with firearms and Willshire wrote that, 'The three of them belong to this country, and will no doubt join the cattle killers and shoot beasts for them.'<sup>133</sup> In April 1895 Norwegian Zoologist Knut Dahl visited the Victoria River Depot and tried unsuccessfully to make contact with 'an old woman, who had once worked on Victoria River Downs',<sup>134</sup> and in May 1895 the contract teamsters taking stores from the Depot to VRD had three Queensland Aboriginal men working for them, one of whom had an Aboriginal wife from Wave Hill.<sup>135</sup>

Just how these Aborigines came to work for the whites is unknown. Some may have come in of their own accord, out of curiosity or to escape the constraints of their own society,<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> W.H. Willshire to Inspector Paul Foelsche, 2-10-1894. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F829, item 7210.

<sup>130</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 6-6-1895, 25-6-1895. Of interest here is the story VRD Aborigines tell of the policeman at Gordon Creek sending out a woman to bring the bush blacks in, and then either giving them poisoned food or chaining them up and shooting them (P. Read and J. Read, *Long Time, Olden Time*, Institute for Aboriginal Development Publications, Alice Springs, 1991, pp. 57-60; D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 1991, pp. 37-39)

<sup>131</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 25-6-1895, 26-6-1895.

<sup>132</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 77.

<sup>133</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 18-3-1895.

<sup>134</sup> K. Dahl, *In Savage Australia: an account of a hunting and collecting expedition to Arnhem Land and Dampier Land*, Phillip Allan & Co., Ltd. London, 1926, p. 184.

<sup>135</sup> Inspector Paul Foelsche to F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the NT, 14-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539.

<sup>136</sup> For discussions of the various reasons for Aborigines 'coming in' in various parts of Australia see H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, pp. 93, 105-107; R. Baker, 'Coming in? The Yanyuwa as a case study in the Geography of Contact History', *Aboriginal History*, 1990, vol. 14, pt.1; P. Read and J.

but in some cases cooperation may have been coerced. The abduction of Aboriginal boys and girls was a widespread practice on the early Queensland and Northern Territory frontiers.<sup>137</sup> Referring to Aboriginal children working for her pioneer ancestors in the East Kimberley region, Mary Durack commented, 'How they got hold of them was nobody's business';<sup>138</sup> the Wyndham Police Occurrence Book shows that one of them was picked up during a police raid on an Aboriginal camp on 'Durack's station' (possibly Argyle) in July 1888.<sup>139</sup> The only reference I have found to children being 'picked up' in the Victoria River district comes from Willshire's book, *Land of the Dawning*. In June 1895 Willshire describes the appearance of a large number of Aboriginal men, women and children at the Gordon Creek police station and he claims that, 'They gave me three little boys, ages respectively nine, ten, and eleven, also one girl of eleven, who soon got fat at my camp. There are now fourteen children here'.<sup>140</sup> We may accept that Willshire was 'given' the children on this occasion, but how did he come by the other ten already at the station? One can't help but wonder if they were survivors of one the 'encounters' with the bush blacks that he describes elsewhere in the book.

At many different times and places on the frontier young Aboriginal women were enticed or kidnapped to assist in stock or domestic work and to be sexual partners.<sup>141</sup> Old Tim Yilngayarri, a Victoria River Downs man, told me how 'that first one policeman' would kill all Aborigines he came across except young women with 'big ngapalu' (large breasts) who he would take back to the police station.<sup>142</sup> At the very least, Willshire would entice young women to come with him to the police station, or allow his trackers to do so – at one stage he claimed to have 'about a dozen' women at his station<sup>143</sup> – but placenames such as 'Kitty's

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Read (eds.), *Long Time, Olden Time*, 1991, pp. 73-93; J. Long, 'Leaving the Desert: Actors and Sufferers in the Aboriginal Exodus from the Western Desert', *Aboriginal History*, 1989, vol. 13, pt. 1, pp. 9-43.

<sup>137</sup> T. Roberts, *Frontier Justice* (in press); Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 93, 140-141.

<sup>138</sup> M. Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles*, 1986, p. 291.

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

<sup>140</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 73.

<sup>141</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, pp. 140-141.

<sup>142</sup> Personal communication; see D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 1991, pp. 49-54.

<sup>143</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 71.

Capture' and 'Rilly's Capture' mentioned in the Gordon Creek police journal apparently allude to the abduction of women, and add weight to Old Tim's claim.<sup>144</sup>

Coerced or voluntary, once local Aborigines began to work for the whites, it was the beginning of the end for what had until then been a uniform resistance. Initially, at least, those who changed sides were treated as renegades by their own people. Two of the VRD employees who ran away with guns in June 1895 were killed by bush Aborigines because, 'they had in the past taken a prominent part with whitefellows in tracking up their countrymen.'<sup>145</sup> This was learnt by Willshire from one of the women who had come to the station a few weeks earlier, and as more Aborigines came in the whites gained more information about the bush blacks – the names of trouble-makers, their whereabouts, the location and timing of ceremonial gatherings – and some of them could act as guides and trackers to help the whites locate wanted individuals or groups.

In spite of the police presence at VRD attacks and killings continued. At the Depot landing in 1894 men guarding the stores had to barricade themselves behind bags of flour and keep up rifle fire all night.<sup>146</sup> Captain Joe Bradshaw was ambushed near the Gregory Creek junction in May 1894 and his 'boy', Nym, was fatally speared (see Chapter 8),<sup>147</sup> and in May 1895 Teamsters Mulligan and Ligar were severely wounded and besieged at their wagons in Jasper Gorge (see Chapter 5). On another occasion Aborigines decoyed some white men away from a building they were erecting and while they were gone other Aborigines stole pieces of thick iron from gates to make into tomahawks.<sup>148</sup>

In June 1895 Joe Bradshaw and two others wrote to the Government Resident Dashwood urgently requesting extra police and trackers for the Victoria River area<sup>149</sup> and during a

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<sup>144</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 25-11-95; 18-1-96 and 5/6-1-96.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid: 25-6-1895. Northern Territory Archives, F 302. According to Reynolds (1981: 107-108) similar revenge was taken against 'turncoats' in other parts of Australia.

<sup>146</sup> K. Dahl, *In Savage Australia*, 1926, p. 190.

<sup>147</sup> *Log Book of Bradshaw's Run*, entry for 29-5-1894.

<sup>148</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-12-1895.

<sup>149</sup> Joe Bradshaw (per Aeneas Gunn), H.W.H. Stevens and P Allen, to Secretary to Government Resident, 10-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, [item number lost]

South Australian Government inquiry Bradshaw suggested that if additional police protection could not be provided, known Aboriginal troublemakers should be outlawed.<sup>150</sup> Inspector Foelsche agreed with the desirability for additional police but stated that none could be sent because of the expense and lack of appropriate personnel.<sup>151</sup>

In 1896 Patrick O'Neil, alias 'Paddy the Lasher', was speared on VRD south of Pigeon Hole,<sup>152</sup> and in the same year Victoria River Downs was almost burnt out by the Aborigines.<sup>153</sup> An attack on E. Johnson at Dead Finish Creek (Delamere station) in May 1896<sup>154</sup> was followed by a call for a police patrol to be established in that particular area,<sup>155</sup> but nothing was done (see Chapter 7). Auvergne homestead was attacked on the night of January 10<sup>th</sup> 1897 when two stone-headed spears were thrown at Ah Fat, the Chinese cook. One spear 'went through a galvanised iron bugget [sic] & also through the iron wall of the Kitchen. This cause [sic] a noise & the blacks went into the water & crossed the river & cleared out'.<sup>156</sup> Mounted Constable O'Keefe and his trackers tried to follow the attackers but could not cross the flooded West Baines River, and O'Keefe remarked that, 'There is a large Mountain close to west baines [the Pinkerton Range] & this is a great home for the Natives as it is impassable for man or horse only at the north end about twelve miles from the Station.'<sup>157</sup>

In April 1898 the police station at Gordon Creek was closed and a new station opened at Timber Creek.<sup>158</sup> The Timber Creek station was bounded on two sides by precipitous ranges up to 200 metres high, and almost from the day it was established the station was under

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<sup>150</sup> Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices. Government Printer, Adelaide, 1895, J. Bradshaw's answers to questions 3774 and 3356.

<sup>151</sup> Inspector P. Foelsche to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 11-6-1895, in response to Bradshaw's letter of 10-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539.

<sup>152</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 18-9-1896.

<sup>153</sup> Mounted Constable O'Keefe's report on the Victoria River district, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1896. 'Government Resident's Report for the Northern Territory for 1896', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1897, p. 15.

<sup>154</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 27-5-1896.

<sup>155</sup> 'Aboriginal Marauders', F. Burdett to the editor, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 3-7-1896.

<sup>156</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 18-1-1897.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*: 20-1-1897.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*: 5-4-1898.

surveillance by Aborigines. For the next eight years the police journal has regular reports of 'blacks on the mountain', or similar.

At the end of the 1890s attacks against the settlers intensified. At the beginning of 1899 at Wave Hill they 'made a most determined assault' on Tom Cahill and his mustering team. While the musterers were camped for dinner (midday) close to the area where 'Paddy the Lasher' had been speared two years before, the attackers crept up unobserved and threw a shower of spears amongst them. Cahill and his men 'quickly rose to a fighting attitude, on seeing which the blacks beat a retreat.'<sup>159</sup> Later that year Wave Hill homestead was 'burnt to the ground by the natives. The niggers put a fire-stick to the building to windward while the men were away mustering, and the place was quickly demolished.'<sup>160</sup> On Wave Hill, VRD, Bradshaw and Ord River, Aborigines were said to be killing cattle wholesale.<sup>161</sup>

In February 1900 a lone traveller named Stanley was believed killed near Campbell Spring on Limbunya.<sup>162</sup> His body was never found so his murder could not be confirmed, but at the time no one had any doubt, and in 1989 Old Jimmy Manngayari took me to a site near Campbell Spring where he said a white man had been killed and his body hidden in a hollow tree.<sup>163</sup> A man named Tom Walton was speared in the thigh on Bradshaw in March 1900,<sup>164</sup> and in October a herd of 500 cattle being taken through Jasper Gorge by Drover Stevenson was attacked by a mob of over one hundred Aborigines. A number of bullocks were killed or injured in the ensuing rush, and the Aborigines let it be known that they planned further attacks (see Chapter 5).<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 20-1-1899.

<sup>160</sup> A. Richardson, *The Story of a Remarkable Ride*, The Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Co. of Australasia Ltd., Perth, 1900, p. 14.

<sup>161</sup> Mounted Constable O'Keefe's report on the Victoria River district, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1899. 'Government Resident's Report for the Northern Territory, 1899'. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 45, 1900, p. 26.

<sup>162</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 25-3-1900, 19-10-1900, 20-10-1900.

<sup>163</sup> Personal communication, Jimmy Manngayari, 1989.

<sup>164</sup> 'Trouble With The Victoria River Natives', F.D. Holland to the editor, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 7-12-1900.

<sup>165</sup> 'More Trouble With The Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 23-11-1900.

Attacks were particularly frequent in the Willeroo-Delamere area (see Chapter 7). Between December 1899 and May 1900 several drovers were attacked there. Most escaped without injury but the last, Drover Mork, was speared in the thigh (see Chapter 7).<sup>166</sup> After this attack, Inspector Foelsche advised the Government Resident that it would be of no use sending police out from Timber Creek or Katherine as it 'takes some days from each station to get to "Willeroo"...and the Natives would know that the police are coming before they could get there, and clear out into the Ranges and return as soon as the police leave again.'<sup>167</sup> He suggested that police should be stationed at Willeroo but warned that this would be very expensive as it would need at least two constables with three or four trackers and twelve horses, 'for almost constant patrolling that district is in my opinion the only means of affording more security to the travelling public in that county.'<sup>168</sup>

Nothing was done and problems in the Willeroo-Delamere region continued. Travellers and drovers were attacked, horses speared, and camps robbed of rations and firearms. Towards the end of October 1900 a lone traveller was attacked several times. He was badly wounded and abandoned his packhorses which were then killed. His pack-bags with all his worldly possessions were looted and destroyed, but he got away with his life.<sup>169</sup>

This last attack was the final straw for many Territory people. Within days of news of the attack reaching Darwin, residents petitioned the Government Resident to outlaw the offending Aborigines and offered to assist the police in arresting them.<sup>170</sup> Their request was never granted, but the increasing frequency of attacks on travellers along the road from Katherine to Western Australia finally prompted the authorities to take action. In mid-October 1900, Inspector Foelsche wrote to the Government Resident advising that he could at last send an extra Mounted Constable and two trackers to assist Mounted Constable

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<sup>166</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 9-6-1900.

<sup>167</sup> Inspector Paul Foelsche to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 20-6-1900, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item, 9722.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 9-11-1900.

<sup>170</sup> Petition presented to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 13-11-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item, 10088.

O'Keefe at Timber Creek. His initial suggestions was that the extra constable could be stationed at 'Willerow',<sup>171</sup> but this never eventuated. Foelsche also asked the Government Resident for permission to arm the trackers with carbines rather than revolvers as,

revolvers are not sufficient for effectation [sic] protection to them where...the natives are Known to be treacherous and it is a well Known fact the Natives have no fear of revolvers and the trackers Know this but with a Carbine in their hands they are more Couragions [sic] and the natives Know the effect of them and are not so defiant.'<sup>172</sup>

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

between Willeroo and Victoria River and particularly around Sullivan's and Gregory's Creek junctions with Victoria River, and at Jasper Gorge. Patrol should roam the area in question and also escort any travellers, drovers etc through the dangerous places.<sup>173</sup>

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

rounded some of the lubras up and told them who we were and then told them the blackfellows not to growl at whitemen and not to kill their horses & cattle and we would not growl at them. The natives knew who we were and where we came from and said blackfellow sulky fellow also wild fellow. None of the lubras could speak English. Tracker Billy could speak to them...<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Inspector Paul Foelsche to Government Resident Charles Dashwood, 13-10-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 10033.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Inspector Paul Foelsche to Mounted Constable E. O'Keefe, 28-11-1900. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 10033.

<sup>174</sup> Report on patrol by M.C. O'Keefe, 27-7-1901. This meeting took place on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1901. Notes taken from the Timber Creek police letter book, written by an unidentified policeman and now housed at the Northern Territory archives (Letter Book, 1911-1925, NTRS 2223). In part, this set of notes overlaps with a photocopy of the Timber Creek police letter book held at the Berrimah police station in Darwin. However, the letter book at Berrimah only covers the period 1894 to 1910, whereas these copies continue to 1925. The copies thus cover a period when there are no surviving original Timber Creek police documents (1919-1923), and a period when there are no surviving Timber Creek police letters (1912-1923). In instances where the copies and the original records co-exist, the copied notes are reliable, but whoever made the copies occasionally made his own comments and connections, and in at least one instance he is mistaken.

If the police journals are any guide, apart from this encounter there seems to have been virtually no contact between the police and the Aborigines, and in spite of the increased police presence, harassment of white people and attacks against them continued as before. In August 1902 another traveller had a skirmish with Aborigines near Delamere. He got away unharmed, but a few days later a German traveller disappeared in the same area, presumed murdered,<sup>175</sup> and two men who had taken up the old Willeroo run abandoned the lease almost immediately because of harassment by Aborigines (see Chapter 7).<sup>176</sup> Late in 1903 Aborigines came to the camp of a traveller on Gregory Creek and demanded tobacco, and later they followed him, but no other incidents occurred.<sup>177</sup>

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

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

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<sup>175</sup> 'Supposed Outrage by Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 5-9-1902; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 24-10-1902.

<sup>176</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 21-9-1900.

<sup>177</sup> Notes taken from the Timber Creek police letter book entry of 9-8-1903, written by an unidentified policeman. Letter Book, 1911-1925, NTRS 2223, Northern Territory Archives; Note: the Timber Creek police journal entry of 21-10-1903 says this incident occurred on the head of the Little Gregory Creek.

<sup>178</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, p. 96.

one of the most important of which was the establishment of 'blacks' camps' at station homesteads and outstations across the region.

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

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

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<sup>179</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 9-12-1895.

<sup>180</sup> 'Wyndham', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 9-12-1898.

<sup>181</sup> Log Book of Bradshaws Run, entries for 7-6-1899 and 28-6-1900.

<sup>182</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 11-10-1901.

<sup>183</sup> D.J. Ronan to Mounted Constable O'Keefe, 25-1-1901. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin; Timber Creek police journal, 14-11-1900.

<sup>184</sup> Mounted Constable E. O'Keefe to Inspector Paul Foelsche, 9-3-1901. Timber Creek police letter book, copy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin.

<sup>185</sup> G. Bolton, *A Survey of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to the Present*, unpublished Masters thesis, University of Western Australia, 1953, p. 124.

The camp at Ord River was established 'with an element of coercion' when the manager and his men rode around the station and mustered the bush people back to the homestead,<sup>186</sup> but in most cases there is no contemporary documentation as to how these camps came into being. However, Aboriginal oral tradition on Victoria River Downs, Willeroo and Delamere suggests that local people who had previously joined the whites were eventually sent out to tell the rest to 'come in'.<sup>187</sup>

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

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

Other managers try and gather the blacks into a camp, close to the head station, and kill an old lumpy or worthless beast for them now and then; and I think, myself, that this is the best way. I think they do not do so much damage if the niggers are got in. The old niggers and old lubras will very often tell what is going on in the camp; and the station boys also mingle with them and learn what is going on from some of the others. Blacks are greatly divided amongst themselves, and will very often put one another away. But if they are very numerous, and a small portion of the tribe can only be got in, then I am of the opinion that it is just as well to keep them out altogether, because there is always a secret communication with the outside camps, telling them the whereabouts of the station hands.<sup>188</sup>

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

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

<sup>187</sup> D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*, 1991, pp. 80-81; J. Wozitsky, *Born Under The Paperbark Tree: A Man's Life*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1996, pp. 5-6; J. Sullivan and B. Shaw, *Banggaiyerri: The Story of Jack Sullivan as told to Bruce Shaw*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1983, p. 65.

<sup>188</sup> 'Some Pastoral Notes and Comments from an Old Stockman's Point of View', by 'Magenta Joe'. *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 27-10-1905. 'Magenta Joe' was John Dunn who died of fever in the Palmerston hospital in December 1909 (*Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 13-12-1907).

Australian Governor, George Le Hunte, 'saw some fine healthy looking aborigines' in a camp near the homestead, and noted that 'Mr. Townshend, who employs several of the boys to look after cattle, spoke very well of them.'<sup>189</sup>

On the basis of his Australia-wide study, Reynolds listed the pros and cons for Aborigines of coming in or staying out. He noted that dwindling indigenous food supplies made it increasingly difficult for clans to live in isolation from the Europeans. In some areas people died from starvation, and if they continued to attack Europeans, spear their livestock or steal their goods, they could be certain of retaliation.<sup>190</sup> Added to this was the possibility that fighting between settlers and Aborigines may have increased the amount of fighting between rival clans.<sup>191</sup> Reynolds concluded that 'life in the bush became increasingly hazardous and eventually "staying out" became the greater of the two evils.'<sup>192</sup>

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

Even if Aborigines took the risk of hunting and gathering in the lowlands, it is likely that, year by year, traditional foods in these areas were becoming scarcer. By the early 1900s cattle had reached significant numbers, with VRD and Wave Hill both estimated to have 60,000 head by 1906.<sup>193</sup> The environmental impact of such cattle numbers was greatly increased in years when the wet season rains came late, especially if the previous wet had

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<sup>189</sup> 'Northern Territory. No. 4 – The Governor's Report', *Adelaide Observer*, 4-11-1910.

<sup>190</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981, pp. 92-93.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*: 60.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> Timber Creek police letter book, 31-12-1906. Photocopy held at Berrimah police station, Darwin.

been poor. 1898 was very dry throughout the district;<sup>194</sup> on VRD it was ‘the driest [sic] Known...for 12 years. Eleven months elapsed without a downpour.’<sup>195</sup> On VRD and Wave Hill, 1900 was reported to have been the worst season ‘for a number of years’,<sup>196</sup> and 1902 was much the same.<sup>197</sup> The wet season of 1904-05 was poor and it was ten months before rain fell again.<sup>198</sup> 1906 was yet another poor year and cattle were reported to be dying ‘because of their massing on water frontages beyond their carrying capacity in the matter of feed.’<sup>199</sup> It seems likely that this series of dry years exacerbating the other ecological and social factors may have been an important factor in the decision to start coming in.

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

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<sup>194</sup> Mounted Constable O’Keefe’s report on the Victoria River district, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1896. ‘Government Resident’s Report for the Northern Territory for 1896’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1897, p. 26.

<sup>195</sup> Report by R. Watson to Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd, March 1899, entitled ‘Victoria River Downs’. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Reports on station properties, 1898-1901. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/307/1.

<sup>196</sup> Temporary Inspector of Stock [Mounted Constable] E. O’Keefe’s report on Victoria River district, 30-11-1900, in C. Dashwood, ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1901’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1901.

<sup>197</sup> Mounted Constable E. O’Keefe, report on Victoria River district, 7-12-1902, in C. Dashwood, ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1902’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 45, 1903.

<sup>198</sup> Temporary Inspector of Stock, Mounted Constable F. Burt, report on Victoria River district, 30-12-1905, in C. Herbert, ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1905’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906.

<sup>199</sup> Timber Creek police letter book, 31-12-1906. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

<sup>200</sup> P. Read and Engineer Jack Japaljarri, ‘The Price of Tobacco: The Journey of the Warlmalu to Wave Hill, 1928’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 1978, pp. 140-48; W.E.H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming*,

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

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

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

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

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

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Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, pp. 46-47; P. Read and J. Read, *Long Time Olden Time*, 1991, pp. 73-93.

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

<sup>202</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 29-6-1907.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid: 14-11-1900. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.

Sometimes the Aborigines prowled around the station after dark, they occasionally threw spears at the trackers, and once or twice they threatened to kill all station personnel. When they saw the white police leave they sometimes would call out to the tracker who remained behind, asking for tobacco or for information, or they would try to get the tracker to join them. At different times they came down to the foot of the mountains and walked around on the creek flats, but if the police went after them they escaped back up the mountains, and the best the police could do was to fire shots in their direction and 'disperse' them, and order them to leave. Over the eight years 1898 to 1905 there are almost seventy references in the police journal to bush Aborigines in the vicinity of Timber Creek,<sup>204</sup> and groups of Aborigines were 'dispersed' at least ten times.<sup>205</sup> On one memorable occasion a lone Aboriginal came close to the station and Mounted Constable O'Keefe 'dispersed him'.<sup>206</sup> An even more memorable incident occurred on February 16<sup>th</sup> 1903 when Mounted Constable Gordon reported that,

a large mob of blacks made their appearance on the side of the mountain near the Station, told them to go away they refused saying that this was their country and they were going to camp on the creek. Told them that if they came near here again they would be shot, still refusing to go fired shot from carbine in the air. This didn't seem to concern them much as they walked away slowly up the creek.<sup>207</sup>

The Timber Creek station was established by Mounted Constable O'Keefe and he remained in charge there until late April or early May, 1905.<sup>208</sup> O'Keefe had a very 'hard' attitude towards the bush blacks, and maintained a policy of keeping them 'out bush'. Within a year or so of O'Keefe's departure the new officer in charge allowed a camp to be formed near

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid: entries for 24-4-1898, 27-4-1898, 28-4-1898, 28-4-1898, 29-4-1898, 30-4-1898, 31-7-1898, 13-9-1898, 20-9-1898, 4-5-1899, 5-5-1899, 26-5-1899, 4-9-1899, 5-9-1899, 6-9-1899, 7-9-1899, 12-9-1899, 13-9-1899, 23-9-1899, 10-10-1899, 14-10-1899, 15-10-1899, 12-12-1899, 14-12-1899, 15-12-1899, 26-1-1900, 2-2-1900, 9-3-1900, 6-6-1900, 16-6-1900, 17-11-1900, 18-11-1900, 7-12-1900, 14-5-1901, 15-5-1901, 4-6-1901, 10-6-1901, 20-6-1901, 6-8-1901, 4-1-1902, 12-4-1902, 13-4-1902, 26-4-1902, 6-6-1902, 11-8-1902, 30-12-1902, 11-2-1903, 16-2-1903, 17-2-1903, 5-3-1903, 18-4-1903, 14-5-1903, 19-9-1903, 21-9-1903, 26-9-1903, 25-10-1903, 8-2-1904, 21-4-1904, 18-7-1904, 28-10-1904, 3-1-1905, 24-1-1905, 26-1-1905, 28-1-1905, 4-3-1905, 8-3-1905, 5-5-1905 and 18-4-1906. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.

<sup>205</sup> 'Dispersals' are mentioned in the Timber Creek police journal, on 29-4-1898, 13-9-1898, 20-9-1898, 13-9-1899, 14-10-1899, 15-12-1899, 9-3-1900, 15-5-1901, 6-6-1902 and 16-2-1903.

<sup>206</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 9-3-1900.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid: 16-2-1903. Northern Territory Archives, F 302.

<sup>208</sup> 'No. IV. The Governor's Report', *Adelaide Observer*, 4-11-1905.

the station.<sup>209</sup> It is clear that as soon as the bush people had the option of camping alongside the white men at Timber Creek they took it, even though these particular white men were police, and journal entries about 'blacks on the mountain' abruptly ceased.

Whatever the reasons may have been, the fact that many Aborigines did come in indicates that, for them, being in the station camps was a better option than staying in the bush – Reynolds' 'lesser of two evils'. Of course, while 'blacks' camps' appeared on most stations within a matter of a few years, not all Aborigines came in at once. There were 'bush' Aborigines in some of the old refuge areas for some decades after the camps were formed. The killers of Alex McDonald on Auvergne in 1918 came down out of the vast and rugged Pinkerton Range.<sup>210</sup> The Aborigines who speared Brigalow Bill Ward at Humbert River in 1910<sup>211</sup> and Jim Crisp in 1919<sup>212</sup> came out of the Stokes Range sandstone country.

Some people stayed out for life,<sup>213</sup> while others moved back and forth between the two modes of life.<sup>214</sup> In 1927 'about 30 myall natives' came in for the first time to Wave Hill station (plates 73, 74)<sup>215</sup> and in 1933 another group came in to Timber Creek.<sup>216</sup> In the latter case it was not stated exactly how many arrived or exactly where they came from, but both examples show that the movement of people from the bush to white centres was continuing to this time.

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

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<sup>209</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 30-5-1906. On this date the police reported 'A mob of 40 blacks with their King now camped near station'.

<sup>210</sup> 'Tragedy at Auvergne', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 20-4-1918.

<sup>211</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1910.

<sup>212</sup> 'Murdered by Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 17-1-1920.

<sup>213</sup> C. Schultz and D. Lewis, *Beyond the Big Run: Station Life on Australia's Last Frontier*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1995, p. 69.

<sup>214</sup> M. Richards, Aborigines in the Victoria River Region: 1883-1928. *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Newsletter*, New Series 17, 1980, pp. 26-34.

<sup>215</sup> Wave Hill police journal, 1-8-1927. Northern Territory Archives, F292.

<sup>216</sup> R. Weddell, 'Report of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Northern Territory', in 'Report of the Administrator of the Northern Territory for the Year ended 30<sup>th</sup> June 1933'. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, session 1932-33, vol. 3.

to go to the Fitzmaurice 'as the blacks in those parts were not to [sic] friendly'.<sup>217</sup> The Fitzmaurice was part of the area where the last Aboriginal 'outlaws', 'Nemarluk' and others, reigned until the early 1930s, and where the last white men killed by bush Aborigines were murdered in 1932,<sup>218</sup> but that is another story.

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<sup>217</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 18-10-1940.

<sup>218</sup> 'Murder of Prospectors', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 29-5-1934; 'Alleged Murder of Two Prospectors', *Northern Standard*, 16-1-1934.





## Chapter 5

### JASPER GORGE

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> NT Portion 554 of five acres was declared a National Park to be known as Gregory's Tree National Park (Reserve No. 1103) on 20-6-1963. *Commonwealth Gazette*, No. 55. In 1979 it was renamed the Gregory's Tree Historical Reserve (NTG G38 21-9-1979), and in 1995 it was declared a Heritage Place (NTG, 22-2-1995). Information courtesy Stuart Duncan, Office of Placenames Committee, Darwin.

Extending off the main gorge are side pockets and one or two long valleys cut by tributary streams, all of them cliff-lined. At the western end the floor of the gorge is up to two kilometres wide and the slopes forming the sides are steep, rocky and high, and capped with low cliffs. Moving eastwards, the cliffs become higher and the slopes below them correspondingly lower, and the gorge becomes narrower and rougher until at the eastern end it is less than 200 metres wide (plate 76). At its narrowest point most of the width is taken up by a long and deep waterhole, bounded on the north side by a cliff that rises straight up from the water and makes it impossible to travel along that side, even in the dry season. On the opposite side there is a narrow flat bounded by a steep rocky slope rising to a cliff that looms overhead. Until at least the early 1930s there was a giant boulder on this flat with barely enough space for a wagon to pass around it (plate 77).<sup>2</sup>

The gorge is a place of hard reality – rocky slopes and cliffs, big waterholes, dense spinifex – and a place of legend and mythology for both blacks and whites. For Aborigines the gorge was created at the beginning of the world when the great travelling Dreaming, Walujapi, the Black-headed python, slid across the Stokes Range, her body pushing up the curving sides of the gorge as she passed.<sup>3</sup> As she created the gorge she interacted with other Dreamings – Mulukurr the ‘devil dog’, Kaya the ‘devil’, Wurliyngki the red ant, and others.<sup>4</sup> All of these Dreamings are still present in the gorge and some can actually be seen as rock paintings, or as natural features such as boulders, or hollows and marks on a cliff face. One Dreaming has been destroyed since the coming of the whites. The great boulder that nearly blocked the way through the narrow part of the gorge was Wanujunki, a Turtle and Echidna Dreaming; it was eventually blown up to widen the road.<sup>5</sup> And of course, the

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

<sup>3</sup> See W. Arndt, ‘The Dreaming of Kunukban’, *Oceania*, vol. 35, 1965, (4), for a description of the movement of snakes and its relationship to the topography of the Victoria River district and Aboriginal Dreaming stories.

<sup>4</sup> D. Lewis, ‘Report on Field Work for the Jasper Gorge – Kidman Springs Land Claim’, prepared for the Northern Land Council, Darwin, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> This appears to have been done by Burt Drew in 1931. Bovril Australian Estates Ltd., Victoria River Downs Ledgers, 1909-1944, ledger 4. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 42/15/1-4.

fish, turtles and crocodiles in the permanent waterholes, and the 'sugarbag', wallabies, echidnas and other resources were, and still are, a great attraction for local Aborigines.

For white people Jasper Gorge also has many meanings. Most appreciate its wild beauty and many have heard or read that it was a place of conflict between Aborigines and the early settlers. It was here where Aborigines attacked and besieged teamsters and killed 'many men',<sup>6</sup> where they rolled boulders down upon passing herds of cattle,<sup>7</sup> where Aboriginal skulls with bullet holes had been found, and where, according to a man I met in the Timber Creek pub in 1971, 'Until the 1950s you could demand a police escort when travelling through Jasper Gorge'.<sup>8</sup> Even the dimensions of the gorge itself have at times taken on exaggerated proportions, with one account describing the cliffs as 900 feet high<sup>9</sup> and another saying nearly 1000 feet (330 metres).<sup>10</sup> In reality they are rarely more than fifty metres and often much less.

Most whites have only limited knowledge of what occurred there. One particular story has appeared in various accounts over the years and is fairly well known – the spearing of teamsters Mulligan and Ligar,<sup>11</sup> – but few whites possess more than the broad outlines of the event or know the exact location where it occurred. There are faint 'echoes' of other stories and yet others that have long been forgotten. So what is the historical reality of the gorge? What is left when the myths and misinformation are stripped away and the facts reassembled? This chapter seeks to provide answers to these questions, to reveal the 'hidden history' of Jasper Gorge.

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<sup>6</sup> K. Willey, *Eaters of the Lotus*, The Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1964, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see 'Vanguard', 'North Australia: The Real Backblocks', *Cummins & Campbell Monthly Magazine*, February issue, 1934, p. 81-83; E. Morey, 'The Donkey Man'. *Northern Territory Newsletter*, February issue, 1977, p. 12. Further references are given in endnote 33.

<sup>8</sup> The same claim was made by Keith Willey in his book, *Eaters of the Lotus*, 1964, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> W. Linklater, and L. Tapp, *Gather No Moss*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, 1997, p. 90. (originally published by Macmillan of Australia, Sydney, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> D. Magoffin, *From Ringer to Radio*, privately published, Brisbane, nd, p. 108. Dave Magoffin came to VRD as a young man early in 1938 and left in August 1940. He later became a well-known radio broadcaster.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see A. Searcy, *In Australian Tropics*, George Robinson & Co., London, 1909, pp. 204-05; *The Graziers' Review*, 16-6-1929: 354-55; G. Buchanan, *Packhorse and Waterhole: With the First Overlanders to the Kimberleys*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1933, pp. 114-115; E. Hill, *The Territory*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 299; J. Makin, *The Big Run: The Story of Victoria River Downs Station*, Rigby Limited, Adelaide, 1970, pp. 103-04.

The first white men to visit the gorge were members of Gregory's expedition.<sup>12</sup> On his second trip inland Gregory ascended the Stokes Range north-west of the entrance of the gorge, and then headed east across the stony sandstone plateau. The following day he found a creek trending to the south which he followed to where it plunged over a precipice into a narrow cliff-lined valley. After a difficult descent Gregory followed the valley four kilometres to where it joined another, much larger cliff-lined valley. Here he struck a wide flooded stream, so he turned east and followed it down. After about seven kilometres his progress was stopped by the cliff-face that rises from the waterhole in the narrow part of the gorge. He went back upstream and managed to get his men and horses to the other side of creek, and this time was able to travel right through the gorge and out onto a large open plain where he camped beside a huge boab tree. Nearby there was a range of hills which Gregory had previously named the Jasper Range, and later the settlers applied this name to the gorge and the creek that flows through it. It's a fitting name; at sunrise and sunset the cliffs lining the gorge turn blood red.

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

The first European to travel all the way through Jasper Gorge was the VRD manager, Lindsay Crawford. In July 1884 Crawford set out from VRD homestead to meet the first boats bringing stores up the Victoria River, and to find a suitable road for bringing these supplies back to the station. There is a high probability that he had a copy of Gregory's map<sup>13</sup> and knew that there were two possible routes to choose from, 'one where the Victoria

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<sup>12</sup> A.C. Gregory, 'North Australian Expedition', in A.C. Gregory and F.T. Gregory. *Journals of Australian Explorations*, Facsimile edition, Hesperian Press, Victoria Park, W.A., 1981, p. 122 (first published 1884).

<sup>13</sup> There is an early copy of Gregory's map in the collection of Victoria River Downs records held at the Noel Butlin Archives, Canberra (Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., F246, 2/859/375).

runs through a gorge thirty-five miles long and an average of half a mile wide, with very high sandstone cliffs, and the other where Jasper Creek runs through.’<sup>14</sup>

Donald Swan and Bob Button, stockmen who were with the first cattle to Ord River, passed through the gorge in 1885 on their way to the Depot for rations. ‘All at once we got the fright of our lives, for blacks suddenly appeared along the cliff tops, Hollering. “Good Day! Good Day!”’<sup>15</sup> Swan and Button were surprised at their knowledge of English words, and decided they must have learnt them at Daly River where settlement had commenced earlier. However, the extraordinary ability of ‘wild’ Aborigines to mimic English words spoken to them has often been noted<sup>16</sup> and it is more likely they had heard the words ‘good day’ shouted out by other white men travelling through the gorge.

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

To the north of Jasper Creek right along the boundary of the Coys property, are a series of high sandstone ranges reaching right to the Victoria river [sic] in fact this river flows through a gorge among these ranges for a long distance, horses can be ridden only with difficulty along the frontage, and there is only one other known pass through these ranges to the lower Victoria river, & that is by following up Jasper Creek, it is up this creek the road is formed to the depot on the river, where the Boats come with the stores. ...[Jasper Gorge] is extremely rough for 6 miles by crossing & recrossing the creek there is just sufficient room between precipitous walls of red sandstone for a road to be forced through, since first opened a very considerable amount of work has been done in removing boulders from the creek & other places, both powder & dynamite having been used and as the wild blacks are here very numerous, it was no easy task to get men to work’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lindsay Crawford, cited by Government Resident J.L. Parsons in his ‘Quarterly Report On Northern Territory’ 31-12-1884. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 53, 1885, pp. 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> D. Swan, 1929, cited in C. Clement and P. Bridge (eds), *Kimberley Scenes*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1991, pp. 101-02.

<sup>16</sup> A good example of this ability is given by Billy Miller on page 120 of his book, *Gather No Moss* (W. Linklater and L. Tapp, 1991); see also I. White, ‘The Birth and Death of a Ceremony’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 4 (1-2), 1980, pp. 32-41.

<sup>17</sup> B. Blair to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 24-10-1889. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/876/7.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>18</sup> 'The Contributor. "Troublesome Aborigines"', *Adelaide Observer*, 11-1-1896.

<sup>19</sup> *The North Australian*, 9-7-1886.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Contributor. "Troublesome Aborigines"', *Adelaide Observer*, 11-1-1896.

camp waiting for reinforcements. For several days they were harassed by the Aborigines night and day:

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

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

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

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

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>23</sup> Report by HWH Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd. 9-10-1891. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872, pp. 13-15.

<sup>24</sup> Report by Jack Watson to Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., 5-12-1895. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Board Papers, 1893-1927. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/124/1659.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>25</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 7-4-1899.

<sup>26</sup> Report by H.W.H. Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., 11-7-1887. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.

<sup>27</sup> 'A Trip to the Victoria River', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 4-5-1889.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Report by G.W. Moore to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 27-11-1891. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Board Papers, 1893-1927. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/124/1093.

him into the ranges, where it is next to impossible for a white man to follow them up, even on foot: The Contractor on this road therefore runs continual risk.<sup>30</sup>

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

The gorge is several miles in length, and from its peculiar formation the blacks, if they had any sense, would be masters of the situation, and could annihilate travellers by rolling rocks down the sides of the steep gorge. Fortunately for travellers the natives have not grasped the strategical strength of the position.<sup>31</sup>

Others since Searcy have made the same observation,<sup>32</sup> or claimed that the Aborigines did roll boulders down,<sup>33</sup> but no account of such action has yet come to light.

In 1895 there occurred the most famous event in the history of Jasper Gorge, the attack on teamsters John Mulligan and George Ligar. This story has been kept alive in the public mind over the years in brief and often inaccurate accounts by various writers.<sup>34</sup> A wonderfully succinct version was written by Jack Watson who was closely involved in events after the attack (see plates 78, 79). Watson had taken over as manager of VRD from Lindsay Crawford in 1894, and in a classic of brevity, he described the attack in his report to Goldsbrough Mort for the months of May, June and July 1895:

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<sup>30</sup> Report by HWH Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd. 9-10-1891. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872, pp. 13-15.

<sup>31</sup> Copy of Mr. John Watson's Station Reports for May, June, July, 1895. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: "General Letters" Papers of Head Office, Melbourne, 1874-1901. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/176/130d.

<sup>32</sup> T. Ronan, *Deep of the Sky: An Essay in Ancestor Worship*, Cassell & Co. Ltd., Melbourne, 1962, pp. 170, 184.

<sup>33</sup> 'Vanguard', 'North Australia: The Real Backblocks', *Cummins & Campbell Monthly Magazine*, February issue, 1934, p. 81-83; 'Attacked by Blacks. Shower of Spears in a Gorge', *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 17-9-1909; K. Willey, *Eaters of the Lotus*, 1964, p. 33; E. Morey, 'The Donkey Man', *Northern Territory Newsletter*, February issue, 1977, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning: Being Facts Gleaned from Cannibals in the Australian Stone Age*, W.K. Thomas and Co., Adelaide, 1896, pp. 74-77; A. Searcy, *In Australian Tropics*, 1909, pp. 204-05; 'Vanguard', 'North Australia: The Real Backblocks', *Cummins & Campbell Monthly Magazine*, February issue, 1934, p. 81-83; S.E. Pearson, 'The Passing of Mudburra', *Frank Clune's Adventure Magazine*, 1948, p. 34; E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 235; J. Makin, *The Big Run*, 1970, pp. 103-04.

On 14<sup>th</sup> of this month [May] the Blacks were invited to a picnic in a place called the Gorge, by Mulligan; As they did not think he treated them with sufficient liberality, they speared him and his men and chased them away from the waggons and took what they wanted, which was much.<sup>35</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>35</sup> J. Watson to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: “General Letters” Papers of Head Office, Melbourne, 1874-1901. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/176/130d.

<sup>36</sup> H.W.H. Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort, 22-7-1890. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-11-1889; ‘Murder of Sam Croker by a Half-caste’, *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 7-10-1892; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 31-1-1896 (advertisement); W.H. Willshire, 1896. *Land of the Dawning*, W.K. Thomas and Co., Adelaide, 1896, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> W.A. Rees to the Editor, *Walkabout*, June issue, 1950, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> G. Buchanan, *Packhorse and Waterhole*, 1933, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> Report on NT Stations. H.W.H. Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 23-10-1891. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd.: Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.

<sup>40</sup> Log Book of Bradshaw’s Run, entry for 2-6-1894. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 2261.

<sup>41</sup> K. Dahl, *In Savage Australia: an account of a hunting and collecting expedition to Arnhem Land and Dampier Land*, Allan, London, 1926, pp. 188-89.

<sup>42</sup> A. Lucanus, 1929, cited in C. Clement and P. Bridge (eds), *Kimberley Scenes*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, 1991, p. 24.

Zealand War' and suffered a severe head injury.<sup>43</sup> This injury may have contributed to an ongoing problem, which was 'lifting his little finger', and this sometimes led to eccentric behaviour. On one occasion 'one of his fingers offended him, so he shot the top of [sic] it with his revolver'<sup>44</sup> – perhaps it was the little one. Whether Mulligan also was an alcoholic is unknown, but the chances are high that on occasion he too enjoyed 'lifting his little finger'.

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

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

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<sup>43</sup> A. Searcy, *In Australian Tropics*, 1909, p. 205.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> G. Buchanan, *Packhorse and Waterhole*, 1933, pp. 153-54.

<sup>46</sup> SA State Records Office, P.C.O/1872/941; G. Buchanan, *Packhorse and Waterhole*, 1933, p. 153.

<sup>47</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 27-12-1879.

<sup>48</sup> Telegram from the Minister for Education to the Government Resident 16-7-1880, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, items A4098; Telegram from the Minister for Education to the Government Resident, 20-8-1880, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item A4136.

<sup>49</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 16-1-1895. Northern Territory Archives, F302. The Gordon Creek police station was the forerunner to the Timber Creek police station, and the journals from both are held in the Northern Territory Archives under the one reference listing.

<sup>50</sup> K. Dahl, *In Savage Australia*, 1926, pp. 188-89.

stockman,<sup>51</sup> including a stint at the notoriously dangerous Florida station in Arnhem Land where he would have worked under Jack Watson.<sup>52</sup>

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

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

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<sup>51</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 100.

<sup>52</sup> 'Old Time Memories. The Lepers of Arnhem Land and Sketches', *The Northern Standard*, 6-7-1934; in the 1891 Census he described himself as a stockman, living at Florida station (1891 census details on microfiche, produced by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society).

<sup>53</sup> 1891 census details on microfiche, produced by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society.

<sup>54</sup> 'McArthur River Notes', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 10-3-1893; M. Costello, *Life of John Costello*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 2002, p. 162 (originally published by Dymocks, Sydney, 1930).

<sup>55</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, pp. 88-89.

<sup>56</sup> Watson family bible, held by Watson's grandniece, Mrs Jan Cruickshank.

<sup>57</sup> *The Graziers' Review*, 16-1-1926: 1296.

<sup>58</sup> Personal communication, Tony Roberts, author of *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900*. In press, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.

<sup>59</sup> C.E. Gaunt, 'Old Time Memories: The Lepers of Arnhem Land and Sketches', *Northern Standard*, 6-7-1934.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Jack Watson to his brother Ned in San Francisco, 20-7-91, Watson family papers; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 3-4-1896.

region, Watson became known as 'The Gulf Hero',<sup>61</sup> a nick-name probably applied in sarcasm by those who thought he was either a lunatic or a terrific show-off. On VRD Mounted Constable Willshire derided Watson for wearing a football jersey and a pair of Mexican spurs (see plate 81).<sup>62</sup> Yet there were those who thought highly of him and one of his contemporaries described him as 'a wild reckless fellow [who] would charge hell with a bucket of water. A splendid athlete and boxer, and a terror on the blacks. He stood six feet one inch, and most men were careful not to cross the "Gulf Hero".'<sup>63</sup>

Many of the stories about Watson remark on his harsh treatment of the wild blacks. He had shockingly cruel methods of killing or maiming them, and collected their ears or skulls as trophies.<sup>64</sup> When a 'boy' of his named Pompey ran away from him and was murdered by bush Aborigines, he asked the police to bring in his skull because he wanted to use it as a spittoon.<sup>65</sup> In his book, 'In Australian Tropics'<sup>66</sup> Alfred Searcy tells of a man who,

boasted to me that he never carried a revolver. He said he did all the punishment he wanted with a stock-whip and a wire-cracker.<sup>67</sup> 'When I want to be particularly severe,' he remarked, 'I cut the top off a sapling and sharpen the remaining stump, bend it down, and drive it through the palms of both hands of the nigger.' That seemed awfully brutal to me, but that man assured me on his oath that he did it. I wonder whether the cruelty he practiced ever came back to him in his struggle for life in the river—he was drowned in the Katherine.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> C.E. Gaunt, 'Old Time Memories: The Lepers of Arnhem Land and Sketches', *Northern Standard*, 6-7-1934; alternatively, he was known as the 'Gulf King' (Hely-Hutchinson, 'The Men Who Blazed the Track', *The Pastoralists' Review*, 15-8-1912: 594).

<sup>62</sup> W.H. Willshire, 1896. *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 76. A letter held by the Watson family shows that in 1891 Jack Watson asked his brother in San Francisco to get him the largest Mexican spurs he could find. It is clear from Willshire's description that Jack obtained the spurs he asked for, but their present whereabouts is unknown.

<sup>63</sup> C.E. Gaunt, 'Old Time Memories: The Lepers of Arnhem Land and Sketches', *Northern Standard*, 6-7-1934.

<sup>64</sup> E. C. Creaghe's Diary, entry for 8-2-1883. Mitchell Library, MSS 2982; E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 232.

<sup>65</sup> W.H. Willshire to Professor E. Stirling, 4-12-1896. South Australian Museum, AD43.

<sup>66</sup> A. Searcy, *In Australian Tropics*, 1909, pp. 174-75.

<sup>67</sup> The 'cracker' of a whip is a strip of leather at the end which is the fastest moving part when the whip is cracked. It moves faster than the speed of sound (340 metres per second) and the 'crack' of the whip is the sonic 'boom' created when the sound barrier is broken. At the speed of sound a piece of wire would slice through flesh like a razor.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Searcy does not name the storyteller, but various details of the story fit with what is known about Watson from other sources, particularly that he never carried a revolver and that he drowned in the Katherine River.<sup>69</sup> In March 1895 Watson took over management of Victoria River Downs,<sup>70</sup> and it was there that he made the acquaintance of Mounted Constable Willshire.

William Henry Willshire is infamous as the trooper who was charged with massacring Aborigines in Central Australia in the 1880s. He was acquitted of the charge, but few today believe he was innocent.<sup>71</sup> After his trial he was not sent back to the Centre, but after several short postings in South Australia was instead sent to Victoria River Downs where hostile Aborigines were causing many problems for the settlers.<sup>72</sup> Willshire's superiors knew what his record was in Central Australia and they knew that a state of extreme hostility prevailed in the Victoria River district. It is difficult to believe that his posting there was anything but deliberate.

There can be little doubt that Willshire was a brave and accomplished bushman, but at least one of his contemporaries (a fellow policeman), thought that he was mentally unstable,<sup>73</sup> and he may have been the type of man who would 'crack' when threatened. Early in 1895 four 'civilised' Aboriginal men took firearms and cleared into the bush on VRD, and local whites, including Willshire, were afraid that these renegades would organise the wild blacks and try and drive the whites out. In the face of this threat Willshire wrote a journal entry on March 21<sup>st</sup> which displays a strange mix of bravado and fear:

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<sup>69</sup> 'Drowning at the Katherine', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 3-4-1896; 'The Drowning of Mr. J. Watson', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 10-4-1896.

<sup>70</sup> J. Watson to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 5-12-95, Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Board Papers, 1893-1927. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, 2/124/1659; Timber Creek police journal, 24-2-1895. Northern Territory Archives, F302.

<sup>71</sup> R. Kimber, entry on W.H. Willshire, in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, vol 1, 1990, pp. 317-320, NTU Press, Darwin; D. Mulvaney, *Encounters in Place*, chapter titled 'Central Australia: Land of the Dawning', University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1989, pp. 123-130.

<sup>72</sup> R. Kimber, entry on W.H. Willshire, in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, NTU Press, Darwin, vol. 1, 1990, p. 319.

<sup>73</sup> Mounted Constable W. South to Inspector B. Besley, cited in R. Clyne, *Colonial Blue: A History of the South Australian Police Force*, Wakefield Press, Netley, 1987, pp. 188-89.

this is a rough place with treachery all around you & when blackboys belonging to the country turn out with firearms, matters are getting tropical. I must go out tomorrow & look them up & promise you I will do my duty to the very last out in the open. I am not afraid of any blackfellow with firearms but their treachery lurks beneath so many guises such as long grass, behind rocks, in creeks, and up high in gorges.<sup>74</sup>

Willshire and Watson grew to hate each other. Among various complaints, Watson accused Willshire of 'cohabiting with a child of the tribe about fourteen years of age or less she now has a child by him.'<sup>75</sup> In turn, Willshire accused Watson of bad management, saying that,

Since Watson came on the run the whole place has been in a state of fermentation, what blackboys and lubras Mr Crawford left behind have all run away since. Watson has such a bad name amongst blacks that they are frightened to remain, nearly every white man has left, and the three that are here now will leave as soon as Watson returns. there [sic] will not be a single person left who knows the run.<sup>76</sup>

And if this was not bad enough, Willshire claimed that 'even the cattle seemed disgusted with him'!<sup>77</sup> As will be seen, the antipathy between the two men spilled over into the dramatic events at Jasper Gorge.



78

The story of the attack on Mulligan and Ligar may be said to begin on April 26<sup>th</sup> 1895 when Mounted Constable Willshire left VRD for the Depot 'to send mail and to see Mulligan through the Gorge.'<sup>79</sup> Loaded wagons are slow-moving and cumbersome at the best of times, and all the more so on a rough track in the narrow confines of a place like

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<sup>74</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 21-3-1895.

<sup>75</sup> Watson to General Manager, Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., 5-12-1895. Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Board Papers, 1893-1927. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/124/1659.

<sup>76</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, entry for 18-3-1895, see also entry for 8-7-1895.

<sup>77</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 38.

<sup>78</sup> Willshire's initials, carved on Gregory's boab. In his book *Land of the Dawning*, Willshire mentions visiting the boab and also that he carved his initials into a rock on top of an isolated hill on the upper Wickham River. I have searched for this hill but not yet located it. However, in 1975 I did find Willshire's initials cut into Chambers Pillar, in Central Australia.

<sup>79</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 26-4-1895.

Jasper Gorge. Because of this, in the gorge the wagons were vulnerable to attack by Aborigines and clearly Willshire considered the threat sufficient for him to provide a police escort, and he had done this from the time he was first stationed in the district.<sup>80</sup>

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

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

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid: 11-6-1894.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid: 5-5-1895.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid: 18-5-1895.

<sup>83</sup> W. H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 74.

<sup>84</sup> See D. Lewis, *The Boab Belt: A Survey of Historic Sites in the North-Central Victoria River District*. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (NT), vol 2, 1996, site 49, pp. 12-16.

<sup>85</sup> E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 235; see also 'Government Resident's Trip to the Victoria River', entry for 24-11-1895, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6891.

Fifty-two years after the event, J. Kyle-Little, who was on VRD in 1895, said the teams usually had 'an escort of five natives not of those parts...armed with Snider rifles and the teamsters had Winchesters.'<sup>86</sup> In the months leading up to the attack the names of four Aboriginal men who were working for Mulligan are mentioned in the Gordon Creek police journal – Harry, Dick, Major and Billy (alias 'Snowball').<sup>87</sup> One of them, 'Mulligan's Dick', who came from Newcastle Waters, had cleared out well before the attack took place.<sup>88</sup> However, from various sources it is clear that the other three 'Queensland natives' had come to the gorge with Mulligan and Ligar and were involved in the attack upon them.<sup>89</sup> There were also three Aboriginal women and a 'half caste' child with Mulligan and Ligar on the fateful trip.<sup>90</sup> In initial reports the women are unnamed, though in later police journal entries three women are named – Mabel, Nellie and Rosy.<sup>91</sup> One came from Happy Creek, a short-lived police station near Camooweal,<sup>92</sup> another was from Wave Hill, and the origin of the third is not stated.<sup>93</sup>

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

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<sup>86</sup> 'Culkah', 'Early Cattle Life', *Pastoral Review*, 15-3-1947. 'Culkah' was a pen name adopted by John Kyle Little, a man who spent a lifetime in the outback as stockman, station manager, mounted policeman and in other occupations ('J.K. Little' [obituary], *Pastoral Review*, 16-12-1953: 1205-06).

<sup>87</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 18-3-1895, 19-3-1895, 18-5-1895; Notes of the Week', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-9-1895.

<sup>88</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 31-3-1895.

<sup>89</sup> 'Outrage by Blacks. Two White Men Speared', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-6-1895.

<sup>90</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 18-5-1895; W. H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 89; Gordon Creek police journal, 22-7-1895; the 'half caste' child may have been the 'half caste little girl known by the name of 'Mary Mulligan', mentioned in the Timber Creek police journal, 28-1-1902.

<sup>91</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 8-12-1895.

<sup>92</sup> The mention of Happy Creek is in a letter from Inspector Paul Foelsche to someone who is unnamed but almost certainly the Government Resident, Charles Dashwood, 14-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539. The identification of Happy Creek as a police station was made in a personal communication from Tony Roberts, author of *Frontier Justice*, in press.

<sup>93</sup> Inspector Paul Foelsche to F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, 14-6-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539.

gorge.<sup>94</sup> On the night in question 'six or seven myalls...visited the waggons and received some tucker', then made a camp across the creek and began a corroboree.<sup>95</sup> Harry, Billy and Major took their guns and went across to join them, something they apparently did regularly and with the acquiescence of the teamsters, but their wives remained at the wagons.<sup>96</sup> Some time after 8 pm the two teamsters were standing near the fire cooking a meal when they were suddenly showered with spears. A stone-headed spear hit Ligar in the back and he sprang for his rifle, but before he got to it a glass-headed spear hit him on the side of the face, nearly severing his nose and penetrating to the left cheekbone. At the same time Mulligan was hit by a spear tipped with a blade from a sheep shear. The *Northern Territory Times* reported that he was wounded in the thigh,<sup>97</sup> but Aeneas Gunn, who was a cousin of Bradshaw and for a period was closely associated with Bradshaw's Run,<sup>98</sup> said that the spear hit Ligar behind the knee and severed the tendons, crippling him for life.<sup>99</sup>

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

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

<sup>95</sup> 'The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 28-6-1895.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> T. Willing and K. Kenneally, *Under a Regent Moon: A historical account of pioneer pastoralists Joseph Bradshaw and Aeneas Gunn at Marigui Settlement, Prince Regent River, Kimberley, Western Australia*, Department of Conservation and Land Management, Western Australia, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>99</sup> Aeneas Gunn, 'The Contributor. Pioneering in Northern Australia', *Prahran Telegraph*, 10-6-1899.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>100</sup> 'The late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 28-6-1895.

<sup>101</sup> Aeneas Gunn, 'The Contributor. Pioneering in Northern Australia', *Prahran Telegraph*, 10-6-1899.

<sup>102</sup> 'A Treacherous Tribe. Interview with Mr. Searcy', *Adelaide Register*, 18-12-1905.

<sup>103</sup> 'The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 28-6-1895.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

long, and they could not take the chance that someone else would arrive in the meantime, so they decided to abandon the wagons and head to the Depot about 100 kilometres away. That evening they took saddles and rifles and went in search of the horses. Of the forty horses that pulled the wagons, the Aborigines had killed one and wounded three, and another three were missing. The other thirty-odd were grazing within a mile of the wagons and the teamsters managed to catch two and get away.<sup>105</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 21-5-1895.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid: 22-5-1895.

waggon & loading we kept watch all day & all night whilst the range was swarming with natives who waved their spears at us.<sup>109</sup>

At the wagons Willshire found everything covered with blood: 'bloodstains on the felloes and spokes, blood on wearing apparel, blood on flour-bags and rifle cases.'<sup>110</sup> He thought the teamsters might have been killed and their bodies thrown in the nearby waterhole, so he 'fired guns off into it to raise the bodies'<sup>111</sup>...and got [his] two blackboys to dive from end to end.'<sup>112</sup>

At 9 am on May 24<sup>th</sup> Jack Watson arrived with two Aborigines and two white men, and everyone began collecting goods scattered on the sides of the gorge.<sup>113</sup> They worked all that day and all the next, and at 6 pm eight more whitemen and four station Aborigines arrived.<sup>114</sup> The latter included a group of overlanders heading for the Kimberley goldfields who had arrived at VRD in time to offer assistance.<sup>115</sup> There were now twenty people at the attack site, all mounted and armed.

After the second lot of men arrived from VRD a letter written by Ligar was found, 'stating that they were speared through their own boys betraying them, & setting the wild natives upon them & that they had gone on to the depot to try and find the "Ark" barge.'<sup>116</sup> Someone had brought bandages and medicines to TK, so Willshire set out to try and catch up with the wounded men to offer medical help.<sup>117</sup> At much the same time (the records are mute on exactly when or why) Watson also set out to find Mulligan and Ligar. Willshire arrived at the Depot at midnight and in the morning found the message left by the teamsters. He immediately set off for Auvergne but on the way met Jack Watson, who had

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid: 23-5-1895.

<sup>110</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, p. 76.

<sup>111</sup> On page 142 of the *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions* (E. and M.A. Radford, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1961), there is described a well-known British superstition that if a gun was fired in the vicinity of a drowned body, 'the concussion would break the gall bladder, and cause the corpse to float.'

<sup>112</sup> W. H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, pp. 76-77.

<sup>113</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 24-5-1895.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid: 25-5-1895.

<sup>115</sup> 'Outrage by Blacks. Two White Men Speared', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-6-1895.

<sup>116</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 26-5-1895.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

been to Auvergne already. Watson told Willshire that the teamsters had gone down river in a boat, so both men started back for Jasper Gorge.<sup>118</sup>

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

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

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid: 27-5-1895.

<sup>119</sup> 'The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 28-6-1895; Log Book of Bradshaws Run, 27-5-1895.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid: 30-5-1895.

<sup>121</sup> 'The Late Outrage by Victoria River Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 28-6-1895; Log Book of Bradshaws Run, 27-5-1895.

<sup>122</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 27-5-1895.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid: 28-5-1895.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid: 29-5-1895.

result of their two days in the ranges was the capture of three middle-aged Aboriginal women whom Watson handed over to Willshire.<sup>125</sup>

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

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

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

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

Willshire had the last word. In his book *Land of the Dawning* he derided Watson for his 'brilliant capture' and claimed that one of the women had a broken arm, another was

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid: 29-5-1895.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid: 30-5-1895.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid: 31-5-1895.

<sup>128</sup> Report on VRD by Jack Watson to Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd., 5-12-1895. Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Board Papers, 1893-1927. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, 2/124/1659.

covered in 'wales [sic] and stripe-like marks extending round her sides', and the third had her breasts swollen and leaking milk, indicating she had an infant that was unaccounted for.<sup>129</sup> The implication of Willshire's statements is that Watson had flogged these women, and given Watson's extreme cruelty on other occasions this may well be correct.

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

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

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

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<sup>129</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, pp. 75-76.

<sup>130</sup> Inspector Paul Foelsche to the Hon the Minister, Charles Dashwood, 20-6-1895. Northern Territory Archives, Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6539; Gordon Creek police journal, 29-7-1895.

<sup>131</sup> Testimonial letter from Thomas Cahill, reproduced on page 101 of Willshire's book, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896).

<sup>132</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 3-7-1895.

<sup>133</sup> W.H. Willshire, *Land of the Dawning*, 1896, pp. 88-89.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*: 88.

Willshire at Gordon Creek, but they managed to escape.<sup>135</sup> Willshire says that Ledgerwood later made a long statement to him about Major, Harry, Billy and Watson, and castigated Watson for 'not offering any assistance, at such a time'.<sup>136</sup> Strangely, in the police journal nothing is said about the shooting of Major, but after Ledgerwood made his statement Major's name does not appear again.

The search for the wanted Aborigines continued for months. Throughout July and August Willshire made several attempts to locate Billy and Harry, without success.<sup>137</sup> In late July Harry's wife and 'the half caste child' were seen on the lower Victoria,<sup>138</sup> and at one stage Harry himself was believed to be '100 yards from VRD meat house'.<sup>139</sup> On July 26<sup>th</sup> both Billy and Harry were believed to be 'lurking about the Wickham'<sup>140</sup> (that is, the VRD homestead),<sup>141</sup> but a wide search the next day found no one. During the search Watson again hampered Willshire by taking back a station Aborigine named Tinker who was assisting him (Willshire), and saying, 'let the bloody police find their own boys if they want any'.<sup>142</sup> Willshire noted that Watson, 'blocks me in my work every possible chance, he curses the police all day to every and anyone.'<sup>143</sup> Next came word that Billy and Harry and their women were 'knocking about' in the bush near Wave Hill, so Willshire patrolled there, but again found nothing.<sup>144</sup> In August Mounted Constable Burt arrived at VRD to investigate the circumstances of the escape of Billy and Harry,<sup>145</sup> and to assist in the hunt for them.<sup>146</sup> He went with Willshire on at least one patrol,<sup>147</sup> but after that seems to have left the district.

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<sup>135</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 8-7-1895.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid: 11-7-1895, 12-7-1895, 20-7-1895, 24-7-1895, 27-7-1895, 15-8-1895, 16-8-1895.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid: 22-7-1895.

<sup>139</sup> W.H. Willshire to J. Watson, 24-7-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6716.

<sup>140</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 26-7-1895.

<sup>141</sup> Victoria River Downs homestead was, and still is, located on the Wickham River, and in early times the station and the homestead were often referred to as 'The Wickham'.

<sup>142</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 27-7-1895.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid: 27-7-1895.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid: 16-8-1895 to 25-8-1895.

<sup>145</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 23-8-1895; Gordon Creek police journal, 15-8-1895.

<sup>146</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 15-8-1895.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid: 17-8-1895.

Harry was finally arrested at Powell's Creek in late August.<sup>148</sup> On being questioned he was reported as admitting to being involved in everything except the actual spearing of the teamsters. He also said that subsequent to the attack, Billy had been killed by the 'myall blacks' who then 'took possession of the lubras belonging to the Queensland boys.'<sup>149</sup> The news of Harry's capture reached Willshire on September 19<sup>th</sup>, two days before his station was taken over by Mounted Constable Edmond O'Keefe.<sup>150</sup> Willshire left Gordon Creek on September 26<sup>th</sup>, travelling first to Darwin where he was to be a witness at Harry's trial, and then on to a new post in South Australia.<sup>151</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>148</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 30-8-1895.

<sup>149</sup> 'Notes of the Week', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-9-1895.

<sup>150</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 19-9-1895, 21-9-1895.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*: 26-3-1895, 26-9-1895; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 4-10-1895.

<sup>152</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 4-12-1895.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*: 12-1-1896, 13-1-1896, 15-1-1896, 19-2-1896.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*: 21-10-1895.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*: 30-9-1895, 9-12-1895, 11-1-1896.

<sup>156</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 13-3-1896.

right to take the law into his own hands with a native than one white man had to chastise another.<sup>157</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid: 6-9-1895.

<sup>159</sup> 'Law Courts', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 18-6-1881, 9-7-1881.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid: 27-12-1879.

<sup>161</sup> For example, the party that went out after the killers of Rudolph Philchowski in 1913 was gone for nearly three weeks (M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, Corgi Books, Britain, 1985, p. 398

<sup>162</sup> C.E. Gaunt, 'Old Time Memories. The Lepers of Arnhem Land and Sketches', *The Northern Standard*, 6-7-1934.

of those directly involved, says that Watson's party caught up with the Aborigines 'after a long search and by patient tracking',<sup>163</sup> but I believe that Watson's party actually caught up with the Aborigines very quickly; possibly Watson had sent a couple of his Aborigines into the ranges ahead of time to locate their camps.

Did he and his men return on the second day and make no further attempt to find the offenders because they felt that 'justice' had been done? And if so, what did this 'justice' amount to? Gordon Buchanan states that 'a large camp of the enemy' was surprised and 'adequate punishment' was inflicted,<sup>164</sup> and his claim finds support in a cutting from the *Northern Territory Times* of June 14<sup>th</sup> 1895, held by the South Australian Archives. This cutting is a report of the attack on Mulligan and Ligar, and at the end, written with a nibbed pen in old-style cursive script is the comment, 'and 60 were shot'.<sup>165</sup>

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

And what of Mulligan and Ligar? Both men survived their wounds and the terrible ordeal they endured in getting to medical help in Darwin, and some months later Mulligan he left for Queensland for additional treatment.<sup>166</sup> When he recovered sufficiently he returned to VRD, probably to retrieve his property, but the blacks seemed to have had it in for him.

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<sup>163</sup> G. Buchanan, *Packhorse and Waterhole*, 1933, pp. 114-115.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> This cutting was brought to my attention by Dr Peter Read and Dr Jay Arthur. It is in the State Records Office in South Australia, but the original reference information has been lost and I have not yet been able to relocate it. The original article comes from the *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-6-1895.

<sup>166</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 22-11-1895.

Some days after he arrived back on VRD Aborigines raided his camp and stole, among other things, his Winchester rifle and a lot of cartridges.<sup>167</sup> This probably did not occur in Jasper Gorge, but the gorge blacks were suspects. Mounted Constable O'Keefe went to Jasper Gorge and spent a week riding over and around the Stokes Range looking for the offenders, but without success.<sup>168</sup>

enough, not touching any of the liquor. Trooper Willshire, with one of the trackers, kept watch over the wagons, the other being despatched to Victoria River Downs Station for assistance. On receiving message Mr. Watson, the station manager, immediately started for the scene with a relief party of eighteen Europeans, consisting of station hands and a party of Europeans en route for the Kimberley, who fortunately happened to be at the station. Search made by this strong party resulted in the greater portion of the stolen goods being recovered, some of the articles being found on the fanges, 800 to 1000 feet high, and at a distance of from 16 to 20 miles from the wagons—showing that a large number of blacks must have been engaged in the work of plunder. Some old lubras were captured, and through them it was ascertained that Mulligan's black-boys and their lubras had leagued with the local natives, and were plentifully supplied with ammunition for their revolvers and rifles, stolen from the wagons. The boys had also taken six to eight horses, with saddles and outfits. f (cc new shot)

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

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

<sup>168</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 20-4-1896 to 1-5-1896.

Mulligan returned to teamstering, but appears to have shifted his operations to the Katherine region.<sup>169</sup> On April 25<sup>th</sup> 1900 he arrived in his camp on the Ferguson River looking worried and ill. The next day he looked much worse and was seen to write several letters and to burn some documents. Later he 'vomited much blood' and that night he died peacefully, after saying 'he was tired and sad and going away to his own country'.<sup>170</sup> His death was put down to natural causes, but the wound he received in Jasper Gorge had caused him ongoing pain, and he had become a regular user of morphine.<sup>171</sup> From the circumstances of his death it seems likely that he had suicided with an overdose.

Ligar returned to VRD in August 1895, possibly to assist in retrieving Mulligan's team horses,<sup>172</sup> and left for Katherine a month later.<sup>173</sup> According to Ernestine Hill, for the rest of his life Ligar would 'scare the girls' by pushing a hairpin or a peg through the hole left by the spear.<sup>174</sup> Eventually he drifted over the Ord River country where he died from the combined effects of excessive drinking and dysentery on the 'Bend of the Ord' in December 1901.<sup>175</sup> He bequeathed his estate to a sister living in Texas.<sup>176</sup>

The attack on Mulligan and Ligar was the most serious that occurred in Jasper Gorge, but attacks, robbery and other problems continued for years. On his way through the gorge in January 1897 O'Keefe came across a large gathering of Aborigines in the gorge and dispersed them,<sup>177</sup> and in 1899 two cyclists riding through the gorge on a round Australia trip had spears thrown at them, and saw 'a number of natives on Mountain singing out & displaying their spears.'<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> An advertisement which appeared in the *Northern Territory Times & Gazette* of February 7<sup>th</sup> 1896 advised that Mulligan was removing his teams from VRD to Maude Creek, north of Katherine.

<sup>170</sup> 'The late J. Mulligan', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 4-5-1900.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*: 4-5-1900.

<sup>172</sup> Gordon Creek police journal, 6-8-1895.

<sup>173</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 6-9-1895.

<sup>174</sup> E. Hill, *The Territory*, Sydney, 1951, pp. 235-36.

<sup>175</sup> Public Records Office of Western Australia, Occurrence Book [Wyndham], 1899-1902, entry for 29-12-1901, ACC 741-5.

<sup>176</sup> Letter dated 29-12-1901, headed 'East Kimberley District Wyndham Station', about the death of Ligar. Public Records Office of Western Australia. Letter Book [Wyndham police station], 1901-1902. ACC 741-13.

<sup>177</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 16-1-1897.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*: 17-11-1899.

When drover 'Dead Sweet' Joe Stevenson was taking a mob of about 500 bullocks through the gorge in October 1900, a crowd of over one hundred armed Aborigines 'sprang up from behind rocks, trees, etc., and commenced yelling and screaming like so many demons'.<sup>179</sup> As was intended, the entire herd took fright and rushed through the gorge, and a number were either killed or so badly injured that they had to be left behind. As soon as the drovers had gone a safe distance the Aborigines came down and began a great feast. Later the 'black fiends' sent word to the 'station boys' that they intended to do the same to every mob passing through the gorge, and that they also intended to attack the station supply wagons, loot them, and kill the teamsters. The *Northern Territory Times* expressed the fear that if nothing was done local residents would be tempted to take the law into their own hands. It reported that many were of the opinion that the number of police in the district should be 'very largely increased', but that one old drover suggested withdrawing the police altogether and giving the locals a 'free hand' to deal with the problem.<sup>180</sup>

After Stevenson's experience the authorities finally acted. The practice of providing a police escort for the teams travelling through the gorge was extended to drovers with mobs of cattle<sup>181</sup> and an extra trooper and two trackers were sent to Timber Creek to begin special patrols of troublesome areas, including Jasper Gorge (see Chapter 4). Between January 1902 and November 1903 the police escorted drovers and travellers through the gorge on seven occasions.<sup>182</sup> Within a few years of the special patrol being introduced, attacks on or harassment of white travellers in the gorge almost ceased. One writer has credited donkey teamster Burt Drew with demonstrating 'how the cunning could be overcome, and the gorge could be made safe for democracy,' but exactly how Drew did this is not stated.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> 'More Trouble with the Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 23-11-1900.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> For example, see Timber Creek police journal, 8-7-1901 (part of patrol report dated 14-7-1901), 13-8-1902, 27-9-1903.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*: 4-1-1902, 1-5-1902, 2-5-1902, 13-7-1902, 4-8-1902, 6-8-1902, 7-8-1902, 8-8-1902, 13-9-1902, 31-10-1902, 6-11-1903.

<sup>183</sup> 'Vanguard', 'The Real Backblocks', *Cummins and Campbell Monthly Magazine*, March issue, 1934, p. 82.

Furthermore, Drew first appeared in the district in 1917<sup>184</sup> but Aborigines had ceased to be a real problem in the gorge more than a decade earlier.

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

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

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

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<sup>184</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 8-9-1917.

<sup>185</sup> T. Ronan, *Deep Of the Sky*. 1962, pp. 184-86.

<sup>186</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 22-8-1909.

<sup>187</sup> State Records Office of Western Australia. Wyndham Occurrence Book, 1886-1888, entry for 9-8-1887. ACC 741/1.

<sup>188</sup> *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 28-2-1896.

Gunn's *We of the Never Never*.<sup>189</sup> The Aborigines who threw the spears at him remained hidden behind rocks, but called out in English that they would 'kill all white ——.' Wakelin, 'immediately set spurs to his horse and galloped for his life, spears following him until he outdistanced his pursuers.'<sup>190</sup> After a prolonged police investigation, Bamboo, Wooroola, and Wanbinola were charged with common assault, convicted, and each sentenced to a years' gaol with hard labour.<sup>191</sup>

The attack on Wakelin was the last known violent incident between blacks and whites in Jasper Gorge; but since that time the myths and legends surrounding the gorge have grown. Possibly the 'aura' of Jasper Gorge has been bolstered by the adventure of travel through it. Long after the possibility of violent conflict became a thing of the past, the gorge remained a rough place for travellers. As late as 1937, on possibly the last trip through the gorge by one of the old-style wagons loaded with stores for VRD, the wagon became bogged (plate 84). The teamster was Burt Drew, who had been carrying the VRD loadings since 1917<sup>192</sup> and was known as the 'Donkey King'.<sup>193</sup> Apparently Drew took advantage of being stuck in the mud in time-honoured fashion – he got stuck into the rum. A month later he was brought in to the VRD hospital (plate 85) where for days he 'had the horrors well & truly.'<sup>194</sup>

For years it appears there was a relic in the gorge which provided tangible proof of the violent history of Jasper Gorge – an Aboriginal skull with a bullet hole in it. From time to time I have heard stories about Aboriginal skulls with bullet holes, but I rarely met a storyteller who claimed to have actually seen one. For my own part, I have seen numerous Aboriginal skulls in rock shelters throughout the Victoria River country and elsewhere in the north, but never one with a bullet hole. I began to suspect that such stories were white

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<sup>189</sup> 'W, Farmer Whyte, "'Never Never" People. Their Strange Fate,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-2-1942.

<sup>190</sup> 'Attacked by Blacks. Shower of Spears in a Gorge', *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 17-9-1909.

<sup>191</sup> 'Felonious Assault', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 16-9-1910.

<sup>192</sup> Timber Creek police journal, 8-9-17.

<sup>193</sup> E. Morey, 'The Donkey Man'. *Northern Territory Newsletter*, Darwin, February issue, 1977, pp. 12-13; E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 239.

<sup>194</sup> Sister Joyce Falconbridge's diary, entries for November 1937, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 853/P1.

myths – until I finally met a firsthand witness. In 1948 Lexie Simmons<sup>195</sup> went to stay with her sister at VRD and soon afterwards some of the station hands took them on a picnic to Jasper Gorge. While there the hands showed Lexie a skull with a bullet hole in a rock shelter near the eastern end of the gorge.<sup>196</sup> As she was telling me her story a few years ago, in my mind I was planning to go and search for it myself, but when I mentioned this to Lexie she told me that the skull had been taken back to VRD homestead, and was no longer in the gorge.

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

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<sup>195</sup> Lexie was born Alexandra Gurr and in 1949 became Mrs George Bates, George then being head stockman at Mount Sanford, on VRD. In later years she divorced George and remarried to a man named Simmons.

<sup>196</sup> Personal communication, Lexie Simmons.

