



# The Aborigines: The Original Australians

**T**he word 'aborigine' means the original inhabitants and was first used in reference to the early people of the region around Rome.<sup>(1)</sup> The term is now used almost exclusively to describe the people who lived in Australia before the arrival of the Europeans and their descendants.

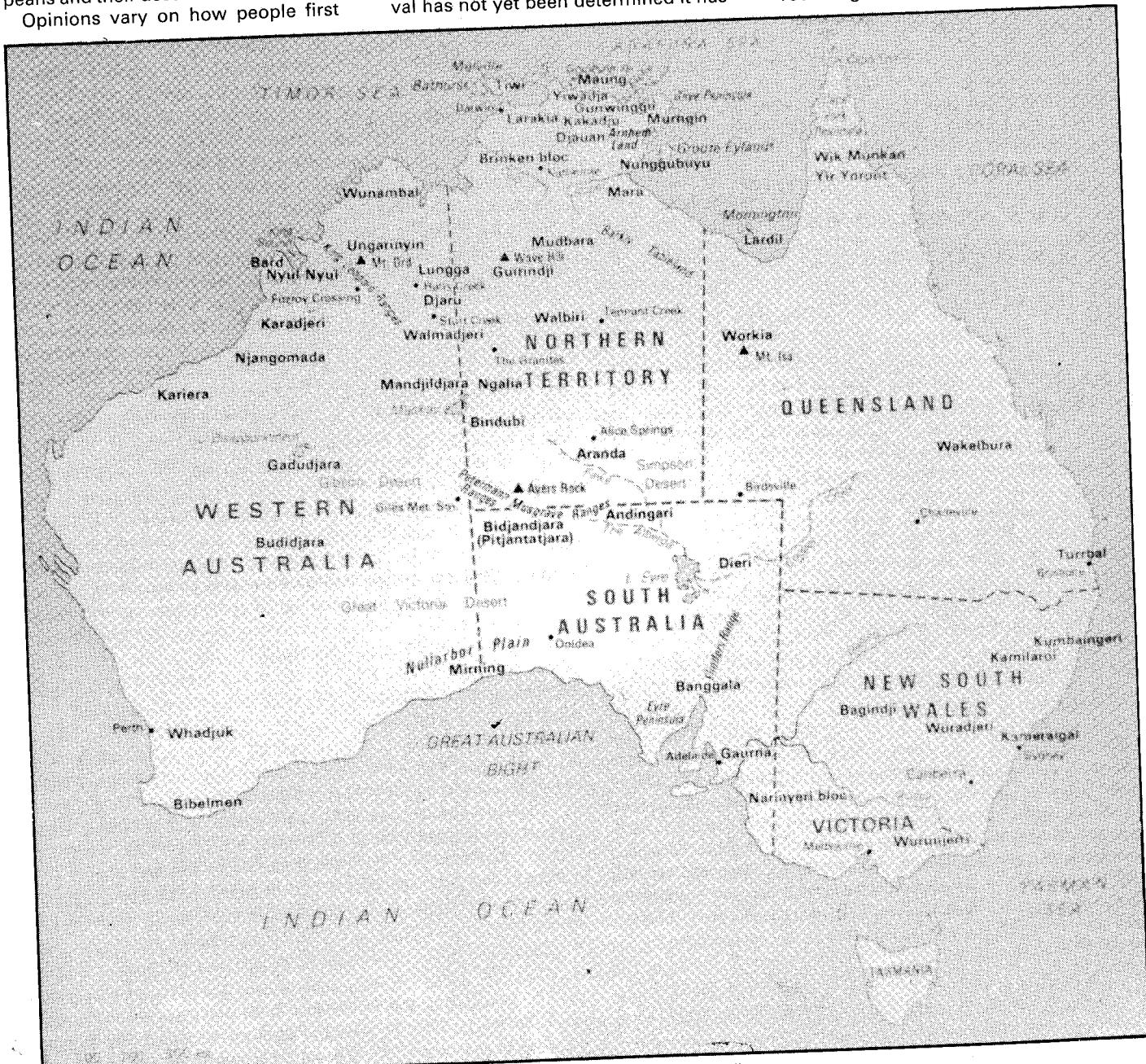
Opinions vary on how people first

by Des Ryan

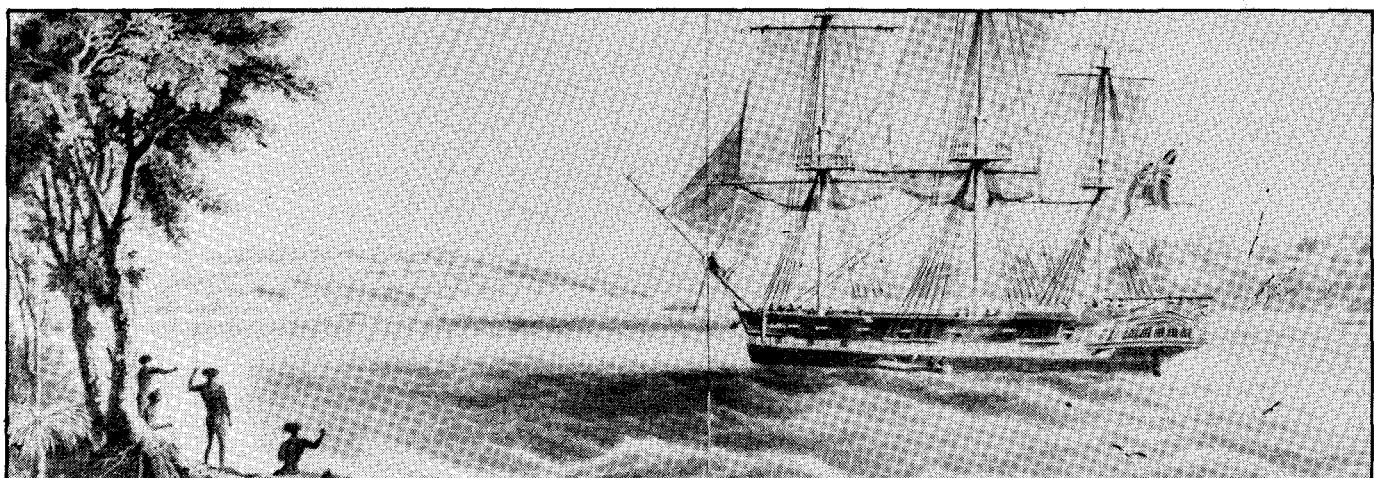
arrived on the Australian continent. Did they arrive during an Ice Age? Did they come by boat, or by travelling over a large land-mass, which geologists believe included the eastern part of South America, Africa, Arabia, the Indian Peninsula and Australia?<sup>(2)</sup> Although the exact period of their arrival has not yet been determined it has

been estimated that they first set foot there some 50,000 — and possibly as much as 120,000 — years ago.

Before the Europeans arrived it is estimated that about 750,000 Aborigines were divided into more than 500 groupings. As might be expected, the population density varied according to the fertility of the country. When a group became too big to live on the food available in the surrounding area some of its members



### *Original distribution of the larger Aboriginal tribes.*



A transport ship arrives at Sydney Harbour.

moved on to the next unoccupied fertile area, but still retained links with the parent group. By this process they extended their occupation of the continent. With the passage of time, differences developed in dialect, rituals and customs. Basically, however, the Aborigines retained a common culture and lifestyle.<sup>(3)</sup>

Being a semi-nomadic people, their habitation varied in different parts of the country. In warm areas they erected windbreaks; in cold and damp areas they built huts or used caves. They preferred to go around naked, apart from small pubic coverings, but in colder areas fur cloaks were worn. In marriage it was desired that the partners be related to each other in a particular way. The tribes had their own form of law and order and the elders arbitrated and passed judgement on grievances.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans the Aborigines had never heard the story of how God had created the world, but they did believe that spirit beings had shaped the land, brought various species to life and established human life and culture.<sup>(4)</sup> They also had coming-of-age rituals for boys and girls, and mother-in-laws seem to have been regarded in the same light as in European countries. The Aborigines remained in this natural state up to the arrival of the first colonists – the convicts and their masters.

An English pirate, William Dampier, gave the first detailed account of the Aborigines, Dampier landed at Buccaneers' Archipelago on 4th January, 1688, and, like the Dutch mariners before him, was not impressed by the country or its inhabitants. His description was not flattering:

*The Hodmadods of Monomatapa, though a nasty People, yet for Wealth are Gentlemen to these; who have no Houses and Skin Garments, Sheep, Poultry, and Fruits of the Earth, Ostrich Eggs, &c. as the Hodmadods have: and setting aside their humane*

*shape, they differ but little from Brutes. They are tall, strait bodied, and thin, with small long Limbs. They have great Heads, round Foreheads, and great Brows. Their Eye-lids are always half closed, to keep the Flies out of their Eyes: they being so troublesome here, that no fanning will keep them from coming to ones Face; and without the assistance of both hands to keep them off, they will creep into ones Nostrils; and Mouth too, if the Lips are not shut very close. So that from their Infancy being thus annoyed with these Insects, they do never open their Eyes, as other People: and therefore they cannot see far; unless they hold up their Heads, as if they were looking at somewhat over them.*

*They have great Bottle noses, pretty full lips, and wide mouths. The two fore-teeth of their upper Jaw are wanting in all of them, men and women, old and young; whether they draw them out, I know not: Neither have they any Beards. They are long visaged, and of a very unpleasing aspect, having no one graceful feature in their faces. Their Hair is black, short and curl'd, like that of the Negroes: and not long and lank like the common Indians. The colour of their skins, both of their faces and the rest of their body, is coal black, like that of the Negroes of Guineas.<sup>(5)</sup>*

Dampier went on to describe the Aborigines' attire, living conditions and food, and again his account is direct and cold-eyed:

*They have no sort of Cloths; but a piece of the rind of a Tree ty'd like a Girdle about their wastes, and a handful of long Grass, or 2 or 4 small green Boughs, full of Leaves, thrust under their Girdle, to cover their nakedness.*

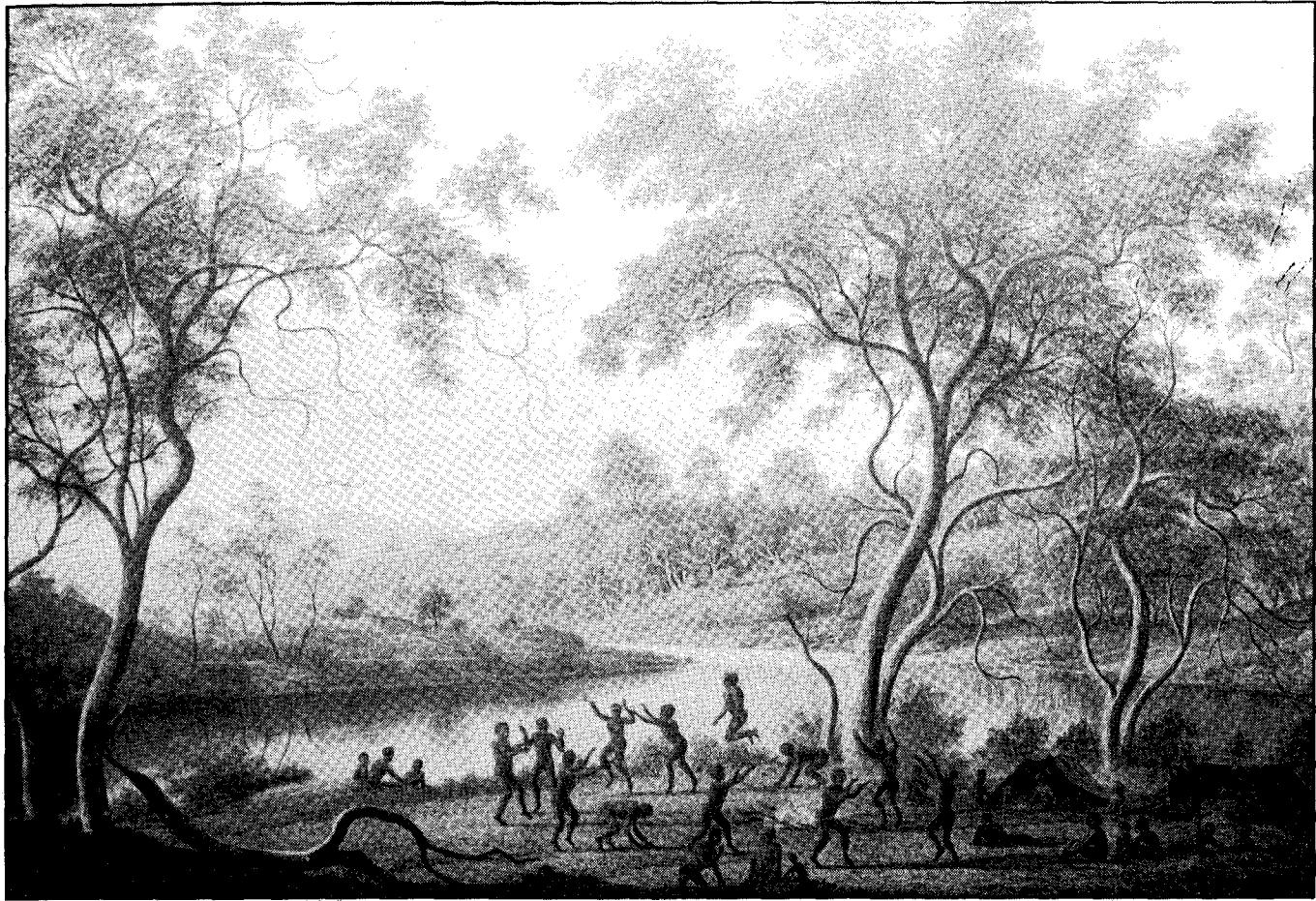
*They have no Houses, but lye in the open Air, without any covering; the Earth being their Bed, and the*

*Heaven their Canopy. Whether they cohabit one Man to one Woman, or promiscuously, I know not: but they do live in Companies, 20 or 30 Men, Women, and Children together. Their only food is a small sort of Fish. Sometimes they get as many Fish as makes them a plentiful Banquet; and at other times they scarce get every one a taste: but be it little or much that they get, every one has his part, as well the young and tender, as the old and feeble, who are not able to go abroad, as the strong and lusty.<sup>(6)</sup>*

The discovery of Australia and the island of Van Diemen's Land (later known as Tasmania) and also the charting of the western coastline was made by the Dutch mariners who sailed those waters between the years 1606 and 1642. They called the north-west section New Holland,<sup>(7)</sup> but the eastern half remained uncharted until the arrival there in 1770 of another English explorer, Captain James Cook. Accounts of Cook's first contacts with the Aborigines differ.

As Cook's ship made its way along the coast from Cape Hicks between the 20th and 29th April, a glimpse was caught of four or five Aborigines 'who took to the woods'. On 29th April Cook arrived at Botany Bay. Some Aborigines were seen on the shore, but most of them ran away; two remained behind and threw their spears but made off quickly when Cook's men replied with three musket shots. Cook and his crew members followed them into a wooded area beyond the shore where they found some bark shelters. They also discovered a few children in one of the shelters and gave them some beads. On the beach itself were some roughly built canoes made from the bark of trees; the bark was folded over and tied at both ends; horizontal sticks were placed in the middle to keep the bark open and to provide seating accommodation.

Another version of this incident goes



Aborigines in playful mood by the riverside.

as follows. One of the Aborigines threw a stone at the small boat as a mark of their opposition to the landing. Cook replied with light musket shot, and the women and children on the beaches set up a loud howl. Thus the Europeans began their brutal association with the Aborigines on the east coast.<sup>(9)</sup>

Cook was anxious to meet the Aborigines but whenever he approached one of their camps they made off. But he persisted and recorded:

*There were six canoes and six small fires on the shore, and mussels roasting upon them, and a few oysters laying near. From this we conjectured that there had been just six people.<sup>(10)</sup> Those whom he did see he describes as 'of a very dark brown colour, but not black, nor had they woolly, frizzled hair, but black and lank like ours. Some that we saw had their faces and bodies painted with a sort of white paint or pigment ... However, we could know but very little of their customs as we were never able to form any connections with them.<sup>(11)</sup>*

But he must have made contact with them, because on 24th June the animal we now know as the kangaroo was spotted. Cook believed the Aborigines

called the animal 'kangaroo', but 'kanguru', or 'kangaru', was merely their general response to a question he had asked. Cook made these notes as he moved northwards along the east coast, but his main mission was the charting of the coastline. On 14th July the first real contact was made with the Aborigines. Four men arrived in a small canoe with an outrigger. They were asked to put their weapons aside, which they did, and were then given presents. Cook noted that they were less than 5 feet 6 inches in height and had small limbs:

*Some parts of their bodies had been painted over with red and one of them had his upper lip and breast painted with streaks of white. Their features were far from being disagreeable, their voices were soft and tunable, and they could easily repeat any word after us. But no one could understand a word they said.<sup>(12)</sup>*

On 20th July a party of nearly twenty Aboriginal men and women approached Cook's ship; ten came aboard and asked for turtle meat and, on being refused, tried to pull two turtles overboard. When stopped by members of the crew, they paddled back to the shore and set fire to some goods and property Cook's party had

been using. Some shots were fired from the ship and the Aborigines were scared off.

By 22nd August Cook had reached Cape York and the next day, on Possession Island, a small island off Cape York, he hoisted the British flag and claimed possession of the whole eastern coast, together with all the bays, harbours, rivers and islands situated along it. Cook's general view of the Aborigines was sympathetic:

*From what I have seen of the natives of New Holland, they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans: being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life, they Covet not Magnificent House's Household stuff &c., they live in a warm and fine Climate and enjoy a very wholesome Air, so that they have very little need of Clothing and this*



they seem to be fully sensible of, for many to whom we gave Cloth & acto to, left it carelessly upon the Sea beach and in the woods as a thing they had no manner of use for. In short they seem'd to set no Value upon anything we gave them, nor would they ever part with anything of their own for any one article we could offer them: this in my opinion argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life and that they have no superfluities.<sup>(13)</sup>

Up to 1775 Britain had dumped her unwanted convict population on the shores of America, but with the outbreak of war between Britain and her thirteen American colonies this outlet was blocked. Prisoners were then kept in hulks tied up along the Thames and in other harbours. People became frightened in case there would be mass escapes, fever, epidemics or smallpox; some said the hulks were schools of villainy and vice.<sup>(14)</sup>

Consequently, the British government was forced to take an interest in the lands that Captain Cook had claimed and it was decided to found a penal settlement at Botany Bay. On the 13th May, 1787, a fleet of eleven ships set sail for Australia: on board were nineteen officers, twenty-four non-commissioned officers, eight drummers, one hundred and sixty privates, thirty wives and twelve children. Estimates on the number of convicts vary. About three weeks before the fleet sailed an official document gave the figures as 565 men, 153 women, 6 boys and 5 girls.<sup>(15)</sup> A retired naval officer, Captain Arthur Phillip, was appointed Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief of the territory of New South Wales.

On 18th January, 1788, the ship *Supply*, with Captain Phillip aboard, sailed into Botany Bay. About forty Aborigines could be seen on the shore; some were fishing. When they saw the massive ship, they ran to the beach and pulled in their canoes while their women gathered the children and ran off into the bush. A handful of the Aboriginal men remained behind, brandishing, their spears, and shouting, 'warr'a, warr'a!' With this half-angry, half-frightened cry to 'go away!' the Aborigines greeted the first ship of the fleet that ferried the white convicts to colonise Australia. The Europeans ignored the yells, and the Aborigines have suffered from negligence and indifference ever since.<sup>(16)</sup>

On 20th January the rest of the fleet arrived. Disenchanted with the terrain and harbour facilities, Governor Phillip decided to try another spot, about sixteen miles northwards, that Captain Cook had charted on his maps of the area and named Port Jackson. Phillip



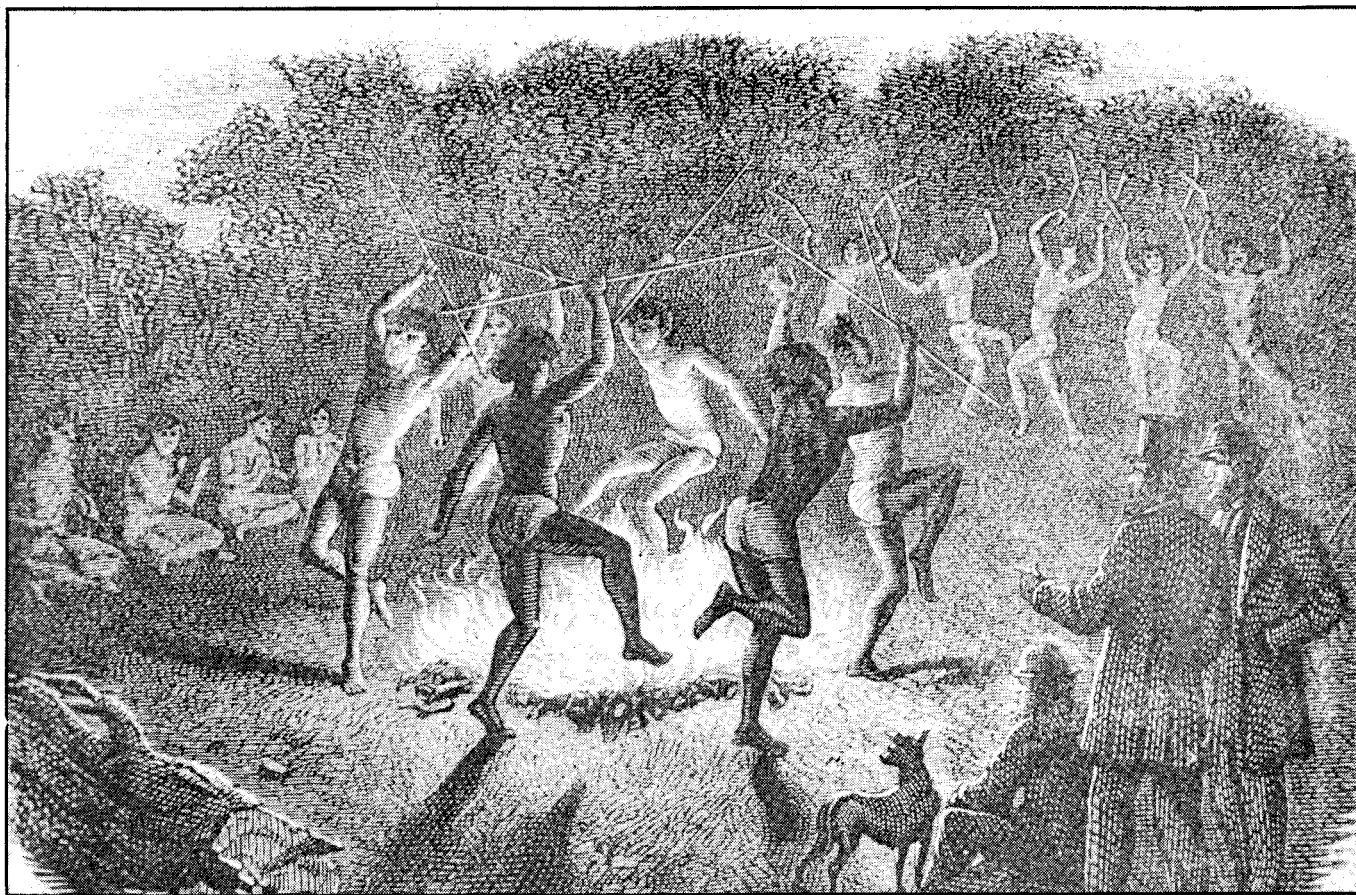
Convicts attack a group of captive Aborigines.

set out with three ships, and as they entered the great harbour of Port Jackson – a harbour with many bays and coves – groups of Aborigines could be seen shouting, gesticulating, and running along the rocky headlands abreast of the ships. Phillip surveyed the coast for three days and, after finding a suitable cove with a fresh water stream running into it, named it Sydney Cove, after Lord Sydney, the British Home Secretary. Today Port Jackson is better known as Sydney Harbour. Although the Aborigines were overawed by the white men and their ships, they showed no hostility; one of them even accompanied the Governor as he inspected the camp where the sailors were preparing food. Phillip returned to Botany Bay on 23rd January and issued instructions to the rest of the ships to proceed to Port Jackson. On 26th January, 1788, the British flag was raised, and a volley of shots fired. Thus

the penal colony was initiated.<sup>(17)</sup>

Governor Phillip gave orders that the Aborigines were not to be molested or ill-treated. We can assume that one of his reasons was the fear that the fledgling penal settlement would be wiped out. By the end of February it was clear to the Aborigines that the white men were there to stay, and when some of the colonists made an attempt to land in one of the other coves they stoned them. The Aborigines also began to steal the white men's food and tools. On 30th May they killed two rush-cutters. As a result, Governor Phillip decided to introduce them to one of the sanctions of the white men's world – flogging. The few Aborigines who watched, showed only disgust and terror.

Attempts to force the Aborigines to conform to the settlers' way of life proved futile. Meanwhile the number of Aborigines living around white set-



*Night dance, or Corroboree, from Illustrated Missionary News, September, 1868.*

tlements declined due to the effects of alcohol and European diseases, principally smallpox.

During the Governorship of Lachlan Macquarie (1810-22) a limited number of Aboriginal families were settled on small farms; but this experiment did not work out and they soon wandered back into the bush. Macquarie also set up a school for Aboriginal boys and girls at Parramatta, not far from Sydney.<sup>(18)</sup>

By 1831 the system of free land grants to free settlers came to an end, but this did not stop squatters from occupying ground beyond the settlements. Inevitably, this led to clashes with the Aborigines, as traditional hunting-grounds and tribal areas were occupied and fenced off. Some settlers were killed and their livestock stolen; in retaliation Aborigines were slain in large numbers as the frontier was pushed further inland into their tribal areas.

The settlers saw land as a means of production to be used and exploited, whereas the Aborigines' attitude was complex and in total contrast to the European approach. As the Australian writer Robyn Davidson has put it:

*Traditional Aborigines are only nomadic over a fixed and specific area of country to which they belong.*

*The notion of people owning land, rather than land owning people, is, in terms of their own law, nonsense. Land to them is a religious phenomenon. They believe that the earth's topography was formed by their ancestors – spirits who came from the time of creation (the Dreaming) who journeyed across Australia and established sacred sites. Descendants of these Dreamtime heroes must protect the sites through ritual and ceremony. The people belonging to a particular piece of land have a spiritual responsibility for it – indeed an individual's whole identity is bound up with that piece of land. Sacred objects – tchuringas – are something like title deeds to the land of each clan.<sup>(19)</sup>*

Thomas Keneally, the well known Australian writer, has also explored this theme:

*According to the Aborigines these tribal areas had been created out of void earth by hero ancestors in a period known as the Dreamtime. Trails which criss-cross the tribal earth from one waterhole to another, from one food source to another, had also been created by the hero ancestors, and the Aboriginal followed them in daily life, maintaining them and enriching them through ceremo-*

*nial and magic. One tribe might share hero ancestors with another, so that the Dreaming trails might run across a number of tribal boundaries. In areas rich in rainfall, sources of food and vegetation, these trails might run for less than sixty miles. But in the great deserts of the centre, where clan groups were more widely scattered and where people had to walk further to collect the bounty of earth – euro, wallaby, kangaroo – rat, nardoo, yam – the trails could run for a thousand miles or more.<sup>(20)</sup>*

But this spiritual concept of land cut little ice with the land-hungry settlers. One sheep farmer was heard to comment 'that there was no more harm in shooting a native, than there was in shooting a dog'. Another white settler told the story of how he and some other men had followed a party of Aborigines who had stampeded cattle, and when they caught up with them they shot about a hundred. He justified this massacre by maintaining that it was preposterous to suppose that the Aborigines had souls.<sup>(21)</sup> Among the Aborigines who did organise fierce resistance was a New South Wales man, Mosquito, who, when captured, was transported to Van Diemen's Land. In 1925, before mounting the gallows,



he said: 'White fella soon kill all black fella ...' (22)

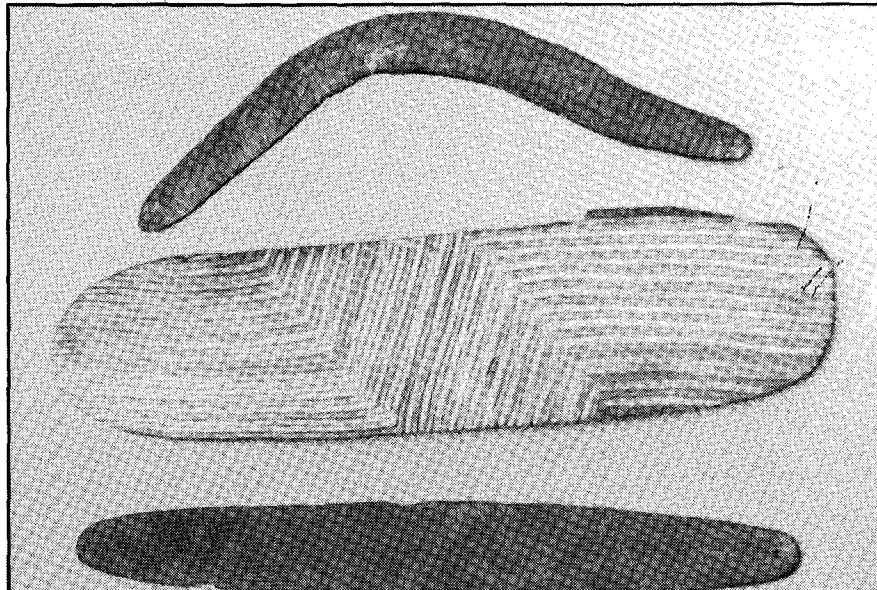
In a mass killing which took place in 1838, at a place called Myall Creek, in Northern New South Wales, it did not seem to matter to the white killers whether the Aborigines had committed crimes or not. Some stock had been stolen and cattle stampeded. The station hands had no idea of who the culprits were. An inoffensive party of Aborigines, some forty miles from the scene, were captured. Twenty-eight unarmed women and children, and two men were tied together and marched to a nearby stockyards where they were slaughtered with muskets and cutlasses. The corpses were later burned on a pyre. The perpetrators of this massacre had to have two trials before they were convicted. The total death rate in the attacks in this area was estimated at around 2,500 whites and about 20,000 Aborigines. (23)

In Tasmania, the largest island off the south coast of Australia, the fate of the Aborigines was much the same. The white settlers' opinions on how to deal with them reflected a similar brutal attitude as that on the mainland. 'They must be captured or exterminated' was the prevailing doctrine.

It was suggested that an attempt be made to poison them by setting up 'decoy huts, containing flour and sugar, strongly impregnated with poison'. (24) Sometimes whites killed Aborigines just for the sport of it. The civil authorities, supported by a few soldiers, set out whenever the occasion offered in search of the tribesmen. Few were brought in alive, even when rewards of £5 for every adult and £2 for each child were offered.

By 1830 about 2,000 out of an estimated 7,000 Tasmanian Aborigines had already been killed. There was a growing fear among the settlers at that time of an attack by the Aboriginal tribes from the areas known as the Big River and Oyster Bay on the east coast. The Governor of Tasmania, Sir George Arthur, agreed under pressure from the settlers to launch an offensive against both tribes. This took the form of an immense hunt in which some 2,000 men, soldiers, settlers and convicts participated. The operation was known as the Black Line, with the men being stretched across two-thirds of the island. The object of the operation was to make a downwards sweep of the east coast and to trap the Aborigines on the Tasman Peninsula. (25)

The hunt began on 7th October and on its conclusion seven weeks later all it had caught were two Aborigines, a man and a boy; two more had been shot and the rest had escaped through the cordon of soldiers and settlers. Although the operation was, in a sense, a fiasco, it did have the effect of driving



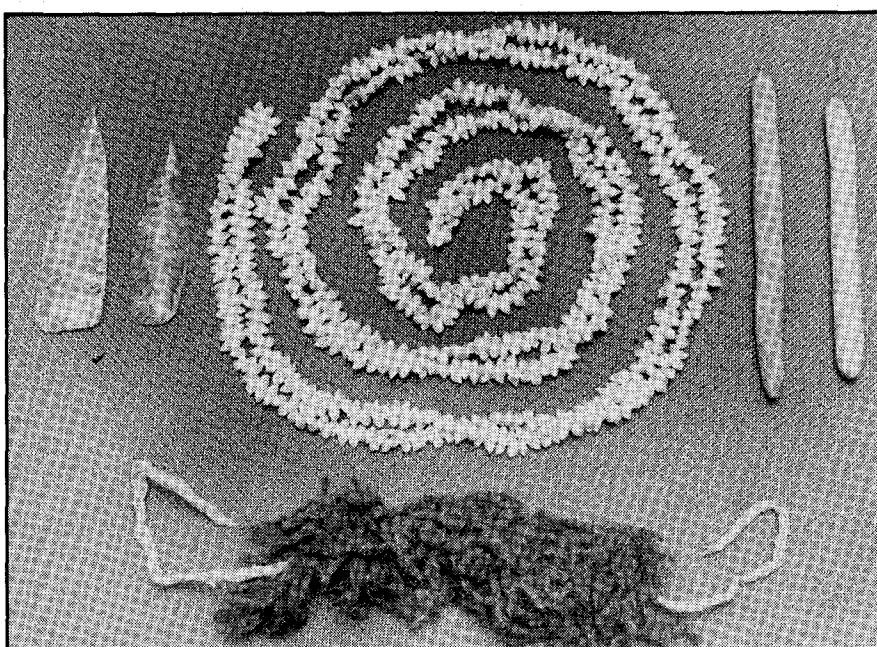
*West Australian Aborigine artifacts collected by Miss Lenihan c. 1910, and donated to Limerick Museum. Top: Returning boomerang; the returning boomerang was used in hunting or as a plaything. The 'war' boomerang did not return. Centre: Parrying shield of wood, with ridge-and-groove ornamentation, the grooves painted white. Below: Bullroarer; a wooden slat tied to a thong and whirled to produce a roaring sound during religious rites.*

the Big River tribe further westwards; the Oyster Bay tribe was split up and driven from their habitual territory. (26) The operation also helped to break their will to resist further incursions on their land. By 1834, after promises of sanctuary, food and clothing, and of a safe haven where no white man would persecute them, the Aborigines of Tasmania were sent, first to Gun Carriage Island, and later to a camp on Flinders Island in the Bass Strait, where in 1835 only 150 were left. By 1843 only 54 remained.

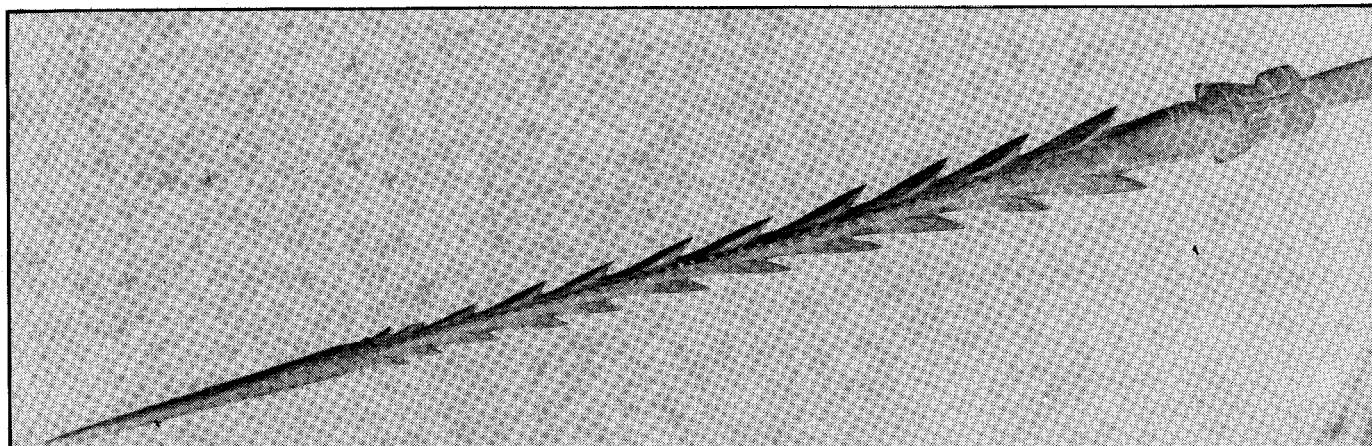
In 1846 survivors were brought back to Tasmania and settled at a place called Oyster Cove, near Hobart. The last tribesman died in 1869, and in 1876 the last remaining full-blood Aborigine in Tasmania, a woman called Truganini, passed away.

Examining the relationship between the Aborigines and the settlers, the Australian writer, Patsy Adam-Smith, has concluded:

*While the traditional life of the Aborigine may have been over-idealised, there's no doubt that the*



*West Australian Aborigine artifacts collected by Miss Lenihan c. 1910, and donated to Limerick Museum. Left: Two spearheads made from bottle/telegraph insulation glass. Centre top: String of shells worn as a head ornament by a woman at Corroborees – festivals with songs and symbolic dances to celebrate important events. Length (doubled): 1.8 metres (5'11"). Right: Two bamborus; message sticks of notched wood, used in inter-tribal communication as the credential of the messenger and as an aid to fix the message in his memory. Centre bottom: Neck ornament of kangaroo/wallaby wool.*



Head of a West Australian Aborigine spear collected by Miss Lenihan c.1910, and donated to Limerick Museum. Carved from a single piece of wood, the spear is 2.78 metres (9'1") long, and has a stylised human face at the base of the head.

two hundred-year encounter between white and black has been catastrophic. Today it has become fashionable to damn missionaries for this but they were the only organised body who acted as a buffer between a pioneer, expansionist society and a people who, because they had been isolated on this large island for a hundred thousand years, were defenceless. During my childhood, missionaries trained girls beautifully – to be house servants. But outside the stern and protective walls of the mission much worse could happen.<sup>(27)</sup>

But although some missionaries may well have acted as buffers of sorts between the exploiters and the exploited, their attitude was often condescending and patronising. For instance, the Church Missionary Society's sponsored book, *Far Off Part II*, published in 1893, written by the anonymous female author of the earlier *The Peep of Day Book*, and revised by Rev. H.C. Acworth of the South American Missionary Society, depicts the Aborigines in language that shows a lack of understanding of their culture:

Before the English came, no country in the world had so few inhabitants as Australia. The natives lived in separate tribes, and spoke different languages. Most of them lived near the sea, or near rivers ... Some heathen countries are full of idols – but there are no idols in the wilds of Australia. No – the poor natives have no thought of God. Like the beasts that perish, they live from day to day without prayer or praise thinking only of eating and drinking, hunting and dancing. And what is the appearance of these people? They are seldom tall, and they generally look half-starved. They are always called 'Blacks', but they are really a purplish copper colour, and not black. They look darker because their bodies are stained with grease, charcoal and earth. They have plenty of thick black

hair, not woolly but curly. Their bodies are hairy, their eyes hazel and blood-shot, their noses broad, and their cheek-bones high. Their mouths are pleasing, particularly when they smile, and their teeth are beautiful. In summer they need no clothes, in winter they can get none. Yet some of them make rugs of opossum-skins, and blankets of bark, soaked and beaten out. Before a fight, the men paint their dark skins with red and white stripes over their ribs, and sometimes plaster their hair with bright-red earth and adorn it with feathers ... There are a great many tribes of natives and they look upon one another as enemies. If a man of one tribe dares to come and hunt in the lands of another tribe, he is immediately killed ... These ignorant savages have their amusements. Dancing is the chief amusement! At every full moon there is a grand dance, called the Corroboree. It is the men who dance, while the women sit by and beat time. Nothing can be more weird to see than a Corroboree. It is held in the night, by the light of blazing fires. The men are made to look more frightful than usual, by great patches and stripes of red and white clay all over their bodies; and they play all manner of strange antics, and utter all kinds of strange yells; so that you might think it was a dance of black spirits ... It may surprise you to hear that these wild creatures have a turn both for music and drawing. Figures have been found carved upon the rocks, which show their turn for drawing. These figures represent beasts, fishes and men, and are much better done than could have been supposed. There are few savages who can sing as well as these natives, but the words of their songs are very foolish. These are the words of one song:

'Eat great deal; eat, eat, eat;  
Eat again; plenty to eat;  
Eat more yet; eat, eat, eat'.

If a pig could sing, surely this song would just suit its fancy. How sad to think a man, who is made to praise God for ever and ever, should have no higher joy than eating!<sup>(28)</sup>

The book comments briefly on the decline of the natives and, after contrasting their behaviour with that of the bushrangers, concludes this section with a disparaging description of the Aborigines' attitude to work:

Once there were only black people in Australia and no white; now there are many white and few black and it is probable that soon there will be no black people, but only white. Ever since the white people began to settle there, the black people have been dying away very fast: for the white people have taken away the lands where the blacks used to hunt, and have filled them with their sheep and cattle. The poor black people have learned also from the white people to love rum and beer and tobacco. Nothing does them more harm than strong drink.

Now and then, men come called 'Bushrangers'. The natives are not nearly so dangerous as these wicked white men; indeed the natives are generally very harmless, unless provoked by ill-treatment. Occasionally, they are willing to make themselves useful, by reaping corn and washing sheep; and a little reward satisfies them, such as a blanket, or an old coat ... They are very clever in following a track. They are often very useful to the police, when they are trying to catch any one. The black women can help in the wash-house, and in the farm-yard; but they are too much besmeared with grease to be fit for the kitchen. It is wise never to give a good dinner to a black till his work is done, because he always eats so much that he can work no more that day ... They are generally soon tired of working.<sup>(29)</sup>

Lest these quotations be considered one-sided, let it be said that not all the



clergymen and nuns who went on the Australian missions adopted such an insensitive and superficial attitude. Indeed, there are some notable examples of dedicated service by missionaries, Protestant and Catholic, among the Aborigines – and perhaps here the selfless educational work of the Benedictine Order should be mentioned. But, for all that, it cannot be denied that far too many brought with them the prejudices of their fellow Europeans.

Attacks on Aborigines continued up to living memory. Just sixty years ago, in 1928, the last recorded massacre of black families took place.

As Australia entered the 20th century, the Aborigines had disappeared almost entirely from much of the continent. A census taken in 1930 showed that there were 61,000 full-bloods and 18,000 half-castes. The census also showed that only 11,000 were in some form of regular employment. The tribal groups that had survived lived mainly in the remoter areas of northern and western Australia and also in the desert areas. In all about 40,000 still lived a nomadic type of existence. Official policy towards the Aborigines was much the same as that of the United States government towards its Indian population: keep them on reservations out of sight and largely out of mind.

In 1937 the Department of the Interior proclaimed new goals for the Aborigines in the Northern Territory based on the conviction that with better health, housing, education and employment measures the Aborigines would be accepted into the white community. The principle of assimilation also met with the approval of the other state governments, but it had only a limited degree of success, and many of the Aborigines were found to be living in squalor on the outskirts of towns. In general, thousands of Aborigines, in spite of the efforts by the government to intergrate them, remained separated from the white community.

A new drive toward assimilation was made in the Northern Territory during the 1950s, when a division for native welfare was set up, one of its tasks being to prepare the Aborigines for full citizenship. An important step in this direction came into operation in 1957 when half-castes automatically became citizens; full-bloods could apply for citizenship if they could show that they were fully capable of looking after themselves and their families. Provision was made also for job-training and other assistance. Most of the other states introduced similar laws. But, as Robyn Davidson has recorded, the great Australian drive towards homogeneity failed to embrace the Aborigines:

*That the great drive did not succeed,*



*A magistrate charging among the Aborigines and slashing at them with his broadsword, 1855.*

*after two hundred years of sustained effort, in turning Aborigines into white men has everything to do with the resilience of Aboriginal culture ... But there were no Aborigines here (in Queensland). The survivors of disease and war had been rounded up and sent to government settlements which were, and still are, concentration camps ...<sup>(30)</sup>*

In 1958 a number of groups concerned with Aboriginal welfare and based within the five mainland states got together and formed the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement. There were three Aborigines among the twenty-five people who formulated a charter calling for the acceptance of a number of basic principles: equal rights with other citizens, a standard of living adequate for health and well-being, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care, equal pay for equal work, with industrial protection, free and compulsory education for detribalized Aborigines and the absolute retention of all remaining Aboriginal reserves.<sup>(31)</sup> Social welfare restrictions on the granting of pensions and maternity allowances to those Aborigines who were not classed as citizens were removed in 1959.

In 1961 a federal parliamentary committee survey revealed that fewer than 2,000 bush Aborigines remained in the desert areas between Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and that they were gradually coming out of their isolation, a few at a time. The right to vote was another subject that the parliamentary committee dealt with. The Aborigines living in the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia already had the right to vote in state and federal elections, but those living in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory were still denied the franchise. The committee recommended that the

right to vote be given to all adult Aborigines.

Meanwhile the number of Aborigines in employment was increasing. Some got jobs as mechanics; others in mining; more had gone back to hunting crocodiles, whose skins were bringing in £1 an inch at the time. Aborigines were also becoming more vocal. When the Federal government tried to grant leases for mining rights on some tribal hunting grounds in the Northern Territory some Aborigines protested and sent a signed bark petition to the capital city of Canberra. The parliament rejected it on a technicality; another petition was prepared and sent off. The end result of all this was that an all-party committee was set up and, after its investigations, the government undertook to see that a royalty was paid into a general fund for the benefit of the Aborigines in the Northern Territory during the life of the 43 year lease.<sup>(32)</sup>

In 1963, Charles Perkins, who was part-Aborigine, and a student at Sydney University, led fellow-students on a number of 'freedom rides' through the New South Wales outback with the aim of ending segregation in cinemas, swimming pools and public places. In 1965 Perkins became the first Aborigine to graduate from an Australian university.<sup>(33)</sup>

In 1966, when reviewing Aboriginal affairs for the *Times* newspaper, he attacked the policy of assimilation, pointing out that apart from material degradation, the Aborigines' greatest loss had been pride in their race which had resulted in lack of self-respect. He went on to say that solutions would not be found in 'dogmatic government policy or in outmoded anthropological suppositions'. He urged that land rights or mining royalties be given as compensation for lost tribal grounds. He



Aborigines hunting game in Western Australia with a nonreturning boomerang (at left) and a spear and woomera, or spear-thrower.

saw this as a way for the Aborigines to regain their self-esteem.<sup>(34)</sup>

In 1967 almost 90% of the Australian electorate voted in a referendum to give the federal government special powers to legislate new measures relating to the Aboriginal people. One such measure enacted was that Aborigines would be counted in the national census. When the 1971 census was taken, it recorded 130,000 Aborigines; but it was claimed that if the full-bloods, half-castes and quarter-castes had been counted, twice that number of people who were recognisably Aborigine would have been recorded. These figures also showed that the Aboriginal population was on the increase and not dying out as some people had thought. The journalist John Pilger relates in his book *Heroes* that, when he was growing up in Sydney during the 1930s, he had been led to believe that the whites were innocent bystanders to the slow and 'natural' death of the Aboriginal race.

As a result of the agitation of Charles Perkins and pro-Aborigine groups, the issue of Aborigine rights began to receive more attention. There were calls to let Aborigines have more of a say in their own affairs, particularly in legal, educational and health services. On 20th January, 1972, three Aborigines erected a tent on the lawns

in front of Parliament House in Canberra to protest against the government's refusal to recognise Aboriginal land rights; with support from other groups and individuals, it was not long before a miniature tent city covered the grounds. By the time they were torn down six months later, land rights had become a leading political issue. In the mid-70s the federal government inaugurated the first land transfers to Aborigines in the Northern Territory.

But old habits and racist prejudices die hard. Robyn Davidson has complained:

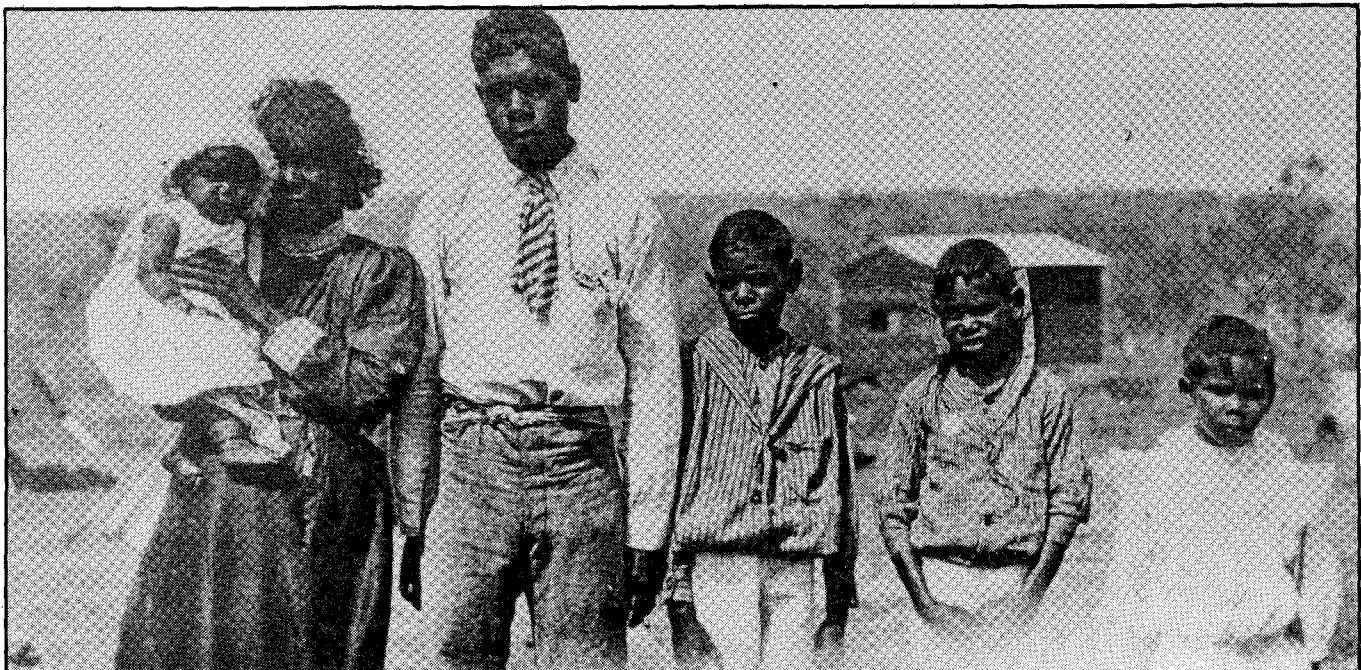
*When representatives of the World Council of Churches visited Australia to compile a report on discrimination and injustice, the Premier of Queensland would not allow his officials to meet them. When a team of medical people went to black communities throughout Australia in an attempt to eradicate trachoma, an eye disease which affects – often blinds – one in four Aboriginal people, Bjelke (the Premier) sent them packing because they were encouraging Aborigines to vote.*<sup>(35)</sup>

In 1978 the then Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, acknowledged that the history of the Aboriginal people over the period of white settlement had been one of 'neglect, deprivation, grinding poverty and per-

secution'. Fraser also helped to clear the way for Aboriginal community leaders to advise the government on policy initiatives; this led to the setting up of the National Aboriginal Council. Its thirty-five members were chosen by Aboriginal voters – but the main spearhead was the federally-funded Aboriginal Development Commission. The Commission, under the chairmanship of Charles Perkins, acquired land and business enterprises for Aboriginal groups.<sup>(36)</sup>

By 1981 more than a quarter of the land of the Northern Territory has passed into Aboriginal hands, and individual Aboriginal groups were also successful in securing contracts with mining companies which provided for special 'royalty' payments covering extraction of mineral deposits.<sup>(37)</sup> In the state of South Australia the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act gave the Aborigines freehold title to 11% of the state's total area. The state governments of Western Australia and Queensland were also working out details of similar schemes, but with more limited responses to the proposals for the transfers of large Aboriginal reserves.

When the present Prime Minister of Australia, Bob Hawke, came to power in 1983, his Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, spoke of Aboriginal land rights as a restitution



A Queensland Aborigine family living on a mission settlement at the turn of the century.

for white Australia's genocidal past and as a final healing of old wounds. A national land rights' Act was to be drafted. It was said that the principles of land rights had already been laid down, and that to deny the Aborigines the right to prevent mining on their land was to deny them basic rights and justice.<sup>(38)</sup>

During the 1984 election campaign powerful mining interests conducted an openly racist campaign, television being one of their main platforms. In the last critical weeks before the election, the then West Australian Labour Premier and now the newly-appointed Australian Ambassador to Ireland, Brian Burke, met Bob Hawke. They talked about the 'problem' of land rights and of the need to be 'fair' to the mining interests which has invested in the future of Australia. After this meeting Hawke effectively cancelled Labour Party policy which would have given the Aborigines the right to control resources on their land. An Aborigine later remarked that 'the betrayal this time at least wore a smile'.<sup>(39)</sup>

Last year the Queensland state government was accused of injecting young Aboriginal women with a contraceptive drug to slow the growth of the indigenous population.<sup>(40)</sup>

The unemployment rate among Aborigines is higher than among the white community. The lifespan of the white male is longer than that of the Aboriginal male. The growth of black children is impaired by high levels of infection, unbalanced diets and poor hygiene. Aborigines are imprisoned at a rate 14 times higher than that for whites, and there has been a call

recently for an investigation into the large number of deaths of blacks in police custody. It is said that Aborigines are so used to being assaulted by police that they think it is a normal part of being arrested.<sup>(41)</sup>

Although all Aborigines are now Australian citizens, eligible to vote and to receive social service benefits, social acceptance by whites still remains limited. And, as merely one per cent of the population, they have no electoral power, and continue to feel betrayed.<sup>(42)</sup>

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the eminent French anthropologist and philosopher, once observed of the art of the Aborigines that certain animals were most frequently depicted in their drawings and engravings not because they were 'good to eat' but because they were 'good to think'. The conclusion he drew from his study of this subject could very well apply to the Aborigines themselves:

*It is hard for us to penetrate the world of the cave artists. Our perspectives are not theirs, and our beliefs and conceptions of the world are certainly different. But whatever it was that motivated the strokes of their brushes and the incisions of their engraving tools, there was an astonishing durability about it.*<sup>(43)</sup>

It is ironic and sad to reflect that the art of the Aborigines has proved itself to be far more durable than its creators.

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