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Deborah Bird Rose
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1 *Remembrance*

The conquest of Australia was born in the oppression of the poor and dispossessed in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Those in power assigned the cause of social problems to those who suffered most, and sought to alleviate problems by getting rid of people: transportation to the Antipodes. The aim was not only to displace people, but also massively to control them. Power and terror were key values; in actualising them in a new society the powerful re-created much of the system which had led them to seek penal colonies in the first place.

In the new land convicts, itinerant rural workers, and bushrangers (outlaws) developed their own values for survival and resistance. 'Mateship' and a 'fair go', the social and cultural representations of equality, became essential features of Australian identity (Ward 1958 offers an eloquent analysis). Subsequently, these values came to inform those social movements, particularly trade unionism, aimed at resisting oppression. The poet Henry Lawson wrote in 1894: 'When the ideal of "mateship" is realised, the monopolists will not be able to hold the land from us' (in Wilkes 1978:215).

The colony was meant to be self-sufficient. Exploration, settlement, and development were officially the key processes by which land was to be 'discovered', occupied, and made to be productive. Less officially, it was a matter of forcibly wresting control of the land from the people who already lived there. This continent-wide undeclared war of conquest was based on a single intent: winning.

Aboriginal people in the Victoria River valley of the Northern Territory of Australia first encountered European settlers in 1883 when Victoria River Downs, then the largest cattle station in the world, was established. At that time there were four or five thousand Aboriginal people living in the area. Fifty-five years later only 187 remained.

Most of this conquest has happened within living memory, and Aborigines tell the stories. Hobbles Danayari, a master story teller and political analyst, located the origins of conquest unmistakably in the

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past, and clearly stated the brutality of the process: 'We have been shot. Captain Cook came knocking [killing] people for land and for gold.' Many white Australians will find these words quaint. They know that Captain Cook did not venture anywhere near the Northern Territory of Australia, as Aboriginal story tellers assert. Nor was he conspicuous in his brutality; compared to subsequent events, his actions were humane. Aboriginal historians locate the facts of many portions of their recent history in the person of Captain Cook. In Hobbles' account, Captain Cook, and Europeans generally, had an insatiable desire for land and minerals. When other people got in the way, they were killed. Equally importantly, in Hobbles' view, European invaders killed Aboriginal people because they did not want survivors who could tell the truth about what had happened.

Many Aboriginal people who discuss Captain Cook express a mixture of revulsion and disbelief: that Europeans preferred to shoot rather than to converse, and that they held the lives of human beings to be of less value than those of cattle. Stated so baldly, this is not the stuff of proud legends.

Invasion is a sustained process with no end in sight. In 1988, Australia's bicentennial year, it was clear that Australian history is not so much a set of events or social relations as an arena of self-definition, and that the strategy of denial is not confined to the past. The indigenous people are the official losers, but when we step away from the fanfare of ideologies, we hear another story. The invaders focussed their options along the barrel of a gun, and their denial of the past constantly distorts their assertions of their own identity, and of their relationships to others.

Europeans most frequently construct Aborigines as emblems: persons are envisaged as signs which signify European-defined Aboriginality. Their art, their archaeological remains, their concepts of the sacred, and their physical presence are appropriated to fuel images of national identity. Shadowy but essential figures in Australian mythology, Aborigines have been represented as intrinsic to Australia's past and largely irrelevant to its future. In a society which takes progress as a self-evident marker of success, images of Aborigines most frequently serve to contrast the past and the present. They rarely figure at all in images of times to come.

This book tells of some of the Aboriginal survivors of the great Australian holocaust known as colonisation. What forms of remembrance, what understandings of humanity, of living systems, and of the future sustain these people and inspire them to reach out to others?

* * *

I went to the Victoria River valley for the first time in September 1980 as an aspiring anthropologist. It was the end of the dry season; the earth was red and grasses were yellow, gold, orange and brown. On

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the plains the scattered gum trees had strikingly white trunks and dusky green leaves. River and mesas provided a contrast of colour and form: sudden dark hills moved snakelike toward the horizon, and a dense tree-green marked the path of the Wickham River. The sky was big, and immensely blue. It was the most beautiful country I had ever seen.

The small Aboriginal settlement known as Yarralin had a different appeal. In a broad but superficial view it looked like the setting for a documentary movie on fourth-world misery, featuring poverty, neglect, abuse, and disease. On looking closer, I found aspects of Yarralin that seemed inexpressibly sweet to me because they reminded me so clearly of the shanty town near which I had lived when I was a child in Wyoming. Here were the same remains of broken down cars with smashed out windows, car seats with springs poking through serving as outdoor couches, discarded clothing, and a seeming proliferation of children and animals. Here, too, were the signs of care which transfigure images and illuminate people: a tiny plant carefully surrounded by wire, babies in lacy pastel dresses.

There were times when being in Yarralin was hard for me; when I was bewildered, confused, and exhausted. But no matter how utterly strange, exasperated, or heartbroken I felt, I could look to the country to lift my spirits. And the small reminders of my childhood brought me back to my essential sense of our shared humanity which underlies the search to understand each other.

In the two years during which I lived in Yarralin, and during many subsequent visits, people gave me a great deal: instruction, friendship, happiness, skills, and understanding. I arrived at a time when Yarralin people were optimistic. They had come through great hardships and had acquired, through their own actions, an area of land excised from Victoria River Downs station. They knew that there was still much to be achieved, and they hoped that making themselves known to other people around the world would help them in their efforts.

In order to appreciate why and how Yarralin people chose to teach others about their world, we need briefly to consider what has happened during the hundred years of invasion.

The Victoria River valley

The great Victoria River of the Northern Territory rises in the sand plains of the desert fringe and winds north through increasingly well-watered savanna grasslands and range country. Mesas and flat-topped ranges of broken sandstone and limestone border much of the Victoria catchment or cut haphazardly across the valley floor through a mosaic of basalt and limestone plains. On the basis of natural vegetation, influenced by rainfall patterns, the region can be divided into three zones: woodlands and tall grasslands in the northern high rainfall areas, sparse low woodlands in the intermediate rainfall areas, and in the arid south, shrublands (Perry 1970).

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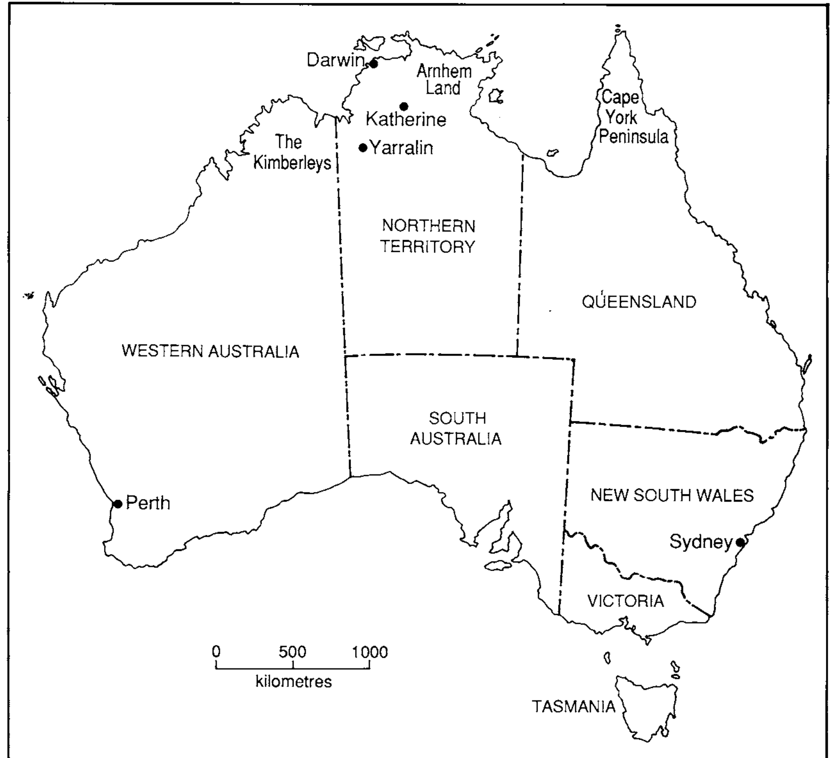
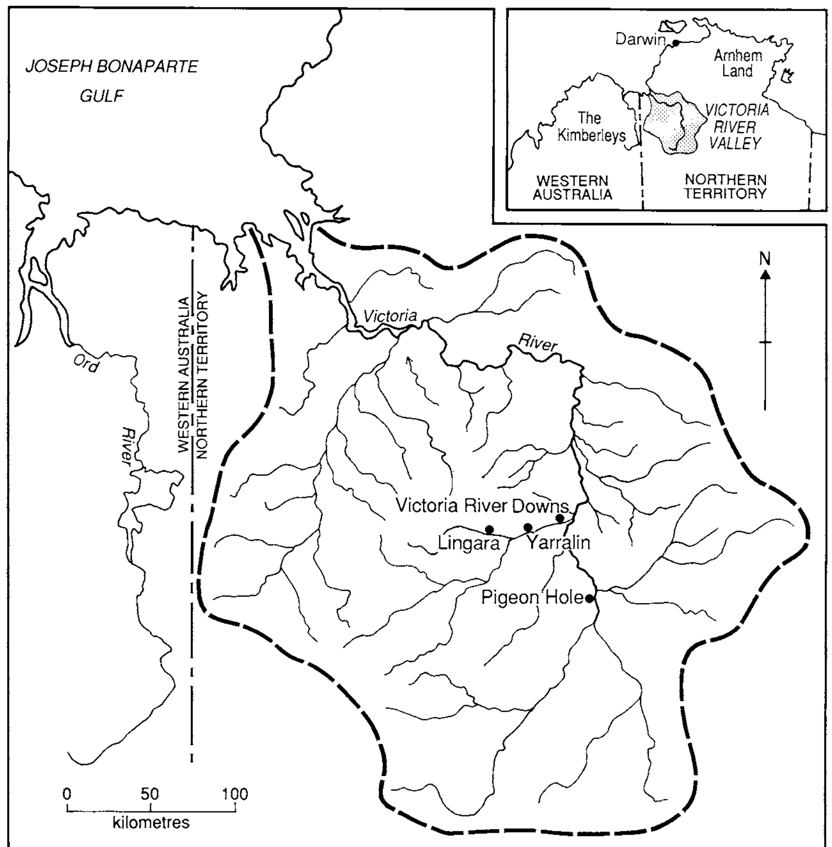


Map 1 Australia



Map 2 Victoria River valley

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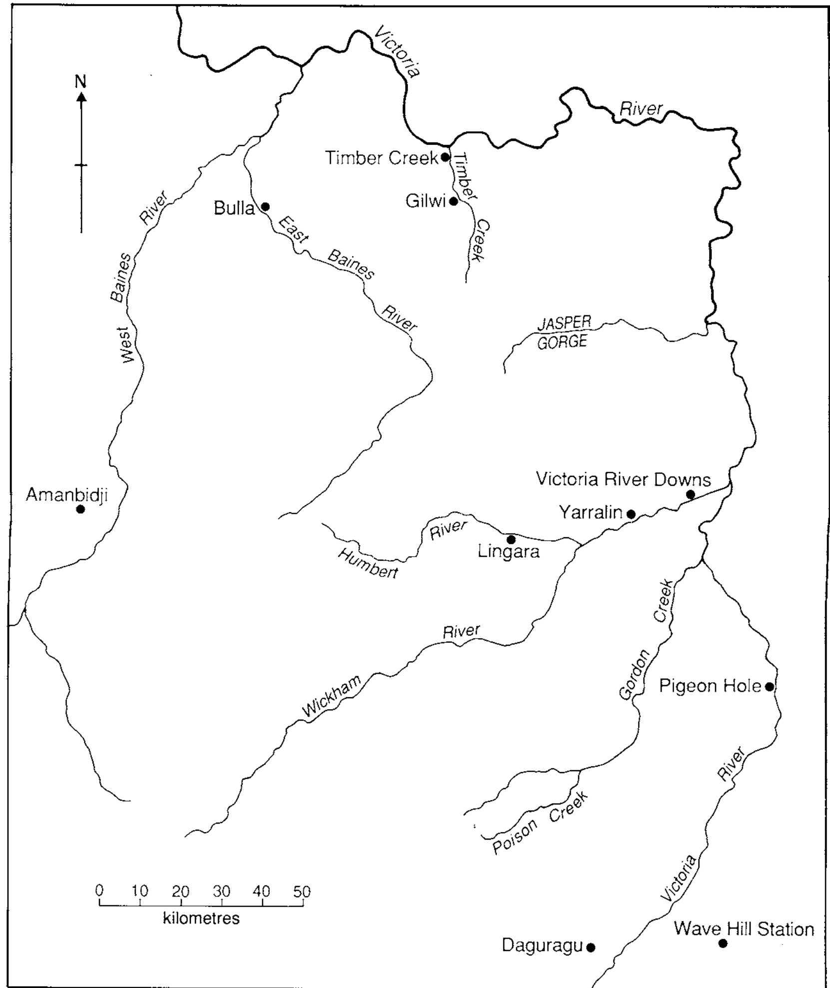

Map 3 Research area: community locations

The climatic regime is a wet-dry cycle with rains, which come during the summer months, preceded by a period of intense heat and humidity. Seasonal conditions may be extremely harsh. July, the coldest month, has average temperatures ranging from a minimum of about ten degrees celsius to a maximum of about twenty-seven. From October to February continuous high humidity is accompanied by daily temperatures of up to forty-five degrees and average overnight lows of about thirty degrees. Average rainfall figures vary, but are usually stated to be between 600 and 700 mm (Slatyer 1970:63; Hassall and Associates 1986:6). These average figures do not show the extreme fluctuations. Both rainfall and temperatures vary significantly from year to year.

There has been no archaeological work done in the Victoria River catchment to provide dates for human occupation. Prehistorians estimate that the Australian continent has been inhabited for at least 50,000 years and there is no reason to suppose that the Victoria River

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valley is anomalous. Work carried out to the west (Dortch 1977) and to the east (Davidson 1935; Mulvaney 1975) offers circumstantial evidence for the supposition that Victoria River Aborigines' adaptation was much the same as that of other Aboriginal people throughout the continent.

Prior to invasion, Aboriginal people in the Victoria River valley lived a life that was similar, as far as can be determined, to that described elsewhere in Australia (Meggitt 1962; Myers 1986; Tonkinson 1978; and Warner 1937 are some of the 'classic' ethnographies). Living for part of the year in family groups, they hunted and fished, collected, propagated and stored vegetable foods, moving through the country as resources reached peak conditions. During the dry season they were restricted by the necessity of staying close to water, a requirement that does not appear to have posed difficulties in this well-watered environment. During the wet season they retreated to the high country, living in rock shelters. Following the wet season the country was particularly rich in foods, and at this time people congregated in large numbers to perform ceremonies, carry on trade, arrange marriages, and resolve disputes. There was a basic, but not rigid, division of labour: men provided meat and women provided plant-derived foods; younger people provided for old people.

Broad estimates derived from hunting and gathering people elsewhere in Australia suggest that about two to four hours per adult per day were spent in producing a livelihood (see Sahlins 1974 for a discussion of 'original affluence'). Working with a relatively simple tool kit, the basic element to subsistence was neither technology nor labour, but knowledge. Freely available to all adults within their own country, knowledge consisted minimally of resource locations, water sources, ecological processes, types of landforms, seasonable variability, animal behaviour, cycles of growth, and types of plants and animals suitable as technical items, foods, medicines and 'tobacco'. Much of the knowledge was coded in song and story–not so much as maps to places unknown, but as condensed ecological history, and as guides to understanding variation and stability.

The Victoria River valley was affected late in the processes by which the continent was brought under the control of European settlers. Europeans had briefly explored the lower Victoria River in 1839 (Stokes 1846). However, the first major European account of the area is that of Gregory (1884) whose expedition traced the entire length of the valley in 1855–56. Gregory's explorations revealed to Europeans the tremendous extent and richness of country suitable for pastoralism, although the first settlers did not arrive until nearly thirty years had passed.

Gregory's expedition also revealed something of Europeans to the thousands of Aborigines whose country he traversed. Unlike those Europeans who were to arrive, en masse, thirty years later, Gregory and his party did not set out to shoot or otherwise molest Aboriginal people. In the country that would later become Victoria River Downs

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station, he established a temporary camp where his men were harassed by Aborigines who, as near as they could ascertain, were telling them to leave the area. Gregory's men fired, and one Aboriginal man may have been wounded. The party did leave, but only after they had completed their explorations.

But like the settlers who were to come later, the explorers went where they chose, making no acknowledgement of Aborigines' rights of ownership. Nor did they seek advice on routes, terrain, waterholes, or dangerous places. With the benefit of hindsight it seems bizarre that he and other explorers chose to treat as unknown wilderness a country that was known intimately to the people for whom it was home. Gregory, like other explorers and settlers, must be seen as a man who exemplified the practices which have generated the 'great Australian loneliness' (Hill 1940). Surrounded by people with whom he could have communicated, who might have offered him assistance, and who would certainly have set him straight on basic facts, he ignored them and made his own hard and isolating way.

Gregory's reports led to European settlement of the Victoria River district; one of the major costs of that settlement was Aboriginal people's lives. It is only possible to estimate the Aboriginal population of the Victoria River district prior to invasion. Birdsell (1953) suggested that a language-identified group (often referred to as a 'tribe') tended toward a mean of 500 persons. He based his assessment on estimates which place the total pre-European population of Australia at about 300,000. Recently, however, these estimates have been revised upwards and it is now thought reasonable to suggest that the total population was of the order of one million (Butlin 1983). White and Mulvaney suggest the figure of 750,000 as a conservative compromise (White and Mulvaney 1987:117).

When Victoria River Downs station (hereafter referred to as VRD) was first demarcated on a map it comprised some 13,060 square miles (SAPP 1910). Included in this area were the homelands of two language-identified groups–Karangpurru and Bilinara. There were also portions of the territories of four others–Ngarinman, Ngaliwurru, Mudbura, and Wardaman (Map 3). The most conservative estimate, based on a figure of 500 persons per language group, suggests that the area which was to become VRD encompassed a population of about 1,400 Aborigines. Bearing in mind the current revisions, a more reliable, and in my opinion still quite conservative, estimate would triple this figure: 4,200 people.

The first census available to me was prepared by VRD station in 1939. The Aboriginal population on VRD was given as 187 people. The population loss between 1880 and 1939 can be calculated to give varying, but equally horrendous, figures depending upon which estimates we take as a base line. Over the years, somewhere between 86.5 per cent and 95.6 per cent of the Aboriginal population of the VRD area was lost. These figures are comparable to others in the north. Ian Keen (1980:171), for example, estimates population loss in the Alligator

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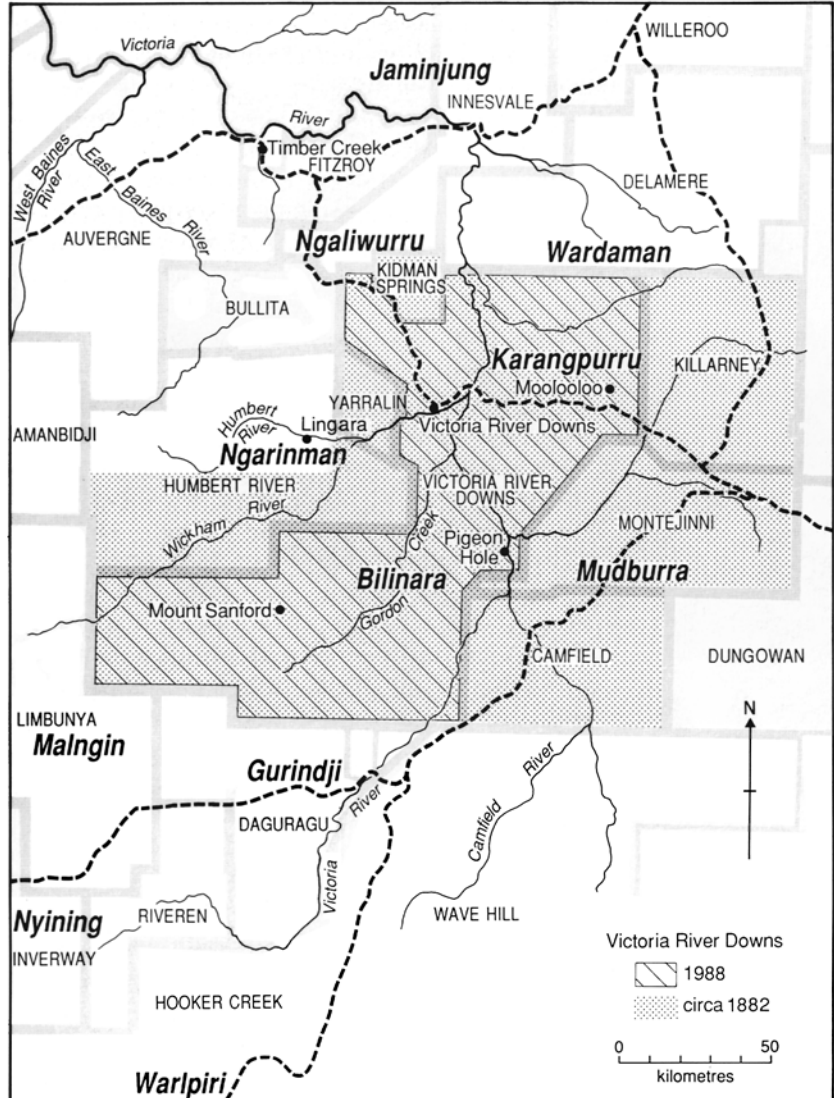

Map 4 Pastoral boundaries and language areas

River region at 97 per cent. With such estimates in mind, we can begin to ask: what happened to all these people?

In 1883 Wave Hill station and Victoria River Downs station, which together comprised the greater part of the Victoria River valley, were permanently stocked with cattle. Officially, there was no war; certainly there were no treaties. Persons wishing to take up pastoral leases in the Northern Territory (then administered by the Colony of South Australia) applied to the Colonial Secretary. VRD was taken up by the wealthy financiers and pastoralists Fisher and Lyons (Makin 1983:52–7).

In addition to pastoralists, other Europeans also came to, or travelled through, the Victoria River District. Within three years of settlement, payable gold was discovered in the Kimberley region west

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of the Victoria River. Many aspiring millionaires came across the east-west road which passed through Victoria River Downs. Police, too, were soon in the area. In response to a decade of European complaints about Aborigines, the first police station in the Victoria River District was established in 1894 (*Gordon Creek Police Journal*, 14 May 1894). The sole policeman, Constable W. H. Willshire, had earlier been tried on charges of murdering Aborigines in the Alice Springs District (*ADB*), and was acquitted, as were most people charged with that offence. It is possible that he was posted to the Victoria River frontier precisely because of his reputation.

From the beginning the Victoria River District was primarily cattle country, and the process of establishing cattle stations was the one which had the most profound impact on Aboriginal people. Most of the managers and workers came to the Northern Territory from Queensland where they had apparently developed strategies through which the country could efficiently be made safe for their purposes. It seems that the initial tactic was to kill; after this period of ruthless extermination, the second tactic was to incorporate the survivors into the station work force.

There were thus two major directions to the conquest strategy: killing and control. Of necessity, Aboriginal people responded differently to each. Initial European violence was met with violent resistance, while later European attempts to acquire and control a labour force were met with various forms of coerced co-operation, as well as non-violent resistance. The two strategies overlapped for about forty years between 1900 and 1940.

Violence and resistance

In the early years of settlement, cattle men and police were engaged in the serious business of conquering the country by decimating its people. They were equally engaged in assuring that word of their actions not be made public, for by the 1880s there had developed behind the frontier, in the southern colonies, a society of settled citizens who protested against the gross ill-treatment of blacks.

G. W. Broughton went to the Kimberley as a young man in 1908, seeking the romance of the outback. Much later he wrote a book of reminiscences in which he stated:

> Native life was held cheap, and a freemasonry of silence among the white men, including often the bush police, helped keep it that way. In far-off Perth, clerics and various "protection" societies tried to get at the truth of stories of native killings . . . but up in the north men kept their mouths shut. The basic philosophy . . . was that the cattlemen had battled their way into this empty land with great hardship and high cost in lives and money; that they were there to stay, and if the wild blacks got in the way, or in other words speared men and killed and harassed cattle, they would be relentlessly shot down. It was as simple and as brutal as that. (1965:53)

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When Aboriginal people in Yarralin first started telling me about the hidden history of the north, they did so out of a particular set of concerns, one of which was their awareness of the silence which has surrounded their history, and the ideologies of conquest (see Reynolds 1974) in which it has been masked. The story of their dispossession has often been treated as if it were inevitable, or as if, somehow, it did not really happen. Broughton's statement that cattlemen battled their way into 'empty country', and then killed its occupants in order to establish their own control, epitomises the central contradiction in Australian ideologies of what is euphemistically termed 'contact'.

To be sure, European sources are not completely silent; particularly in the early years it was accepted that killing was essential. To quote Ernestine Hill, a journalist who interviewed many of the early settlers:

> The business of establishing a cattle empire depended upon killing. To the new station you brought working blacks from some far country–no conspiracies, they were terrified of the "bush niggers" . . . There was "quiet nigger" country and "bad nigger" country, but on most of the far-out stations cattle-killers were a grievous trouble for thirty or forty years. (Hill 1970:175)

The Europeans who made their way there often described themselves as 'practical' men (cf Rowley 1974:286–7). They were cattle men, duffers (rustlers), miners, fugitives from southern justice, bagmen (itinerant workers)–a mixed mob of frontier opportunists. Many were recognised for their brutality, and some were rewarded. Matt Savage, a drover during the early decades of this century, recounted his life story to Keith Willey. He stated that 'a reputation for being "hard on blacks" was worth a dollar a week extra to a stockman–and that was big money on the wages of those days' (Willey 1971:52). Jack (John) Watson, the second manager of VRD, illustrates the point. He had previously worked at a station in Queensland, and the story is that once, when the owner complained that the blacks were giving him a hard time and that his men were so lazy he had to do all the 'dirty work' himself, 'Watson reached into his pocket and pulled out three sets of blackfellows' ears. He slapped them down on the table and snarled: "Take a good look at those, and then say I haven't been doing my job!" ' (ibid: 26).

Constable Willshire was stationed at Gordon Creek while Watson was managing VRD. Although they appear to have been hostile toward each other, there were some matters on which they could co-operate. Willshire's response to a letter requesting information about a certain Aboriginal named Pompey described two men of that name whose deaths he had witnessed as a participant. He concluded by discussing a third man named Pompey and his companion Jimmy, both of whom were killed by Aboriginal warriors:

> I went out and brought both their sculls (sic) in and buried them in my

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