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978-0-521-13178-0 - Whitefella Comin': Aboriginal Responses to Colonialism in  
Northern Australia

David S. Trigger

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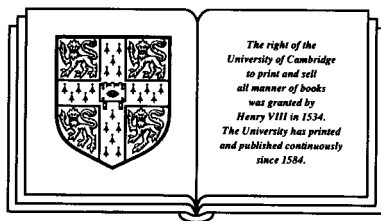
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# WHITEFELLA COMIN'

Aboriginal responses to colonialism  
in northern Australia

David S. Trigger

Department of Anthropology  
The University of Western Australia



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*In memory of Johnny Watson, a great singer.*

*And for Vicki, Benjamin and Rebecca.*

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## Preface

This is a study of power relations and social action at Doomadgee, an Aboriginal settlement on the Nicholson River in the far northwest corner of Queensland, Australia (see map 1). My interest is in how Aboriginal and White people in this relatively remote setting have operated within the political and economic structures of colonialism. If the laws and policies of the state have historically promoted coercive local administrative practices, what have been the responses of Aboriginal people? Has there been resistance as well as compliance? What counts as resistance, and what counts as consent, among subjugated Aboriginal people encapsulated within colonial social relations in northern Australia? Has there been ideological incorporation of Aboriginal people to the extent that they come to attribute legitimacy to the state-sponsored system of administration? And if so, have particular material and social conditions engendered this form of accommodation to a system of colonial domination?

I regard these as questions with complex answers, best addressed by detailed ethnographic and historical research. My study of colonialism, resistance and consent focuses on the period between 1978 and 1983, during which I carried out fifty-four weeks of fieldwork, visiting the settlement and the surrounding region every year except 1981. Aboriginal people at Doomadgee have traditional and historical ties across a region encompassing areas in both Queensland and the Northern Territory, and the study includes investigation of the history of this region prior to the establishment of Doomadgee Mission in the early 1930s. This historical research relies in part on much unpublished archival material, as well as on Aboriginal oral historical accounts.

The country from Burketown in the east to Borroloola in the west has always been populated fairly sparsely. During the period of my

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research, most of the pastoral leases were owned and managed by non-Aboriginal people, although Aboriginal stockmen worked at some of these cattle stations. Just over half of the 212 people living at Burketown, some 90 km east of Doomadgee, were of Aboriginal descent, according to 1981 figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. To the north lies the more populous Aboriginal settlement of Mornington Island. Indeed, you have to drive some 400 km to the south, to Mt Isa (a town of 24 500 with an Aboriginal minority of only 7 per cent), before encountering a centre that is predominantly comprised of White people. The officially recorded Aboriginal population at Doomadgee itself increased during my fieldwork from 885 (DAIA 1978: 26) to 1083 (DAIA 1983: 46), although there is some evidence (DAA n.d.a: 5) that these were over-estimates of the number of people actually resident there at any one time. Most importantly for this study, there have also been up to eighty non-Aboriginal Christian Brethren missionary staff and their families at Doomadgee, a small minority, but one that has exercised colonial influence over the nature of settlement life.

The quotation in the title of this book, 'Whitefella comin', is a statement I heard often during fieldwork, as Aboriginal people commented apprehensively on the approach of a White staff member. Rarely was it said with malice, and on occasions the tone was affectionate. By including this phrase in the title, I mean to invoke the image of the White presence in this remote settlement as simultaneously peripheral to much of Aboriginal social life yet also highly influential over certain aspects of Aboriginal action and consciousness. An understanding of Aboriginal people at Doomadgee requires an understanding of various aspects of non-Aboriginal society. For to borrow from Genovese's (1974: xvi-xvii) similar point appropos north American slavery, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in north Australia have shaped each other in important ways, and an adequate study of their situations cannot treat each in isolation.

Most of the fieldwork for this study was undertaken while I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Queensland and simultaneously an employee funded to carry out research on Aboriginal sites of significance and traditional systems of land tenure. Since completing the PhD dissertation in 1985, I have returned to the Gulf Country for a number of short periods of research.

I wish to acknowledge intellectual and social support from staff and student colleagues in Brisbane during the main period of fieldwork; in particular, my debt to Athol Chase, Chris Anderson and Ian Keen is considerable. I am grateful to Paul Memmott who generously gave me access to historical records held at the Aboriginal Data Archive, University of Queensland. The opportunity to carry



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out the research was made possible by grants from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and I wish to thank Bruce Rigby for assistance in maintaining the continuity of this funding. More recently, comments from Jeremy Beckett have been constructive and, since my move to The University of Western Australia, Bob Tonkinson, Michael Pinches, John Stanton and John Gordon have given much helpful advice as my manuscript has taken shape.

Without the support, collaboration and interest of many Aboriginal residents at Doomadgee, the research could not have been carried out. Several missionary staff also assisted me hospitably. While the Aboriginal people to whom I am indebted are far too numerous to name, I wish to express my gratitude to the community as a whole, and to make special mention of my close friendship with the late Neville Ned and his wife Alice Ned. My residence during much of the fieldwork was at the home of Alan and Cathy Jupiter (and family) to whom I am particularly grateful.

The people of Doomadgee have enriched my life by sharing their experiences with me, and I have attempted to portray my understanding of these experiences both sensitively and accurately. Nevertheless, this book is written for a wider audience, in an attempt to provide an informed analysis of Aboriginal/White relations. As in any study of politics and power, it would be naive to expect that all the people about whom I write will agree completely with my analysis, although I am confident that there will be no lack of such agreement. I ask simply that this study be received in the spirit in which it has been written, which is to improve our understanding of the process of colonisation and its aftermath.

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### **Abbreviations and conventions**

DAA Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs

DAIA Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement

QGG Queensland Government Gazette

Field tape recordings are referred to in parenthesis by reference to the number of the tape following the letter 'T', for example (T1). The tapes are lodged in the archives of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

References to unpublished historical and archival materials are listed separately in the bibliography; these are referred to in the text using the full date (day, month and year) where it is available.

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I know these old people, if they're sittin' round in a group, if they ever see Mr. . . . , Mrs. . . . [the manager and his wife] they'll say: '[whispering] *Mandagi* [Whitefella], *Mandagi*, *Mandagi* . . .', and get up and run away then . . . [and the young child] will know what to do when he see a White man — he'll learn that habit . . . from an early age.

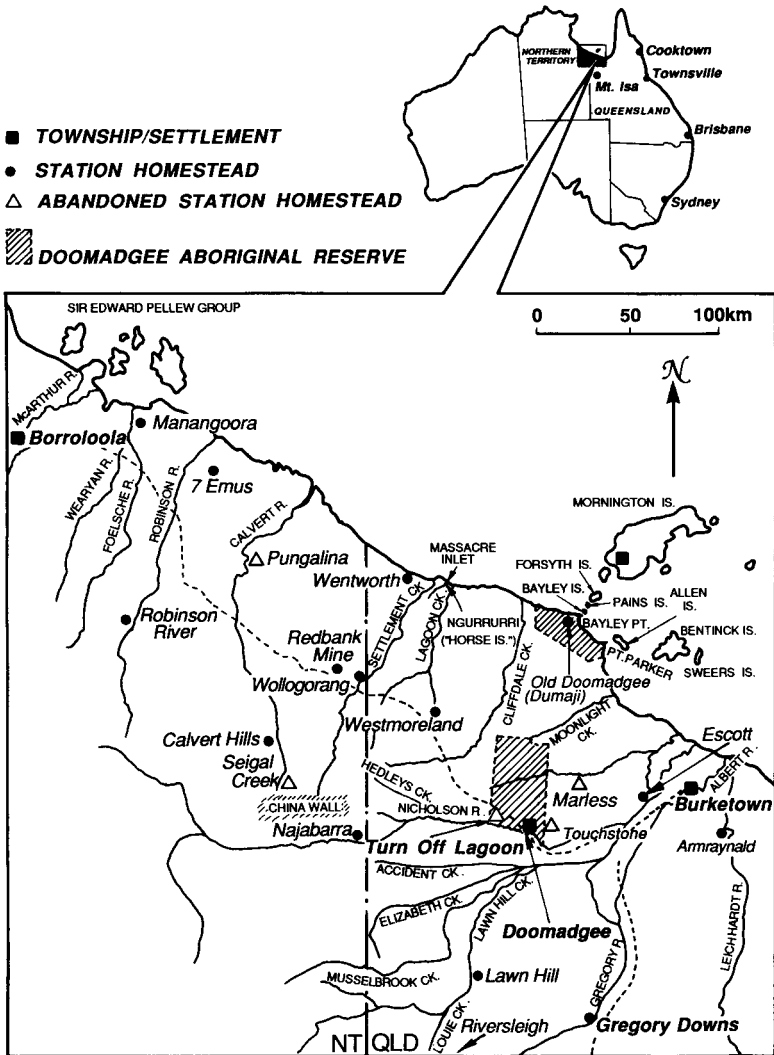
A comment from an Aboriginal resident of Doomadgee

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Map 1 Southern Gulf of Carpentaria region, northern Australia