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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to provide a survey of the available information on the economic status of Aborigines in Australia. It is true that a few economists (and in particular H. C. Coombs) have studied facets of the economic life of Aborigines in different parts of the country. And it is also true that historians and political scientists (such as G. Blainey and C. D. Rowley, to mention only two names) have vividly described the prehistory, history and contemporary history of the Aboriginal people, and in doing so have touched upon past and present economic issues. But in general there is a lack in the literature of an overall economic view of Australia's Aboriginal population. The closest attempt to a survey is a work which is now more than ten years old (*Aborigines in the Economy* (1966) eds. I. G. Sharp and C. M. Tatz) but in which only one of the twenty-four chapters (comprising conference papers) appears to have been written by a person described as a practising professional economist.

Economists in general have indeed seemed to shun the study of Aborigines in the Australian economy. For example, a widely-used text book in Australia (P. A. Samuelson, K. Hancock and R. Wallace (1970), *Economics*, 2nd Australian edn) dismisses the issue with these words (pp. 124–5): 'The position of the Aborigines is undoubtedly worse than that of the American Negroes, but their numbers are smaller and the problem of Aboriginal poverty has to date been regarded as a problem more of social welfare than of economic policy'. It is no doubt very largely true that any economic problem connected with Aborigines has been eschewed from 'economic policy discussions'. But whether this is wise or justified is another matter, and it is the intention of the chapters which follow to focus attention, first, on

the economic status of Aborigines in different parts of the economy (such as it can be gauged from secondary information) and, second, on the issues for economic policy which seem to arise from these conditions.

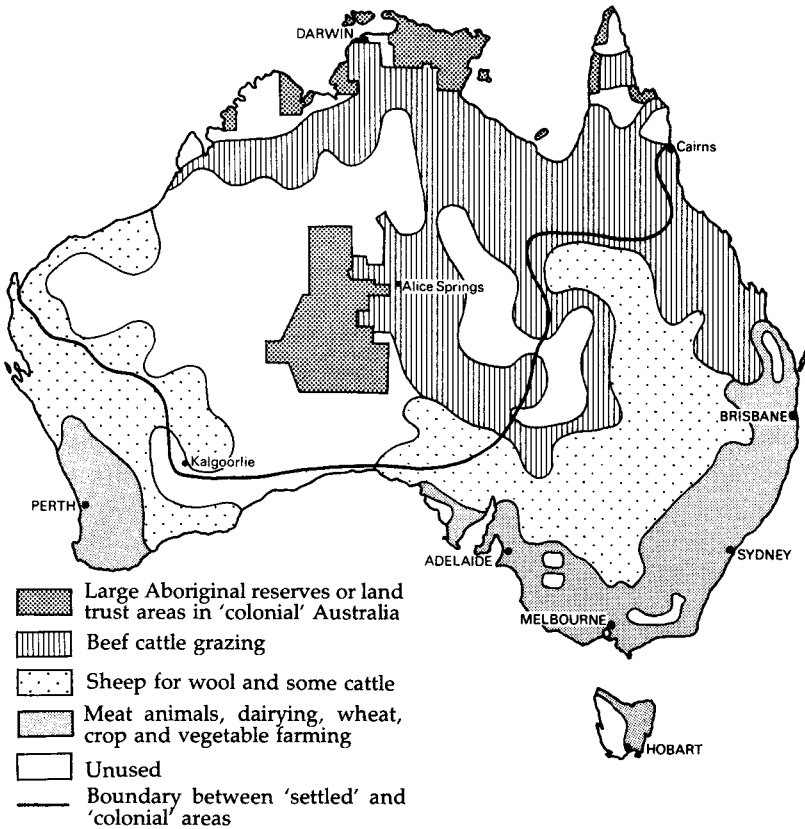
It appears that there is in fact a great array of economic policy issues arising from the presence in Australia of a 'mixed or 'dualistic' economy, in the sense of the coexistence of a highly developed monetised economy alongside a spectrum of other forms up to nearly complete subsistence. In many respects these issues resemble those in 'developing' and more heavily dualistic economies elsewhere, especially in the context of self-determination, that is, of Aboriginal communities deciding the pace and nature of their own future development as important components of a diverse Australia. For example, in this setting, should the improvement of economic levels among Aborigines (especially in remote Australia) be left largely to the processes of time and the market mechanism, or is it desirable for Aboriginal communities to plan and regulate economic activity so as to achieve higher living standards? Alternatively, is it necessary for communities to devise methods for their *protection* from the economic impact of 'white' Australia? Should wage rates or industries (and their surrounding infrastructure) employing Aboriginal labour in remote regions be subsidised or should emigration to regions of greater economic opportunities be encouraged? Should land settlement schemes be fostered and, if so, what are the most efficient institutional backdrops for these projects? What should be the educational policy in Aboriginal community schools? The range of questions that could be asked is very substantial. In writing this book, the main intention is to offer a description of the economic status of Aborigines in the various areas in which they live in Australia; and to highlight some of the questions of economic importance which occur. If further enquiry and thought on the issues raised ensues, a major objective of this study will have been achieved.

In attempting this survey, important qualifications have to be entered. There is, firstly, the problem of 'bias' or 'ethnocentrism'. By this is meant a fear lest value judgements may be implied in a study which examines 'standards of living' and 'socio-economic status' from the viewpoint of one set of cultural assumptions. While seeking to document different economic conditions among various communities of people, it is not implied that economic change, especially socially disruptive change, is necessarily desirable. Secondly, there is the

problem of encapsulating in the divisions made in this study the great variety of peoples across a number of State and other boundaries. The divisions have been made for purposes of elucidation of available information. But it is important to remember that these demarcations are not rigid. Nor are the people within them homogeneous.

The plan of the chapters is as follows. Chapter 1 summarises the available information on the general demographic and economic welfare indicators of the Aboriginal population. Chapter 2 discusses Aborigines on government settlements and missions, while Chapter 3 is concerned with those on pastoral stations. Chapter 4 reviews the information on the 'decentralised' communities, that is, those Aborigines who have moved from white-controlled communities to found more independent ones of their own, especially in association with traditional land areas. In Chapters 5 and 6 the economic conditions among Aborigines in the towns and cities of Australia are considered. Finally, in Chapter 7 some of the economic questions which the previous chapters suggest are briefly catalogued. In making this chapter division, a general separation between 'remote' and 'settled' Australia – as depicted in Map 1 – needs to be remembered: Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are concerned with 'remote' Australia, and Chapters 5 and 6 with 'settled' Australia. This division is rough (since it hides, for example, some 'settled' portions in 'remote' Australia) but necessary to demarcate a difference of major importance between the influences weighing upon the two basic geographic groupings of Australian Aborigines. Moreover, these groupings are also economic and cultural divisions. In the treatment of the material on 'remote' and 'settled' Australia, therefore, slightly different approaches are required, since in remote Australia special attention needs to be given to 'non-economic' and traditional cultural aspects of Aboriginal life which bear upon the standard of living.

In the discussion, attention is paid to the present, and a stark picture it is, with relatively very poor conditions applying to Aborigines in every economic comparison made with the general Australian society. But the current situation is, of course, the product of the past, and it seems necessary to include in the introduction a brief reference to the historical background of the Aboriginal 'economy'. This is done despite the obvious risks of very severe compression, and merely to supply a framework for the analysis which follows. (In Appendix 1, dimensions of Aboriginal economic development (in remote Australia) in terms of subdivisions of the historical phases – pre-contact and



Map 1. Rural land use showing 'colonial' and 'settled' Australia (Source: Adapted from C. K. Rowley *The Remote Aborigines*, A.N.U. Press 1971, p. 2.)

post-contact – and resource endowment, social systems and external contact, are itemised as supplementary material.)

In what may be termed the pre-contact era to 1778 (that is, before contact with European colonists) it is generally agreed that the traditional economy of Australian Aborigines was basically organised for the needs and with the resources of self-contained subsistence rural economies. These subsistence units could be characterised by a number of features: (1) there was a lack of much labour specialisation and the division of labour was predominantly by sex and age; (2) there was an absence of regular production of a surplus with a view to sale. Trade was not the primary object of economic activity. External contact was limited to trade relations between some far north Australian Aborigines and Macassans, but this was irregular; (3) the state of

technology was relatively stationary, and had not undergone substantial change over many generations; and (4) although very long established in Australia, Australian Aboriginal society was semi-nomadic and land extensive, without organised agriculture (although as G. Blainey has speculated in *The Triumph of the Nomads* (Macmillan 1975) it was very adaptable within the context of its own amazingly skilful if 'fixed' technology).

A combination of these four features composed a pattern of a largely static economy which all Aboriginal communities exemplified at the turn of the nineteenth century, with relatively inconsequential differences between them (except perhaps that, in the far North, Aborigines had some external contacts). The Aboriginal economic system prior to the incursion of white settlement was basically tribal, land extensive, non-specialising, non-competitive, non-exchange and non-monetised, whereas the alien economic system brought by whites was in the midst of an industrial revolution.

Following initial contact, some haphazard exchange occurred, with Aborigines generally trading foodstuffs and traditional goods for new foods (sugar, flour and tea) and for tobacco. But traditional subsistence economic activity still predominated. From the 1830s, however, spheres of European rural influence were more permanently established. In the geographically remote areas this was generally through Christian missions and government depots, and in the less remote areas in the form of government settlements and pastoral stations. During this phase (that is from the 1830s right up until at least 1960) most Aboriginal land was alienated and there was pressure upon Aboriginal people to exchange their labour services for alien goods. With the encroachment of areas of European settlement, there was some limited assimilation. Because of land alienation, the traditional subsistence economy declined in importance during this phase, and there was a growing dependence on government support.

As contact with whites in rural areas continued, traditional Aboriginal economic norms were drastically undermined and goods from the new economy began to be viewed by Aborigines as essential to their living conditions. And, especially since the 1930s, this phase may be linked with the government policy of assimilation (especially for part-Aborigines) and the abolition of most aspects of the discriminatory laws against Aborigines which had been established down the years. Aborigines became firmly entrenched in the pastoral industry (especially in the Northern Territory) receiving relatively very low

wages. Missions and government settlements became 'institutionalised'. While traditional economic activity had, however, been undermined, the opportunities to replace it were few and a high level of dependence on church and government sources grew.

Since the start of the 1960s, up until the present (1977), there has been a notable reactivation of Aboriginal traditions and values (especially in remote Australia and partly associated with government-sponsored encouragement of 'self-determination'). Some areas of secure land tenure have been established, funds for investment (from the Aborigines Benefit Trust Fund, for example) have been made available, and aspects of discriminatory laws against Aborigines have been reformed, even if informal prejudice and discrimination continues. New economic opportunities in some remote regions, through mining expansion (albeit in largely unskilled labour categories) have arisen, while a 'decentralisation' movement gained momentum (as Aborigines disenchanted with life on government settlements and missions migrated back to traditional areas to protect sacred sites and take part once more in traditional subsistence economic activity but in a broader mixed framework).

The diversity of Aboriginal-white contact experiences is exemplified by observing that any 'phases' distinguishable in the history of this contact seem to overlap for different communities, in concert with their continually changing nature over time. Communities in New South Wales and Victoria which were once remote are now enclaves of a predominantly European society and economy; many missions and settlements have become part of settled areas (on the fringes of towns), while some large cities have engulfed Aboriginal communities.

In the chapters which follow, attention is directed mostly to the last decade, that is since the 1967 referendum when the Commonwealth government assumed new responsibility by receiving authority to subsume the powers hitherto exercised over Aborigines by the several States.

Not only have new policies been in the air, however. There has also been some change in the resource endowment of Aboriginal economic life through recent government initiatives, and there are now at least four possible avenues of response by Aborigines to the changing economic climate: (1) the agricultural-entrepreneurial economic behaviour of whites might be imitated; (2) more Aboriginal people might enter the wage-earning sector; (3) Aborigines might decide that costs of obtaining Western-style goods (through foregone traditional

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values, and so on) outweigh the benefits and that (with only minor modifications) a traditional hunter-gatherer life-style is to be preferred; (4) complete dependency upon government or mission support could be accepted. Indeed, historically, there is evidence, in different parts of Australia at different times, of each of these responses (which have on many occasions been Hobson's choices). However, in the future economic life of Australia's Aboriginal people, it remains to be seen whether their rising political voice will influence their status in a direction different from the recent past, following Australia's colonisation by whites.

University of Melbourne,
January 1978.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ABSEG	Aboriginal Secondary Grants
AICHS	Aboriginal and Islander Community Health Service
ASGS	Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme
CDEP	Community Development Employment Project
CES	Commonwealth Employment Service
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DAIA	Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement
DLI	Department of Labour and Immigration
ETSA	Employment Training Scheme for Aborigines
GEMCo	Groote Eylandt Mining Company
NAWU	North Australia Workers Union
NEAT	National Employment and Training
NPI	National Population Inquiry
PCM	Protein-calorie malnutrition
PS-SWP	Private Sector Special Work Project
QIMR	Queensland Institute of Medical Research
RED	Regional Employment Development
SWP	Special Work Project
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TMPU	Town Management and Public Utility
TSI	Torres Strait Islander
UCNA	United Church of North Australia