5. CONTACT IN THE WESTERN DESERT 1905-99[1]

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1:0 INTRODUCTION

When Western Desert Aborigines moved back to the desert to set up their own communities at Punmu, Well 33, Parnngurr and elsewhere they most likely had in their minds to reverse a process that had dogged them all their lives. It is an attempt to wrest from European Australia the power to define their identity and position in the larger society. During the period of substantial encounter with European Australia, roughly from the 1940s to the present, they have been subject to extraordinary pressure to forget their past and their language because many of us in white Australia found their difference intolerable or impractical. The choice to return to the desert has been made after reflection, and a re-assessment of the cost in terms of social cohesion and human life, that change has brought. European misunderstanding of their choice, and the past that made it, and the general determination to subordinate their interest, inhibits any genuine compromise.

Both sides of the encounter have been limited in their view of the other by an understanding, shaped by the necessity to explain the other, by what we see as similar in the other's behaviour or expression of cultural meanings. Occasions of cultral dissonance now have a history of intensity ranging from senseless murder and rape, to violations of desert protocol, such as photographing secret images and uttering the names of the deceased. The Aborigines, of course, had the added disadvantage of a powerlessness which, for a very long time, ensured they were excluded altogether from the political process responsible for the formation of the context for their encounters. Our understanding of the Aborigines have also been hampered by our uncertainty about how contact has changed them, and ourselves, and an unwillingness to see the changes in anything but a negative light.

All the intruders into the desert have been able to convince themselves that their presence has served some greater good and by a calculus guaranteeing its pre-eminence, justified a view that the Aborigines must simply 'give way'. Explorers,

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1 In 1987 and 1988 the writer was engaed by Western Desert Puntukurnuparna as an historian to produce a men's "Oral History of the Canning Stock Route", after receiving a grant from the Australian Bicentennial Authority. The men's and women's stories have been published as a book by Western Desert Puntukurnuparna and the Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre titled "Yintakaja-Lampajuya. These are our waterholes." The initial archival research was done on a grant from the WA Heritage Committee.

missionaries, bureaucrats, pastoralists, rocketeers and miners in their various searches for water, souls, the national interest, labour, empty space and yellowcake, have in their own ways, and with varying degrees of force, made Aborigines accept an unconditional surrender.

The present difficulties for the Aborigines living in the Karlamilyi (Rudall River) National Park are exacerbated because they must articulate their interests in a foreign language, within a context formed by the outsiders' needs, and in terms they hope will make sense to Europeans. They persevere with their genuine desire to be understood but are constantly frustrated by misreadings of their statements and an apparent wilful indifference to their priorities. Now that it appears they have been admitted to the political process, their difficulties are of a different kind to those they faced before they left the desert. Although they have access to skilled assistance from anthropologists and lawyers to represent their interest, encounter remains problematic on a number of fronts. Now, for example, they must face the subtle criticism that in their new circumstances, that is, after an absence from their country of a couple of generations, and having suffered the rigours of contact, their relationship to their country has changed in ways which diminish their claim to it as traditional land. As the stakes have increased, they have been forced to articulate their claim with some considerable vigour and to engage arguments which have turned on questions of European law inferred from anthropological evidence in a legal process designed ostensibly to protect the Aboriginal interest. In WA in recent years, most notably at Noonkanbah and Argyle, that process has been found to be wanting. In the course of such proceedings about traditional ownership and sites, always very important and sensitive matters, other issues such as their acutely felt need for social isolation, are given less prominence than they deserve. The problems faced by contemporary Aborigines do not have a history of capturing the imagination of politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals in the way that traditional culture has done, and have been generalised as 'welfare problems', removed from their particular genesis in colonial duress. Our knowledge of Aborigines is then, limited to seeing social disruption rather than the resilience of social organisation, cultural atrophy rather than creative responses in the face of adversity. In the course of the history of contact, desert Aborigines have lost the authority to define their own agenda.

Dialogue in the National Park is hampered to the extent that dynamism and continuity are removed from our consideration of the process of cultural change. The movement back to the desert is sometimes viewed more as a cultural salvage operation than the outcome of mature judgement. We have applied an almost photographic model of

culture to the Aborigines: once they have been snapped at a critical moment they are fixed by our need to know them before they met the whiteman, before they fell from cultural grace and ceased to be available as noble savages - or, as the State Minister for Culture said in1980, before they lost 'what was worth preserving'[2] . It is a selective, static and timeless model of culture which excludes any sense of the process of change or transformation and encourages a view of Aborigines today as people who have suffered a great loss that has left them essentially flawed. They are often seen as members of a culture sullied by contact, with little more than nostalgic links with their past, and a dubious commitment to genuine change. It is difficult to make any sense of the Aborigines' determination to re-occupy the desert without some understanding of the profound continuities between the pre-European past and the present challenge they have taken up of establishing strong communities back in their homelands.

2:0 THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

2:1 1905-1912. SURVEYED AND OPENED.

Substantial encounter in the desert was brought by the conjunction of the economic aspirations of East Kimberley cattle producers and the political expediency of a government in Perth vulnerable to pressure from producers in the North-West and consumers of beef in the south. The result was the Canning Stock Route. The quality of the relationships between Europeans and Aborigines during its installation was shaped by the determination of both to claim superior rights. The former by virtue of their mission, the economic development of WA, and the latter because of their previously uncontested title to the land.

The pastoralists were isolated by distance, a tick infestation in their stock and by a political inability to gain access to the lucrative southern markets. The tick, which produced red-water fever in the cattle, flourished in the humid tropical conditions of the East Kimberley and resulted in much of the herd being quarantined. The West Kimberley and North-West cattle producers were able to profit from the exclusion of East Kimberley beef by charging high prices in the south. At the same time, there was open resentment about prices from consumers in Perth and the goldfields. Meat prices became a public scandal, and in 1904, the government conducted a Royal Commission to investigate the activities of a "meat ring", involving, amongst others, Alexander Forrest, brother of Sir John, and a member of Parliament with sizable pastoral interests in the north.

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2 The West Australian, 28/3/1980.

In April 1905, James Isdell, the member for the East Kimberley, approached the Minister for Lands about a scheme to bring the tick-infested cattle to the southern markets. He proposed that a stock route be made from Sturt Creek, near Hall's Creek, to the headwaters of the Oakover River in the West Pilbara, there joining the coastal stock routes taking cattle south. Isdell argued that such a journey across the dry desert would be too arduous, for the ticks would simply die and fall off, leaving clean but leaner cattle on the hoof. Isdell's perishing tick theory turned out to be correct , but he was forced to test it in the dehydrated overkill of the Canning Stock Route. His plan met with general approval because, as the Chief Inspector of Stock remarked, "a material advantage will accrue to the state as a whole, in that a store of breeding stock in particular will be obtainable at a greatly decreased cost by those who are in a position to advantageously breed for the local markets".[3]

The advantage of Isdell's route was that it avoided the worst of the desert, about which explorers had given quite horrendous reports, and nine years before, two members of the Calvert expedition had perished. But when the North-West producers expressed doubts about his tick theory, the alternative route was canvassed. A few years earlier, there was some discussion about the possibility of a stock route in such a direction, but after consideration of the explorers' journals, it was decided, quite definitely, that it was not feasible. At this point, the Department of Mines took charge of the organisation of an expedition to survey the country between Wiluna and Hall's Creek, a distance of about 1500 kilometres across desert and hundreds of sandhills. In November 1905, the Minister for Mines wrote to the Minister for Lands, "We are considering a new stock route from the East Kimberley to the goldfields, such that no objection can be raised by the North-West producers about probable tick infestation".[4] It was essentially a political, rather than an economic, decision to placate North-West pastoralists and paid little heed of its cost to the public purse, or the practicalities of such a venture. The alliance of mining and pastoral interests remains a force to be reckoned with in WA, especially where Aborigines are concerned.

Alfred Canning, an experienced surveyor, was commissioned by the Minister of Mines, in April 1906, to take charge of the survey party, after being advised by Canning's friend, H.S. King, the Under-Secretary for Mines. A few weeks later, Canning and his men left Perth for Wiluna. As they made their way to Wiluna, a flurry of bureaucratic activity followed them, as King took care of some last minute

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3 Memo. Chief Inspector of Stock to the Minister for Lands, 2/5/1905. Mines Department file 694/06 "Proposed Stock Route. Sturt Creek to Wiluna. Vol. 1." Folio 2.

4 Ibid. 18/11/1905. Folio 1 (new series).

hitches. Canning had forgotten his parallel ruler and his copy of "Spinifex and Sand", (David Carnegie's account of his exploration of the desert in 1896), and the camel man had forgotten four dozen nose-pegs for his camels. After despatching more than twenty telegrams, King was able to supply all en route. Their departure was delayed a few days because the camels strayed away one night. Eventually a party of seven men, twenty-three camels and two horses left Wiluna on 25th.May 1906, and arrived in Hall's Creek five months later. They began the return journey in February 1907, arriving back in Perth in July of that year to a very warm Parliamentary reception. In their preparations for their expedition, the only acknowledgement they made to the presence of Aborigines in the desert they were about to cross, was in the form of chains they borrowed from the Prisons Department and beads they carried for the women.

Canning was possibly the first explorer to enter the desert with the clear intention of relying on Aboriginal informants for his water. But he had no knowledge of their language, or any idea of how to make any sensible contact with the Aborigines. It was also a time when it was widely thought that Aborigines were savages of the worst kind, whose very humanity was suspect. David Carnegie, the English aristocrat, was more practical in his assessment of the Aborigines, "...the most useful, contented and best-behaved boys that I have seen are those that receive treatment to that a highly valued sporting dog gets from a just master; 'to pet' stands for 'to spoil'".[5] Canning seems to have delegated responsibility for relations with Aborigines to H.S. Trotman, another experienced bushman, whose primary qualification for such a task was simply that he had been in the desert before, and that he was willing and able to employ the basest forms of social control: force and violence. It was a choice of stategy which reflected the enormous cultural gap between the intruder and the intruded. Canning's men entered the desert - for them, a hostile, empty space - with fear and ignorance in their hearts and without conscience for the consequences of either. It simply did not enter their heads that the viability of their stock route might in some way depend on the goodwill of the Aborigines. The fruit of their self-interest and misunderstanding was bloody violence.

Criticism of the behaviour of Canning's survey party were initiated by Edward Blake, the camp cook, when he heard Trotman was going to return to the desert, with Canning, to construct the wells. In his view, Trotman was "not the right man to have anything to do with natives". Blake wrote to the Minister for Mines but received no response. Then he wrote to the Treasurer, who also ignored him, until F. Lyon Weiss, a prominent barrister and secretary of the Aborigines Amelioration Society, expressed his concern.

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5 Carnegie, David W. 1898. Spinifex and Sand. Hesperian Press. p154.

In his letters, Blake drew particular attention to the practice of chaining informants and the harsh treatment of the desert women. After a public meeting to discuss the issue, and a petition to Parliament organised by Weiss, the Government finally called a "Royal Commission (to Inquire into the Treatment of Natives by the Canning Exploration Party)", in January 1908.[6]

Blake provided the Treasurer with details of one incident involving an Aboriginal couple that he found very disturbing.[7] During the Royal Commission the incident was examined very closely. Canning's men referrred to the couple as 'Mad Buck'[8] and 'the Pissing Gin'[9] - the man on account of the vigour of his resistance to the chain and to being dragged behind a camel, and the woman, who was about sixteen years old, because of her persistant, involuntary urination, a condition consistant with a state of absolute terror. With others, they had come into the party's camp of their own accord, but the man was immediately seized and chained by the neck to a tree for the night. The women worked through the night to remove the chain, but without success, and by morning there was clear evidence of chaffing and soreness on his neck. He was then tied to a camel, with nine feet of chain, and made to walk five miles. At lunchtime, it was decided to take him off the camel but, unfortunately, it seems he got it into his head that the raging fire Blake had made to cook lunch was meant for him. He panicked, and when he grabbed the camel's rear leg, it made to bolt. He was in very real danger of having his neck broken. After a desperate struggle, he was released from the camel, but the chain remained around his neck. In the afternoon, he was made to walk a further ten miles, carrying the chain. Next morning, while still on the chain, he escaped. Trotman decided to use the young woman as a hostage, so he handcuffed her by the ankle to a water barrel, while he went off to search for the man. In evidence before the Royal Commission, Blake ιestified that the woman was handcuffed to the barrel for forty hours,[10] while Canning said it was no more than sixteen hours.[11] Trotman found the man, and retrieved his chain, without bringing him back to camp, because "he was too mucked about".

The Royal Commission also heard detailed evidence on a number of other sensitive issues but here, because of the restraints of space, a few will only be described briefly:

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6 Royal Commission to Inquire into the Treatment of Natives by the Canning Exploration Party. January 1908.

7 Blake, E. Letter to the Treasurer 29/10/1907. Copy held Battye Library, Perth.

8 Royal Commission. Notes of Evidence. Question 81.

9 Ibid. Question 105.

10 Ibid. Question 120.

11 Ibid. Question 3748.

1. The practice of running down informants on horseback and chaining them for lengthy periods was canvassed widely. The argument turned on whether or not such methods were necessary or cruel, rather than any dispute about their occurrence.

2. The Commissioners examined closely the treatment of Tommy, a six year old boy they 'picked up' near the McKay Range and took through to Hall's Creek, where he was speared in the side, because local Aborigines thought he was responsible for a death. He survived, to return to his country the following year. He was used by Canning's men to collect firewood and to chain to adult informants when they went out of sight to relieve themselves.

3. The most contentious issue the Commissioners looked at was the sexual involvement with the women, including the information that two of the men sexually active on the southward journey had contracted VD in Hall's Creek.

4. Blake argued in evidence that the behaviour of the party had brought about the deaths of four men: an Aborigine and three whitemen, Tobin, Grace and Colreavy. Blake was supported in his view by expert witnesses, such as Carr Boyd who also displayed before the Commission the bush pragmatism of the day, by opposing chaining, yet insisting that anyone who was chained should be shot once their services were no longer required, because those who followed would be in great danger if they were set free. Tobin, a member of the survey party, and the Aborigine simultaneously met their deaths near Well40 - as one threw his spear, the other fired his rifle. Tobin had gone off to capture an Aborigine to get information about crossing a salt lake and had found the man with a woman and two small children. The Aborigine defended himself immediately. Grace and Colreavy were two prospectors speared in the McKay Range in 1907, during the conduct of the survey. Blake and Carr Boyd argued that the behaviour of the party, particularly in relation to the women, on the northward trip had set up an expectation of violence and harsh interaction between Aborigines and visitors to the desert that was justified on neither humanitarian or practical grounds.

In their final report, the Commissioners gave greatest weight to the evidence of experienced bushmen like Sir John Forrest and William Rudall, who argued that Trotman's harsh methods were necessary to survival. The report drew special attention to the economic significance to the State of Canning's expedition and, while

acknowledging much of Blake's testimony, the Commissioners completely exonerated the exploration party of all charges. Canning was then appointed to return to the desert with Trotman, to install the stock wells. Edward Blake was not appointed camp cook.

In January 1911, two drovers, named George Shoesmith and James Thompson, left Sturt Creek with 100 head to try the stock route. Thompson's diary reveals,[12] with mounting anxiety, that there were problems with water from the outset. The first difficulty they encountered was to find Canning's wells. At several of the wells they had to contend with broken buckets and stolen ropes, and then having to move on without water in the height of the summer. No one in Perth had given any thought to the problem of maintaining the 51 wells, and troughs, buckets and ropes across 800 miles of desert, nor to the possibility of vandalism by Aborigines. Shoesmith and Thompson were clubbed to death near Well 37. Their bodies were found by Tom Cole as he brought down a mob 400 head. The stock route was not used again for twenty years.

During the summer of 1911-12, a police expedition went up the stock route from Wiluna in search of the Aborigines who killed Shoesmith and Thompson. It was led by Sergeant Pilmer, who had earned a reputation in the Kimberley as a man to be feared by Aborigines. When they were in the vicinity of Well 37, they encountered a large group of Aborigines, and a small battle followed. Several Aborigines were shot, including "the ring-leaders in the crime" on Pilmer's reckoning. From there, the police party continued on to Hall's Creek. When he returned to Perth, Pilmer told "The West Australian", "As far as the avenging of the murders of the drovers, Thompson and Shoesmith, and their native boy is concerned, our expedition has been a successful one".[13] It is very difficult to ascertain what happened in the incident because Pilmer's account is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions but, as the Aboriginal account confirms, six Aborigines were shot. Today, the Aborigines remember this massacre as the 'Kinyu shooting'. During the fieldwork for the "Oral History of the Canning Stock Route", several informants, including three grandchildren of victims, referred to it. The identities of those shot are still known, and the story of their deaths remains a powerful reminder of early European intrusion into the desert.

2:2 THE 1929-1930. RECONDITIONING.

The first suggestions for reconditioning the Stock Route were made in 1925, when R. Falconer, the lessee of Billiluna Station, approached the government because he was

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12 Thompson, J. C. Diary. Copy in Mines Department file 3846/11 (acc. 964) "Warden Clifton. Copy of diary of late J.C. Thompson. Murdered on the Canning Stock Route." Folios 1-8.

13 The West Australian. 7/2/1912.

finding it too expensive to take his cattle to the Wyndham meatworks. In 1929, the government commissioned W. Snell to recondition the stock wells, but he ran out of materials before completing the northern end. In his report to the Public Works Department, he had some interesting things to say about the Stock Route, its wells and the impact it had on the lives of the Aborigines of the desert. Almost all of the stock wells on the Canning Stock Route are sunk either on, or beside, an Aboriginal spring or soak and, as Snell pointed out, all the water eventually found its way into the stock wells. When the Aborigines returned to these more reliable water sources in the dry season, they found they could not get at the water, because the stock wells were so constructed by Canning that it required a camel or a horse to raise the iron bucket, which weighed fifty pounds and held ten gallons of water. The Aborigines had destroyed many the wells. Remarkably, Snell recommended that a series of wells be sunk, such that individual Aborigines could use them - he, in fact, modified some of the wells with the Aborigines' needs in mind "to heal the wounds so severely inflicted and as a safeguard against the natives destroying the wells". The Chief Protector of Aborigines found Snell's report of 'considerable interest', and felt that " we shall have to do something to assist the natives, who have been deprived of their natural waters, but at this stage it is difficult to determine the most suitable steps to take to that end". Nothing was ever done.

In 1930, the government commissioned A.W. Canning, then sixty-nine years old, to finish the job that Snell had begun. It took him sixteen months, and it seems it was quite a difficult expedition. His party met considerable hostility from Aborigines along the Stock Route, in contrast to Snell, who did not report any trouble the year before. This writer has had a personal communication from a relative of a man who was with Canning in 1930, and was quite disturbed by the treatment of Aborigines, including a murder of an Aborigine. As reported, he was shot because he urinated in the wrong place. "The West Australian" quoted a letter of Canning's ,written from the bush: "We have had quite a lot of trouble with the niggers lately, and they have been very hostile, spearing our camels and actually stealing and killing four, besides wounding others, one rather seriously. It is lucky they did not get any of us..." From1931 until 1958, at least one mob of cattle a year came down the Stock Route from Billiluna to Wiluna.

3:0 FIRST CONTACT

For many of the desert people, the first whitemen they encountered were doggers, drovers and prospectors during the Depression. For others, it was at the ration depot at Jigalong, from where employees of the Rabbit Department maintainted the Rabbit Proof Fence, or when they visited relatives or traded dingo scalps at stations, like Roy Hill

and Balfour Downs. The last of the desert families made contact with the welfare patrols in the 1960s, when the desert was virtually de-populated, and became a site for British rocket tests. In these moments of experiencing the radically new, they made their different choices on the basis of need and interest.

The personal memories of these times are often positive or humourous stories about the drama of seeing a whiteman for the first time or tasting his food. For example, one informant can remember following the stock mob to feed off the bullocks left by the drovers, without actually seeing any white stockmen. Another, as a boy of about ten years old, used to meet his uncle, a stockman for Billiluna Station, at Well 35 and travel down to Well 24 with him. Then he would walk back, a distance of nearly 300 kilometers. There is indication ,too, of Aboriginal wariness of contact with the drovers for fear of losing children, a concern which Canning may have begun when he kidnapped a small boy and took him to Hall's Creek and back. There are a few stories, also, about trouble on the C.S.R., usually about women or access to culturally important places. There is one story, told with some satisfaction these days, about an incident near Kinyu (Well 35) . Two European men, travelling by camel through the desert, most likely in the 30s, made trouble one night and were attacked in their sleep. One was bashed over the head and killed, while the other got away in the dark. When asked, in 1987, why the men were attacked, one old woman who had been present said, "he was a cheeky fella", that is, there was trouble involving women.

The prospectors, doggers, sandalwooders, camel men, drovers, wife deserters and criminals who inhabited the frontier offered the Aborigines a view of the civilised world through the distorting lens of the behaviour and attitudes of marginal men, of those who had broken with the good order of their own society. A story[14] about one of these men, a dogger named Joe Wilkins, provides some insight into the tension which charged some of the first contact, and of the position of desert people in Australian law and society. Again, it is a story about a young 'cheeky fella', who was killed by Aborigines in the desert.

In 1936, a young English dogger (i.e. .a man who shot dingoes for the bounty on their scalps from the Vermin Board) named Joe Wilkins, was killed by Aborigines, about 300 kilometres north of Wiluna. He was speared by two Aborigines, but his body was not discovered until the following year. An inquest was satisfied that the remains were Wilkins' because some of his ginger hair was still evident. A police party was

14 Information for this story has been taken from the Department of Native Affairs file 473/37 (acc. 993), "Murder of Joe Wilkins".

despatched to apprehend the Aborigines responsible. When the police were in the vicinity of where Wilkins' body was found, they met a group of Aborigines, who they asked about Wilkins' death. Two Aborigines, named Maloora and Yalyalli, immediately claimed responsibility. They were then arrested and brought back to Wiluna. Maloora's wife, Choojama, was also taken to Wiluna as a crown witness. The trial and conviction for murder of Maloora and Yalyalli became a highly publicised issue, and in the early 40s, their case was taken up by the National Council for Civil Liberties in London. In 1936, Maloora and Yalyalli were still living the life of hunter-gatherers in the country to the east of Jigalong around the Stock Route, which had been operative for six years. They almost certainly would have had some contact with European society through meeting drovers, doggers and prospectors, and perhaps they had visited the stations at the southern end of the Stock Route, or even Wiluna itself.

At the time of Wilkins' killing, there was a third, older man, named Chunga and his two wives, Vayall and Crackie, camping with Maloora, Choojama and Yalyalli. (Note: the spelling of these names is probably incorrect, but they will be used, because this is how they appear in the official records). It seems that Chunga and Wilkins had reached an agreement of sorts, such that in return for some of Wilkins' provisions, Chunga allowed Wilkins to sleep with his first wife, Vayall. But after two nights, Wilkins took also Chunga's second wife, Crackie. This enraged Chunga, and he conspired with the other two to kill him.

During the trial, an objection was overruled that Choojama was a non-compellable witness because in English law she was not considered a wife and, therefore, was obliged to give evidence. Choojama described herself as Maloora's gin and stated in court that she had borne his children. The law defined a marriage as "the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others". An opinion from the Crown Law Department declared that,"in view of the fact that Australia is a country settled by Englishmen, as distinct from a country conquered or ceded, English law applies throughout and takes no cognisance of tribal laws, whether prevailing at the time of settlement or not". In the late 30s, however, there were moves afoot in official legal circles to grant the status of wife to the consorts of bush natives. The judge also did not instruct the jury to ignore the confessions of Maloora and Yalyalli, as a precedent had established he should. They were convicted of murder and sentenced to life in Fremantle gaol.

There followed several years of official correspondence and legal opinions during the cause to have Maloora and Yalyalli released, on account of the fact that the evidence of a non-compellable witness brought the conviction. It was argued consistently that in Aboriginal law, the provocation was sufficient to warrant a spearing.

In 1940, a letter from the National Council for Civil Liberties in London, demanding that the sentence be quashed, arrived in Perth. Briefing papers were sent to the Agent-General in London to defend the government's position on the convictions. But in 1941, Chunga turned up at Granite Peak station, north of Wiluna, and he now had three wives. Chunga was arrested and his wives were taken into custody as witnesses. The Commissioner for Native Affairs recommended that the wives not be called as witnesses. He complained of the voluminous correspondence the earlier case produced, and he made it clear he did not want to repeat the experience. The Solicitor-General, in a separate opinion, decided that in view of the absence of compellable witnesses - the police wanted to call Chunga's mother, but she was considered non-compellable also - the charge against Chunga should be dropped. After this decision, the Commissioner wrote to the Minister for the North-west, recommending that Maloora and Yalyalli be released. He concluded his memo by writing: "I doubt if I would have addressed you in this way had Wilkins met his death for reasons other than sexual intercourse with native women". Maloora and Yalyalli were released after serving four years in Fremantle Gaol.

3:1 CONTROLLING CONTACT

As Aborigines experienced the intrusions of Europeans into their country, they had no initial doubts about their ability to control the terms of contact. It presented new possibilities, which could be incorporated into their existing economy and patterns of movement. For example, there are quite early accounts of trading dingo scalps with doggers for flour, tobacco, tinned meat and sugar. In the case of one group, from the Well 33 area, the trading route they developed for this purpose eventually became the path of their exit from the desert. It is difficult to say what changes the men's trade in dingo scalps for food had on Aboriginal production and social relationships, but gradually this trade turned into an irreversible dependence. What is clear, is that with the Europeans came food, knives, axes, rifles and strange animals, and with them came the luxury of new choices.

It is difficult to say, with any certainty, what the primary motivations were when the Aborigines initiated an expansion of the terms of their first contact. There was certainly an element of economic rationality as they acted to moderate the temper of

their desert environment. It was an exploration of new possibilities and an admission that some kind of accomodation was necessary and inevitable. There was no reason to believe that the acceptance of new economic possibilities would, in any way, effect the religious or social dimensions of their lives. An implacable confidence in their own culture allowed a certain flexibility when considering which elements of the foreign culture to experiment with and absorb. Now the desire for European food is mentioned as the most significant factor in the early decisions, particularly by people whose country is to the east of the stock route. There is no indication that when it became an integral part of their economy and they had to accept a compromise, that is, providing labour and sexual services to pastoralists to guarantee its continued supply, that they felt in any way there was reason to think that such changes might have implications for the integrity of their own culture. Although the radical economic changes have persisted, it is likely they have not had the dramatic effect on religious and social life previously thought because of a greater degree of relative autonomy of economic life than has been understood until now. Once some differentiation is made between religious life, where highly structured relationships exist between individuals and spiritual attachment to country is paramount, and economic life, which allowed a measure of individual choice in respect of groupings and responded to seasonal variations in productive capacity, then the argument for social disintegration since the walk-in, is diminished considerably. In addition, acknowledgement should be made of the process of reproducing spiritual attachment to country during long absences.

The manner in which many European observers of these changes have described their effects, has seriously clouded our perceptions of desert Aborigines. Despite the work of western desert anthropologists, such as Tonkinson and Myers, who have written about the maintenance of an autonomy in internal social and religious life after leaving the desert, the general view of Aboriginal culture in decline hangs over much of the discussion of the movement back to the desert. The transformation from hunter-gatherer economy to station-mission-town dwelling, has long been read as some kind of 'fall', as evidence of social disintegration. Sometimes, certainly, the difficulties of analysing these changes have been compounded by some quite serious social consequences, such as alcoholism and violence, but there is no clear evidence or logical argument from which to conclude that such consequences necessarily reflect cultural decline. Although they have had a fairly long absence from their country and harsh experiences in European society, social relationships amongst desert Aborigines and traditional attachment to country retain an authentic vitality and resilience.

However, once control of the economic situation slipped away, and the traumatic experiences of the first years out of the desert took their toll, the choices available to them rapidly diminished. It was a period when their economic dependence was consolidated and many tussled with missionaries for the hearts and minds of their children. It is significant that many of those children now provide the energy for the return to the desert. Part of the current movement to repopulate the desert has, as its source, the wish to recover some of the autonomy lost during the last forty years, particularly in respect of education, as well as the determination to escape the worst of the social consequences of town life.

Many of the stories about contact show how ready Aborigines were to incorporate the evidence of another world into their own. This is particularly true in the case of food. Initially, though, there were problems here, too. In the early sixties when Len Beadell, the great desert track maker, gave people apples and oranges they naturally tried to cook them first. Baked apple was deemed a success, but the orange did not cook well at all.[15]

In retrospect, some of the more imaginative solutions to those early puzzles are now seen as quite bizarre. For example, in the 1930s, when one group came across horse, cattle and camel tracks for the first time, the old men were summoned to explain the phenomenon. The horse and cattle tracks defied explanation and remained a mystery. The old men were sure about the camel tracks though - they were "little fella bums", the marks of celestial beings sitting their way across the country.[16]

On other occasions, the first contact struck raw terror into people's hearts. During the war, the RAAF had a base at Meekatharra, and evidently used the desert for their low-flying formation training. When one group near Lake Dora encountered the aeroplanes for the first time, they were overcome with fear. They hid for days without food or water, and although it was winter, they lit no fires at night. The old men said it was "a big mob in the sky coming".[17]

4.0 EXIT FROM THE DESERT

During the twenty years after World War II, virtually all Western Desert Aborigines left their country to live on missions, stations or in the towns. The reason commonly given is the desire for a stable supply of food, but the walk-in remains a complex

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15 Mack Gardiner, pers. comm
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.

question. The other major reason usually given, and to some extent it depends on the country of the informant, is the wish to seek out absent relatives. Once the process of depopulating the desert had gathered momentum, then the maintenance of some aspects of traditional life, especially initiations and marriages became more and more difficult. As well, there were some periods of severe drought to give the economic considerations a sharper edge. In the earlier years, it seems to have been quite a free choice, and they genuinely believed they would be able to maintain their independence and cultural priorities. Those who left in later years, when assimilationist ideas had a firm grip on policy formulation, had a more limited choice.

The period when the last groups moved out of the desert, the late fifties and early sixties, coincided with the time much of the desert was marked out as a target area for British rocket testing. Although there is the coincidence of timing, and there was some direct involvement of personnel connected to the tests with the final exits, from the available evidence it is difficult to see the military activity as a primary causal factor in the depopulation of the desert. The fact is that by the late 1950s, when plans for rocket testing were well under way, the number of Aborigines still living beyond the frontier were relatively small. Certainly, there were a few concerns expressed in a couple of cases about unnecessary inducements, in the form of tinned meat and sugar, being used by welfare officers. But even here, if there was some fire to accompany the considerable smoke the public disclosure raised, and it is quite possible there was, we should be wary of such vulgar animal husbandry as explanations for quite complex social-cultural decisions. For the Aborigines, it was the conclusion of a process begun some time before. For the Europeans, it was more a case of *terra nullius in extremis* - the Aborigines' homelands were literally regarded as empty space, as it nearly was - and the culmination of inevitable changes deemed progressive in the assimilationist's programme.

However, to say that there is no evidence of an official plan to remove Aborigines from their country *en masse* does not mean that senior officials were entirely convincing in their claims to be stout defenders of the Aboriginal interest, or that those responsible for the rocket testing really knew what they were doing. In1946, the Minister for Defence informed the House of Representatives that the project was of "vital importance to the security of the British Commonwealth". He told the House that after initial trials on a short range, "it is expected that the accuracy of control will be largely perfected and that the risk to the aborigines (sic), when the range is extended, will be negligible..., less than that taken by the ordinary citizen of one of our cities crossing a motor thoroughfare, or from the danger of an aircraft falling from the skies."

The following year, after much public protest about the range, which focused mainly on the social implications, for the Aborigines, of more Europeans in the desert, rather than the dangers of falling rockets, A.O. Neville, the Commissioner for Native Welfare, wrote to the Minister for the North-West, addressing the thorny problem of avoiding any claims on the public purse the protests might cause:

> "...much of the comment has been ill-informed and unjustified and can therefore be safely disregarded...You would not wish I know, that any unfounded rumours emanating from whatever source should presently encourage the mass migration of natives from within the whole reserve to places where they believed they could obtain sustinence (sic), and that might entail some embarrassment and the assembling of big supplies for people now able to maintain themselves in the bush."

In 1958, the official estimate of the number of Aborigines remaining in the target area was 120. There was a suggestion to conduct a survey using helicopters to take them to a ration depot but, again, there is no evidence of this happening. Similarly, in 1964, Kim Beazley asked the Minister for Territories about attempts to locate people in the target area by buzzing them with low flying planes and pursuing them in vehicles - the first aerial muster? - but with little success because of the fear such methods caused. He also asked about a rocket which fell well short of its expected trajectory, into an area regularly inhabited by Aborigines. This is a different Blue Streak Rocket from the one which went off target and fell to earth near the Percival Lakes, frightening a group of Aborigines there for days. The Minister did not address either question in his reply, and instead made a speech about drought, malnutrition and the details of transporting Aborigines to Papunya.

In October 1964, welfare patrols located two groups with links to the Karlamilui (Rudall) area. One group of twenty were met near the Percival Lakes. There were seven women and thirteen children in the group and for some time, perhaps two years, had lived without the men who, it seems, had made different decisions about the white man's world. The other group of eight - one man, two women, two young men and three children were met at Well 31. Both groups were taken to Well 35 and then to Jigalong.

For the men, or boys as many of them were, introduction to the pastoral industry was a very early experience after they walked in and, at first, an adventure. Memories of that work now, however, are marked by recollections of sleepless nights, long months of droving and a loss of freedom of movement. Difficulties with harsh bosses remain

strong memories too, particularly the occasions when police were called in to enforce labour if a stockman tried to leave a station.[18]

The women were regarded as being more 'tractable' than the men. At Jigalong in the 1960s, the young girls were responsible for the care and milking of 60 goats without pay. In the early years, women were involved in mustering and droving and, invariably, they supplied domestic labour to the homesteads, doing the cooking, cleaning, laundry and minding children.[19] The women provided sexual services throughout the region and often station managers offered prospective white employees access to the women and girls of the blacks' camp as one of the conditions of employment.

For many of the children, it meant an introduction of mission life and bearing much of the brunt of unskilled Europeans' experiments in social engineering; the 'civilising process'. It was an austere, limited attempt at assimilation, which permitted a child to be beaten for speaking his mother's tongue.

5.0 MILTON CHAPMAN'S STORY

I was born south of Yaralalyu. From there I moved around with my family. We kept moving westward. As I got older, I used to go hunting with dogs. Sometimes I got thirsty. We lived in that area, then started moving towards Jigalong. We met people around the Canning Stock Route, like Mitchell's mob and other mobs from this area. My father was from around Well 33, and my mother was from around the Punmu area. We started moving westward. My brother was born at a place called Wongalina, near Yantikuji (Camron Creek near the Oakover). Before that we saw the horse tracks and motor car tracks. Then we got to the Oakover. Then we kept on going. Then we met a feller with a grader on the north side of Balfour, around Wandina. The grader stopped at the main water hole, so we waited until dark to get a drink of water. Minyou and others walked in. We stopped back and walked back. The grader driver gave us some food and we slept there the night. We got up early in the morning and left. Then we saw a plane coming. We waited until dark. Then we went back to have a drink of water. The grader driver feller had a truck with him. Then next day in the afternoon we went back to the rockhole. Then the whitefeller loaded us up on the truck. We were all scared on the back of that truck. As the truck was moving away I jumped off. Then the mob left without me. They went about 10 kilometres away and they had to stay for a night. I started following them. I got to the place where they stopped. They were looking around

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18 Roley Williams, pers. comm. Punmu, September 1987.

19 Daisey Charles, pers. comm. Jigalong, July, 1987.

for me. But I caught up with them and they were happy. Next morning we all got on the truck and started for Balfour Downs.

There were six or seven of us on the truck - my three sisters, my two brothers, my mother and me. There was another mob on the truck: Minyou, Marjorie, Priscilla, Darlene and their mother and some others who have passed away. We were the last mob to come in. We all started sicking up on the truck. As the motor car was moving the trees were moving too. We got to Balfour. The whitefeller kept us there for 3 about days. Then he rang the mission truck from Jigalong. The Jigalong truck picked us up. He had a few Martu with him, Baker and Frank French. They took us to Jigalong. We left all our dingoes and pet dogs at Balfour. Then we stayed a few days at Jigalong. Then we all felt sad because the dingoes got shot. They were our pets. Those dogs were like bullets for us. They used to get meat for us.

We got to Jigalong in 1967. That was my first year in school. I stayed in the dormitory. Life was a bit hard for me, being away from my mother. I used to go for a few hours visit every day after school, to visit my mother in the camp. I got used to it in a few months. I made friends with other kids. I knew Mitchell, Teddy and Benjamin and a few others. I got used to being in white society. Then I lost my mother. Then I was adopted by Titch Williams and Rosie. As I grew I learned different things. Then in 1973, I was taken up to Hedland for high school. I did 3 years there, one was hard. I didn't finish the year in 1974. I got homesick and ran away to the Jigalong mob at Strelley.

I stayed at Strelley. I didn't like it very much. I was not used to that place. I was sort of missing Jigalong. From Strelley, I took off again with a few others up to Broome. I stayed around there. Then I got a job at Thangoo Station, working on the stock and building yards. Then I left and went back to Broome again. Then I went back to Strelley again. Then I went to Jigalong and stayed around there. Then I went to Balfour and stayed there for 3 years on the station. Then I went to a station near Pannawonica, called Yalleen. The bloke used to own 2 stations: Balfour and Yalleen. Then the camp started at 61 by the Strelley mob, that is, by the Jigalong people who were living at Strelley. Strelley sort of ran that place. From Balfour I went back to Strelley. I got a job at Jigalong working in the office. That was in 1983. Then in 1985, I was selected vice-chairman of Jigalong Council for a year. In 1987, I moved to Punmu and am now living at Punmu.

6:0 THE WORLD THEY ENTERED

In 1939, the British and Australian Governments entered an agreement, whereby the British would purchase the entire Australian woolclip for the duration of the War. But woolgrowers in the Pilbara were unable to take full advantage of the guaranteed market because, from 1935 to 1939, a drought had decimated sheep numbers. In the last years of the War, another drought hit the industry, leaving sheep numbers in 1946 half those in 1934. The urgency of wartime requirements, and the extreme pressure imposed on the industry by long drought, meant that senior bureaucrats, including the intelligence establishment, took a special interest in wool production in the north. Inevitably, their attitudes to Aborigines were informed by the policies of the 1930s, when official zeal for the control of Aborigines was at its maximum. The larger political context, in which those responsible for native policy located their concern for Aborigines, allowed the bureaucrats to view them as mere factors of production, having no claim, beyond subsistence, on the products of their labour.

In those extraordinary times, native policy was fraught with contradictions. Aborigines were accustomed to the harshest interventions in their lives by police, bureaucrats and squatters, but it seems that during the War those sensibilities which moved otherwise reasonable officials to do something about the 'Native Question', were all but suspended. In the case of Aboriginal labour in the North, a detachment from any genuine concern about the welfare of the Aborigines encouraged a rank exploitation, which permitted squatters to profit in the name of the national interest. Although the politicians and bureaucrats were in no doubt about the importance of Aboriginal labour in the war effort, and in post-war re-construction, their pre-conceptions about the worth of Aborigines precluded any serious consideration of proper remuneration for their labour.

Pastoralists in the North had always been spared the economic realities of their industry. White labour was almost impossible to retain because of the poor wages, the very tough living conditions and the lack of any incentives for families to settle in the region. The pastoralists had no alternative but to employ Aboriginal labour. Because labour relations consisted only in the supply of the barest subsistence required to reproduce the labour force, the cost of labour could be measured in a few tins of flour and some meat from the herd. The pastoralists consoled themselves with the thought that because the blackfellers did not know the value of money, they had no need for it . In the '30s and 40s', the industry operated very much on the margin, and the cheap Aboriginal labour was the difference between survival and bankruptcy. In 1945, the Commissioner

of Native Affairs, Mr. Bray, implicitly acknowledged the true situation, when he wrote to the Minister for the North-West if

> "we do not take a closer interest in preserving the native population, there is every probability that we will have a huge territory with no labour to develop it, and people will then be arguing for the introduction of cheap Asiatic labour."[20]

But the Commissioner had no intention of advocating the payment of wages, since he was convinced the industry had no capacity to pay, for reasons which went far beyond the immediate industrial issues.

In 1946, a strike was called by the Aborigines to challenge the organisation of the pastoral industry and the extent of bureaucratic control over their lives. The primary focus of the protest was conditions on the stations, where labour relations were similar to a feudal system of production and, in some important respects, more akin to a slave society. In return for flour, meat, sugar and tea, sometimes tobacco, and perhaps one pound per week, Aborigines gave their labour and surrendered any claim to independence. The men maintained station bores and fences, mustered the sheep and drove them to the railheads, a job which could take three or four months working night and day without any breaks. The women supplied domestic labour and sexual services to the homesteads. As well, children from about the age of ten were often considered to be part of the station's workforce. In 1946, as the strikers gathered support, the position of Aborigines in the pastoral industry was justified in terms of the requirements of northern economic development - the red menace and the yellow peril lurked just beyond the horizon - rather than the demands of the war effort. In this politically volatile situation, the Commissioner of Native Affairs advised the Committee for Northern Development as follows:

> "There are many wide issues involved in native policy, including missionary considerations, and since the care of the natives is of sovereign interest, there is some doubt as to how far the Directors and the Commissioner should commit their respective States, or whether they should commit them at all, on principles of the welfare of natives or as regards native policy".[21]

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20 Memo. 4/10/1945. Department of Native Affairs file 1091/45 "Development of North-West areas." Folio 3.

21 Ibid. Folio 32.

The pastoralists and their apologists, such as the Commissioner and some members of the Catholic Church, defended the system stoutly. In one memorable exchange between Don McLeod, a white leader of the strikers and the editor of the Cathedral Chronicle, a Catholic paper published in Geraldton, the editor defended the industry with an impassioned account of the conditions under which Aborigines worked. The editor argued forcefully that the employers amply fulfilled their obligations to their employees, by supplying rations to the workers and their 'hangers-on', by distributing a few clothes, by not obliging women with young babies to work, by giving the women billycans at Christmas and by making a small contribution to a Native Medical Fund, controlled by the Department. There was no mention of housing, or an education for the children, or the degree of consent under which the Aborigines gave their labour, and certainly nothing of the history of exploitation which shaped the pastoral industry. And wages were quite out of the question:

> "It is simply rot of the most stupid kind to think that the native is going to be uplifted by higher wages. Assuming that higher wages is the solution to the problem and that the native is educated to the use of money, who is going to employ him in his present state of 'civilisation'."[22]

The Commissioner argued in similar vein:

> "The natives in our northern areas are thirty years behind the natives in Queensland ...The natives would use the money for gambling and the stations would still be expected to feed and clothe the workers and their dependents ... The native workers should be mentally developed at native settlements and missions in trade and domestic classes and tutored in monetary value and obligations ..."[23]

As a matter of policy, the Commisssioner stated the bottom line unequivocably: "If a wage system is foisted onto us at this stage it would paralyse the pastoral industry."[24] He assured the Minister for the North-West, that the Department of Native Affairs would take responsibility for training the Aborigines for the pastoral industry by means of a system of grants to the missions to provide trade and domestic classes.

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22 Cathedral Chronicle. Geraldton, March, 1947.
23 Op. cit. D.N.A. file 1091/45, folio 32.
24 Ibid.

Throughout the first weeks of the strike, the Commissioner steadfastly refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of any of the social, political and economic grievances which motivated the strikers. He even defended, on the pastoralists behalf, the appalling material circumstances of station life, such as the lack of amenities like toilets and adequate drinking water. He wrote to Premier Wise and informed him that

> "There are difficulties in effecting improvements. These depend on the managements, but in many instances the natives are not responsive to good conditions due to their mental standards and superstitions in respect to the occupancy of structures."[25]

Many Aborigines in the Pilbara never worked in the industry again after 1946. For those who did, the situation remained essentially unchanged until the late sixties, when the equal pay decision forced pastoralists to face the economic realities of their industry.

7:0 JIGALONG - OF BUREAUCRATS AND MISSIONARIES

After the war, the desert Aborigines began their involvement with European society in the very intense political environment of the Pilbara. Some of them made their way to the Jigalong mission of the Apostolic Church of Australia. Between 1907 and 1946, there was an Agriculture Department depot at Jigalong for servicing the Rabbit Proof Fence, and after a request from the Chief Protector of Aborigines, it acted as rationing agent for the desert people. There were times that the Agriculture Department seemed reluctant to supply rations to the Aborigines, because the job was not without its difficulties. In correspondence there are references to "past irregularities" in the treatment of women, and to the "particularly difficult task of keeping off undesirables". In the 30s, there was conflict between employees at the depot about providing medical treatment to the Aborigines during office hours, when the man who was evidently quite concerned about their health should have been breaking camels for the riders on the Rabbit Proof Fence.

In October 1944, the secretary of the Apostolic Church in Sydney wrote to the Commissioner for Native Affairs, proposing that they establish a mission in WA "somewhere between Beagle Bay and New Norcia". Strangely, Jigalong is now situated almost half way along a line joining Beagle Bay and New Norcia. There are no references accompanying the secretary's letter. The Commissioner, who had not

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25 Memo. Commissioner for Native Affairs to the Premier, 21/5/46. D.N.A. file 800/45 "D.W. McLeod. Port Hedland", folio 85.

heard of the Apostolic Church, replied, requesting details about the tenets of the Church and the extent of its ability to finance the mission. The secretary promptly informed the Commissioner of their fundamentalist beliefs and of their willingness to carry some of the financial burden. The Commissioner was satisfied with the assurances from the Church, and on 4th.December 1944, six weeks after the first letter, recommended to his minister that the application be approved. The minister obliged, and a week later the Commissioner wrote to the Church, outlining possible locations and funding arrangements. Thus, the Commissioner for Native Affairs placed the destiny of Western Desert Aborigines into the hands of a group of people in Sydney, who knew absolutely nothing about Western Desert Aborigines, who had never been to the Western Desert, and who he had never met. In the twenty three years that followed, there was never a policy discussed, or an understanding reached, between the Department of Native Affairs and the Apostolic Church about what constituted the best interests of the Aborigines. It occurred to no one to ask the Aborigines what they believed those interests to be.

During 1945, and the first half of 1946, the commissioner corresponded with other government departments to secure land for the mission and to acquire buildings and other facilities. The mission received favourable consideration when they sought buildings and water tanks from the Commonwealth Disposals Commission in 1946, after the government closed the R.A.A.F. base at Meekatharra. The first missionaries left Sydney in May 1946. Then began the ceaseless task of equipping and maintaining the mission.

Throughout the history of the mission, there was always tension about resources and outcomes. It was vaguely understood that the mission was supposed "to evangelise and train the natives whose habitat is between the Rabbit Proof Fence and the Canning Stock Route", but the actual meaning of this responsibility was never spelt out. In practice, it generally meant gospel readings, a school for children, placing the young men on stations as stockmen and having the young women work as domestics on the mission. From a policy point of view, the overriding consideration was always the financial implications for the state of mission activities. The Department of Native Affairs was prepared to tolerate the administrative shortcomings of mission staff, because it was well aware that missions remained the "cheapest form of native administration available to governments". From the outset, the Department's determination to get the desert Aborigines off rations, and into employment on the stations, undermined the stability of the mission. In 1950, the Commissioner made it very plain, in a policy statement, that the Department would not "tolerate large numbers of natives living in

idleness on government stations or missions". He could see the desert Aborigines in the Jigalong area becoming a state liability and he was quite definite that all "able-bodied natives can find work in this district or subsist on natural resources". This pressure from the Department to move the younger men on, exacerbated tensions between local station managers, who demanded a steady supply of cheap labour, and the missionaries, who required labour for the development of Jigalong.

In 1954, the Commissioner complained bitterly about the 'crushing burden' of the process of changing Aborigines from a "state of dependence on nature to dependence on charity". The distribution of rations was a continuous source of strain between the Department and Jigalong because the numbers were never constant, but mostly rising, and the Department was constantly revising the system of rationing in its efforts to reduce costs. For example, in 1951, when the Commissioner was analysing the steadily increasing ration figures at Jigalong, he was alarmed to find that flour and rice and sugar and honey were distributed. Afterwards, the Deputy Commissioner warned his field officers to be on guard against evidence of 'rice-bag Christianity'.

Throughout the twenty three years of the mission, there were constant demands from Jigalong to capitalise the institution. Between 1951 and 1961, the requests, each of which generated prodigious correspondence, included several for more land, a truck, houses, water supplies, a fridge, a school, a piano, a power plant, a transport subsidy, a hospital, sewing machines, dormitories for segregating the boys and girls, and a hostel for girls fifteen to twenty one years old "if they are to be saved from tribal marriages".

For the Aborigines, the shape of their relationship with European society took quite a different form from the relationship the Department and the missionaries had with them. Their primary concerns were not money or labour, but with dealing with the extraordinary change going on in their lives, and with maintaining the social and cultural integrity of their society, which, in the early days, they probably did not believe was under serious challenge from the missionaries.[26]

The first crisis which newcomers from the desert usually had to face was a rapid deterioration in their health. For the first three years of the mission, a remarkable woman they called Matron Daniel was responsible for health care at Jigalong. A copy of her detailed monthly reports to the Health Department was sent to the D.N.A. and provides a graphic account of the difficulties endured by the desert people when they

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26 See Tonkinson,R., 1974, The Jigalong Mob: Aboriginal Victors of the Desert Crusade. Menlo Park. California: Cummings.

first walked in from the desert. At the beginning, the Aborigines' camp was a three mile walk from the clinic but, nevertheless, in her first year Matron Daniel managed to treat 4966 outpatients. The list of matters she dealt with included births and deaths, large sores, yaws, VD, spearings, diphtheria, colds, an epidemic of influenza, trachoma, severe burns, severe lacerations, pneumonia, gastroenteritis, measles, and several children were drowned in a flood.

For much of the time they were also pre-occupied with what they regarded as unnecessary interventions in their lives by government officials and the missionaries. Even before the mission, there was trouble with the pastoralists about their dogs, because of the widespread use of poisons to eradicate the dingoes which attacked the sheep. The police also regularly visited Aboriginal camps and shot any surplus dogs, as did the mission staff on a couple of occasions. The constant abuse of Aboriginal women by Europeans (but not the missionaries), and intervention in their marriage laws, was the source of much animosity also. But perhaps the most hotly contested issue, was the struggle for the hearts and minds of children. Parents deeply resented their children being beaten for speaking their language and the mission's attempts to undermine social and cultural life, even if these attempts were remarkably unsucessful. They lived always with the threat hanging over their heads that the Department would charge them with neglect and take the children from them, and give them to the mission, or place them in another institution. Ultimately there was never any genuine communication between the Aborigines and the mission. The Aborigines accepted the very negative opinions the missionaries had of them, and their sometimes forceful interventions, in return for material subsistence.

8:0 A MARTU HISTORY OF THEIR COUNTRY

"When I had my father and mother, his cousin's brother came along and picked me up near Kinyu. My father told his cousin's brother, 'You can take my kid so long as you bring him back'. And so he took me from there right up to Jupiter Well, Karilwara, Nyinmi, Kiwirrkura and all round there. He took me round and round and north to Nyarkal and Palinpalin. I bin one year with that old man. He's still alive, he's at Kiwirrkura. My father was worrying for me. He came along behind and we met at Kuny Kuny. He was satisfied with me, that old man. He bring me right back to my old father and mother. Right, my father was satisfied with me. From there he took me north with another mob, another family. We went right up north along the stock route to Winpa. From Winpa I came back to Karlamilyi (Rudall River). We bin stopped round there - Karlamilyi, Punmu, Kunawariji and all round Nartiwarta."[27]

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27 Mack Gardiner, pers. comm., Jigalong, July, 1987.

In 1987-88, Western Desert Puntukurnuparna conducted an oral history of the Canning Stock Route to provide curriculum materials for the desert schools. When the old people told their stories, the themes of family and country were always most prominent. Of less importance, were narratives about events, or chronological accounts of changes in the desert. Despite the extraordinary changes of the last forty years, the recorded stories revealed the existence of important continuities between what we know to have been the concerns of the pre-contact oral tradition of storytelling, such as family, landscape, autonomy and movement, and the themes of stories, which they regard as the cultural and educational priorities for their children now. Although many of the stories are about first encounters with whites, there is no indication that they are, in any way, an attempt to grapple with what Europeans often regard as a cataclysmic disjuncture in the Aborigines' understanding of history.

The common desire of the storytellers was to re-create the history embodied in the landscape. This did not take the form of 'Dreaming stories', but of reminiscences alluding to such stories, a form reflecting the history they inherited from the Dreaming. Consequently, the structure of the stories about individual and family experiences is shaped by the signs in the landscape of great events from the Dreaming, which gave their country significance.

Why did they choose to tell such stories at this time? As part of the move back to the desert, there is a very strong feeling that the country has to be talked about again, to re-vitalise the desert and to teach the children about it. The stories are not about learning traditional knowledge, but providing an important place for the past and organising their experiences, so that the children can learn their history and accommodate the changes as they try to build something new. Part of the urgency they communicated, also has its source in their concern about the incessant mineral exploration and the very real prospect of a uranium mine nearby. One of the changes of the last forty years, is that they are less secure about their occupation of traditional lands; the title which birth and knowledge once conferred, no longer has the status of earlier days. They now have to articulate their title in European terms, for a wider audience, and to demonstrate knowledge of their country where, previously, it was beyond dispute.

While the stories do not 'explain' their remarkable ambition to repopulate the desert, they do shed some light on the historical experience of Western Desert Aborigines, and the strength of their committment to live again in the desert, in their own communites. Although most of the stories are about knowledge of country, or first experiences of Europeans and the movement out of the desert, they contribute also to an understanding

of their present situation. The community leaders have aspirations for the stories to contribute to their literacy program in the schools.

The content of the first stories recorded was confusing, because it did not meet the expectations aroused by a reading of European accounts of contact in the desert. Also, an understanding of the Aboriginal stories was initially hampered by European prejudices about what constitutes 'history'; especially the requirement to locate events in time. Matters were further aggravated by Aboriginal perceptions of the impact of early European intrusions into the desert, particularly the Canning Stock Route, as quite marginal to their experience. Gradually, the significant themes became clearer: family, country, movement, autonomy and the pleasures of the hunter-gatherer economy. There was, of course, much discussion about first contacts with the whitefellas and their tucker, but it seemed incidental to the main themes. It took the form of anecdotes about a different world, which was not immediately perceived as a threat to their own.

Experiencing the country - that is, being in, living in, using or moving about the country - is the point at which the old people wished to begin to teach the children about their culture in school. It is the critical category in any exploration of the past and it provides the sense of continuity between the transcendental history of the Dreaming and the secular history of contemporary experience. It is particularly relevant in a bilingual program where language, usually Manjiljarra or Warnman, is as important as history. The oral history offered the opportunity to express Aboriginal priorities in education, and to maintain and strengthen the links between the school and the camp.

From the outset, the differences between European and Aboriginal ways of recording and remembering the past were quite apparent, and highlighted different choices about what was important in the past. Broadly, these differences can be accounted for by the fact that one society is literate, while the other has an oral tradition. In literate societies, knowledge and law exists separate from individual humans as the written word, and is not structurally tied to everyday life and experience.[28] In oral societies, authority and wisdom reside with old men and women, who know the law as it is embodied in the stories and traditions of the past. In an oral tradition, the skill of storytelling seems to lie, in part, in recognising what is important in the past and conflating the various elements in such a way that they acquire a symbolic quality, which can be readily

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28 Ong, Walter J., 1982, Orality and Literacy, Methuen. p42.

reproduced and made available to an audience. The written word allows more reflection about the details of events and characters.

Travelling in the desert with Aborigines there is a constant reminder in the form of named places, of the significance of the geography. It is a commonplace to remark that the land is important to Aborigines, but it is doubtful that we yet fully understand how it links experience and social relationships and becomes a symbol for a whole range of meanings. In Mack Gardener's story, the country mediates his preparation for the approaching existential crisis of puberty and initiation. It was through learning about the country that he grew up, as he perceives it.

The differences between oral and literate ways of recording the past raise some special problems for a history project. One of them, for example, is clearly evident in what we will call "the John Forrest problem". In stories and conversations about the first Europeans in the desert, mention is made of acts of violence, including shootings and the violation of women. Some of these incidents are within living memory and almost invariably are attributed to John Forrest, who was in the Western Desert in 1874, and much to the south of the country of the Manyjilyjarra people. There is, however, one dramatic event which occurred in 1874 at Weld Spring, later Well 9 on the C.S.R., and has Forrest as the central character. Forrest's party barricaded themselves against the local Aborigines, so as to control the available water and, in the ensuing battle, several Aborigines were shot. Ever since, the name of John Forrest has been notorious throughout the Western Desert and remains a powerful symbol of the worst of European conduct. The difficulty arises when Forrest is made responsible for other important events, in which he could not possibly have had any part. For example, amongst the desert people he is held responsible for the Kinyu (Well 35) shooting in 1912. The heroic stature of Forrest can possibly be explained also by another episode, which has nothing to do with his time as an explorer. Don McLeod, another legendary figure in the Pilbara, has consistently argued that Forrest, through some political skullduggery in London when he was Premier, was responsible for denying the State's Aborigines a constitutional share of revenue after self-government.[29] Perhaps past associations with McLeod have re-inforced their view of Forrest as the archetypal oppressor. But "the John Forrest problem" is also, in part, the outcome of the need of Aboriginal storytellers to organise knowledge and experience in a form which can be easily recalled. Heroic figures are a common feature of all oral traditions and are very effective as a means to give historical events contemporary meaning when empirical certainty is not possible or necessary.

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29 McLeod, D. W., How the West was Lost ,p2-10.

Although there was much interest in the stories about events such as the Kinyu shooting, first contacts with white men and early experiences on missions and stations, that is, the history of encounter, it was clear that the primary effort went into reproducing their knowledge about country. This took the form of stories about movement through the country and the production of a map. In both, the naming of places was very clearly the most important activity.

The map measures 2.5 by 2.0 metres, covers about 150,000 square kilometres and names over 650 water sources. It was the outcome of a series of meetings of family groups to list the place names of their respective country. The ambition was clearly to make a strong statement about links with the past and present occupancy of the desert.

9:0 ENCOUNTER NOW

"We have come to talk about what is happening in our country. That's where most of our old people came from and we are descendants of them. It seems to us that people are going into our country and doing whatever they want to, which is hurting us. It is happening in the national park."
(Chairman of Western Desert Puntukurnuparna, Parnngurr, June 1987).

Much of the intense contact today is in the highly structured form of the meeting. The chance encounters with mineral exploration parties and tourists occur regularly and are often charged with anxiety and suspicion, but the meeting has become the dominant intrusion. The initiative for most meetings comes from Europeans, who seek ratification of agendas generated in Perth, and decisions endorsing their presence in Aboriginal lives. It is an activity which allows little room for Aboriginal perspectives, nor the time to process information into forms Aborigines find readily accessible and meaningful. **Real consultation with desert communites is hard work, demanding painstaking effort to communicate information effectively and time for it to be absorbed. Even then, it can not be assumed that new information is received in the manner intended.** Although one official or agency may take the trouble to communicate their position properly, the Aborigines are often subject to different opinions on the same matter from other officials. For example, in the Karlamilyi (Rudall River) National Park issue, information arriving from the Premier's office, the Minister for Mines, the Mines Department, the Minister for CALM, the Department for CALM and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (Federal and State) can carry indications, subtle and otherwise, of varying priorities, personal styles and politics. Not only do Aborigines have to work out what is happening, but also where the power lies.

An interminable frustration for desert people is the inordinate amount of time spent negotiating the terms of the delivery of services, such as health, education, housing and employment. They are certainly important resources to them, but they are essentially the outcome of the political struggles of Aborigines who have had much longer and more direct involvement with the larger political process, and of Europeans in the cities who have supported them. But the time such services command in the desert deflects energy from another agenda which exists in, and has been generated within, the communites - the social and cultural revival that is of their own making. Their priority in the move back to the desert is this other agenda and not the desire for a solar powered fridge. A critical aspect of Aboriginal access to such services is the bureaucracy's fixation with financial accountability, rather than social processes and outcomes. It is a responsibility the communities fully accept as necessary, but it is still difficult. For example, the writer was at a meeting at Punmu, in 1987, to discuss the community's housing project. Four senior officials from the relevant agencies and the building firm had flown from Perth and Port Hedland for the occasion. Each in turn proceeded to berate the community about some alleged, unspecified 'problems'. After quietly taking the humiliating criticism for over an hour, no one had the nerve to ask "what are you talking about?", but ever so gently changed the subject. They truly did not know what was at issue, and as it turned out, neither did the resident building consultant who, during the meeting, had been outside the window building houses, with the help of his Aboriginal trainees. The officials had arrived with no specific agenda or complaint, had not informed the community in any detail about the purpose of their visit, and did not seek any decisions from them. Someone, somewhere had developed the idea, quite independently of the reality, that the community was not doing the right thing. It was made very clear to the community that if their training program was not a great success, then all the other desert communities would be denied similar resources. This very demanding and unsatisfying process is intensified manifold when the issue is land and miners.

While it is acknowledged that such resources largely make possible their sustained re-occupation of the desert, for those living in the remote desert communities, the considerable tension surrounding this dimension of contemporary 'contact' is difficult because their motives and priorities have quite different sources. Social relationships, law business and sparing their children the rigours of town life are their major concerns. The weight given to economic matters by today's 'intruders' places severe constraints on the expression of their social priorities, which are often assumed to be a simple consequence of bureaucratic largesse. The overwhelming experience of the Western Desert Aborigines has been marked by exploitation, exclusion, abject

poverty and powerlessness. To rebuild a genuine community and to sustain the interest of their young is not a simple task at all. It requires commitment, energy and courage.

A part of the history of encounter is the history of the imposition of ideas, and the power of one to describe the other. Aborigines have been made to carry the burden of our obsession with property. In our present problem, this has taken the form of a drama surrounding claims of land ownership. The inherent issues are very important, but to elevate them above all else, is, in significant respects, to miss the point.

The great obstacle in the Karlamilyi (Rudall River) National Park is the absence of a process involving Aborigines in authentic negotiation, one which defers at significant levels to their perceptions of their own standing and rights. In the desert, to be consulted about one's country is a gesture of the utmost significance.

There is a frustrating appearance of involvement, but never the satisfaction of having the feeling of a measure of control over events and decisions. For example, although the conduct and outcome of the meeting, between Premier Dowding and Western Desert Puntukurnuparna last August, were viewed positively, there remained a nagging doubt among Aborigines, that a 'study' could be another deflection of their interest, in favour of more powerful interests because the meeting left important matters on their agenda unresolved. It always seems the context of encounter is shaped and developed by priorities set beyond the territory their influence reaches. Always, they are expected to respond to calls for important meetings with significant others who, it is implied, are in positions of power and are able to represent their interest in the right places and even influence major decisions in their favour. Yet, despite the appearance of the best of intentions, it never quite happens. There is compensation in the form of favourable decisions, involving the expenditure of monies on such items as Toyotas, housing, health, schools etc. - a form politicians, bureaucrats and much of the broader community find readily intelligible and Aborigines also regard as important. But the fact remains, that **when the reality of their occupation of land in the National Park, or elsewhere, encounters other interests and values, the truth of their political standing, - their relative powerlessness, - is sharply revealed and acutely felt. As Jimmy Williams of Parnngurr put it, "Talking, talking, talking and we are getting nowhere."**

In recent years, a certain disillusionment with politics has surfaced among Aborigines, as expectations of positive change have been heightened and then let down. In the recent case of the Seaman Inquiry, for instance, they were raised to fever pitch

and then dashed mercilessly. In the Western Desert, the big meetings associated with mainstream politics require enormous energy to organise and mobilise, and carry with them the prospect that matters of consequence will be dealt with by those who count. Some people have to travel two or three days to attend, and the logistics of supplying the meetings have a somewhat expeditionary aspect to them. The big meetings are regarded as very significant political events and much effort is put into the preparation. But now, **after a few critical experiences, the Aborigines have become aware of a radical disjuncture between the outcomes of the meetings they participate in, and the political decisions shaping their lives.**

In June 1987, a big meeting was held at Parnngurr to deal with the problem of Aboriginal residence in the Park and the uranium at Kintyre. People from Punmu, Jigalong, Parnngurr and Well 33 attended. Present also were officials from DAA, CALM, ALS, Aboriginal Sites, Mines Department, the Advisor to the State Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, a consulting lawyer and five senior executives of CRA, who were asked to wait for a later meeting. The first hour of the meeting consisted of statements from all the Aboriginal men of standing. They canvassed many issues, but most notably they were concerned to express the following:

- the strength of their claim to speak for the country in question,

- their feelings about the National Park and a uranium mine on Aboriginal land, and the threat both posed for their important places,

- their serious concerns about the environmental implications of a uranium mine, for their food and water,

- their worries about the future of their communities and their childrens' future in the event of an accident at the mine,

- an unequivocal dissatisfaction with the lack of progress in their negotiations with the Government.

The meeting was then left open for the white protagonists. For their part, the visitors, from the perspective of their individual responsibilities, communicated, *inter alia*, the following:

- "No!" (the Aboriginal Liaison Officer of the Mines Department when asked if he felt obliged to inform Aborigines of mining company activity on land of interest to them).

- "We wouldn't know because its a big area. All we can do is come out as often as possible ... to see what is happening. We wouldn't know. I admit that. Periodically we have a look to see whether the people are doing what they said they would do, and sometimes they are a bit wrong and we say "fix that business up.'" (CALM officer when asked how he would know if a company was complying with conditions of entry and work in a national park).

- "What the mining tenement conditions says is that the operator will comply with the provisions of the Aboriginal Heritage Act and ensure that sites are not damaged. Therefore, there is a grey area, if you like, of interpretation." (Mines Department officer when questioned about alleged new CRA activities which have not been subject to official scrutiny).

At one point in the meeting, when discussion turned to the environmental worries at the uranium mine, one of the CALM officers informed the meeting of the current monitoring situation. It is worth quoting at length:

> "One of the things the company has told me they are going to do is drilling near the mine, round where the place is, they are going to be drilling holes, so that they can take some of the water out of those holes and make sure there is none of this poison and this uranium going into the water that could go through the ground into the river or anywhere else. They have told me they are going to do that. I don't know what they are going to do if they find that it is doing that, but they are checking to see that. One of the other things that they are doing, is they are taking some of the plants there and some of the animals there and they are seeing how much uranium there is, that those animals have got in their bodies now and they want to keep doing that all the time, so they can check to see if the animals are getting more uranium in their bodies and they want to do this so they can check this stuff isn't going into the animals and going out to the other places, that it isn't going to be a danger for you people who want to eat them or whatever. Now, what the results are I don't know, but I know they want to do that, those things."

There is no doubt that this was a genuine attempt to comfort the Aborigines, but in the confusion he reinforced their worst fears. What about the turkeys? Extraordinarily complex technical questions are rendered almost impossible to grasp by a lack of specificity and a presentation in which information has not been processed into a form desert Aborigines understand. People have been eating food in the region for thousands of years. Why, all of a sudden, is it a problem?

Nearly all the visitors seemed determined to clarify and improve the situation. These extracts are not intended to diminish the contributions of most of the visitors but to show the confusion in legislation, in the co-ordination of policy formulation and in the movement of information. For the Aborigines, it leaves the impression that the people who should know how to deal with their problems do not know and, possibly, a few of those people think that maybe the whole thing is a bit too hard anyway. Understandably, they worry about it a lot. But, perhaps for the sake of balance, we should hear the following:

> "Sites are my responsibility. The problem that we face is that we very seldom get to hear what is going on. It is all very well and good to say there must be clearance for sites but the problem is that we don't get informed about this and I don't know where it is breaking down. The Act is there to be observed and there are conditions on the mining blocks that say they have to look after sites and have to avoid them. From today's meeting it seems to me that we are not talking to one another enough. We don't get to hear about these activities. We are certainly not consulted by CRA about these new tracks and core drills and as far as I know there are no agreements being struck between CRA and the people out here. The problem is that there are so many different agencies involved, including the community and the Western Desert Land Council, who might be talking to part of the other side but we are not all talking together. What we need to bring out of today is to get a plan where everyone sits down and puts their plans out and we get a proper mechanism where we can all talk together and make sure these sort of things don't happen." (Aboriginal Sites Department, senior officer).

Twenty-one months later such a mechanism is still to materialise. The overall effect of such meetings is to leave Aborigines with a sense of impotence and exclusion. After four hours the meeting was closed and the CRA executives were summoned. In their statements, they were courteous and respectful and by comparison the meeting was almost convivial. They emphasized the economic imperative of sufficient national

income to allow Aborigines to drive around the desert in Toyotas. They also went to some lengths to impress on the communities their wish to be good neighbours. For the Aborigines this was a more successful meeting. As one Jigalong man commented, rather nervously, after the meeting, "It was a good meeting because they listened properly." As a result, Western Desert Puntukurnuparna overlooked to challenge them about their new activities.

Assuming these larger issues can be resolved in some way, it still leaves other difficulties, such as chance encounters with exploration parties and tourists as serious intrusions in the life of the communities in the Park. Whenever the Aborigines make contact with employees of mining companies on the tracks or find their camps unexpectedly intruding on their land, their prior ignorance about the identity and purpose of these intruders can evoke a profound anxiety. Once, when this writer was travelling with a group between Parnngurr and the Canning Stock Route, we came across a new camp and as we approached to look from a distance, one man in his forties asked, only half jokingly, "What sort of fellas are these? Are they going to shoot us or something?" It is crucial that any process of managing encounter in the Park now should involve Aborigines in ways which remove such anxiety.

In the case of tourists, encounter is made much more difficult by the absence of any comprehensive controls effecting their presence, and by the fact that some of them display an insensitivity to Aboriginal life verging on malicious contempt. For example, recently while one community in the Park was mourning the death of of one of their leaders, tourists arrived and began photographing. On another occasion, a convoy of Toyotas from a four wheel drive club arrived at Well 33 and emptied the community's water tank - if there had been a wind drought, there would have been a very serious problem. **Again, there needs to be devised, monitoring mechanisms which involve Aborigines and respect their cultural values.**

10:0 CONCLUSION

What the Aborigines have lost is the power to authorise the expression of what they mean,, when they speak of their return to the desert. A real culture/lesser culture dichotomy, at a subtextual level, informs much of the discussion about Aborigines and their rights to land. It is a dichotomy having real benefits for those who perceive the Aborigines as rivals, because, as the cultural integrity of the latter is impuned, the political fortunes of the former are enhanced. The problem for Aborigines in having lawyers reading anthropologist's or linguist's translations, is that it leads to a situation where the Aboriginal statements about their occupation of the Park are located

primarily in a context constructed to enable legal adversaries to argue about property. In such a process, we examine the statements to find what fits, what is similar to our own categories. Our law gives pre-eminence to a notion of property, which affords to one the right to exclude another. In Aboriginal society, it is a right which usually defers to other values and responsibilities to enhance, not limit, social relations.

The political consequences are that Aborigines are obliged to articulate their claims in the Park with respect to the 'traditional owner' model. Much of the tension in the Park has focused on the standing of the Aboriginal protagonists, in terms of familial lineage and association to country in pre-European times, rather than on current need. That is, once again the intruder has claimed the power to define the position of the Aborigines in the political process in ways which guarantee the primacy of their own needs. The Aborigines regard the land question as enormously important, and it occupies their minds constantly, but there is a very real danger that Europeans will see Aborigines only in their relation to land and, in adopting the static, retrospective view, reduce them to dumb inhabitants of the past. They are then removed from the political process as active, contemporary players.

The great challenge of cross-cultural encounter is to understand the signs and gestures of the other and to give them the meaning with which they were offered.[30] In Canning's search for water, Aborigines were seen only as natural creatures who knew how to satisfy a thirst in the desert. In the 1908 Royal Commission, there were persistent attempts to establish the voluntary nature of some of the Aborigines' contact and their 'contentment' while on the chain as evidence that they did not see the brutality. The voluntary contact was not read as a sign of willingness to engage in genuine dialogue because it was simply assumed they were incapable of doing so. Now signs, such as their readiness to be involved at meetings, are constantly being misread or ignored.

There is a need for policies and plans of management which recognise their source in Aboriginal politics. For example, there is no inherent reason why the processes which produced the Community schools in the desert and the programs of language maintenance cannot be employed to address the problem of managing encounter in the Park. It requires a shift in attitude to recognise their re-occupation of the desert as a courageous attempt to find Aboriginal solutions to their problems and to establish genuine communities spared the vagaries of grog. When Europeans conduct their affairs in the desert in a provocative and threatening manner, there is a need to hear in

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30 Dening, Greg. 1980. Islands and Beaches. Melbourne University Press.

discussions about land an anxiety about the vulnerability of their cultural revival and their search for a small measure of independence.

Intruders in the desert have always demanded, and got, carte blanche. When Canning marched across the desert, his vision did not extend beyond political and economic concerns in Perth. The understanding of Aborigines was restricted to showing that their pattern of using water was similar to budgerigars,[31] and that "natives feel the immorality of their lives as keenly as whites".[32] . Pastoralists demanded Aborigines give their labour freely. The defence establishment demanded empty space. The missionaries demanded the right to impose a new sense of time and a new morality. The times, it is said, have changed. Aborigines are an integral part of the nation's body politic at the historical moment when it grapples with its own diversity and complexity. To offer new intruders in the desert de facto carte blanche by not obliging them to accept certain responsibilites and to abide by the spirit of laws which inherently respect the legitimacy of the Aborigines' case, is to leave us with the budgies.

31 Royal Commission, op. cit. Questions 2849 and 2922.
32 Ibid. Question 3322.

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