

# East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project

PRE-SETTLEMENT INTRUSION  
INTO THE EAST KIMBERLEY

Cathie Clement\*

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A Joint Project Of The:

Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies  
Australian National University

Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

Anthropology Department  
University of Western Australia

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

The aims of the project are as follows:

1. To compile a comprehensive profile of the contemporary social environment of the East Kimberley region utilising both existing information sources and limited fieldwork.
2. Develop and utilise appropriate methodological approaches to social impact assessment within a multi-disciplinary framework.
3. Assess the social impact of major public and private developments of the East Kimberley region's resources (physical, mineral and environmental) on resident Aboriginal communities. Attempt to identify problems/issues which, while possibly dormant at present, are likely to have implications that will affect communities at some stage in the future.
4. Establish a framework to allow the dissemination of research results to Aboriginal communities so as to enable them to develop their own strategies for dealing with social impact issues.
5. To identify in consultation with Governments and regional interests issues and problems which may be susceptible to further research.

Views expressed in the Project's publications are the views of the authors, and are not necessarily shared by the sponsoring organisations.

Address correspondence to:

The Executive Officer  
East Kimberley Project  
CRES, ANU  
GPO Box 4  
Canberra City, ACT 2601

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\* 151 Joel Terrace, Mt Lawley, WA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the historical evidence that indicates how and when Aborigines in the East Kimberley district, Western Australia, probably first become aware of, or had contact with, Europeans. It presents the author's interpretation of the records compiled by the Europeans who penetrated various portions of the East Kimberley during the period 1819 to 1884. By focussing on the activities and movements of various parties of Europeans, the paper demonstrates that contact during the pre-settlement phase of intrusion was sporadic and usually involved small groups of people. It also shows that this contact took place in widely differing circumstances and with a comparatively low level of conflict.

Throughout the pre-settlement phase of intrusion into the East Kimberley, Aborigines appear to have permitted Europeans to visit and traverse their territory more or less unchallenged. Where conflict did occur, Europeans may have triggered Aboriginal acts of aggression by appropriating limited supplies of fresh water, by failing to respect protocol, or by otherwise behaving imprudently. It is also possible that they provoked hostility by approaching, or perhaps interfering with, places significant to the local people.

## EXPLANATORY NOTE

In undertaking postgraduate research at Murdoch University during the past six years, I have examined a mass of data relating to European intrusion into the Kimberley. The results of this research, in addition to supporting a thesis, are also to become the basis of a comprehensive social history of the Kimberley.

In this paper I look at the intricacies of nineteenth century contact between Aborigines and Europeans. I use this approach, firstly, to highlight the degree to which actions by individual participants appear to have influenced the outcome of early intrusion, and secondly, because early contact forms such an important part of the backdrop against which all subsequent Aboriginal/European contact has taken place.

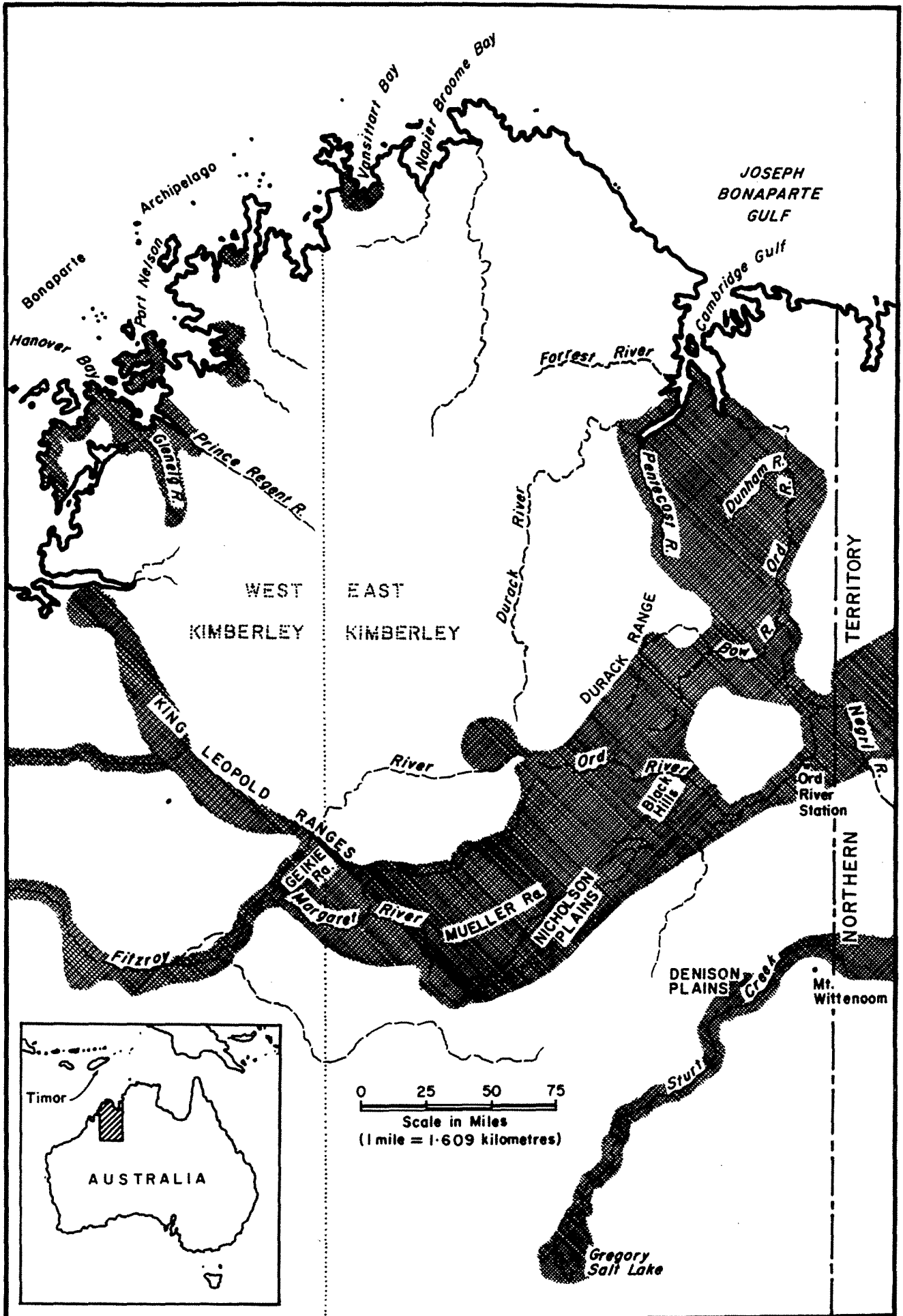
The term 'European' is used to describe Caucasians of European and Australian origin. The term 'European intrusion' describes the entry by such people into territory occupied by Aborigines. Most of these early intruders brought non-Kimberley Aborigines and some livestock with them. They were mainly itinerant and had no intention of taking up residence in the Kimberley. Because of this, Aboriginal dispossession was not an integral part of pre-settlement intrusion.

The term 'pre-settlement' refers to the time before non-Aboriginal immigrants first took up residence in the East Kimberley. Ideally, the length of this phase of intrusion would be determined, on a locality by locality basis, by the dates from which Europeans first instituted their various pastoral, mineral, commercial and urban enterprises within the district. However, because I have yet to acquire and analyse sufficient data for writing at such a level, this paper uses 29 June 1884 - the day on which cattle reached the Ord River Station leases - to mark the close of the pre-settlement phase of intrusion. The extent to which Europeans had penetrated the East Kimberley up to this time is shown on Map 1.

As far as content is concerned, this paper is primarily empirical. It is a European researcher's interpretation of European records. I have tried to convey as clearly as possible my knowledge of Kimberley events, including as much detail as is necessary to make those points which I consider are important. The numerous sources used for the paper will be cited in full in my thesis.

I believe that, up to at least 1884, these sources contain a more or less accurate record of Kimberley events. Numerous gaps exist, but as a rule these seem to stem, not from censoring of contemporary accounts, but from failure to record or preserve such material. Historical records relevant to frontier activity in the Kimberley seem, in general, to be too candid to have suffered any amount of censoring.

In view of the above, I have allowed my source material to speak largely for itself in this paper. The roles of the various participants are no doubt understated in some instances and glorified in others - a matter that can be rectified by the reader adding a pinch of salt where necessary.



MAP I. EAST KIMBERLEY LAND AFFECTED BY PRE-SETTLEMENT INTRUSION



## Introduction

Little is known of the recent history of the eastern Kimberleys from the European point of view, aside from what is contained in a finite and relatively brief set of records, compiled by explorers, administrators and professional investigators such as anthropologists and linguists.<sup>1</sup>

Almost a decade after its publication, Bruce Shaw's observation regarding the state of eastern Kimberley historiography is still fair comment. More recent research, however, has shown that the records he describes as a 'relatively brief set' are actually quite extensive.

In Western Australia's Battye Library alone, thousands of archival records touch on the eastern Kimberley's European history. As individual sources, few afford any great insight into the overall picture of early intrusion. Taken as a whole, they constitute an extremely rich resource. Like some gigantic jigsaw puzzle, they promise a mix of satisfaction and frustration to those who seek to piece them together.

The picture that emerges promises to portray the complete panorama of European intrusion into the Kimberley. Clear in some spots, but fuzzy in others, its numerous cameos afford fascinating glimpses of the past. While the accuracy and significance of these cameos must remain unproven until something like the complete panorama is to hand, their consistency to date suggests that they are representative of Kimberley history.

Early contact between Kimberley Aborigines and European intruders was sporadic. As a rule, this contact exposed small groups of people to a wide variety of experiences. Perception of this variety, and thus of the impact of intrusion on specific Aboriginal communities, is greatest when contact is seen as

interpersonal interaction. Analysing contact as interaction between races, or between groups of people defined by shared social or occupational characteristics, makes such perception difficult.

In this paper I have focussed on the short-term, rather than long-term, objectives of the European intruders. Their long-term objectives were invisible to the indigenous people, and therefore played no part in determining Aboriginal response to pre-settlement intrusion. It is fair to say that these interlopers saw both the Kimberley and its Aboriginal inhabitants as resources from which they might derive some benefit. That they seldom had the inclination, or the time, to attempt to do this with any subtlety emphasised the impact of their intrusion.

Securing a supply of fresh water was the most basic of the short-term objectives pursued by Europeans. Upon entering new territory, they invariably sought out drinkable water. When the quantity procurable was minimal, they often vandalised wells, pools and springs in their quest for better supplies. Pursuit and/or interrogation of local people was common in such situations, and was often the scenario in which members of two cultures first came together.

The role of water in the European conquest of Aboriginal Australia cannot be overstated. European appropriation of water-holes, whether for temporary or permanent use, generally meant that Aborigines were denied continuing access to these. This probably disrupted social and economic patterns of Aboriginal life. It may also have placed heavier demands on adjacent water supplies.

Another reason for concentrating on short-term objectives is that we need to acknowledge the importance of both personal autonomy and high occupational mobility on frontiers. To date, the recognition accorded to these aspects of Australian colonisation has been negligible. Yet, in opting for the alternative of

attaching bland occupational tags to their subjects, writers have also unintentionally imbued these people with an undeserved uniformity.

Pursuit of a particular occupation does not make a person behave in a manner that can be considered characteristic of that occupation. As a rule, the Europeans who were involved in Kimberley colonisation tended to be itinerant males who behaved in a highly autonomous manner. Their personalities and backgrounds, as well as their short-term objectives, determined how they would act upon encountering Aborigines. This, plus the uniqueness of each of these encounters, is what makes interpersonal interaction such an important component of frontier history.

My investigation of Kimberley history has led me to conclude that, until experience or hearsay encouraged Aborigines to view Europeans with distrust, they were seldom explicitly hostile to intrusion. Europeans in the Kimberley were extremely vulnerable to Aboriginal attack, but rarely suffered it. When they did, they were rarely the first outsiders to have penetrated their assailants' territory.

It is significant that Kimberley Aborigines did not exploit ample opportunities by which they might have killed European intruders without recourse to battle. Stealthy attacks on explorers and other itinerants comprised only a fraction of pre-settlement conflict. Overt displays of hostility accounted for a greater portion of this conflict. Often staged well away from interlopers, these involved much shouting, gesticulating and brandishing of weapons on the part of the Aborigines concerned.

The end result of such displays appears to have been very much an outcome of how the interlopers handled Aboriginal hostility. Where they moved on without attempting to engage in battle, displays usually ended on that note. Endeavours to engage the apparent leader, or leaders, of Aboriginal groups in a parley

sometimes defused explosive situations. It was also common for Europeans to rout aggressive Aborigines by firing weapons either at them or over their heads.

Although they were relatively common, overt displays of Aboriginal hostility were not sufficiently numerous to be considered a commonplace response to intrusion. Explorers travelling about the Kimberley in the nineteenth century, for instance, would have been unlikely to witness more than two or three such displays during several months' work. This was notwithstanding that such explorers were often aware that Aborigines were monitoring their presence at other times.

Given further research, it may become possible for historians to pinpoint the specific places in which Aborigines responded aggressively to European intrusion. If this can be done, and the results matched with data relevant to the significance of particular places to Aboriginal groups, it will then be somewhat safer to formulate hypotheses as to why overt displays of Aboriginal hostility occurred when and where they did. My research to date suggests that East Kimberley Aborigines may have staged these displays when outsiders failure to respect the intricacies of local protocol and the significance of revered objects or places.<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible to say anything conclusive about why Aborigines chose to make their presence known in some instances and not in others. It does seem, however, that prior opportunity to observe and/or discuss the behaviour of outsiders induced Aborigines to adopt a higher profile in response to intrusion. Where they did make themselves conspicuous, be this with hostile, neutral or friendly intentions, the manner in which Europeans reacted to their conspicuousness played a key part in deciding whether personal interaction followed.

Face to face contact during these early encounters must have been both exhilarating and nerve-racking. Documentary records of such

events tell us little about the emotional state of the European participants. Comments on the emotional state of the Aboriginal participants, on the other hand, are plentiful. Although subjective, these comments can yield considerable insight into the nature of Aboriginal response to European intrusion.

It is possible that, at least as far as pre-settlement intrusion into the East Kimberley is concerned, further investigation of the way in which Aborigines responded to intrusion will show that certain types of response were peculiar to specific phases of intrusion. For example, East Kimberley Aborigines appear to have kept totally out of sight only when Europeans first penetrated a locality. Dealing with chance meetings by fleeing in terror also appears to have been a first contact response.

By comparison, the Aboriginal practice of watching intruders from obvious vantage-points appears to have occurred in localities in which prior intrusion, or perhaps a conspicuous approach by Europeans, allowed local people the chance to observe and/or discuss interlopers privately before any meetings eventuated. In this regard, the composure shown by certain coastal Aborigines during episodes of pre-settlement contact was seemingly greater than that displayed by people in the inland - perhaps because contact with outsiders on the coast was more common.

These and other subtleties of Aboriginal response are most evident when one peruses a wide range of records documenting European intrusion into the Kimberley. It is unfortunate that there is little record of the activities of non-Aboriginal people on the East Kimberley coast prior to 1819. That earlier intrusion did take place is beyond question. What we lack is information of the type that would allow us to gauge how this intrusion may have influenced Aboriginal reception of the Europeans who first went to this coast as representatives of the British Government.

In dealing with events which took place away from the coast, it is somewhat easier to gauge the extent to which prior intrusion

may have influenced known episodes of contact. Although there are some cases for which no data have survived, documentation is available for most of the instances in which Europeans penetrated the interior prior to settlers first occupying land in the East Kimberley. Common to all of these is evidence that the intruders in question usually managed to penetrate and leave Aboriginal territory without encountering much overt hostility.

Prior to Europeans appropriating land for pastoral use, Kimberley Aborigines had every reason to assume that these intruders were nomadic. They erected temporary shelters, moving on as, and when, time suited. If they sometimes camped for longer periods, there were always some of them who went out on excursions of one sort or another.

On many such excursions it was common for Europeans, and also for their non-Kimberley Aboriginal assistants, to walk about alone or in company with only one or two others. Even where these men were armed, it would have been relatively simple for Aborigines to have killed them. Yet, only two Europeans - Patrick Ahern and Will Fargoo - are likely to have met with such a fate during the East Kimberley's pre-settlement phase of intrusion. They are also just as likely to have died of thirst.

Where attacks did occur, it is often possible to point to some catalyst; generally an aggressive or imprudent action on the part of one or more of the intruders. In a later section of this paper, a detailed description of contact associated with Phillip Parker King's survey of the Kimberley coast illustrates this point.

A further conclusion, and one that warrants elaboration, is that European intrusion into the East Kimberley was unlike that which took place elsewhere in northern Australia. Two main factors were responsible for this distinctiveness. Firstly, East Kimberley intrusion was recent enough to have been instituted mainly through the diversion of steam, rather than sailing, ships from

their usual itineraries. Secondly, the Europeans involved in this intrusion had little interest in employing, or otherwise making use of, the indigenous people.

This distinctiveness is most evident when seen within the broader context of European intrusion into the Kimberley as a whole.

### **East and West - Worlds Apart**

Geographically, the East and the West Kimberley do not constitute separate regions. Yet their histories do differ; and, if this difference is to be appreciated, some line of demarcation is needed. In this paper, the line that forms the main portion of the east boundary of the Shire of Derby/West Kimberley, i.e. the 126th meridian of longitude, separates the East and the West Kimberley.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, the most significant difference between the sectors is the degree to which each experienced intrusion prior to being settled by Europeans. Varying considerably from one locality to the next within the sectors themselves, pre-settlement intrusion by Europeans spanned, at the absolute minimum, the periods 1644 to 1864 in the West Kimberley, and 1819 to 1884 in the East Kimberley.

Intrusion during these periods was intermittent and belonged to two distinct eras. One, a time when small European nations vied for new trading partners and territorial holdings; the other, a time when young Australian colonies struggled towards economic self-sufficiency. Some idea of how this affected Kimberley Aborigines can be gleaned from the following overview.

During the first era of European intrusion, maritime exploration and naval surveys took Europeans to the Kimberley coast. Geographical differences concentrated attention on the West Kimberley, giving rise to that sector's longer European history. It was of some consequence that, while the territory on either side of the East Kimberley provided ships with fresh water, the land around Cambridge Gulf did not.

Although the impact of this first era was minimal as far as East Kimberley Aborigines were concerned, stories of contact in neighbouring localities no doubt reached some of the more northern of these people during the first half of the nineteenth century. This is discussed in due course. The impact of the second era of intrusion was much greater, but was not fully apparent in the East Kimberley until 1886.

The explanation for the different histories of the East and West Kimberley involves both their physical geography and the sequence in which Europeans acquired knowledge of their natural resources. Phillip Parker King's survey of Cambridge Gulf in 1819 was the only substantial East Kimberley work undertaken during the first era of intrusion. This survey indicated that, if any fresh water and rich resources existed in the East Kimberley, these were likely to be in the interior.

King's survey, along with work completed by other British mariners and explorers, located abundant sources of fresh water on either side of the East Kimberley. With the impetus for examining interior portions of the East Kimberley thus diminished, it was not until 1856 that Europeans again penetrated this district. A party of horsemen detached from A.C. Gregory's North Australian Expedition then found that the Sturt Creek contained only isolated pools of water. This party saw nothing that was indicative of Australia's north-western interior providing the water for any large river system in the East Kimberley.



The 1860s saw Europeans attempting settlement on either side of the East Kimberley. Some settlers sailed from Victoria intent on taking sheep to the Denison Plains section of Sturt Creek. But, upon hearing that West Kimberley pastoral enterprises at Camden Harbour and Roebuck Bay were failing, they went elsewhere. Colonial expansion thus bypassed the East Kimberley at this time. (See Map 4 for Camden Peninsula)

In the 1870s, when renewed European interest in the Kimberley came about, this trend persisted. Worthwhile deposits of guano, and then beds of pearl-shell, were located off the West, but not the East, Kimberley coast. Exploitation of these did not produce mainland settlement; but it did renew European demands for access to fresh water on the mainland.

Use of a spring at Beagle Bay produced rapport between Aborigines and the European mariners who ferried water to the Lacepede Islands; a refreshing change from the all too common brutality of intrusion. It is, however, an unfortunate fact of life that such instances often have harsh sequels. In the West Kimberley, the guano industry paved the way for forcible recruitment of Aborigines. Labour traders who secured their recruits by force were known as blackbirders.

Blackbirding came about primarily because profitable pearl-shell fishing depended on acquisition of cheap labour. Aborigines provided an alternative to Asian workers, and each year blackbirders rounded up and kidnapped dozens of West Kimberley men and boys. Ill-treatment was rife amongst the pearling boats and, for many West Kimberley Aborigines, the approach of Europeans thus came to mean violence and the loss of kin.

In other parts of Australia, and certainly in the Pacific islands, indigenous people had some chance of identifying blackbirders through their association with ships and the sea. In the West Kimberley, these people were indistinguishable from

pastoralists, shepherds, pearlers and other such intruders. Indeed, they often were pastoralists, shepherds and pearlers.

This occupational plurality illustrates why it is impractical to view frontier contact as interaction between labelled groups of people. If intruders are described as pastoralists, for example, we are inclined to conjure up mental images which, despite varying from one person to the next, have certain basic characteristics. Such images are not likely to portray a pastoralist as a person who captures and chains Aborigines in order to supply divers to pearling boats.

Failure to move beyond occupational labels also fosters the belief that the mere presence of Europeans and their livestock was responsible for provoking Aboriginal aggression. In Kimberley records, and probably in others as well, there is reliable evidence that Aboriginal attacks on Europeans and other non-Kimberley people up to, and for at least several years beyond the time of settlement, often followed episodes of contact which involved the abuse, kidnapping or detention of Aboriginal people.

It was significant in frontier contact in the West Kimberley that, because European occupational mobility was high, it was difficult for Aborigines to discern the occupational status and the objectives of any outsiders who approached them. Their dilemma was heightened by the fact that, if these people were employed by the distant and unacknowledged British government, they stood to be arrested, or shot at, if they fled.

Discerning the occupational status and objectives of approaching Europeans was somewhat easier in the East Kimberley, principally because there were no blackbirders. The earliest intruders were explorers who sought water, grazing land or gold. The objectives of the men who first brought cattle to the Ord River were more or less exaggerated versions of those of their predecessors. Most importantly, they did not look to the local population for their labour needs.

In the West Kimberley, because fencing was not of high priority, profits from wool-growing, like pearl-shell fishing, depended largely on the availability of cheap labour. Working shareholders were one source for this; ex-convicts and Aborigines (both Kimberley and non-Kimberley) were another. The former source contributed much to pastoral ventures on both sides of the Kimberley, while local Aborigines and ex-convicts were initially employed only in the western sector.

West Kimberley Aborigines were thus recruited both as pearl-shell divers and as shepherds. Some accepted employment willingly and chose to stay with particular Europeans. Others walked off when the opportunity presented itself. Either way, during the earliest years of land-based intrusion, they were far more likely than East Kimberley Aborigines to have had personal dealings with Europeans and with associated immigrant Aborigines.

Overall, infrequency of personal encounter was the key aspect in which East Kimberley contact differed from that elsewhere in northern Australia. Until 1886, when thousands of fortune-hunting immigrants flocked to the Kimberley for the Halls Creek gold-rush, comparatively few East Kimberley Aborigines had dealt personally with any European person. The following sections mention some of the encounters which are known to have occurred during the pre-settlement phase of intrusion.

### **First Impressions**

The date on which East Kimberley Aborigines first became aware of the existence of Europeans is unknown. Some may have heard stories from the West Kimberley following the visits of such mariners as Abel Tasman and William Dampier in the seventeenth century. It is also possible that these or other mariners visited the East Kimberley around that time. Two cannon, which were found in 1916 on Carronade Island in Vansittart Bay, and which were

reputedly forged in Spain in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, suggest some interesting possibilities.

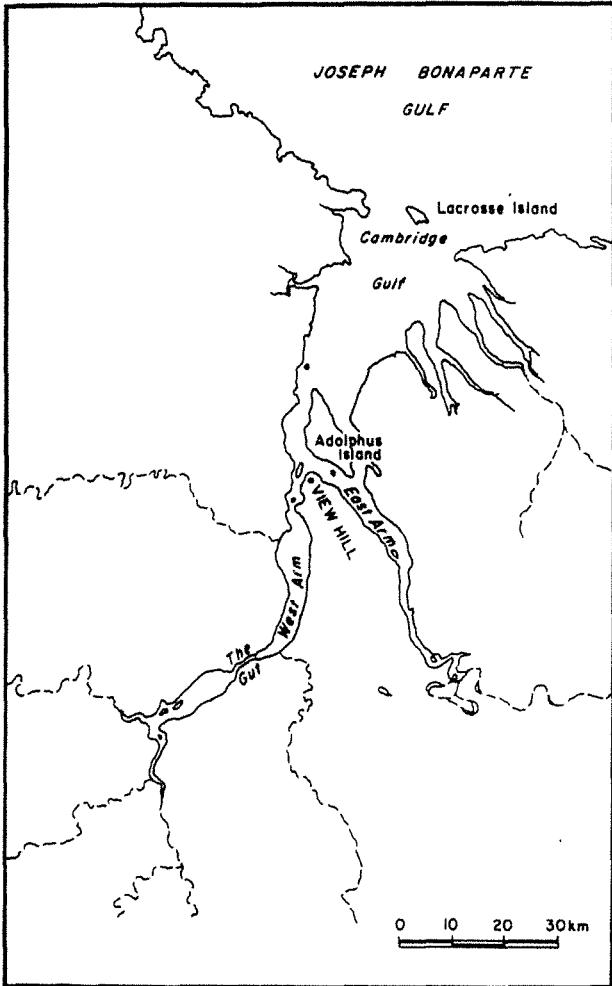
As far as my knowledge goes, Kimberley Aborigines had no contact with European mariners during the eighteenth century. In 1772, a French expedition led by Saint Allouarn examined parts of the Kimberley coast while the Gros Ventre was en route from Shark Bay to Timor. No landfall was made and no further visits eventuated until Thomas Nicolas Baudin's expedition of 1801 moved up the coast on the final leg of its survey of western Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Had the scientists who sailed with Baudin been allowed to complete the natural history component of their prescribed research, contact with Kimberley Aborigines would probably have eventuated. As it happened, Geographe did only a cursory coastal survey to the westward of Bonaparte Archipelago before Baudin headed for Timor to take on supplies.

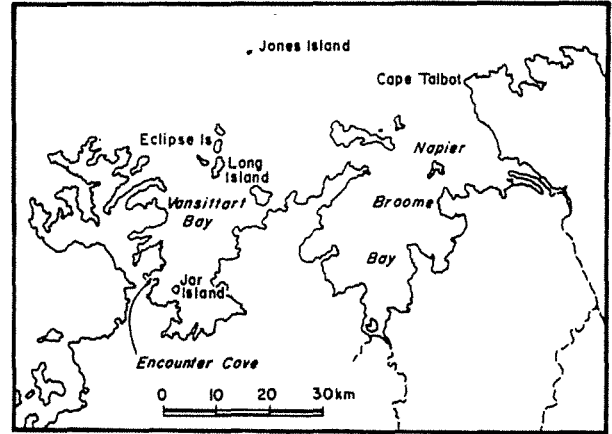
In 1803, again commanding the Geographe and finalising a western Australian survey, Baudin returned to the Kimberley coast. He sailed in company with Louis de Freycinet's Casuarina. In two visits, divided by a run to Timor for supplies, the Frenchmen surveyed Bonaparte Archipelago and charted the shore of Joseph Bonaparte Gulf.

Whilst at the Bonaparte Archipelago in April, Baudin's party came across a fishing fleet manned by people whom he variously described as Malays and Makassarese. By following up this fleet, which appeared to be based on one of the Archipelago islands, his associates ascertained that these people visited the Kimberley coast periodically without having any permanent settlement there.<sup>5</sup>

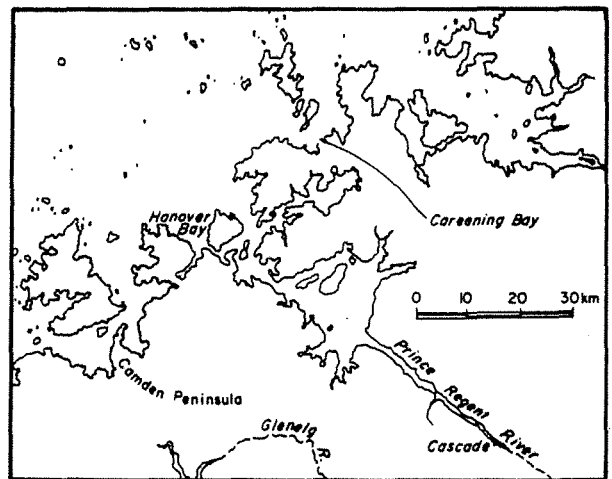
I am not aware of any recorded instances of contact between these French mariners and Kimberley Aborigines, or, with particular reference to this era, between these Asian fishermen and



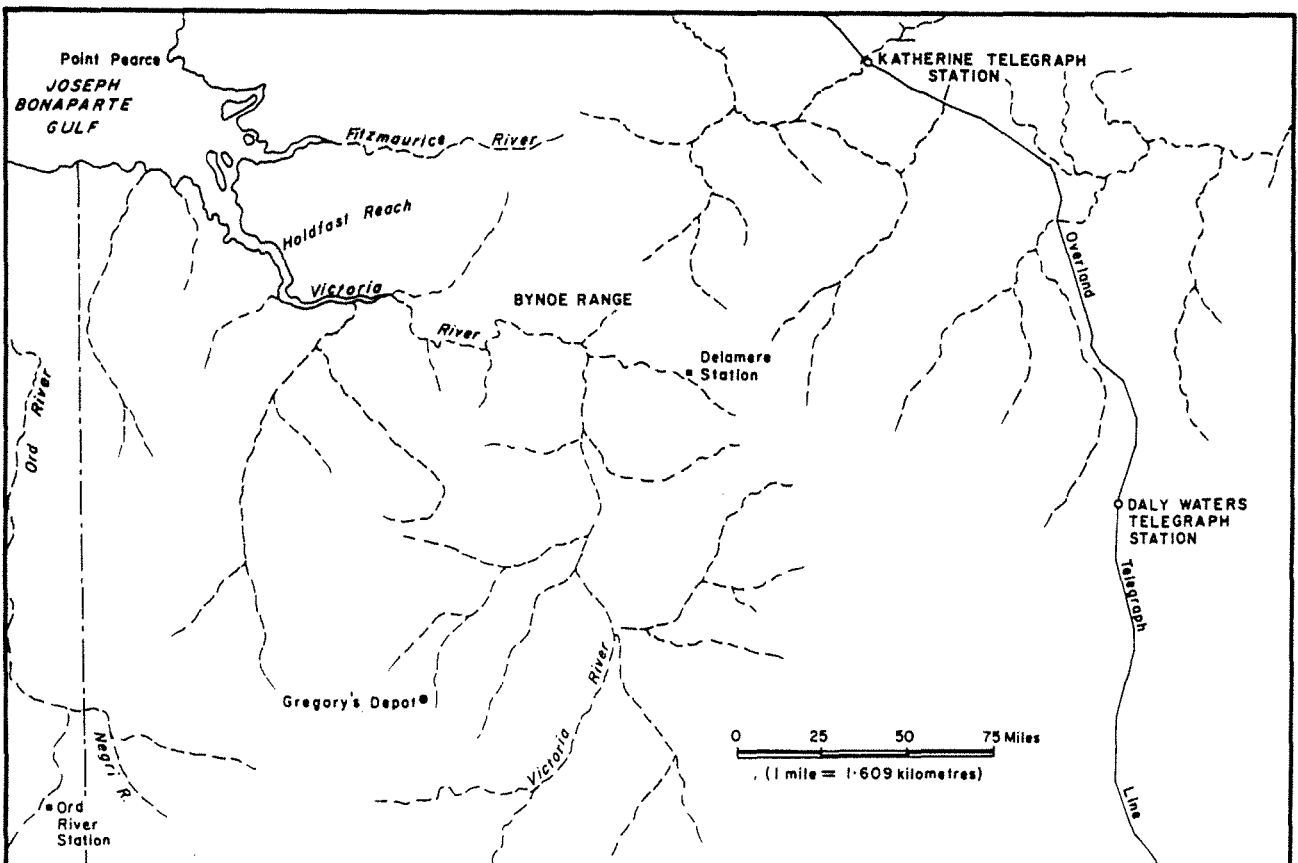
MAP 2. CAMBRIDGE GULF AND THE GUT



MAP 3. NAPIER BROOME AND VANSITTART BAYS



MAP 4. CAREENING AND HANOVER BAYS



MAP 5. PORTION OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY RELEVANT TO EAST KIMBERLEY INTRUSION

Kimberley Aborigines. The renewal of European/Aboriginal contact appears to have been left to the British.

Phillip Parker King, during his survey of the northern Australian coast in 1819, undertook a closer examination of Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. King's vessel, the Mermaid, was possibly the first European sailing ship seen at close quarters in the East Kimberley. Several people on Lacrosse.

Island hastily left the beach and made for higher ground when they first sighted the ship on 17 September. (See Map 2)

King shouted and waved his hat to these people, but did not seek to communicate with them further. This was notwithstanding that, due to rats having gnawed holes in most of his ship's casks, he was decidedly short of water. In fact, earlier the same day, some of his crew had come across people on the island and had withdrawn without causing any alarm. When another landing was made following King's salutation, at least nine Aborigines watched the intruders from the hills.

King continued his survey of Lacrosse Island and that evening took the Mermaid back to her second anchorage so that his crew might secure turtle meat and eggs from the beach. During the next week, they examined Adolphus Island and several sections of the mainland near View Hill and along the West Arm of Cambridge Gulf. A recently used camp on the west bank of The Gut lifted their hopes of finding water; but a search of the surrounding country yielded nothing.

Returning to Adolphus Island, the Mermaid anchored at the island's north-west point. While she was there, an accident resulted in one of King's crew suffocating. The death of the unfortunate William Nicholls was not noteworthy in itself. It was, however, somewhat unusual in that, despite sailing the following day, King did not bury Nicholls' body at sea. Instead,

he had it interred on the island and named the north-west point in memorial.

Moving out of Cambridge Gulf to examine the coast to the westward, King anticipated that his crew's health would deteriorate. Fatigue and heat stress now compounded the debilitating effects of salt provisions. This, coupled with their dwindling water supply, reduced the enthusiasm that these mariners would normally have felt in approaching territory so far presumably unseen by Europeans.

The earlier French expeditions had not examined the islands and reefs around Napier Broome and Vansittart Bays. In doing so, King found fireplaces on Long Island, but no signs of recent habitation. Greenery on the western side of Vansittart Bay induced him to put the Mermaid into a inlet there. This inlet did not yield water, but showed evidence of a large population frequenting this neighbourhood. (See Map 3)

On the beach, laid out in a straight line, the mariners saw forty small fire-places. Beside each were stones on which the Aborigines, or, as King termed them, the Indians, had been breaking seeds. The presence of husks around these stones indicated recent occupation. A wide search of the vicinity revealed no fresh water, but brought to light evidence of earlier visits by Asian trepang fishermen.

King was aware that the French had seen trepang fishermen in this locality. He was aware too, from discussions with trepang fishermen at Timor, that fishing parties often met with a hostile reception when they landed on northern Australian shores. In fact, King feared that his own intrusion would provoke hostility solely because Aborigines would not be able to distinguish British sailors from Asian trepang fishermen.

King's position was tricky. His options were: to continue seeking water in a locality in which hostile racial contact was likely to

have occurred; to depart, and seek water further to the westward; or, cutting his survey short, to make for Timor. He chose to stay. And so, anchoring the Mermaid in the south-east corner of Vansittart Bay, he set off with others to examine the shore.

At least one group of Aborigines was nearby. In a camp concealed from the intruders by mangroves, nine or ten people were cooking food on an inlet behind Jar Island. As the mariners approached this inlet, they spotted a lone man running towards it. Leaping nimbly from rock to rock, he displayed neither fear nor anger as the row-boat drew alongside him.

Then, having reached higher ground, he stood watching the mariners as they endeavoured to entice him to approach their boat. He was unarmed and after a short time moved off to join his companions. Alerted thus to the Europeans' proximity, they gathered up their possessions and moved away from the fire. Pulling up the creek in their row-boat, King and his party found armed men protecting the retreat of the women and children.

Confronted by this, and not wishing to cause further alarm, they rowed some sixty yards across the creek to its opposite bank. A nearby hill offered scope for observing the Aborigines. These people were now about fifty yards behind their fire, watching the intruders and talking amongst themselves. Then, apparently intent on preventing the mariners from returning to their boat, the Aborigines made a sudden dash for the foot of the hill.

Having climbed the hill unarmed, the Englishmen were in an awkward situation. Fortunately, upon their starting the steep and rocky descent, the Aborigines fell back. No confrontation occurred, and, upon reaching the row-boat, the mariners saw that the group had again assembled in its earlier position. Now neither openly fearful nor hostile, the Aborigines watched the mariners from a tree.



Encouraged by this, King decided to row across the inlet and seek a parley. Apparently uninterested, the Aborigines promptly climbed down and retired amongst the mangroves. Unable to induce them to venture out, the intruders eventually departed. A short distance away, tempted by the prospect of securing plants for the ship's collection of specimens, they headed for a lightly-wooded point.

As the boat backed in to this point, the mariners debated whether they should land so near to people who had already shown displeasure at their intrusion. But, before any decision was made, their attention was distracted by the appearance of a dog. This animal, which had been with the Aborigines around at the inlet, walked into the shallow water from behind a bush and waded towards the row-boat.

Keen to bring it within reach, the mariners threw food overboard. The animal, wary of strangers, merely sniffed at this and made off to a bush fifty yards away. Then bedlam erupted. Shouting as they sprang from behind this bush, the Aborigines ran to the water to hurl stones at the intruders. With their boat backed in to the shore, the Englishmen were again in an awkward position.

This time, however, they had light arms at hand. The stones did no damage, but the prospect of spears flying amongst them as they sat in the open boat was more daunting. So, seeing spears prepared, King fired his musket overhead. Alarmed by the echoing report, the warriors turned and fled. Two further shots overhead ensured that their introduction to European weapons was suitably impressive.

Bestowing the name Encounter Cove on the inlet, King's party moved on to Jar Island. Here, traces of a trepang fishing camp encouraged King to conclude that earlier contact with Asian people must account for the hostility he had just encountered. A week later, when rats were found to have holed two more of the ship's water casks, he headed for Timor.

When he returned to resume his Kimberley work in 1820, and again in 1821-22, King examined the central Kimberley coast. These visits may seem beyond the scope of this paper, but stories concerning events at Port Nelson and Hanover Bay probably reached at least a few Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley. Since local encounters were virtually non-existent, such stories would have been central to the formation of their first impressions of Europeans.

Upon reaching Port Nelson in September 1820, King was obliged to beach the Mermaid in order to undertake major repairs. Landing all of the expedition's equipment and provisions, the mariners camped ashore while they careened their ship. Aborigines probably watched the Mermaid arrive, but did not show themselves in the eighteen days that King and his men occupied Careening Bay. (See Map 4)

Their absence, particularly since the site had an excellent supply of fresh water, may have been due to the firing of muskets on the first night. Two shots were fired towards the supply dump when the appearance of flames near this induced the wary mariners to think that the dump was about to be plundered. These flames were merely the result of a breeze rekindling the embers of nearby bush-fire.

The Aborigines' absence left King with mixed feelings. Pleased to have been able to repair the Mermaid in peace, he nonetheless regretted the lack of opportunity to establish friendly contact with these people. Reasoning, however, that any quarrel would have jeopardised both his own party and future visitors, he eventually concluded that his unchallenged occupancy of the bay had been for the best.<sup>6</sup>

Leaving the name of his vessel carved deep in a baobab tree, King sailed a little further west. Finding abundant fresh water at the Prince Regent River cascade, he became excited by the potential of this section of the coast. Yet, worried by the condition of

his ship, he felt unable to push on. He therefore reluctantly ended this segment of his work.

In July 1821, equipped with a sturdier vessel, King returned to the Kimberley. Finding the Careening Bay water-hole dry, he made for the cascade on the Prince Regent River. The water was still abundant, but the task of ferrying it down to the sea proved tedious work. Thus, upon subsequently sailing into Hanover Bay, King was delighted to find fresh water at a readily accessible site.

The Aborigines who watched the Bathurst sail into Hanover Bay gave no sign that this caused them any alarm. Indeed, one woman and two men waved and shouted from the rocks in so friendly a manner that King took a party ashore to parley with them. To smooth their approach, he had an Aboriginal employee named Bundell stand naked in the bow of his boat and make friendly gestures to the seated trio.

The local people responded with like gestures, but their attitude changed as soon as King and Bundell began climbing up the rocks towards them. The men stood up, spears in hand, and the woman walked away. Then, upon seeing that the strangers came unarmed, the two men placed their spears on the ground. King, making use of further friendly gestures from Bundell, continued his approach. His other companions had remained back at the boat - their muskets at the ready in case of trouble.

The Aboriginal men accepted an offering of fish from the previous evening's catch. Then, in reciprocation, one gave King an eighteen inch club and the other gave Bundell an opossum fur belt. Pleased with their response, King next took out a clasped knife. After showing them how to open and close this, he gave it to the man who had given him the club.

Seeing things going so well, two of the other Englishmen from the boat ascended the rocks. One was unarmed, but the other,

Montgomery, had a pistol beneath his coat. At their approach, the indigenous men talked between themselves and took up their spears again. Montgomery offered a fish to them, and, when they were unwilling to come forward and take it, he tossed this across the several yards that separated the two parties.

King was not especially worried by this occurrence, believing that the men had taken up their spears out of caution rather than hostility. Yet, by his own acknowledgement, it was their anger that now induced him to ask for the knife back so that he might try to entertain them with a repeat of his earlier demonstration of its mechanism. Upon his request, one of the Aborigines placed the knife in King's hands.

Instead of pacifying his hosts with his repeat performance, King incensed them. Fazed by this development, he threw the knife at the feet of its original recipient. The man picked it up, and, talking animatedly with his companion, moved a short distance away. Their demeanour was now clearly aggressive. Despite this, King decided that the situation might yet be rectified by a casual withdrawal.

In fact, he figured that the Aborigines would overlook their anger and follow him meekly down to the boat. So, waving farewell, he and his men began the descent. Quick to take advantage, the Aboriginal men sent two spears whistling down. One felled Montgomery. The other, striking a rock, dropped broken on the ground. Bundell grabbed a piece of this and gave chase and King called for reinforcements.

By the time these reinforcements arrived, both Aboriginal men were out of the range of the muskets. The mariners returned to their boat and found Montgomery complaining of great weakness from loss of blood. The spear had gone some three inches into his back, inflicting an extremely painful wound. As the expedition's surgeon, he was obliged to direct his own treatment, both on the spot and after returning to the ship.

Next day, when Aborigines were sighted from the Bathurst, further trouble was anticipated. Plans to thwart this, and to impose punishment for the previous day's attack, were soon instituted. These resulted in one man, reputedly the one who had speared Montgomery, being shot. King recorded that his wound was apparently to the shoulder, inflicted by a musket ball fired by Bundell.

By way of added punishment, the mariners seized the Aborigines' boats and all the tools and weapons they could find. Content with this, King felt that his retribution would instill respect for the superior power of European weaponry. He continued watering his ship, but sailed several days later when the supply proved inadequate to meet his needs.

Unbeknown to the Aborigines who watched his departure, King's use of their water supply ensured that it would be central to the planning of future European intrusion into the Kimberley. Initially, there was a long interval during which they may have thought that the ship and its unpredictable owners would not return. Nonetheless, sixteen years later, the Lynher arrived and George Grey set about exploring the mainland.

The impact of Grey's expedition was far more severe than that of King's intrusion. Grey introduced foreign plants and livestock, and, when he pushed into the interior, he took along a cavalcade of men and animals. While significant in itself, this may well have been eclipsed by the attention that Grey and his men paid to Aboriginal cave paintings and to stone mounds that they supposed to be tombs.

Curious as to the contents of these mounds, Grey opened one of the two that he found between the Glenelg and the mouth of the Prince Regent River. This was on 7 April 1838. He recorded that this mound contained 'the remains of many and different kinds of sea-shells' and that:

... we found no bones in the mound, only a great deal of fine mould having a damp dank smell. The antiquity of the central part of the one we opened appeared to be very great, I should say two or three hundred years; but the stones above were much more modern, the outer ones having been very recently placed; this was also the case with the other heap: can this be regarded by the natives as a holy spot? We explored the heap by making an opening in the side, working on to the centre, and thence downwards to the middle, filling up the former opening as the men went on; yet five men, provided with tools, were occupied two hours in completing this opening and closing it again, for I left every thing precisely as I had found it. The stones were of all sizes, from one as weighty as a strong man could lift, to the smallest pebble. The base of each heap was covered with a rank vegetation, but the top was clear, from the stones there having been recently deposited.

Grey's interference with this stone mound may have been newsworthy enough to have been recounted to neighbouring communities. The same may have applied to incidents in which Grey shot an Aborigine's dog and in which Aborigines attacked Europeans detached from his main party. Word of Grey's activities may thus have reached Aborigines in at least the north-western portion of the East Kimberley. Following on from stories that would have recorded King's visits to the coast, such news may have contributed to a notion that visits from outsiders often meant trouble.

Around this time, Aborigines in the north-eastern portion of the East Kimberley may have heard stories about European intrusion into the Victoria River area of the Northern Territory.

The eastern reaches of Joseph Bonaparte Gulf had been visited, but not surveyed, during the 1819 segment of King's northern work. Unable to manoeuvre the Mermaid into the gulf's more southern inlets, he had left these unexplored. Though initially regretful, given their likely value, he had subsequently scaled down his estimation of their importance when he sailed into Cambridge Gulf. It was largely due to these circumstances that Europeans did not see the Fitzmaurice and Victoria Rivers until 1839. (See Map 5)

In October of that year, John Clements Wickham sailed almost fifty miles up the Victoria in the Beagle. Anchoring in Holdfast Reach, he and his men spent two months investigating resources in this vicinity. Their activities, which included survey of the river valley as far upstream as the Bynoe Range, involved surprisingly little contact with Aborigines.

The river valley, as far as the Europeans were able to determine, was thickly populated. On several occasions Aborigines fled, apparently in panic, when approached by the mariners. Later, taking up a stance on the bank of the river opposite a European camp, two particularly robust men shouted and gesticulated at the intruders. Believing these men to be scouts from a large party, the interlopers assumed a defensive position and waited for an attack. When none was forthcoming, they moved on.

Notwithstanding further indications of Aboriginal hostility, the mariners took no great pains to guard against attack. It was therefore comparatively easy for an Aborigine at Point Pearce to spear Wickham's assistant, John Lort Stokes. A search for his assailant produced nothing beyond the location of a recently deserted camp. The local Aborigines thus escaped learning of the effect of firearms on human flesh - a less than satisfactory state of affairs for those who considered this attack an unprovoked assault.

Another noteworthy occurrence, though not one that was productive of any immediate outcome, took place before this spearing and while the Beagle was still anchored at Holdfast Reach. Soon after dark each night, flocks of whistling ducks were heard overhead, flying in a south-west by west direction towards the head of Cambridge Gulf. This led the mariners to suppose that the ducks were bound for some river in that direction; a pointer to the soundness of King's observation that the interior of the East Kimberley appeared to be better watered than the coast.

To the explorers of this era, the fertile country on rivers such as the Victoria, the Glenelg and the Fitzroy appeared to be crying out for colonisation. Britain was not, however, about to contest Aboriginal right to these rivers. The garrison at Port Essington had been, and for a decade would continue to be, that nation's main economic commitment in northern Australia.

It was thus not until 1856 that European intrusion again affected the East Kimberley. This time, at least insofar as the people in the district's south-eastern corner were concerned, the intruders were not men from the sea. It was only across on the lower Victoria River, where the schooner Tom Tough awaited the return of Augustus Charles Gregory's mounted exploring party, that Aborigines might have perceived the means by which these horsemen had originally approached their country.

Searching for a major inland river system, Gregory travelled by a circuitous route from the Victoria to Sturt Creek. It was through this that his approach, though clearly visible in the dry summer conditions, had no tangible connection with encampments on the lower Victoria. Its links with a depot camp en route may have been more obvious. Either way, this party was effectively the first overland expedition encountered by East Kimberley Aborigines.

Already a seasoned Australian explorer, Gregory showed none of the naivety with which his naval predecessors had conducted their excursions into Aboriginal territory. Indeed, soon after setting out, he recorded in his journal that the local people viewed his intrusion with contempt. He went about his work circumspectly; yet, out of necessity, still made severe inroads into the limited supplies of surface water.

On 22 February, a thunder-shower filled the main channel of Sturt Creek north of Mount Wittenoom. This provided water locally, but only mud further down. Next evening, aware of having an audience, and unable to find water, Gregory approached eight Aborigines.



Scarpering into high grass and bushes, these people avoided contact. Afterwards, although he saw traces of Aboriginal presence from time to time, Gregory did not see any other Aborigines in the East Kimberley.

On the return journey, while riding between the border of Western Australia and their depot camp, the explorers heard people hailing them from a distance. Upon one of them approaching the Aborigines concerned, these people retrieved their spears from the grass and ran off. There had been racial conflict in the vicinity of the depot camp while this party had been away - a situation which may explain why Aborigines made their presence obvious to Gregory's party at this late stage of its East Kimberley excursion.

Gregory's abandonment of his depot camp marked the end of imperial exploration in and around the East Kimberley. Europeans now knew a good deal about the adjacent territories, but next to nothing about the East Kimberley itself. As far as East Kimberley Aborigines were concerned, those who knew anything at all about Europeans may have begun to believe that they would reappear from time to time.

The low incidence of overt hostility on the part of the Aboriginal people during this first era of pre-settlement intrusion suggests that they considered the newcomers to be either extremely powerful or quite harmless. I am unable to say whether, upon first encountering Europeans, Kimberley Aborigines thought that these people were spirits.

Because European excursions almost invariably involved the use of firearms, Aborigines may have believed that Europeans possessed certain powers or magic. Similarly, because Asian trepang fishing fleets which worked along the Kimberley coast also carried firearms, Aborigines may have come to some like conclusion regarding the powers and resources of Asian people.

Aboriginal people's understanding of the use of guns is uncertain.

Some explorers in the Kimberley noted hearing noises which they swore were gunshots, but which they later found were distant meteorological or volcanic activity. The existence of these and other natural sounds meant that, during the earliest phases of intrusion, it was probably only when Aborigines actually witnessed gun-fire, or had some prior knowledge of this phenomenon, that they associated its sound with the use of guns.

Where intruders fired shots overhead with the intention of scaring Aborigines, comprehension of the manner in which firearms are normally used was unlikely. Even in the earliest instances in which interlopers wounded or killed animals, birds or people in the Kimberley, Aboriginal witnesses may have found it difficult to accept that these weapons could inflict instantaneous injury without leaving the intruders' hands. Those who did witness gunfire no doubt broadcast the news of their experiences far and wide.

All things considered, it is likely that East Kimberley Aborigines could have assumed that the Europeans and Asians who first came to their attention were spirits. How long they would have entertained this notion is impossible to say. In evaluating such situations, we should, however, be mindful that each episode of intrusion was unique and that Aborigines consequently had no set scope for determining from which world outsiders might have come.

Further, because Aborigines often monitored the arrival and movements of intruders, they are likely to have realised quite rapidly that European and Asian intruders were human. That such interlopers should have failed to adhere to local protocol would have caused consternation and may have caused offence. Other factors, including the disturbance of game, the appropriation of fresh water where supplies were scarce, and incidents involving

interference with people, camps, weapons, tools and sacred sites, would have exaggerated the impact of intrusion.

An important component of Aboriginal perceptions of Europeans at this time was surely that each of the episodes of intrusion instituted by King, Grey and Wickham culminated in Europeans leaving Aboriginal territory following the spearing of one of their number. It is likely that the long intervals that preceded subsequent intrusion by Europeans would have rendered these spearings far more potent in Aboriginal eyes than would otherwise have been the case.

It may also have been the case that these spearings confirmed that Europeans were vulnerable to Aboriginal weapons. If so, then the spread of information concerning such matters probably had a marked influence on evolving Aboriginal perceptions of Europeans. Exactly how far afield such information travelled is hard to gauge. However, if the episodes of contact cited in the remaining sections of this paper are representative of pre-settlement intrusion into the East Kimberley, then the distances involved do not seem to have been very great.

#### **Alexander Forrest discovers the Ord**

Following Gregory's withdrawal from the East Kimberley, more than two decades passed before Europeans again intruded into this sector of northern Australia. In the meantime, colonists moved into the adjacent sectors, but managed to effect enduring settlement only on the eastern side. By the end of the 1870s, when compared to the strip of land which embraced the scattered pastoral and mining settlements in the Northern Territory, the East Kimberley was already somewhat of an anachronism as far as colonisation was concerned.

The distinction between the East Kimberley and adjacent portions of northern Australia was evident late in 1879 when Alexander Forrest emerged triumphant from traversing the Kimberley. He and his associates were only the second Europeans to see any interior portion of the East Kimberley. Yet, only days after Forrest reached the overland telegraph line in the Northern Territory, news of his whereabouts reached the west coast of Australia. The degree to which colonisation had overtaken the rest of Australia is further illustrated by the fact that, when Forrest came to make his way back to Fremantle, he was able to take advantage of the comfort and convenience of steamship travel. (The overland telegraph line is shown on Map 5)

Forrest was the first European to venture into the East Kimberley of his own choice. Each of the earlier expedition leaders had been under orders to advance European knowledge of this little known portion of the continent. Forrest, on the other hand, acted as a private surveyor when he successfully sought colonial government approval and money to travel overland from the De Grey River to Port Darwin.

The West Kimberley portion of this expedition is not of any great relevance to this paper. It is sufficient to say that Forrest's journey along the Fitzroy River to the Geikie Range was the least arduous part of his work. The usual shooting of game occurred, but the presence of outsiders does not seem to have provoked any hostile response from local Aborigines. In fact, Forrest recorded quite a few friendly encounters.

From the Geikie Range, Forrest's party travelled north-west along the foothills of the King Leopold Ranges. Fruitless attempts to find a way through these ranges weakened the expedition greatly. Upon regaining the Geikie Range in July, men and horses were exhausted. Only two men, both of whom were ill, were now riding. Half of the expedition's horses had been left behind, overworked or dead.

Before pushing on into the East Kimberley, Forrest re-arranged his packs to free four more horses for riding. Only two of the party's eight members were now obliged to walk. Fresh water and grass were fortunately plentiful. Game also proved easy to shoot. Given this, it is surprising that Aboriginal people seen by this party between the Margaret River and Mount Pierre Creek were not robust. Forrest recorded that these old men, women and children were 'the most miserable lot we have seen as yet'.

Travelling along the south-eastern side of the Mueller Range to the Nicholson Plains, the explorers did not see any Aborigines. If the Aborigines, on the other hand, saw the intruders, they may have noticed people of their own kind using firearms to bring down game. On another tack, but also significant, is that it was in this sector of the East Kimberley that Forrest noted seeing land eminently suitable for pastoral use. His description of this land ensured that it would be coveted by Europeans.

As Forrest's party moved toward the Black Hills on the upper Ord River, the presence of Aborigines became more evident. On 24 July 1879, Forrest wrote that:

today, we came across an old native man and three children, who made a tremendous noise when they saw us, and seemed to be dreadfully frightened. Farther on we met three women returning to their camp, whose terror deprived them of speech. When, however, we moved on, they commenced shouting loudly.

Fearful they may have been, but the people in this vicinity were curious, and maybe reconnoitering, as to who and what had come amongst them. Just before dusk on 25 July, at least seven watched the explorers' camp from a position less than half a mile away. The following day, when the interlopers moved five miles downstream and camped south-west of the Bungle Bungle massif, about twenty Aborigines monitored their camp from across the river. Stationed about half a mile away, these people seemed unafraid. They moved off as soon as the outsiders noticed them.

By this time, four of Forrest's men were too ill to walk. His two Aboriginal assistants in particular were so weak that they were barely able to sit astride their horses. The party had been on short rations for two of the five months it had been out. Indeed, its survival was due largely to fresh water, fish and game being unusually abundant along its route. It may have been that this abundance of water and food encouraged local Aborigines to allow the party to travel unchallenged through their territory.

Forrest's only other encounter with East Kimberley Aborigines took place on the Ord River, some 10 kilometres below where Osmand and Panton subsequently established their Ord River Station homestead. One evening, after setting up their camp here, some of the explorers went down to the river and started fishing. A short time later, a small Aboriginal party walked up - apparently with the intention of camping for the night. As soon as they spotted the intruders, this party hastily crossed the river and disappeared from sight.

With his party's food supply and stamina dwindling, Forrest left the Ord at the Negri River junction. His journal entries show that he was greatly impressed with the country above this junction. Reference to numerous streams and to splendid grassy plains indicated that intending pastoralists would find this a far cry from the drought-stricken plains that abound elsewhere in outback Australia. It was thus to be expected that, once the Western Australian Government published and distributed Forrest's journal, the eyes of land-hungry Europeans would fall on the East as well as the West Kimberley.

The hardships that Forrest encountered in travelling from the East Kimberley to the overland telegraph line are documented in his journal. These hardships, along with those that the Kimberley itself had cast in the explorers' path, paled into insignificance as news of their wondrous discovery of rich and extensive pastoral land became known. The richest land in other parts of the continent had long since been taken over by pioneer settlers.

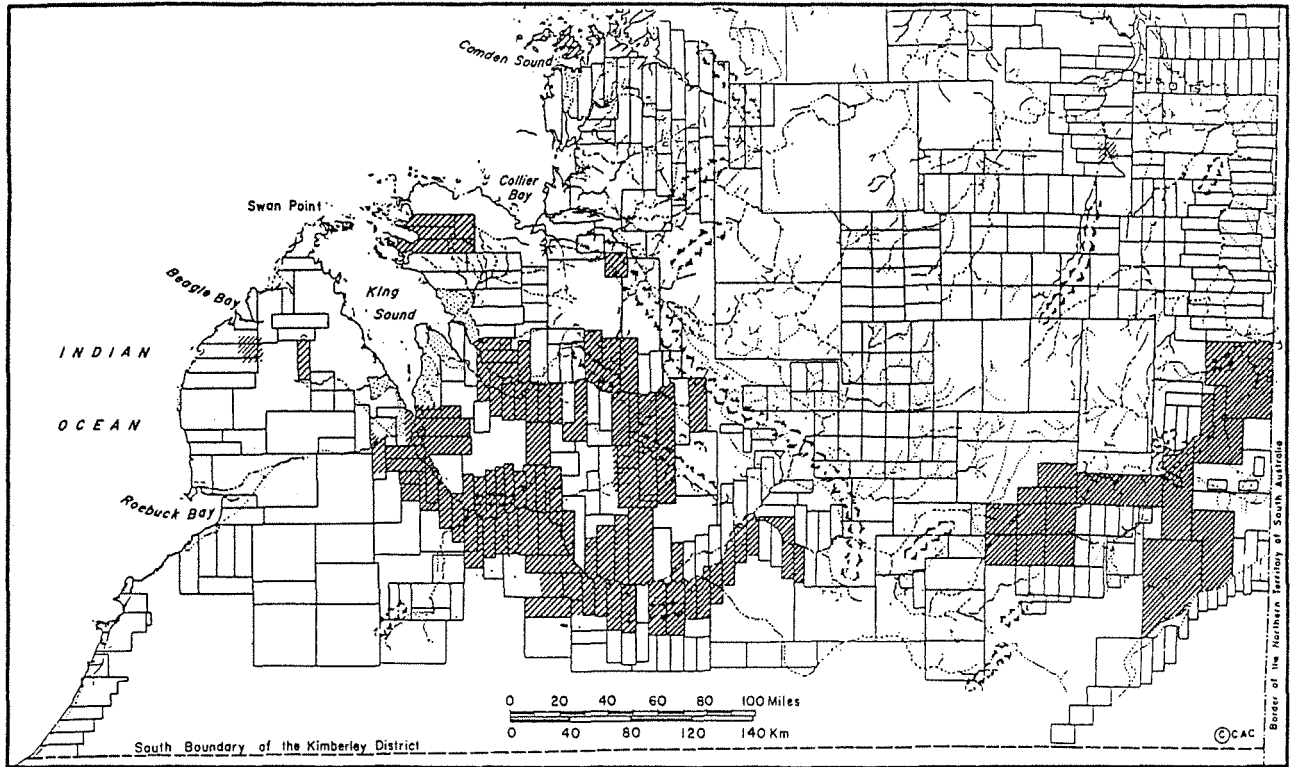
The Kimberley now seemed to hold similar opportunities for the sons of these settlers and for other more recent immigrants.

It was also significant that Forrest's journal included reports on the geological character of the country seen by this expedition. Written by Fenton Hill, a mining and geological surveyor, these pointed to the likelihood that land towards the head of the Fitzroy River would prove to be gold-bearing. Enterprising colonists who turned their attention to the East Kimberley in the wake of Forrest's expedition thus anticipated being able to exploit three resources: fresh water, grass and gold.

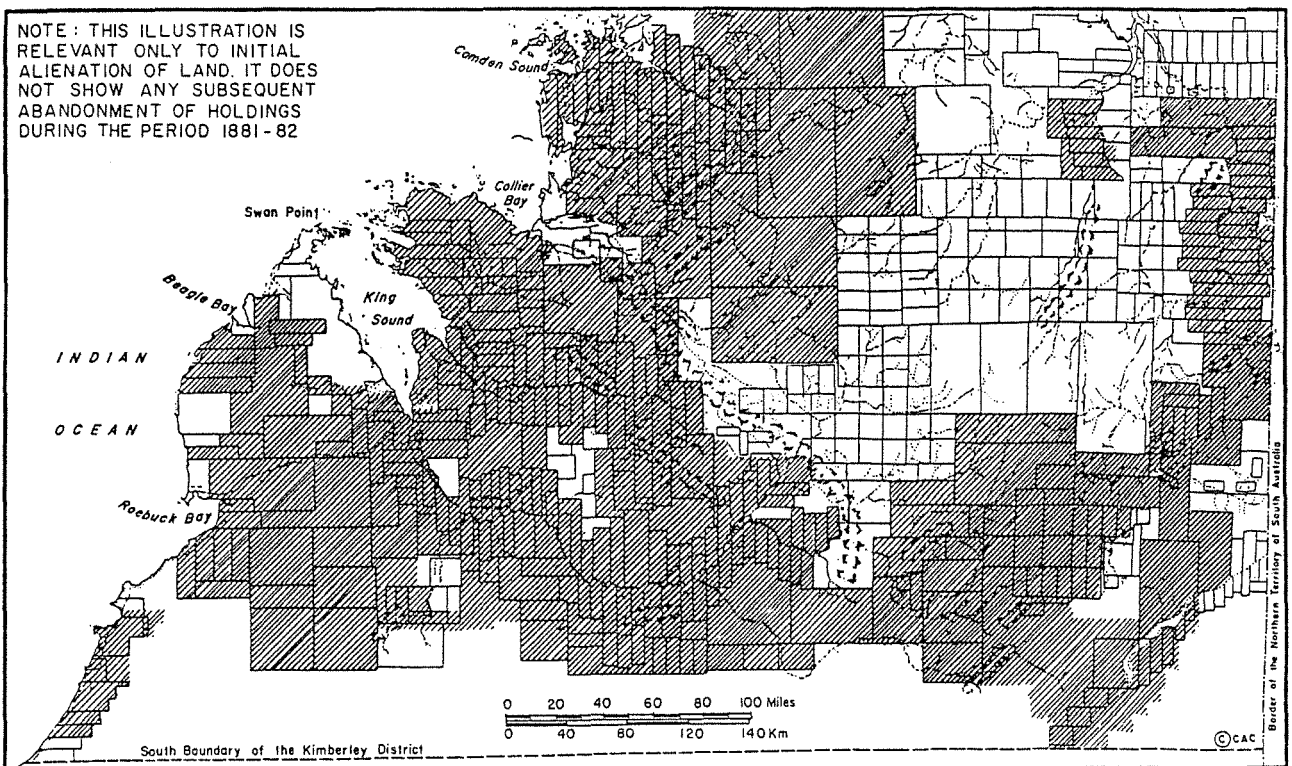
#### Prelude to Colonisation

It was the West Kimberley which first attracted entrepreneurs. The maritime industries already operating off that coast provided a means by which pastoral occupation could be implemented. Perhaps more important was that the prospect of conveying settlers and their stock to Kimberley ports was attractive to some of the vessel owners already involved in the north-west pearling and guano industries and in carrying passengers and cargo on the Western Australian coast. Keen to sell space on their vessels to would-be pastoralists, these men were also set to grab prime land for their own purposes.

The Western Australian Government, on the other hand, was keen to prevent speculators undermining the Kimberley's potential. As the last of the continent's grasslands to be made available to pastoralists, this district promised to yield hundreds of leasehold blocks - a particularly profitable situation as far as on-going revenue was concerned. However, in order to ensure that it could control the selection and use of these new leases, the

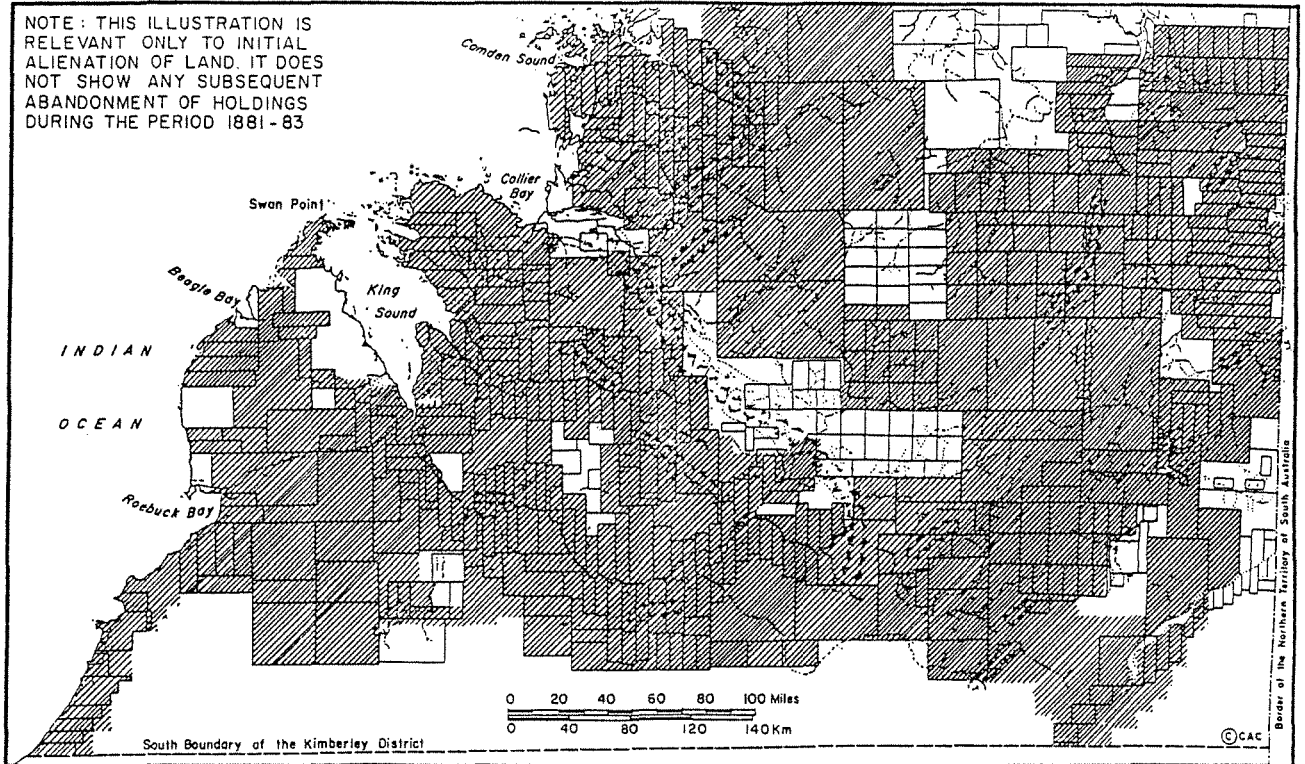


MAP 6. KIMBERLEY LAND ALIENATED UNDER PASTORAL LEASE DURING 1881

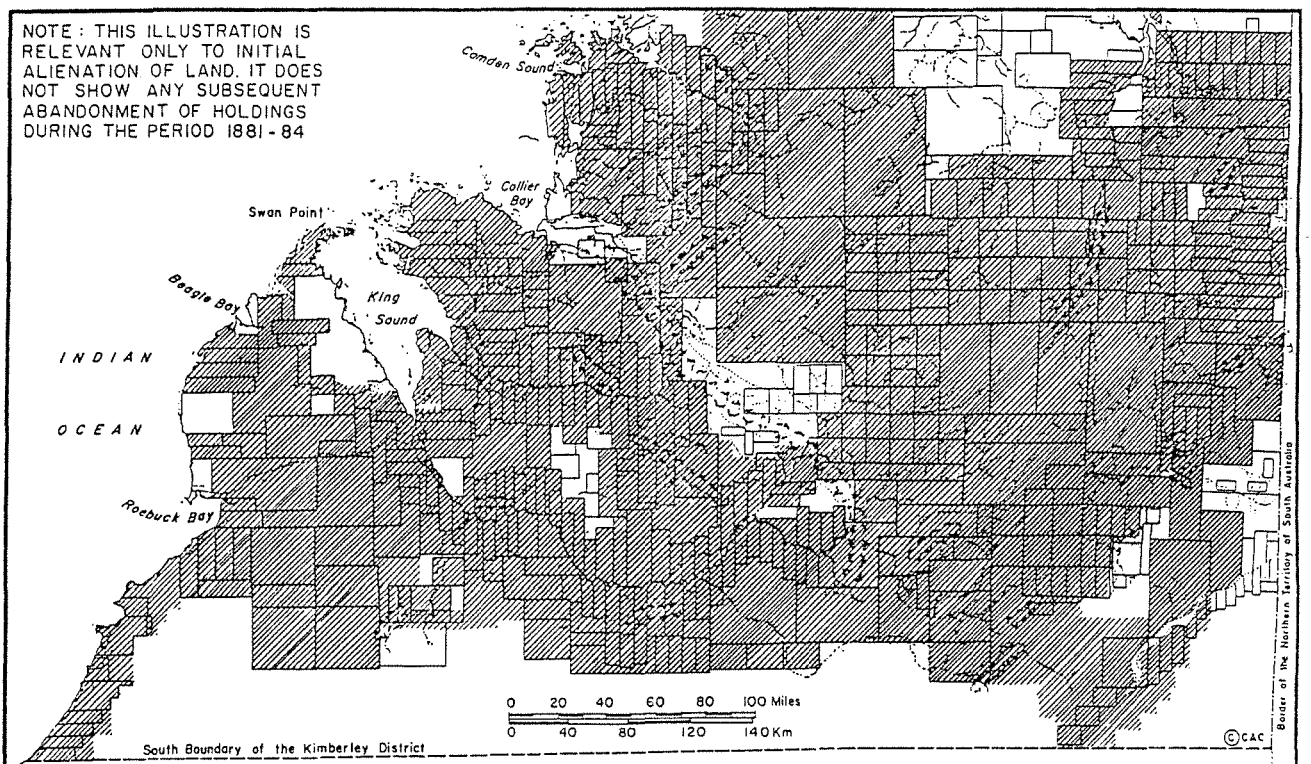


MAP 7. KIMBERLEY LAND ALIENATED UNDER PASTORAL LEASE DURING 1881-1882





MAP 8. KIMBERLEY LAND ALIENATED UNDER PASTORAL LEASE DURING 1881-1883



MAP 9. KIMBERLEY LAND ALIENATED UNDER PASTORAL LEASE DURING 1881-1884

government had first to come up with some suitable new land regulations.

Informed of this situation, intending pastoralists had either to bide their time or risk being prosecuted for taking stock to a closed district. Some brought pressure to bear, but were unable to persuade the colonial government to accept any applications for Kimberley land until October 1880. After this date, and before the fate of any applications was decided, four hundred and forty-eight lease applications came in. On 1 February 1881, with the new land laws apparently ensuring that lessees would stock their leases within two years, a ballot was held to decide which of these hundreds of applications were to be approved.

The conditions governing pastoral leases acknowledged Aboriginal occupation of the Kimberley - at least in as much as the Aborigines' right to derive subsistence from alienated land was recognised. However, given that subsequent European monopoly of water supplies inevitably ruptured the pattern and tenability of a hunting and gathering economy, any right to derive subsistence was little more than legislative window-dressing.

East Kimberley land barely featured in the applications decided by the ballot of 1 February. The government approved several leases on the Nicholson Plains, but, when a legislative loophole did permit widespread speculation in Kimberley leases, these were among the many for which no rent was ever paid. Late in 1881, the government gave approval to other more enduring leases, including some which eventually became the nucleus of Ord River Station.<sup>7</sup>

Early in 1882 pastoralists leased land on either side of the lower Ord. This was not stocked until 1885. Some idea of the rate at which the government approved leases over Kimberley land during these early years can be gained from the maps on the following pages. During 1882 and 1883 Kimberley lessees resident in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland initiated the first of the drives which were to stock the East Kimberley with cattle.

These lessees and other interested parties also organised further private exploration expeditions.

Little is known about the colonists who first penetrated the East Kimberley in Forrest's wake. Patrick Ahern and Will Fargoos left evidence of their presence on at least three trees; and then vanished. Travelling from the Northern Territory, possibly following Forrest's route through the East Kimberley, they camped on the lower Margaret River close to Mt. Krauss in September 1881. At this time, there was no more logical way of approaching the upper Fitzroy River from the Northern Territory.

By November, the two men were roughly ninety miles north-east of Mt. Krauss. It is possible, though no evidence exists to support this theory, that Ahern and Fargoos travelled up the lower Leopold and Little Gold Rivers to reach their November campsite. Where they headed next is unknown. Four years later, Fitzroy River Aborigines spoke of two white men perishing some eighty miles east of Mt. Anderson - apparently with plenty of provisions on hand, but no water.

Journeys into the East Kimberley were not for the faint-hearted. Enjoying none of the assistance that off-shore industry afforded to West Kimberley intrusion, members of more than one expedition survived only through reaching some outpost of European settlement before the ravages of hunger and thirst became insurmountable. With their horses and boot-leather long since spent, others simply dropped by the wayside.

The next party to mount an expedition into the East Kimberley got under way while Ahern and Fargoos were still alive, but did not reach the district until late in August or early in September 1882. Led by Philip Saunders, an experienced northern Australian prospector, this expedition included two other Europeans and a Port Darwin Aborigine. Like Forrest, Saunders was hampered by ill-health within his party. His partner, Adam Johns, lost the

greater part of his sight and mobility when stricken by a severe illness.

Saunders entered the East Kimberley in much the way Forrest had done - travelling along the south-western foothills of the King Leopold Ranges. But, after crossing the Fitzroy River, his party turned north-east and travelled up the Leopold River and Horse Creek. Scrambling over rocks and spinifex, the men and their horses ascended the eastern arm of the ranges. Just below the top, they encountered the strongest display of Aboriginal resistance yet directed towards any European party in the East Kimberley.

Saunders described this as follows:

They surrounded our camp; first they collected in a body on the top of the cliffs overlooking our camp; then two of them came down to the creek within fifty yards of us, and gathered a quantity of pipeclay, and returned, taking a supply of water with them to mix the war paint with; all hands then went in for a good thick coat of the mixture. After the painting business had been satisfactorily performed, they presented very much the appearance of a dirty lot of white men; I was greatly amused at their antics. Following this, one old warrior told off his men into three different detachments, evidently keeping the strongest force for his own protection in case of accidents. I took particular notice of this old brave during the incidents that followed, and, although he may have been a very distinguished warrior amongst his own people, I must say that when it came to close quarters he fully exemplified the old adage, "that discretion is the better part of valour." They compelled us to show them that the white man was their superior; two of our number effectually dispersed a large number in a few moments.

The following day, when Saunders' party rode through a very large Aboriginal camp, no-one challenged their passage. Two days later, as the intruders made their way eastward along the top of the ranges, another big mob attacked. This contest ended as the first had ended. No further contact occurred during the remainder of Saunders' journey through the East Kimberley. His party found the colour of gold for forty miles along the upper Ord River, but,

because of Johns' illness, was unable to stay there long enough to prospect this country thoroughly.

While Saunders and his party worked their way eastward across the East Kimberley, another group of Europeans travelled generally southward from Cambridge Gulf. Financed by the Emanuel and Durack families, this party was under the leadership of Michael Durack. Principally concerned with examining the pastoral potential of the East Kimberley, it was also equipped to assess the district's mineral capabilities. All told, this party included six Europeans, two Port Darwin Aborigines and twenty-one horses.

Landing on the north-western side of The Gut in mid-August 1882, Durack spelled his horses for ten days to offset the effects of their voyage from Brisbane. Within two days of starting inland, he came upon a big group of Aborigines fishing in Bulla Nulla Creek. These people, who were of all ages and of both sexes, ran away as the horsemen approached. Some way off, they flourished their spears and sat down on the plain to watch the interlopers.

The explorers moved on, resting again for several days between the Durack and the Pentacost Rivers. Travelling up the Pentacost, they were followed by a big party of armed men. Shouting and gesticulating, these men started a series of fierce blazes by firing the long grass. Ready to do battle, Durack's party rode slowly towards them. Confronted by this, the Aborigines retreated across the rocky river bed and out of sight.

Further shouts and gestures greeted the intruders as they pushed south-eastward from the Pentacost. Here, however, fear was as prevalent as hostility, and Aborigines fled in apparent terror at the horsemen's nearer approach. The Port Darwin Aborigines shouted reassurance to these people, but to no avail. Once out of reach, they declined to be coaxed from their rocky sanctuaries.

Can we assume that this localised variation in Aboriginal reaction to European intrusion arose from the intruders having

crossed from the territory of one linguistic group into that of another? It is possible that information regarding the activities of King and Grey across on the central Kimberley coast may have travelled to the Pentacost River, but not beyond. Also possible is that the people living in this locality may not have been aware of events that had taken place in connection with European intrusion into the Victoria River area.

Other subsequent and unrelated cases of contact suggest that news regarding the arrival of Europeans did not travel great distances within the East Kimberley during the pre-settlement phase of intrusion. Equally possible is that hearsay regarding intrusion may have encouraged people not to remain within reach of lighter-skinned outsiders. Knowledge, as well as ignorance, could thus have accounted for the response with which Durack and his associates met beyond the Pentacost River.

Throughout the remainder of the Durack expedition's East Kimberley travel, the local Aborigines appear to have kept out of sight. Crossing the Dunham and then the Bow River, Durack pushed eastward and struck the Ord River below the Negri junction. Travelling upstream, and then south-west across the ranges, he and his companions exited the East Kimberley via the Margaret River.

A week or so before Durack travelled up the Ord, Saunders' party had travelled downstream, presumably on the opposite side, as far as the Negri River junction. Since neither party recorded any encounters with Aborigines, it seems likely that the people whose territory encompassed this portion of the East Kimberley were either keeping out of sight or were elsewhere at this time.

There were now five primary points through which Europeans entered and left the East Kimberley: the Negri, Margaret and Leopold Rivers, the Sturt Creek and The Gut. Pastoralists and land speculators had taken out leases over approximately half of the land in the Kimberley. Settlement was already under way in

the western sector, but the first of the cattle destined for the East Kimberley had not yet left Queensland.

Keen to ascertain the best route for their stock, the owners of these cattle joined with other Victorians to dispatch another party of explorers to the East Kimberley. Led by William O'Donnell, this party entered the district via the Negri River in May 1883. Its objective was to assess the mineral and pastoral potential of land between this river and the King Leopold Ranges. An interview with Philip Saunders en route enabled O'Donnell to capitalise on that prospector's earlier travels in the East Kimberley.

On the Negri River, about a mile above its junction with the Ord, the explorers established a depot camp in order to rest their weary and footsore horses. O'Donnell, thinking that their intrusion would irritate the obviously large indigenous population, had his six companions build a stockade out of saplings. They then settled in for an anticipated stay of three weeks.

Although these men comprised the fifth such party to have visited this locality, no European had yet seen the lower Ord River. Ahern and Fargo, as well as the parties under Forrest and Saunders, had passed to the south of where the Ord receives the waters of the Negri. The party led by Durack had come onto the Ord about six miles below the Negri, and had then travelled upstream. The prospect of being the first explorer to see the lower Ord thus lay tantalisingly before O'Donnell.

His map of the district indicated that Cambridge Gulf was no more than ninety miles from their depot.<sup>8</sup> Given this, and believing that they would find William Osmand's yacht, the *Cushie Doo*, anchored in the gulf, O'Donnell and two other men used four of the party's strongest horses to trace the Ord to its mouth. Travelling over rugged terrain, and carrying only a fortnight's rations, the trio endured much hardship. Their return journey was

made even harder by the fact that the Cushie Doo was not in the gulf. All told, they must have travelled at least a thousand miles.

This excursion, which occupied five weeks and claimed the lives of two of the party's best horses, involved a great deal of walking on the part of the explorers. It also took them within range of many Aboriginal people. A big party of Aborigines near the junction of the Bow River ran away surprised as the intruders rode down the Ord towards them. Later, when they were joined by another mob, these people allowed the Europeans to approach. They then entered into a parley with O'Donnell.

Several weeks later, around this same locality, a large party of Aboriginal warriors challenged the returning, and by now obviously weak, explorers. But, once the Europeans moved on without offering any fight, these warriors withdrew. It is because such an outcome was typical in encounters of this type that I am inclined to believe that the intent of these overt displays of hostility was primarily to deter outsiders from acting in ways that were offensive to the Aborigines concerned.

Some further analysis of this encounter is warranted. At the time the Aboriginal warriors challenged the explorers, O'Donnell's companions were both leading horses which were too weak to carry a rider. The men themselves were rapidly declining in condition, having eaten nothing but kangaroo for eight days. It is also relevant that, in using firearms to secure their food, these intruders would perhaps have given the warriors some insight into the effect that their weapons had on flesh.

Although apparently confident of their ability to handle a battle with the intruders, the warriors seem to have been satisfied with seeing the Europeans move on up the river. Assuming that this move did not take them into an area which was forbidden to these Aborigines, the fact that the explorers survived the next few days lends support to the hypothesis that overt displays of



Aboriginal hostility constituted a response quite distinct from the execution of an outright attack.

On the day following the Aborigines' challenge, O'Donnell assessed the state of his party and decided that his companions were unlikely to make the distance to the depot camp. So, while they camped on the river preserving their strength, he rode on alone to seek assistance. Despite the obvious vulnerability of these two men, no Aborigines harassed them during the four days they awaited relief.

Similarly, the men who had remained at the depot camp experienced no Aboriginal hostility during the five weeks occupied by the Cambridge Gulf excursion. Also interesting is that, unlike instances reported by explorers in other adjacent areas, abandonment of this campsite does not seem to have induced the people living in the neighbourhood to show any unusual interest in the place. Several days after his two companions had been brought in, O'Donnell moved on. Before doing so, he buried surplus saddles and rations. These, and six horses which were left grazing near the campsite, appeared untouched when collected two months later.

Looking again at the contact between the Negri River and the Carr Boyd Range, it seems that the diverse ways in which Aborigines responded to O'Donnell's presence may be indicative of developments in Aboriginal response to intrusion. That one group of people parleyed with O'Donnell, and that this or some other group subsequently challenged his party, may mean that people in this locality conquered fear in order to deal with European intrusion by entering into negotiations and issuing ultimatums.

All told, O'Donnell spent two months in the East Kimberley. Other encounters which took place between members of his party and Aborigines during this time indicate that the local people were often unaware of, or at least unconcerned by, the proximity of outsiders. If the latter applied, then the surprise that often

greeted any sudden appearance of Europeans may have stemmed from an expectation that outsiders would not approach local people without giving some indication that it was their intention to do so.

O'Donnell was concerned that Aborigines ran away, abandoning their camps, tools and weapons, in response to any sudden arrival of Europeans and horses. He and other leaseholders planned to start running sheep in the East Kimberley in the near future, and they hoped to accomplish this feat without antagonising the local people unduly. Thus, well aware that amicable relations between Aborigines and pastoralists would enhance the profitability of their sheep stations, O'Donnell sought to atone for his intrusion by leaving coloured handkerchiefs and other small presents in abandoned Aboriginal camps.

O'Donnell and his companions travelled via the Bow and the Wilson Rivers to the Durack Range. In mid-July 1883, they established a depot camp on the Wilson opposite Mt. Lush. Most of the horses stayed at this depot, watched over by two Europeans and an Aborigine from the Northern Territory, while the rest of the party found a passage through the range and pushed westward. In the country they examined there, both water and grass were abundant.

The only contact recorded by the interlopers in this neighbourhood took place near the depot camp. Here, as two Aboriginal hunters followed up a kangaroo which they had wounded, David Linacre shot this animal and bagged it for consumption in the depot camp. Then, thinking that the two Aborigines who were nearby might not take too kindly to his cheekiness, he fired a shot over their heads in order 'to disperse them in case they retaliated'.

Two days after this incident, the explorers regrouped and started their homeward journey. On the second day out, two of them surprised a couple of Aborigines sleeping on a river bank. These

people sprang up, yelling in terror, and jumped into the water. O'Donnell used the fact of their spears having been left behind to induce one to return and parley with him. Afterwards, he presented this man with a handkerchief.

Further down this river the tracks of Saunders' party were still visible. By this time, the triangular section bounded by lines linking the Durack Range, the Nicholson Plains and the Negri River had been the subject of more European intrusion than any other portion of the East Kimberley. The effect of this was evident when O'Donnell and another man rode into an Aboriginal camp on or near the Nicholson Plains in August. Here, although startled by the arrival of the strangers, a large group of people stayed put to engage in a parley and accept some gifts.

By comparison, across on the Panton River, where the ranges had so far protected the local people from European intrusion, Aborigines fled across the river screaming in terror when the intruders rode up to their camp. Similarly, along the Ord River, where no contact had been reported since that generated by Forrest's expedition, Aborigines seemed fearful. A few of the more adventurous people followed O'Donnell and another man for a few miles, calling out to them. On each of the occasions on which the outsiders attempted to approach them, these Aborigines backed off.

Upon leaving the East Kimberley, O'Donnell and his party suffered considerable hardship travelling from the Ord River across to Delamere Station in the Northern Territory. The distance that separated the East Kimberley from the nearest outpost of European settlement had decreased since Forrest's crossing - but the task of exploring the East Kimberley had not become any less hazardous. This, however, was soon to change.

Back in July 1883, as O'Donnell had attended to his examination of country around the Durack Range, other Europeans were investigating the geological composition of the valley of the

lower Margaret River. Edward Hardman, a geologist employed by the Western Australian Government, made only a cursory inspection at this time. The following year, he returned and undertook work that put the East Kimberley firmly in the public eye.

Meanwhile, O'Donnell did his share of promotion. When he reached the overland telegraph line and reported the results of his expedition to his sponsors, these men immediately applied for pastoral leases that amounted to several million acres. Although many of these subsequently turned out to be speculative leaseholdings, Europeans were still moving irrevocably forward in their quest to occupy East Kimberley land.

On the McArthur River in the Northern Territory, Nat Buchanan was holding Osmand and Panton's cattle back while he waiting for rains which would enable him to complete his monumental drive. Well behind him, but also heading for the East Kimberley, were cattle belonging to members of the MacDonald and McKenzie families and to the various branches of the Durack family. On 29 June 1884, when Buchanan's drive reached the Ord River Station leases, the manager and his hands set about establishing a small, but extremely important, European stronghold there.

Osmand was touring the Western Australian coast in the Cushie Doo at this time, with Joseph Panton and others along as guests. In October, he anchored his yacht in Cambridge Gulf and dispatched a small party of horsemen to Ord River Station so that he might have the station manager, Bob Button, come down to consult him. That Osmand was able, or for that matter obliged, to do business in this fashion illustrates the enormous expenditure of capital and energy demanded of those who chose to pioneer the beef cattle industry in the East Kimberley.

These 1884 journeys between the gulf and Ord River Station were somewhat less arduous than the one made by O'Donnell and his companions some fifteen months earlier. Within another twelve months, such journeys were a common event. By the end of 1885,

with government survey parties, private prospecting parties, and the owners and hands from the Duracks' cattle drive moving between Cambridge Gulf and Hall's Creek, Europeans were no longer a rarity in certain sections of the East Kimberley.

It was at this stage that dispossession became an integral part of European intrusion. The story of that dispossession is beyond the scope of this paper. In some parts of the East Kimberley, decades would elapse before Aboriginal communities encountered their first European intruder.

These communities no doubt gained knowledge of Europeans, and experience of their commodities and animals, before sighting the people themselves. Their story thus differs from that of the communities which experienced pre-settlement intrusion.

### Summary

This paper is my first attempt to write up research results that have so far been used principally to satisfy my own curiosity. It shows, apart from other things, that the records documenting European intrusion into the East Kimberley can afford considerable insight into the impact of this intrusion on Aborigines. In time, I hope that my publication of this and other related data will encourage fellow history enthusiasts to seek out complementary oral history.

European intrusion into the Kimberley, and, indeed, into Australia as a whole, was much more complex than we are generally led to believe. It is unfortunate that the convenience of focussing on the long-term, or the most obvious, of European objectives has so far masked much of the reality of what actually happened on Australian frontiers. Certainly, as far as the Kimberley is concerned, few secondary sources published to date

contain discussion of anything that can be said to constitute first contact between Kimberley Aborigines and Europeans.

Up to the time that non-Aboriginal people first took up residence in the East Kimberley, European intrusion had affected no more than one third of this district. However, because outsiders were mostly dependent on surface water, and therefore followed the major watercourses, many more than one third of the Aborigines in this district are sure to have become aware of the existence of Europeans within this time.

Of these people, only a negligible number personally encountered any intruders. Those who were nearby when Europeans first arrived on the East Kimberley coast probably had little or no notice of their approach. On the Sturt Creek, even though the approach of Gregory's party may have been more obvious, the local people declined to mix with the strangers who came uninvited amongst them. Because this scenario was common during subsequent European excursions into Aboriginal territory, it seems that Aborigines in the East Kimberley initially handled intrusion by avoiding contact with Europeans.

It also seems that Aboriginal response to European intrusion into the East Kimberley underwent rapid change - presumably through people amending their perceptions of European power and mortality and gaining a better idea of how the interlopers were likely to behave. Significant in this regard is that observant Aborigines had ample evidence of European frailty - a situation brought about by the ruggedness of local terrain, the prevalence of illness in exploring parties, and the distance between the East Kimberley and the nearest pockets of European settlement.

Pre-settlement intrusion gave East Kimberley Aborigines no clear idea of why Europeans were in their territory. Overall, it is reasonable to conclude that the intruders gave Aborigines the impression that they were a nomadic people who had no knowledge of, or maybe no respect for, Aboriginal protocol. Occasionally,

East Kimberley Aborigines responded to particular events in pre-settlement intrusion with overt displays of hostility. It was, however, unusual for them to mount an outright attack on European interlopers.

Instead, European parties appear to have been allowed to pass more or less unchallenged through most Aboriginal territory. Those instances in which their passage or presence was challenged can often be linked to specific imprudent acts on the part of a particular intruder. There is also the possibility that Europeans provoked hostility in otherwise calm vicinities by approaching, or interfering with, places significant to the local people.

It is impossible to say whether the comparatively low incidence of pre-settlement conflict in the East Kimberley meant that Aborigines were tolerant of intrusion or whether they left Europeans alone because they recognised the superior power of their weapons. On the whole, however, because Aborigines saw Europeans pursuing their short-term, rather than their long-term, objectives, it is fair to say that Aboriginal response to intrusion varied in accordance with the immediate impact of this on their environment.

European source material affords little opportunity to explore the question of what East Kimberley Aborigines thought about Europeans. It would seem, however, that until the arrival of working pastoralists and prospectors exposed some of the long-term objectives of Europeans, East Kimberley Aboriginal communities which were affected by intrusion could do little more than ponder the purpose of past and present visits from Europeans. That they developed strategies for handling future intrusion is beyond question - but whether any were prepared for the sight, sound and smell of the enormous herds of cattle which ultimately invaded their territory is debatable.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Shaw, B. 'On the Historical Emergence of Race Relations In the Eastern Kimberley: Change?' in Berndt, R.M. & C.H.(eds), *Aborigines of the West, Their Past and Present*, p. 261, UWA Press, Nedlands, 1980.
2. This hypothesis is presented purely as a personal observation. A great deal more research will need to be undertaken if it is to be substantiated.
3. Selection of the 126th meridian as the division between the East and the West Kimberley has no historical or geographical foundation. It simply allows generalised comparison of the two sectors.
4. For coverage of French intrusion see Leslie R. Marchant, *France Australe*, Artlook Books, Perth, 1982.
5. Fishermen from what is now known as Indonesia have collected trepang, or beche-de-mer, on the northern Australian coast on a seasonal basis for around two hundred years.
6. In 1884 there was conflict between Aborigines and European sailors at Cape Talbot and on Eclipse Island. As far as my knowledge goes, no other Europeans had visited this locality since the time of King's brush with Aborigines at Encounter Cove.
7. For details of all early pastoral lease transactions affecting Kimberley land see Cathie Clement, *Kimberley District Pastoral Leasing Directory, 1881-1900*, National Heritage, Perth, 1988.



8. Maps issued by the Western Australian Government around this time showed the distance from the Negri River to The Gut, as the crow flies, as between 103 and 123 miles. Horsemen who overlanded between these points during the first half of the 1880s faced a journey at least three times this distance.

ATTACHMENT 1

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