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"A State Of Open Warfare": Frontier Conflict In The Cooktown Area



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I have reformatted the text, placing the footnotes at the bottom of the page and converting the citations and date formats to match the rest of the material across the **About The North** site. Lengthy paragraphs have been broken into sentences to make the text slightly more readable..

Cover: Finch's Bay, Cooktown, 1876 (Photograph from a picture in sepia by P. Dodgson. Original photographer: W.T. Bennett, Cooktown; [State Library of Queensland](#).)

A State Of Open Warfare": Frontier Conflict In The Cooktown Area

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"...as regards its aboriginal inhabitants, the colony falls naturally into two divisions - districts where the blacks are "quiet" and those where they are "bad". In the first the blacks have given up all avowed hostility; their depredations, if they commit any, taking rather the nature of larceny. In the second, a state of open warfare between the two races exists...in places where they are bad, as in the Palmer district, every depredation committed by the blacks is avowedly an act of warfare. They mean war; they only know one way of waging it - killing everyone they can catch, and all that belongs to him and if their foe were to refrain from retaliating in the same manner, they would not feel grateful for his mercy - they would simply deride him as a fool." ¹

"The history of the occupation of Australian territory by the whites is a continual tale of warfare with the blacks, of attack and reprisal. It is a story of two people separated by a gulf of thousands of years, generally unbridgeable except by a slow and minutely studied progress. That the result was disastrous for the inferior race can readily be understood and is in keeping with the history of the world's conquest and colonisation." ²

These two quotations probably provide as good a place as any to begin a consideration of what happened when two civilizations – one which had exercised total hegemony over the area we are concerned with for at least 7,000 years ³ and probably over a much greater period, and a second whose ethic of progress and self-confident belief in their own innate superiority led them to believe that there was nothing inherently wrong in dispossessing a weaker, less technologically advanced race – came into contact in the country between Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfield.

While neither quotation tells us much that historians of frontier conflict are unaware of, and each shows the bias of earlier generations, they introduce four themes which underly my subject.

First, they refer to the fact of warfare. We shall see that Europeans generally, and the editors of the Cooktown newspapers in particular, believed that they were involved in a state of open warfare, the aim of which was to establish white hegemony over the pathways between a port and a goldfield.

¹ **Brisbane Courier**, cited **Cooktown Courier** 1 January 1878.

² Hudson Fysh, **Taming the North**, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1950, p.25.

³ D. J. Mulvaney, **The Prehistory of Australia**, Ringwood, Pelican, 1975, p.193.

I am not concerned with the realism, or otherwise, of this belief. It could perhaps be shown that this belief **[p. 32]** was not wholly accurate.

It was, however, believed and is significant by virtue of its existence regardless of the degree of objective truth it represents.

Second, Hudson Fysh refers to the belief that this state of open warfare was to all intents and purposes inevitable, when these two civilizations came into contact without the kind of period of grace which might allow them time to adjust to each other.

It is worth remembering that the Europeans on the whole had been sufficiently indoctrinated by their experiences in other areas, or by what they heard and read, to believe that there was no point in allowing the blacks a period of grace – that by virtue of Aboriginal treachery any such period merely postponed the day when the white man would have to prove that European culture was supreme, and that resistance was useless.

The settlers expected resistance, believing it to be inevitable, and therefore acted first to gain and hold the initiative.

This leads us to a third point - the belief in the innate and insurmountable biologically-imposed inferiority of the Aborigines.

Later we shall see this type of belief emerging in the newspapers of the day, often accompanied by a type of Social Darwinist belief that this fact of inferiority meant that the Aborigines were fated inevitably to disappear when faced with a superior culture.

This belief provided some justification for the activities of the Native Police and others who were in practice waging a war of extermination against the blacks.

However lamentable such a state of affairs was seen to be, it could at least be partly excused as a mere acceleration of an entirely natural process.

Finally, Fysh points out to us the belief that this extinction of the inferior race "in keeping with the history of the world's colonization and conquest" makes the eclipsing of native peoples an unfortunate consequence, a melancholy footnote, to the bringing of the light of civilization to the benighted corners of the earth.

Such a belief would have had a soothing effect on what might otherwise have been disturbed colonial consciences.

Having introduced these themes, before turning to consider the actual events which form the meat of this lecture, it might be as well to establish some form of theoretical framework for our observations.

I would suggest three basic hypotheses concerning the factors which influence **[p. 33]** the nature of frontier conflict in a given area.

While I would not claim that these are the only considerations, I would suggest that, all other things being equal, they are major considerations. My hypotheses are as follows:

- i) Settlement of an area occurs either by diffusion, spreading from a neighbouring area, or by the relatively sudden arrival of settlers from somewhere outside the immediate vicinity,
- ii) The nature of Aboriginal-European relations in a given area is partly determined by which of these forms of settlement applies,
- iii) The nature of race relations on the frontier depends partly on the forms of economic activity carried out by Europeans.

I would suggest that the first hypothesis enables us to distinguish clearly between the classic type of pastoral expansion, of going one step further into the unknown, one step beyond the previous limits of civilization, to found a sheep or cattle station, and a second type of settlement which may be seen as corresponding to jumping off the deep end in order to learn how to swim.

This second type of settlement may be the result of the discovery of gold somewhere far beyond the bounds of civilized, or even of semi-civilized, life.

Or it may be the result of a decision to establish a port somewhere along the coast, perhaps to provide access to a goldfield, or to a pastoral area, or perhaps for strategic and commercial reasons.

Or it may be the result of the discovery of good grazing country somewhere far beyond the horizon.

Most of Queensland was settled by diffusion, but the initial settlement of Brisbane, the establishment of ports at Bowen, Cardwell, Townsville, Somerset and Cooktown, as well as the results of the discovery of gold on the Palmer River, are all examples of settlement by jumping into the deep end.

With regard to my second hypothesis, I would suggest that in areas of gradual settlement Europeans will be preceded by stories passed on from tribe to tribe, and it is possible that their presence in a neighbouring area may warn the Aborigines of the dangers inherent in resisting invasion.

It may postpone or even prevent conflict by giving the blacks time to learn the types of behaviour that whites regarded as desirable, or to learn by hearsay how to effectively resist the invasion of their territory.

[p. 34] Again, it may contribute towards the type of deliberate migration away from tribal areas described by W.E.H. Stanner in his article *Durmugam: A Nangiomeri*.⁴

Conversely it may be seen that in an area of sudden settlement there is little opportunity for Aborigines to learn particular types of behaviour or to choose their course of action.

However we should remember that permanent settlement in such areas may well be preceded by itinerant Europeans: for example, explorers, or along the coast merchant ships, marine surveyors, or beche-de-mer fishers, and that some of these may give, by their treatment of Aborigines, an early unfavourable image of Europeans as a whole.

Dalrymple and Hann both refer to the presence of beche-de-mer fishermen near Cooktown prior to settlement in 1873.⁵

Thirdly, I would suggest that the actual nature of race relations on the frontier depends to a great extent on the forms of economic activity carried on by Europeans.

This may seem obvious, but it is nevertheless worth remembering. Obviously farmers and graziers use the land in different ways. Obviously miners will be different again.

Other types of frontier spring readily to mind. In the Cooktown area we can refer to an urban frontier, a maritime frontier, a missionary frontier, and the type of frontier I will be chiefly concerned with – a transport frontier.

European attitudes, I believe, spring from their hopes and aspirations in a given area, and the subjugation, extermination, or whatever, of the Aborigines has to be seen in terms of the requirements of a given type of economic activity, and of the attitudes of Europeans to Aborigines as a racial group, which helps to determine the European perception of the requirements of that area.

The area I have defined as the Cooktown area for the purposes of my research is bounded by the Daintree River and the Great Dividing Range in the south, the Hann, Morehead, and North Kennedy Rivers in the west, and Princess Charlotte Bay to the north.

⁴ 4. in J. B. Casagrande (ed.), **In the Company of Man**, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1964.

⁵ 5. William Hann, *Report...and Copy of Diary of the Northern Expedition*, in **Votes and Proceedings**, 1873, p.1039; Dalrymple, G.E., *Narrative and Reports of the Queensland North - East Coast Expedition of 1873*, **Votes and Proceedings**, 1874, pp. 636, 637.

This paper, however is concerned with one slice of this area - the part lying between Cooktown, the junction of the Normanby and Kennedy Rivers, and the Great Dividing Range.

This is the area where most of the fighting took place, and falls broadly into one particular type of frontier situation which I will refer to as the transport frontier.

Most of the country between Cooktown and the Palmer was not settled during the period we are concerned with and represents a frontier where movement was the major constant factor.

Diggers, packers, [p. 35] bullock drivers and other travellers passed along the various tracks to and from the Palmer as fast as their legs, horses, or bullocks permitted them to travel, stopping only to rest where fairly permanent water, good grass or alcohol had led to the development of established rest areas.

Perhaps if settlement had been closer, the duration of Aboriginal resistance might have been shorter. In 1880, after seven years of frontier warfare, the "wild blacks" of the Hells Gate area were "still very dangerous", ⁶ and the fighting, though it may have decreased with the decline of the Palmer as an alluvial field, and the losses suffered by the blacks, still continued.

Prior to the establishment of Cooktown in 1873, the area was visited by a number of Europeans, notably by Captain Cook who came into conflict with the *Gugu-Yimidjir* tribe over the quantities of fish and turtle which the crew of the "Endeavour" were catching. ⁷

Other visitors included Philip Parker King, who ran into trouble with the Aborigines at Cape Flinders and Lizard Island in 1830 and 1821, and William Hann the discoverer of the Palmer River, if not of the payable gold in its bed, in 1872.

Hann's discovery of a few grains of gold in the Palmer, and his claim that the gold was not payable, led Irish prospector James Venture Mulligan to investigate the prospects more closely.

⁶ "Mines Department Report for 1881 - Prospecting Parties" in **Votes and Proceedings**, 1882, Vol. II, p.756.

⁷ for a detailed account of Cook's stay, see F. P. Woolston, *The Gugu Yimidjir People and the 'Endeavour'*, **Queensland Heritage**, Vol. 2 , No. 2 , May 1970.

Mulligan's party found payable gold and despite his warnings about the nature of the country and the amount of gold, Mulligan found himself the father of the last real alluvial gold rush in Australia: enthusiastic rumours led miners to sell, if not their souls, at least their worldly goods in a blind rush to reach the new "river of gold".

We now move to the Endeavour River. The time: 4.30 p.m.; the date: Friday, October 24th, 1873, as the Queensland Government North East Coast Expedition under George Elphinstone Dalrymple came sailing into the Endeavour aboard the chartered cutters *Flying Fish* and *Coquette*, having reached the northern end of its journey aimed at exploring and assessing the agricultural potential of the coast north of Cardwell.

Dalrymple pitched his camp near where Cook had beached the Endeavour and settled down to await the arrival of a party led by Philip Sellheim who was to have left the Palmer to blaze a trail to the coast. Sellheim however, never arrived.

At 11.30 the next morning

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the camp being busily engaged drying stores, pitching more tents, cleaning firearms &c, &c, we were all startled by the sudden appearance of the tall masts and yards of a large steamer over the mangrove belt towards the point.⁸

The steamer was the *Leichhardt*, chartered by the Colonial Government to bring officials, police, and some 70 miners to the Endeavour en route for the Palmer.

Alarmed by the developments, the Government had recalled Sellheim, and decided instead to send a full administrative staff to the Endeavour by fast steamer.

The official party, comprising Howard St. George, the warden of the new goldfield, Macmillan, the northern road engineer. Native Police troopers, sundry administrative staff and the miners left the new port on October 28th, guided by Jerry, an Aboriginal member of Hann's party.

Dalrymple, after thoroughly exploring the lower reaches of the river, sailed away on the 31st, as did the *Leichhardt*.

Thus we can see that Cooktown was, in the terms of my first hypothesis, settled off the deep end. Without warning, the first of a flood of miners – 50,000 in the first three years – had arrived and, literally overnight, an almost deserted inlet became a major port.

⁸ G. E. Dalrymple, op. cit., p. 364.

Given the experiences of Europeans elsewhere in the colony, it is unlikely that they did not expect some form of resistance.

It came within a week of the departure of the official party. A letter to the Brisbane **Telegraph** described it this way:

November 3rd - Started over the spur of the range running to E; came to Normanby River (15 miles); started a mob of blacks; shot four and hunted them; fine river; November 4th - Started, 15 miles. Surprise Lagoons; camped 5th for spell; November 6th - Blacks surprised us at daybreak, about 150, all were armed; got close to camp before anyone heard them; great consternation; shot several; they ran into the water holes for shelter, where they were shot; travelled then unmolested for 2 or 3 days to Kennedy River...good country about Kennedy; came over ridges next day to Palmer, 12 miles below diggings; plenty of game and fish; camped one day; fishing; came to diggings on Friday. ⁹

Sixteen members of the party subsequently denied two of the three allegations in the report but confirmed the attack on the party, claiming:

The blacks were rounding up our horses to take them away and we heard there was one black shot in the dispersion but did not see any one shot. The Native Police did not follow the blacks but saddled up immediately and went on to the Palmer. And we believe that there was not a single black followed or shot by any one. ¹⁰

This account is unsatisfactory in a number of ways.

It would be surprising, to say the least, to find that a Native Police detachment [p. 37] would have the restraint to refrain from reacting in the manner which they usually employed to punish depredations when the particular incident involved an attack on their persons.

The use of the word "dispersion" in bloodless circumstances also represents a departure from the norm, and doubts on the matter can only be increased by the comment of the Cooktown Police Magistrate that:

To imagine for a moment that an expedition of the kind could pass thro' such a country amongst tribes of hostile blacks in close proximity to where at least two white men have been killed and eaten would be quite impossible, for it not infrequently happens that diggers travel with their rifles loaded and even cocked for fear of sudden attack.¹¹

⁹ **Brisbane Telegraph**, 20 January 1874.

¹⁰ **Brisbane Telegraph**, 20 January 1874.

¹¹ Ibid.

The stage was set. In 1875 the Cooktown Herald wrote:

at that spot, the natives, wholly ignorant of the terrible power of fire arms and confiding in their numbers, showed a ferocity and daring wholly unexpected and unsurpassed. Grasping the very muzzles of the rifles they attempted to wrest them from the hands of the whites, standing to be shot down rather than yield an inch. This was the beginning of a series of attacks that at first were daringly open; but as the knowledge dawned on their minds that the white race had a fatal superiority of weapons, these attacks became stealthy, cautious, and only made at great advantages of numbers and situation. ¹²

Elsewhere it was reported that 13 Aborigines died at Battle Camp, ¹³ and the locality retained a bad reputation with an attack on the Palmer gold escort ¹⁴ and the murder of the Macdermott brothers ¹⁵ in 1874 and an attack on the district mail carrier, John Hogsflesh ¹⁶ in 1876.

Significantly, Hann's party had been attacked in the same area in 1872, though Hann had acted provocatively by detaining an Aboriginal boy in his camp.

The attack on Hann and the events may be linked, but it is more likely that some provocative action prompted the attack on Macmillan's party.

In 1878 it was claimed that members of the party

thievishly took and wantonly destroyed the fish that had been secured by labour and preserved with diligence by the unoffending blacks at that time, and when they showed signs of displeasure, shots were fired to intimidate them, which were responded to with spears, their only means of revenge. ¹⁷

It is possible that this episode corresponds with the events of November, as described in the ***Brisbane Telegraph***.

As well, it may be significant that it was the end of the dry season, the time of year when **[p. 38]** the Aborigines gathered around permanent waterholes.

The fact, that the party was camped by a lagoon may thus have been amply provocative.

¹² **Cooktown Herald** 8 December 1875.

¹³ **Cooktown Herald** 19 August 1874.

¹⁴ **Cooktown Herald** 3 June 1874.

¹⁵ reported as rumour **Cooktown Herald** 28 October 1874; seemingly confirmed **Cooktown Herald** 29 May 1875.

¹⁶ Ibid, 26 January 1876.

¹⁷ Ibid, 6 April 1878.

In any case the fighting had started, and over the next six years an absolute minimum of 17 Europeans and Chinese were killed, at least 10 more were wounded, and a further five rumoured or reported dead.

As well, an absolute minimum of 133 horses and 67 bullocks were speared over the same period.

These figures, as I said, represent an absolute minimum. No one can be sure exactly how many whites died and my primary research is by no means complete.

The livestock figures represent only the total obtained from numbers given in press reports - they do not include one "wholesale slaughter" ¹⁸ eight cases where "some" livestock were speared, ¹⁹ two where "a number" were speared, ²⁰ five where "several" went ²¹ and two when "many" were speared. ²²

These nineteen cases would, I think, push the total livestock tally well over 300.

While this concern with livestock may seem-slightly ridiculous, the whites in the area, particularly the packers and bullock drivers were not happy about their losses and frequent comments about the regularity and expense of such losses found their way into the local press.

Considering the importance of horses and bullocks on the transport frontier, this is hardly surprising.

The regularity of such depredations gave rise to constant calls for increased police protection along the lines of communication.

After all, as the **Cooktown Courier** rather succinctly pointed out:

When...a hardworking man loses at one fell swoop 10 or 11 horses of the average value of 40 or 50 pounds he cannot be so very much to blame if he commits an indiscriminate act of slaughter amongst the blacks should he fall in with them. ²³

¹⁸ **Cooktown Herald** 5 June 1875.

¹⁹ **Cooktown Courier** 15 June 187 ; 25 January 1879 ; **Cooktown Herald** 8 May 1875; 30 October 1875; 12 February 1876 ; 31 July 1877.

²⁰ **Cooktown Herald** 3 March 1875; 24 November 1875.

²¹ Ibid., 1 July 1874; 7 February 1877; 4 April 1877; **Cooktown Courier** 10 August 1878.

²² **Cooktown Herald** 16 January 1875; **Cooktown Courier** 31 July 1878.

²³ **Cooktown Courier** 2 March 1878.

Nor is it surprising that the packers and bullockies should call for an increase in the Native Police in order to

let us at once exterminate these useless and obnoxious wretches. It seems that nothing short of extermination will check their animosity to the whites and all that is theirs. ²⁴

After all, the livelihood of those involved in transporting goods to the Palmer was at stake, and at times it seemed as if

The black has an inordinate appetite for horse flesh and a craving for the chase: the white man also is fond ad extremum of horse flesh (i.e. neither cooked nor dead) but at the same time he is painfully fond of money and it gives him many a cruel pang to see valuable property no longer valuable by [p. 39] reason of a spear sticking through its ribs. Horses in the Palmer district are a vital necessity to its existence and from the nature of the country and the climate must for a long time be a most expensive adjunct to the field. There is, therefore, the more reason why we should dread the incursions of savages, whose only object is a raid for chops, that cost the unfortunate wight, whose animals furnish the repast from 20 to 30 pounds each. ²⁵

Certain areas developed a reputation as bad areas for stock spearing.

Of my absolute figure of 200, two areas, the immediate environs of Cooktown – the land around the lower reaches of the Endeavour and Annan Rivers, and what may be termed the Normanby corridor – encompassing the land on either side of the Normanby River between Battle Camp and the Great Dividing Range, accounted for 173, and another 11 were speared in the Hells Gate area.

Despite this apparent concentration of depredations, protection by the Native Police was constantly regarded as insufficient and the local press contained many complaints about the lack of protection and the inefficiency of the detachments in the area.

In 1877 the **Cooktown Herald** complained that, with regard to cattle spearing at King's Plains:

If a man steals a pair of trousers from a store in the town he is tracked until he be secured, carried off to the watch house, tried, sentenced, and punished, but here a man is allowed to suffer the loss of 8 valuable horses through these marauders without so much as a sympathising word or a hand stretched out to help him....When horses and cattle can be speared with impunity so close to the town we may reasonably expect the blacks paying a visit to Charlotte street and carrying off anything they may fancy or desire, without any danger of their being molested. Such indifference is

²⁴ **Cooktown Herald** 30 October 1875.

²⁵ Ibid.

not only unjustifiable but it amounts to absolute criminality on the part of those whose duty it is to inflict upon the miscreants the just penalties they deserve. ²⁶

Though the spectre of an assault on the main street of one of the colony's major centres exaggerates the actual danger, there was some justification for such complaints.

Absolute security along the lines of communication was, admittedly, virtually impossible due to the presence nearby of almost inaccessible ranges which provided a reasonable retreat for the Aborigines and the lack of permanent settlement along the tracks.

The Government, however, having created a force to police the frontier, certainly failed to employ it in the most effective manner and there were never enough Native Police troopers to satisfy the demands of the settlers.

Fever and desertion acted to further impair the efficiency of the Native Police.

[p. 40] Stock spearing was bad enough, but the most indignant cries of rage came, as we might expect, when murders were reported.

The Europeans had, however, a sense of priorities in this regard.

A local politician, W.P. Morgan stated in an election speech that

some Chinese had been speared by the savages, and a few of them had died, but this was not near so bad as Borghero losing several horses by the same agency. ²⁷

One event in particular, the murder of a German named Strau, found its way into the folklore of the day as an indication of the utter vileness of the Aborigines.

The ***Cooktown Herald*** of 21 October 1871 described how a Mr. Alfred Court, travelling between the Palmer and Cooktown

...heard the noise of blacks, and cantered on to have a sight at them, which he obtained and found that there was a mob of about 50 evidently engaged in something beyond honest pursuits.

(Of course, any large group of Aborigines were, in the eyes of the settlers, bound to be engaged in something beyond honest pursuits, and therefore warranted "dispersing".)

Mr. Court did not wait, but hunted them to the river into which they

plunged after one or two of them giving signs of distress by jumping into the air. On returning to his mate on the road Mr. Court saw at once what the black devilskins had been up to, for there were all kinds of rations strewn about the road, and close by was a horse dray and a short distance off

²⁶ Ibid, 31 January 1877.

²⁷ ***Cooktown Courier*** 30 November 1878.

were three bodies - one of a woman stark naked on her back, and alongside of her the body of a girl 5 or 6 years of age also on her back naked; further on the body of a man with his trousers on lying on his face. The woman had evidently been ravished by the murderous wretches, and then tomahawked in the head, her face being covered with blood; the girl and the man having the appearance of a similar fate. ²⁸

Reprisals of course followed but are not described in the same graphic detail.

Punitive expeditions were seldom described at all, most references to them speaking of dispersal "in the usual manner".

The Strau murders were recalled in 1877 when news arrived of the deaths of two brothers named Macquarie near Hells Gate.

The **Cooktown Herald** described those responsible as "these treacherous black cowards...possessing all the subtlety, dissimulation and treachery of the American Indian with none of his generosity." ²⁹

What made it worse was the widely held belief that the Aborigines of the area were cannibals.

Murder was bad enough, sexual assault worse, and less widespread, but cannibalism was worst of all. Actual evidence [p. 41] of cannibalistic feasts was rare – obviously the only concrete evidence could be half cooked remains – but the widely accepted belief that the Aborigines carried off the corpses of their victims gave some credence to reports of cannibalism.

In 1875 it was alleged that "the increasing appetite of the Aborigines for roasted Asiatic is one of their marked peculiarities." ³⁰

This state of warfare, and the atrocities committed on both sides – the murders and stock spearings by the blacks and the ensuing reprisals by the whites were fairly typical.

In one case 24 Aboriginal men were trapped in a ravine near Cape Bedford and shot, another four being presumed drowned, in retaliation for the non-fatal spearing of two whites. ³¹

Debate resulted in the local press and, it may be reasonably assumed, in the community at large over the method of dealing with the Aborigines.

²⁸ **Cooktown Herald** 21 October 1874.

²⁹ Ibid., 3 February 1877.

³⁰ Ibid, 30 November 1878.

³¹ **Brisbane Courier** 1 March 1879 ; in Q.S.A. COL/ A272 858 Bishop Mathew Hale to Colonial Secretary 4 March 1879.

Such controversies arose in most areas of the colony and led to the rise of two camps of opinion with a considerable amount of polemic flying between them.

One side, believing that the treatment of the Aborigines was inhumane, was centred on the Aborigines Protection Society and its partisans were frequent correspondents of the southern press.

Expressions of such opinions were less frequent in the northern newspapers – probably because of a combination of the close proximity of the frontier, and of editorial policy which would have consigned such correspondence to the "mysterious depths of the journalistic waste basket" unless the editor desired to have a little fun at the humanitarians' expense.

While the humanitarians admitted the need for security on the frontier, they were generally of the opinion that

even a blackfellow has some rights. He has a right to existence and a claim to be saved from mere purposeless slaughter; he has a right to have his property - the canoe he has laboriously hollowed out of a log or framed with bark, the weapons, nets, or implements he has fashioned - protected from the thievish curiosity of any party of idle travellers that may visit his camp; and he has surely a right to prevent his gin - his wife or daughter - being run in by any white man or his aboriginal servant who may take a fancy to her. And it is creditable to the colony that the aborigines of Queensland have been, and are, subjected to each and all of these outrages at the hands of the whites, without the chance of any reparation except such as they may themselves exact with spear or nullah, the "wild justice of revenge."³²

[p. 42] The second side, which seems to have had the support of most settlers on the frontier, believed that suppression was the only answer.

They claimed that

It is well known in the North that the first hostilities have in all cases been on the part of the blacks: in every instance where the races have come into collision the aboriginals have been the aggressors. They have ever been treated with leniency and consideration until bitter experience showed that no faith could be safely placed in them, and that the benefactor of the day might be the victim of the morrow.³³

The suppressionists believed that there were three options open to the settlers.

They could abandon the territory they had settled, or they could continue "as at present, letting everyone shift for himself, and content to let some unfortunate European or Asiatic

³² **Cooktown Courier** 1 January 1878.

³³ **Cooktown Herald** 8 December 1875.

furnish an occasional banquet for these degraded wretches,"³⁴ or they could "at once organize a system of repression and protection, that would of necessary become extermination if the "poor blacks" will not recognize the paramount influence of the law."

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Needless to say, it was the latter course that was favoured by the settlers.

Expressions of Social Darwinism can be found in references to the "inevitable extinction" of the Aborigines, and it was remarked that

Desperate diseases call for strong remedies and while we would regret a war of extermination, we cannot but admit that there exists a stern, though mayhap cruel necessity for it.³⁶

The alleged inefficiency of Native Police protection, and the need to increase the number of detachments in the area, led to calls for the establishment of a Volunteer force³⁷ and proposals in the southern press for the establishment of a force of Chinese police who would protect their countrymen.

This suggestion brought a reply from a Mr. G.E. Buckmaster, who described himself as

U.S. Army, Texas Mounted Rifle Rangers and Victorian Mounted Police, teaches the British Cavalry and Infantry Sword, Lance and Bayonet exercises. Infantry Drill, Military Equitation Sec. Drill-books forwarded to school teachers at 2s 6d (stamps) each.³⁸

The frequency of depredations led to frequent derogatory comments regarding those who wished to protect or proselytise the Aborigines.

The following quotations show quite clearly the scorn of the frontier editor for the humanitarian.

[p. 43]

This black nuisance is becoming quite a bore to those who have occasion to travel the roads, and we think that the Government should at once despatch Mr. Alfred Davidson, the Brisbane agent of the "Aboriginal Destruction Society" in England to the scene, as we feel confident that with the administration of a few doses of his "Adelphi brimstone and treacle", the "poor blacks" may be dissuaded from that piece de resistance of a camp banquet - "Whitefellow a la Australienne."³⁹

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 27 October 1875.

³⁷ Ibid, 5 May 1875; 8 May 1875; 30 June 1875.

³⁸ Ibid., 12 January 1876.

³⁹ Ibid., 21 October 1875.

...the "Fools are not dead yet". Our contemporary [i.e. the **Cooktown Courier**] in its issue of January 10th, publishes an article which may have the effect of luring one unsuspecting and unsophisticated enthusiast, to his destruction. The article aforesaid after charging the Native Police with murder, supplemented by nearly every fiendish crime in the calendar, which can disgrace our civilization, calls for "one single man" who for the love of his God" should penetrate the untrodden wilds, and try to make friends with the first wild blacks he meets, live with them, learn their customs, learn their language, teach them Christianity &c, &c". This noble language has called forth a reply from an enthusiastic gentleman signing himself "W.E. Hillier", who responds thus:

"If you will be the New York Herald, I will be your Stanley. I am a student of the Presbyterian College and will give up my snug home, the study of Greek and Latin, and will take my life in my hands, carry out your suggestion &c, &c". The **Courier** does not respond to this in enthusiastic terms, but says that through white influence the blacks in the immediate vicinity are dangerous, yet offers to convey Mr. Hillier 50 miles up the coast and then send him adrift with a few tomahawks and gaudy beads to teach the benighted savage how to find the great thoroughfare to Christianity and Heaven.

We say, come along, Mr. Hillier, we will help you in the Christian work of planting you 50 miles in the interior, or underground, if you are bound to sacrifice yourself. We believe in giving a show to every man of energy and not to be outdone by the **Courier**, will supplement a weeks rations for your contemplated journey, believing you will not require half that amount in the prosecution of your labour of love and that the balance, together with your manly form, before that time will be undergoing the process of digestion in the clamerous bowels of those "black brudders", for whose salvation you and your friend of the Courier are so fondly yearning.⁴⁰

Such sentiments were not, by any means, exceptional.

We have seen, in the course of this lecture, that a state of warfare existed at least in the minds of European settlers.

It was a war aimed at establishing European control of the lines of communication between Cooktown and the Palmer.

The legacy of the war in the Cooktown area, as in Queensland as **[p. 44]** a whole, is still with us today.

Perhaps it seems that the rediscovery of racial violence is adding to, rather than solving, the problems associated with race in Australia today.

We must, however, remember that it is impossible to realize the extent and the true nature of violence in our past without looking at some of the uglier aspects of our heritage.

Only by re-assessing our past can we see what we are today, and without a close look at relations between Aborigines and settlers we can never accurately understand what we have been, or what we are today.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3 February 1877.

However galling the idea may be, we must remember that the settlement of the north, in the words of the **Queenslander** of 1 May 1880, amounted to:

a fitful war of extermination waged upon the blacks, something after the fashion in which other settlers wage war upon noxious wild beasts, the process differing only so far as the victims, being human, are capable of a wider variety of suffering than brutes. The savages, hunted from the places where they had been accustomed to find food, driven into barren ranges, shot like wild dogs at sight, retaliate when and how they can. They spear the white man's cattle and horses and if by chance they succeed in overpowering an unhappy European they exhaust their savage ingenuity in wreaking their vengeance upon him, even mutilating the senseless body out of which they have pounded the last breath of life. Murder and counter murder, outrage repaid by violence, theft by robbery, so the dreary tale continues, till at last the blacks, starved, cowed, and broken hearted, their numbers thinned, their courage overcome, submit to their fate, and disease and liquor finish the work which we pay our native police to begin.⁴¹

⁴¹ **Queenslander** 1 May 1880.