

The Last Country God Ever Made

(Manning Clark)

*About those who had been there
for a long time*

Introduction

The Aboriginal population

harassment: overgreb
kindred: lignende
self-affirmation:
selvbekræftelse
safeguard: værn
encroach: trænge sig ind
på
subversive: nedbrydende,
undergravende
pithily: fyndigt
miscegenation: race-
blanding
prude: snerpet person
densely: tæt
stockrider: cowboy
tracker: 'sporhund'
dispossession: fratagelse,
fordrivelse
aver: hævde

We have already seen how the Aboriginal population suffered from initial contact with the Europeans (the spread of diseases and sexual harassment).

For the early settlers self-affirmation in one's Englishness was the best safeguard against the encroaching 'otherness' of the continent. Consequently, the mixing of races was looked upon not only as shameful but also subversive, and as Xavier Herbert pithily put it many years later: "the problem of miscegenation [was] great. The prudes who ruled the country were afraid of that. To prevent it they would rather wipe out the Aborigines – wipe out the whole race."¹ Of course, a lot more reasons went into "the wiping out of a race" – white expansion, protection of property, 'abo-hunting' as a local sport, paranoia – but the fact remains that by 1847 only forty four Aborigines were alive in Tasmania, and by 1858 the Aboriginal population in Victoria was down to fifty six! In other less densely populated areas they fared slightly better, and sporadic attempts were made to 'integrate' them into white society. They were, for example, employed as stockriders and in the more hateful jobs as convict hunters and police trackers. But all of these flimsy endeavours rested exclusively on white premises, and by mid-century more than half the original population had been wiped out.

Apartheid policy

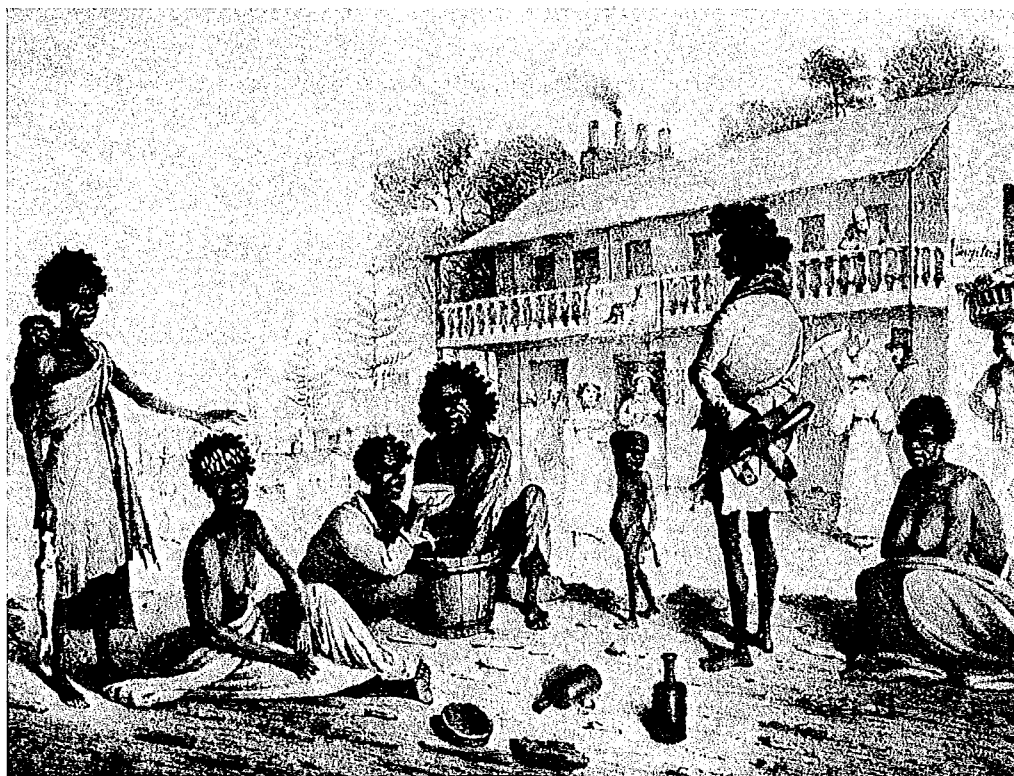
The killing and dispossession of the indigenous people were an ongoing process throughout the 19th century, and the official attitude was perhaps expressed in 1902 when Australian women were given the right to vote. When during the debate, the indigenous population was brought up it was averred that there

was no scientific evidence that the Aborigine was a human being at all, and franchise was not conferred until 1967, a few years after they had been given the right to work for equal wages.

The Aboriginal population, which had reached a low ebb of about 60,000 people at the turn of the century, was kept in place through a rigorous apartheid policy. Those who did not live in the old tribal way, and that was the majority, were kept in reservations, sometimes referred to as settlements or missions, the latter suggesting the no doubt well-meant attempts to "humanize the backward savages".

franchise: valget
confer: give, tildele
rigorous: streng
refer to: omtale, henvis
til

Augustus Earle "Natives of New South Wales" c. 1830



tracts of land: landområder
 forcibly: med magt
 compulsory transfer: tvangsforflytning
 disruptive blow: ødelæggende slag
 be tantamount to: være ensbetydende med
 arbitrary: vilkårlig
 void: tomrum
 abominable: afskyelig
 miscegenation: raceblanding
 exploitative: som har karakter af rovdrift
 yella-fellas/narda-nardas: mulatter
 conduct: opførsel
 Exemption Act: dispensationslov
 probation period: prøveperiode
 forfeit: fortabe

Reservations and mission schools

From vast tracts of land the Aboriginal people were rounded up and forcibly taken to government reserves, sometimes in chains. To a tribal Aborigine land and location are of vital importance, and compulsory transfer to a foreign spot with strangers that are not tribally related was a disruptive blow to personal integrity. To die outside one's area was tantamount to losing one's soul.

In the first decades of the 20th century the Aboriginal population started picking up again, and by the 1940s more than three hundred and fifty government reserves had been set up. The Missions were grossly overcrowded and little room was given for privacy. The inmates had at all times to carry identification papers, "dog tags" (see p. 110), and favours and punishments were given in an arbitrary way. The old tribal rituals and sacred ceremonies were forbidden as heathen practices, and in some camps the speaking of one's former language was a punishable offence. In that way the Aboriginal people were left in a cultural void. The most abominable aspect of settlements and missions was the belief that tribal parents were morally incapable of raising their own children. Thousands and thousands of children were taken away and brought up in mission institutions, some never to be reunited with their parents! This practice was kept up into the 1950s, and is the bitter subject matter of Sally Morgan's widely read biographical books.

Miscegenation

Miscegenation, as we have seen in one of the previous chapters, was a major problem in colonial Australia, and the mixing of the races continued into the 20th century, although on a less exploitative basis. The population increase was partly due to a substantial number of "yella-fellas" or "narda-nardas", and the authorities eventually had to face the problem of mixed origin. The general idea was to integrate as many as possible into white society. At the bottom of the integration policy lay a classification system which, with respect to physical appearance and general conduct, divided people into two groups. Mobility between the two groups was ensured through an Exemption Act: after initial classification the person in question could after a probation period earn or forfeit his rights as a white citizen. During this peri-

od it was essential that the applicant refrained from social contact with Aborigines! (see p. 115ff)

So in many ways the Australian way of dealing with the indigenous population was similar to the Apartheid system in South Africa. Many middle-aged Australians, who during their university days took an active part in anti-Apartheid demonstrations, realized as a shock that exactly the same things had been taking place on their own doorsteps. Aboriginal affairs had not found their way into the history books of mid-century. The emphasis was still on Empire and white Australians.

applicant: ansøger
refrain from: afstå fra
franchise: valgret
redress: råde bod på,
afhjælpe

Improvements

However, the 1960s saw great improvements for the Aboriginal people. Missions and settlements had been phased out, and in addition to franchise and the right to work for equal wages, the Aborigines were now given the right to bring up their own children! On paper at least, the indigenous people now had the same rights as other Australians, and in the 1970s an elected Council for Aborigines was set up to advise the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. The redressing of past wrongs is, of course, a

Queensland Native Police, Dawson River, late 1850s – 1860s



excessive: umådeholden
 conspicuous: synlig,
 iøjnefaldende
 thwart: komme på tværs
 launch: sætte i gang
 concession: indrømmelse
 against the grain: mod
 årener/strømmen
 proliferate: formere sig
 hastigt
 pre-eminent: som går for-
 ud for andre
 lay claim to: gøre krav på
 amply: righoldig
 the Torres Strait Islands:
 australske øer som lig-
 ger nord for Cape York
 og Carpentaria
 momentum towards:
 fremdrift mod
 wrangling: tvtrækkeri
 title: skøde, ejendomsret
 sovereignty: suverænitæt,
 herredømme
 apply to: gælde for

slow and difficult process, and Aboriginal people still bear a heavy burden of high unemployment and crime rates, just as excessive drinking and destitution are very conspicuous in many Aboriginal communities (see Archie Weller (p. 117) and Kevin Gilbert (p. 125)). Given their family background it is no wonder that many Aborigines find it hard to adapt; their social aspirations are often thwarted by racial discrimination, and they are caught on the wrong foot, so to speak, between two cultures (see the newspaper article about tribal justice on p. 126).

Land rights and Mabo

In the 1970s a new phase in Aboriginal history was launched when the government passed a law which recognized Aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory. This was a major concession, and The Land Rights Act of 1976 in many ways went against the grain of mining and agricultural policies which made up the backbone of Australian economy. Since then the claims for tribal land have proliferated, and the struggle for land rights has become a pre-eminent Australian issue. The interests of many white Australians have been seriously threatened, and they find it hard to accept the justice of a legislation that reaches back to a period of time before they or their ancestors laid claim to the land. The complexity of the land rights issue is amply illustrated by the case named after Eddie Mabo.

In an attempt to claim land rights Eddie Mabo, a Torres Strait Islander, applied for official permission to go to the islands and record their history, but the Queensland Government turned him down. It was this realization that he was in fact an exile that began the momentum towards taking the issue to court. After much wrangling it ended up in the High Court which in June 1992, after Eddie Mabo's death, reached a historic decision. By a six to one majority it ruled that "Eddie Mabo had been right, that he *did* own his land, not because he held a title from the Crown, but because his family and his ancestors had owned the land at the time of claim of sovereignty. ... He owned the land according to traditional custom which still ran in the Torres Strait." In addition the Court ruled that the principles of its decision applied to all of Australia.

The implications of the 'Mabo Judgement' are far-reaching. First of all it overturned the old doctrine of *Terra Nullius* -

where there is no title it must now be assumed that the owner is Aboriginal! Before Mabo, if Aboriginal communities were to claim land rights, they had to establish that they were the traditional owners. This was also the idea behind the Land Rights Act of 1976. After Mabo it has to be assumed that Aboriginal ownership survives unless the Crown can show that it does not. The onus is on the Government to prove the case, not on the traditional owners.

The Aboriginal people can now claim a reasonable compensation for land taken in a questionable or an illegal manner in the past. In this connection it has also been ruled that property passes down the generations. It is only when people have forgotten their tradition and have lost their links that they lose their Native Title.

Though the after effects of Mabo have not yet been sorted out, there is no doubt that the impact has been tremendous. In 1993 Peter Yu summed up the situation: "Mabo [...] presents Australia with an opportunity to heal itself of the [...] trauma of its violent birth and development which, in all sorts of ways, has continued to tear at the nation's soul. More importantly, the Mabo judgement gives Aboriginal people the legal power to [...] achieve political and economic autonomy [...] Mabo is much more than an issue of land ownership and management. It is also about *human rights*."²

Notes:

- 1 Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia* (Angus & Robertson 1938), p.186
- 2 Peter Yu, "Mabo – Its meaning for Aboriginal Australia" (1993), p.1

establish: godtgøre, bevis

onus: bevisbyrde

impact: (ind)virkning

autonomy: selvstyre