Until late in the nineteenth century the history of contact between Aborigines and Europeans attracted the attention of many historians. G. W. Rusden's *History of Australia* devoted a major introductory chapter to 'Natural phenomena and the Australian tribes' and attempted to weave the contact experience into the general narrative. Historical interest was especially focussed on Tasmania, where the rapid and easily identifiable decline of the Aboriginal population aroused widespread curiosity, prompting attempts to chronicle developments from first contact. However, as the century drew to a close the dispossession of the Aborigines was excised from the historical consciousness, though there was an awakening of anthropological interest. The continued existence of Aboriginal communities faded from public attention. There was no place for Aborigines, regarded as a 'bygone people', in the twentieth century.

Contrary to expectations, it was being realised by the late 1920s that the Aborigines were not dying out. A. P. Elkin and others began to voice the radical notion that 'a major development of aboriginal economic, social and political life from its broken down state was a . . . possibility'. The 1930s were a time of conflicting trends. While state governments were tightening the provisions of their protectionist legislation a meeting of State and Commonwealth officials in 1937 set as a policy objective the assimilation of part-Aborigines. Daisy Bates' pessimistic *The passing of the Aborigines* (1938) was well received while novelists Katherine Pritchard and Xavier Herbert were playing a leading role in mediating the humanity of the Aboriginal through literature. The revival of general interest in Aborigines was reflected in the publication of the specialist historical studies of Foxcroft, Hasluck and Turnbull and the historical novels of Eleanor Dark. While serious historical studies had begun to appear, professional historians found it difficult to come to grips with the 'dark underside of the Australian mind', with the result that some of the major historical works, especially before the 1970s, have been produced by the anthropologists A. P. Elkin, C. H. and R. M. Berndt, W. E. H. Stanner, D. E. Barwick and the political scientist-historian, C. D. Rowley.

The fruits of the new interest in contact history have been most apparent in the last ten years. This period has witnessed the publication of the papers of Robinson, Threlkeld, Salvado and Gillen, at least six documentary collections, outstanding...
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interpretative essays,9 two general histories,10 a brief comparative survey of Australia and New Zealand,11 and a large number of biographies, autobiographies12 and specialist historical works.13

Perhaps the most important single work to emerge from this period is Rowley's *The destruction of Aboriginal society* (1970). At a time when serious historical study had not made much headway Rowley attempted to write a history of contact. To do this he not only synthesized the existing specialist work but conducted extensive research of his own to fill gaps in historical knowledge. His study has served to heighten general awareness of what was, at the time of its publication, a neglected aspect of Australian history, and it has opened the field for subsequent scholars.14 Yet the magnitude of Rowley's pioneering achievement should not be permitted to impede a critical appraisal of his work.

The structure of the book, with separate chapters for the major colonies, makes for a degree of repetition. A thematic approach, as adopted by E. G. Docker in his less ambitious *Simply human beings* (1964), would have facilitated the task of analysis. The emphasis on narrative and the restricted range of sources consulted leads in places to less than adequate explanations. For example, in accounting for the implementation of the crucial Queensland protectionist legislation in 1897, Rowley argues that 'the controlled institution . . . was inevitable once a genuine concern with Aboriginal welfare developed'. Yet he fails to establish the existence of a 'genuine concern' in government circles. Scattered throughout the narrative there are the seeds of possible alternative explanations. By 1897 the last frontiers in Queensland had been breached. The Native Police had served its function. The remnants of Aboriginal society were creating a nuisance in the townships. Contrary to the rationale of the protectionist legislation, the labour requirements of the pastoralists were safeguarded.15 In the words of one reviewer, Rowley's book 'reveals an extensive knowledge of and penetrating insights into the subject, which have not been fashioned into an integrated whole'.16

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9 Stanner 1969; Hartwig.
10 Rowley 1970; Franklin.
11 Howe.
12 See especially Clark; Harrison; Holmes; Horner; Lamilami; Mathews; Perkins; Roughsey; Tucker. See also Berndt 1951b; Gordon; Stanner 1960.
13 See especially Biskup; Cato; Corris 1968; Durack; Evans, Saunders and Cronin; Bobbie Hardy; Long; Reece 1974.
15 Rowley 1970:175-185. Issue can be taken with Rowley on a number of factual points. To take one example, he writes that in Parry-Okeden's Report of 1897 'the Native Police Force was finally damned by its own most senior officer' (1970:181). I would suggest that the picture was not so clear-cut. Rowley fails to point out that Parry-Okeden recommended, in opposition to Meston, the retention of a 'reformed' Native Police system. Parry-Okeden believed, like his predecessors, that 'among savages demonstrations of strength of a character that they will respect are necessary'. He was only willing to concede that 'grave wrongs have occasionally been done in the past' and he stressed that 'it is not for a moment to be inferred that I in any way join in the wholesale implications against the force'. The use of a wider range of sources gives a truer insight into the colonial situation. For example, see leading articles in the *Brisbane Courier* for 29 October 1896 and 21 April 1897.
16 Curthoys 1971:41.
Considering the amount of energy expended in the last ten years, the quality of the yield has been disappointing. We still await a Judith Binney or a Dee Brown, to say nothing of a writer with a degree of theoretical sophistication, such as Stanley Elkins or Eugene Genovese. Within the confines of this brief article it will not be possible to review the huge output of recent years, a task which has been attempted by Corris and Reece. Rather, attention will be focussed primarily, though not exclusively, on articles published in the last five years in an attempt to piece together some disparate strands and to discern directions and problems for future work.

One clear focus for recent work has been the contact experience along the frontiers of settlement. Until the 1960s there was a widespread belief that Aboriginal society had quietly and rapidly disintegrated with the arrival of the European. In an article published in 1972 Reynolds observed:

White memories of racial violence have more often been expunged than preserved, while the decimating impact of disease and deprivation has often been accepted as a comprehensive explanation of a rapidly declining indigenous population. This belief partly reflected the historians' lack of interest in the contact experience, but the desire to 'draw the veil' over the brutalities of the past also played a part. Reynolds and others have directed attention to the guerilla warfare fought by Aborigines, which in areas favourable to this form of resistance 'significantly increase[d] the economic and human cost of settlement'. As a result of Aboriginal resistance flocks and herds were slaughtered, huts and head stations were burnt, stores looted, lines of communication threatened, labour rendered scarce and expensive and widespread anxiety created in colonial society. Reynolds and Noel Loos have estimated that Aborigines were responsible for the death of at least 800 to 850 Europeans, Melanesians, Chinese and 'civilised Aborigines' and at least 8,000 to 8,500 Aborigines were killed by Europeans in Queensland. While not wishing to underestimate the impact of resistance, Reynolds and Loos argued that in a broad context it had 'only a marginal effect on the overall pace of European expansion'. The 'tribesmen could harass but not repulse the invading settlers'.

Some of the most detailed studies of frontier conflict are still unpublished, as in the case of Lyndall Ryan's exhaustive research into the Tasmanian experience. But even in the published work the stage of declining returns is being reached. The latest publication of Reynolds and Loos partly duplicates the earlier work of Evans. There is evidence that the reawakened awareness of the bitter frontier conflict is filtering through to work designed for the general reader, as in Hector Holt-house's *Up rode the squatter*.

In future it will not be sufficient merely to demonstrate the existence of frontier conflict. Studies in this area are reaching the stage when questions of some sophistication can be tackled. In which circumstances did Aboriginal resistance pose a major threat to European settlers and in which circumstances was it easily overcome? In which circumstances was frontier conflict most bitter? Did the response of Europeans and Aborigines vary significantly in different regions? In a broader perspective, which factors influenced the development of relations between Aboriginal and European society?

17 Corris 1973; Reece n.d. This survey does not attempt to deal with the rapidly expanding field of Aboriginal prehistory, in which scholars have been employing a wide range of interdisciplinary skills to penetrate the past.

18 Reynolds 1972b:471.
19 Reynolds 1972b:474.
20 See Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1975: 51ff; Loos.
21 See Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1975: part 1, chapters 1-3. This duplication may be a reflection of the lapse in time between acceptance of an article and its publication.
Aborigines and Europeans after Europeans had established a presence in the Aborigines' homeland? Was the Australian contact experience so uniform in character that variables in the contact situation can be ignored, as has been largely the case up to the present?

A considerable amount of comparative work has been carried out on a broad scale, one focus being the contrast between the Australian and New Zealand experience, enabling the isolation of major variables. A discussion of variables involves a consideration of the peoples in contact and the physical environment in which contact took place. To date, historians have given very little attention to investigating possible variations amongst the Aboriginal population. These include population density, degree of preparedness (this factor being influenced by prior contact with alien people) and the impact of disease prior to contact. From the European side the inter-dependent variables include:

a) the effective location of power; the degree of control over Europeans in direct contact with Aborigines; the role of such Europeans in the formulation of government policy.

b) prevalent attitudes to Aborigines in England and the colonies; the prior experience of settlers.

c) the date of settlement — a key factor in determining the operation of the first two variables.

d) the speed of frontier movement and relative population ratios.

e) the economic basis of contact — pastoral, mining and maritime frontiers. Variables d) and e) played a key role in determining the degree of contact and the role of the Aborigines.

f) the physical environment. This factor played a key role in determining (i) the operation of variables d) and e), and (ii) the ability of Aborigines to resist European settlement.

There were marked differences, at least on a superficial level, between the colonies of Queensland and Western Australia in the period 1860-1890. From 1859 Queensland was a rapidly expanding self-governing colony, with pastoralists exercising a major role in the determination of policy, while Western Australia developed more slowly and was a Crown Colony till 1890. Western Australia suffered from a labour shortage, necessitating widespread employment of Aborigines in the pastoral industry, especially in the north, while the physical environment was generally less favourable than in Queensland to the waging of guerilla warfare. Did these differences significantly alter the contact experience in the two colonies? Such questions will only be answered when historians trace precisely the operation of significant variables in the Australian environment.

In contrast to the study of frontier conflict, the study of racial ideas is in its infancy. Reynolds has published two articles in the field, firstly demonstrating that racial concepts prevalent in Europe and the United States were present in the colonies prior to the gold-rushes. In a second, more general work, he devoted considerable attention to the impact of social Darwinism. Evans has attempted to delineate the stereotype of the Aboriginal and its impact in colonial Queensland.

Much of this work is of a preliminary nature and suggests more questions than it answers. Wolpe and others have urged the necessity of investigating 'the inter-relationship between race prejudice and political and economic structures'. Evans claims to do this, yet he is content to generalise for the whole of Queensland over a sixty year period, while Reynolds has not, to date, attempted to relate directly his work on dispossession with that on racial concepts. In my work I have tried to be

23 Baker; Berghe; Geddes; Howe; Jacobs; Mason; Price; Rex; Rowley 1969; Sinclair.
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more specific, defining the 'ideology of the frontiersman' by concentrating on the statements of pastoralists, and attempting to trace the impact of social Darwinism by studying leading articles in the liberal press of Melbourne. Close study is required for the production of meaningful analyses. We need to study racial ideas in context; within areas where Aborigines were a vital part of the workforce and areas where they were simply 'rural pests', within urban and rural environments, and within various sections of the population. John Rex, a leading sociologist of race relations, has made a useful distinction between various levels of racial consciousness. He distinguishes between the systematic statements of intellectuals; an intermediary range, reflected in the leading articles of quality newspapers; and the views of the unsophisticated person who has little recourse to theories other than those reflected in folk wisdom, proverbs, jokes and popular newspapers. At present nearly all the work has been confined to the first two levels. We know very little of popular attitudes.

When specific case studies become available we may be able to achieve an understanding of the role of racial ideas in the Australian context, though for some this may be more of a conceptual question than one open to empirical investigation. Evans asserts that:

>A detailed and denigrating racial stereotype of the tribalized Aborigine arose out of the direct experience of the violent frontier. Backed by ingrained ethnocentric conceptions, traditional as well as scientific beliefs and emotive second-hand evidence, this stereotype emerged as the major raison d'être for racially prejudiced attitudes and responses towards the libelled native.

In contrast, Reynolds is somewhat ambiguous. Some of his evidence points to the purely rationalising role of racial ideas, as a 'soothing' of consciences, though in places he seems to give an important causal role to racial ideas. Further research may show that the systematic statements of intellectuals, generally imported rather than developed locally, exercised a differential role, depending on factors such as an individual's economic position, level of education and extent of direct contact with Aborigines.

A further consideration to emerge from Reynolds' work on racial ideas centres on the question of the inter-relationship of attitudes to Aborigines and other non-Europeans. From the mid-1960s it became fashionable to argue for the existence of an inter-relationship and Reynolds, reflecting this trend, asserted that 'Chinese and later Melanesian migrants fitted into a well established pattern of race relations'. The first detailed investigation of this subject by Ann Curthoys has provided a warning against over-hasty generalisation.

My own work has led me to question the existence of an inter-relationship prior to the 1880s. Evidence on the first reactions to Chinese gold-diggers, as well as to Maori and Negro immigrants, does not reveal that attitudes held towards Aborigines were applicable to other non-Europeans. In the 1850s Aborigines were generally regarded as the most primitive of peoples; a people without the benefit of the technological advances of civilized man and without a conception of elevating ideals. Aborigines posed a physical threat to Europeans on the pastoral frontiers and were

28 For some preliminary work in this area see Docker 1964b; note also the speculation of Corris 1975:469-470.
30 Reynolds 1974a, 1974b; Reynolds and Loos.
33 For an elaboration of this argument see Markus n.d.
overcome by the use of overt force. The remnant surviving the act of dispossession were despised and neglected. The situation with Chinese was different. Compared to the Aborigines, the Chinese were seen as a civilized people, though most believed that the civilization of China had atrophied. The Chinese posed a threat because of their ability to compete with Europeans on the gold-fields and, at later stage, in a wide range of occupations. Unlike the Aborigines, who could be ignored once they had been subdued, the Chinese could not be ignored, for it was believed they would triumph if allowed to compete in a free market environment. One of the rare links between the two contact situations came at a time of rioting at Lambing Flat. The Sydney Empire declared:

Our philanthropists maintain that the Aborigines are justifiable in resisting the settlement that deprives them of their hunting grounds, and we are not disposed to dispute the proposition. It simply resolves itself into a question of power. We cannot see that the same principle is inapplicable to European miners in a British possession, unless it is mentioned that the Chinese have as much right there as themselves.34 This may be seen as an exception which proves the rule. Had society been able to deal with both peoples by the use of overt force, analogies could have been drawn. But the precedent of violence was of limited application. Colonial society distinguished between Chinese and Aborigines, and was not willing to deal with them in a similar manner. The problems posed by the presence of the two peoples were dissimilar: the solution called for dissimilar methods.

Historians of race relations in Australia have been reluctant to apply theoretical concepts in a systematic way. Exceptions are Hartwig's development of the ideas of van den Berghe and the attempt by Evans and his associates to apply Rex's formulations to colonial Queensland. Greater use could be made by other writers of what Stretton has termed 'artificial models ... [and] ... those selected from pasts or neighbours' to create awareness of a wider range of possibilities in a given historical situation and to prompt the posing of more penetrating questions.35 For example, in the analysis of the inter-relationship of attitudes to non-Europeans Leo Kuper's development of the notion of two-category and multi-category structures in social consciousness provides a valuable insight.36 Applied to Australia, these concepts clarify the existence of a multi-category structure in the 1850s, with distinctions being made between Aborigines, Chinese and Europeans. For the post gold-rush period some hypotheses can be advanced. Firstly, a distinction needs to be made between rural communities in which two or more racial minorities were present, and urban communities, in which only the Chinese minority was present in significant numbers. In such rural areas, found especially in the northern parts of the continent, the Europeans drew sharp distinctions between the social and economic position of themselves and non-Europeans, though distinctions were also drawn between the various non-European groups. In such an environment the formation of a two-category structure was facilitated and it seems likely that the Europeans' attitudes to Aborigines and other non-Europeans interacted. In the urban areas, on the other hand, multi-category structures persisted following the gold-rushes. There was no widespread generalisation of the experience with various non-European peoples till the 1880s, when the popularisation of social Darwinism provided the necessary bridge for the linking of attitudes.37

To date, the greatest difficulty has been experienced in the writing of history from the Aboriginal viewpoint. Part of the problem lies in the nature of the source

34 Empire, 26 February 1861.
material. In the United States rich sources are available for a study of the American Indian, notably in the voluminous treaty council records. In New Zealand there are the accounts of Europeans living with, or having close contact with, Maoris and the accounts of the Maoris themselves, largely literate by the 1840s. In Australia, partly reflecting the nature of the clash between Aborigines and Europeans, the records are much poorer. However, a meticulous sifting of conventional sources, including the accounts of explorers, pastoralists, escaped convicts, missionaries, ethnologists and government functionaries, together with material in Parliamentary inquiries and colonial newspapers, can yield rewarding results, including direct Aboriginal testimony.

While the source material presents problems, in the past the lack of interest on the part of historians has been the major obstacle. There are also problems of a different nature. Aborigines are only now beginning to write their own history, and most Australian historians lack the linguistic and interdisciplinary skills which would enable them to utilise the full range of source material. One notable exception is Campbell Macknight, whose protohistorical study of Macassan trepangers in northern Australia draws on archaeology, physical anthropology, ethnography, linguistics and history. Anthropologists using the historical method have been able to draw on a broad range of sources and they have brought a wider understanding to the subject. Unfortunately, in many cases their work has suffered from a failure to critically scrutinise the written record and to sustain the historical analysis.

The study of Aboriginal history is in its infancy, with much of the early work having been carried out by anthropologists. One aspect of this history centres on the Aboriginal response to alien contact. Works dealing with physical resistance to European expansion have already been noted. Other writers delving more deeply into 'the other side of the frontier' have produced evidence to demonstrate that 'Aboriginal society cannot be characterized as conservative and unable to adapt itself to new conditions'.

In eastern Arnhem Land the effect of Macassan contact has been important in some aspects of life. Thus a few items of material culture were permanently adopted by Aborigines, the most important being the dugout canoe. However, the fundamental bases of society remained unaltered. Fragmentary evidence from the pastoral frontier of northern New South Wales and Queensland indicates that some groups of Aborigines developed techniques to manage sheep, cattle and horses. For example, there is evidence of skilful cutting-out of sheep. A Wide Bay settler reported that he had followed a group of Aborigines who took a mob of between 400 and 500 sheep over two mountains, through a mile and a half of rain forest, and on to another mountain. On occasions Aborigines stole horses to assist in the driving of sheep and cattle and they developed techniques to prevent captured sheep from straying, including the construction of folds or stockyards from brushes and logs. In Tasmania, within a few years of first seeing dogs the Aborigines had incorporated them into their culture, adapting their hunting methods and making profound social and psychological adjustments to set up an affectionate relationship with the dog.

In describing the situation confronting Aborigines, David Turner has written:

39 For example see Jackson; Ward.
40 For example see Gilbert; Perkins; Roberts. See also Frank Hardy.
41 Macknight 1976. See also Corris 1968.
42 For example see Berndt 1951a: chapter 2, regarded by the anthropologist Marie Reay (1965:380) as 'good history'.
Face to face with Whites and their possessions and standards — radically different from those of Aborigines — these people were, in a sense, ‘forced’ to re-evaluate what was true, what was false; what was good, what was bad; what was right, what was wrong; and what was of value and what was not. Where they decided in favour of the alien point of view, or at least against the traditional one, the seeds of social change were sown.  

The range of responses varied, depending to a large extent on the pace of European settlement, with initial decisions being made in the economic sector under the stimulus of the desire to gain access to the abundant supplies of food and other useful items possessed by Europeans.

In parts of the north frontier expansion was very slow, leaving Aborigines room to manoeuvre. Annette Hamilton has described the range of methods employed in an attempt to assimilate Europeans and to get them to behave ‘morally, properly and generously’. These methods included the incorporation of Europeans into the kinship system through the provision of sexual services, the attempt to induce Europeans to look after the Aborigines as a group by the provision of economic services, and in recent times the attempts to involve Europeans in traditional ritual life to ‘tie them to the country’. In resorting to these methods Aborigines were attempting to graft ‘the external manifestations of European culture, in particular its material benefits, on to their own structural system’.

The ability to cope with change varied amongst Aboriginal groups. Prior alien contact in eastern Arnhem Land conditioned the people so that ‘they did not crumple in the face of it as many other groups . . . have done’. For other groups the appearance of aliens was entirely outside the realm of their experience. Turner theorises that the ‘more novel the experience in question and the more extreme the oppositions within it, the more quickly will aspects of the new be incorporated into existing patterns’.

The contact experience in parts of Victoria and New South Wales presented some marked contrasts with the northern parts of the continent, revealing a rapid ‘crumpling’ of Aboriginal society and an equally rapid adaptation of Aborigines surviving the act of dispossession. Elkin has postulated a general model of Aboriginal reaction to European settlement in which Aborigines were unable to proceed to an ‘intelligent appreciation’ of European society unless ‘the white man intends that they should, and helps them to do so’. This model does not appear to have universal applicability. By the end of the 1850s many Aborigines in Victoria had acquired farming skills and experience of the Europeans’ world. Between 1858 and 1869 six reserves were established in Victoria, partly at the request of Aborigines. The most spectacular success occurred at Coranderrk. Aborigines cleared the land, fenced the property, cut a channel for irrigation and planted a wide range of crops. Visitors to the reserves in the 1870s and 1880s found the ‘residents’ dress, homes and furnishings equal to those of English working men and superior to those of many selectors’. The adaptation of Aborigines was not superficial. Their acculturation was ‘swift and largely voluntary’. There was a rapid change in the status and roles of women and the Aborigines, both male and female, demonstrated an ability to successfully manipulate the British political system.

Studies of Coranderrk and other reserves prompt a number of questions. Why

47 R.M. Berndt 1962: Foreword, 94.
49 Elkin 1951:57.
50 Barwick 1972, 1974:51, 57; see also Massola; Mulvaney 1967.
were some reserves more successful than others? To what extent was success influenced by the location of reserves, the nature of economic activity pursued thereon and the management policies of administrators? From a different angle, there is considerable significance in the successful adaptation of at least some Aborigines before the end of the nineteenth century. It seems that this adaptation was checked not by failure on the part of Aborigines but by community pressure and government policy, though this did not prevent some part-Aborigines from 'passing' into the European community. To take some examples of the changing situation, during 1890-1891 the shearers' unions adopted rules to encourage Aboriginal membership. These rules were short-lived. Early in the twentieth century attempts began to restrict the pastoral industry to European workers and a provision in the rules of the Australian Workers' Union clarifying the right of Aborigines to membership was removed. In the same period moves were made to deny Aboriginal children access to public schools and government legislation reduced all Aborigines to a status in keeping with that of minors or lunatics.

At present there are very few historical studies of the early twentieth century and all the contours of the picture are only starting to emerge. Future studies will need to clarify the extent of Aboriginal adaptation, the nature of oppressive measures and the factors accounting for changed European attitudes and policies. In accounting for these changes historians will need to take into consideration the changing role of Aborigines in the workforce, particularly in the pastoral industry, and the increasingly formalised racialism of Australian society, manifested in the treatment of all non-Europeans, not only Aborigines. As Aborigines place their experiences on record, at this stage mainly through the medium of autobiographies and biographies, an awareness of the brutality of twentieth century protectionist policies is being created; an awareness that a significant factor accounting for the status of Aborigines has been the Australian governments' racially motivated policies of repression.

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51 Amalgamated Shearers' Union, General Rules 1892, sec. 58; Australian Workers' Union, General Rules 1894, sec. 52, 56; 1898, sec. 5; 1903, sec. 5; Biskup 1973:78.
53 See especially Biskup; Barwick 1972. Also Fennell et al; Beckett.

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