10. Ethnographic Rivalries

*The Australian Race* was the last of four significant ethnographic works to be published in Melbourne in less than a decade. The first was R. Brough Smyth’s *Aborigines of Victoria* (1878), which like Curr’s work was published by the Victorian Government. In subsequent years the Melbourne-based bookseller George Robertson published Lorimer Fison and A.W. Howitt’s seminal *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1880) and James Dawson’s study of Aborigines in western Victoria titled *Australian Aborigines* (1881). Robertson also published Curr’s *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* in 1883. In *The Australian Race* Curr took the opportunity to assert the superiority of his own ethnographic work. In several passages he was highly critical of both Smyth and Fison, while Dawson and Howitt did not escape unscathed.¹

Curr also compiled a recommended reading list for works on the Australian Aborigines, the vast majority of which were published before 1850. His primary concern was to promote the accounts of those who had early contact with Aborigines and whose observations he thought reliable. This list of ‘the most trustworthy writers on our Blacks’ included early government officials (Phillip, Hunter and Collins), explorers (Mitchell, Grey and Eyre) and missionaries (Threlkeld, Ridley and Taplin). Of the more recent works of his rivals, he recommended only Dawson’s *Australian Aborigines*.² His omission of Fison and Howitt was particularly telling, as *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* had already earned a positive international reputation as a pioneering work of social anthropology. Curr, however, was not significantly engaged with anthropological discourse, only reading more recent theoretical works if they touched on the Australian Aborigines. He stressed personal experience over theoretical approaches and eschewed the intellectual debate that surrounded his endeavour. It is not surprising that he chiefly valued written works that were produced by explorers and early government officials, whose experiences were similar to his own.

Curr believed the integrity of his evidence derived from his own personal experience of bush life. Moreover, he stressed that his collaborators were often men with a similar background to his own, as he had sent his pro forma questionnaires to ‘stock-owners here and there’.³ These were men with actual bush experience, not armchair anthropologists with a surfeit of education but a deficit of personal experience among ‘the Blacks’. When assessing the evidence of other writers, Curr regularly assumed the ultimate authority of the bushman. Typical statements by Curr included: ‘I have never witnessed nor

---

¹ Dawson 1881; Fison and Howitt 1880; Smyth 1878.
³ Curr 1886, vol 1: xiv.
heard any bushman mention such a state of things’; or, ‘this passage will, I think, be looked on by bushmen as sheer extravagance’. Curr’s ‘stock-owners here and there’ might indeed have been well placed to observe Aborigines first hand, but the involvement of so many of his informants in the pastoral industry certainly casts doubt on the impartiality of their statements. Many collaborators had a clear motive to portray Aborigines as hopelessly primitive, as such a view justified (in their own minds) colonial land acquisition.

Curr’s emphasis on bush experience is readily apparent in his concerted attack on the work of his colleague R. Brough Smyth:

Mr. Smyth as we know is no bushman and has no acquaintance with our Blacks in their savage state; and he furnishes another instance of the fact that book lore never compensates in such matters for the want of knowledge which comes of personal intercourse alone.\(^5\)

---

\(^5\) Curr 1886, vol 1: 238; see also a similar comment on page 52: ‘we know that Mr Smyth has no personal knowledge of the Blacks’.

Figure 24: R. Brough Smyth (c.1880). George Gordon McCrae.

Curr devoted several pages of *The Australian Race* to correcting the numerous errors that he had identified in Smyth’s book. He offered qualified praise for Smyth’s descriptions of Aboriginal weapons, but noted ‘they are not entirely free from even important errors’. He also refuted Smyth’s elaborate description of the typical Aboriginal approach to setting up a new camp, insisting that ‘[the] operation is got over very quietly, and is soon completed; all of which is very different from Mr. Smyth’s fancy picture’. Curr derived much mirth from Smyth’s interpretation of an artefact that Curr had obtained in the Burdekin area, which was apparently used to cure illness through sorcery:

One of these … I formerly lent to Mr. R. Brough Smyth, not knowing at the time what was its use, and he has depicted in his *Aborigines of Victoria*, and described it as probably a fish-hook! I have since had full information concerning it. That a fish with a mouth sufficiently capacious to take in an object of such length would be too heavy to be held by so fragile a hook, as I pointed out, failed to convince him of his mistake. But how often does one meet with similar such haphazard statements in the accounts of savages!

![Image of an object earred at each end, which the conjuror pretends to extract by incantation from the chest, or stomach, of a sick person.](image)

**Figure 25: R. Brough Smyth’s ‘fish-hook’.


Curr’s extended critique of Smyth’s volumes focussed principally on the section devoted to language. He noted there were many inconsistencies in Smyth’s collection of vocabularies and singled out a contribution from John Green, the former manager of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station. As noted, it was Green’s vocabulary that had earlier influenced Curr’s mentor Hyde Clarke to suggest a link between Aboriginal languages and those of Portuguese Africa. Curr declared that Green had ‘evidently no knowledge of Aboriginal languages, or of any language but his own’. He argued that Green had asked ‘some Black’ for a translation of an English phrase, then ‘treat[ed] the corresponding

---

6 Curr 1886, vol 1: 237–244.
7 Curr 1886, vol 1: 143.
9 Curr 1886, vol 1: 49.
phrase as a word for word rendering’. With barely concealed contempt Curr concluded: ‘Of the different construction of the two languages he has evidently little idea.’10 Smyth and Curr had been allies against John Green during the Coranderrk protests, but by the 1880s Curr was dismissive of both. He argued that Smyth should have contented himself with ‘compilation’ and with ‘pictorial representations of weapons and implements’. By attempting to present ‘a succinct narrative’ investigating ‘even the nuances of savage life in Victoria’, Smyth too often fell into error: ‘in some cases it would be easier to rewrite a chapter than to expose half of its shortcomings’.11

Although Smyth was a principal target, Curr did not shirk from identifying errors in previous works, even those written by people he broadly admired. For example, in volume 3 he included an extended account of the customs of the Kabi (Gubbi Gubbi) people written by the young Presbyterian minister and aspiring anthropologist John Mathew. While Curr’s decision publish Mathew’s account was certainly a compliment, he was careful to direct the reader to its shortcomings:

> From that gentleman I learn that some years back he spent a short time in the country of the Kabi, and I attribute the fullness of his description of the tribe rather to his love of ethnological studies, which has led him to observe and remember what came under his notice, than to that ripe knowledge which results from long experience.

Curr further stressed that Mathew had lived among the Kabi in a period when contact with white settlers had altered traditional custom. To underline his own authority, Curr noted his own experience among the Kabi in 1856 (eight years before Mathew) when he had owned the cattle station Gobongo.12

James Dawson’s *Australian Aborigines* (1881) attracted mild but significant criticism: Curr explained that it contained ‘several glaring errors’ balanced by ‘a good deal of trustworthy and minute information’.13 Curr and Dawson’s first point of divergence was Aboriginal numeracy, on which point Curr insisted: ‘No Australian Black in his wild state can, I believe, practically count as high as seven.’14 In disputing Dawson’s alternative view, Curr noted: ‘In fact, in a number of his statements that writer stands alone.’ His principal disagreement with Dawson related to ‘the existence of government among the Blacks’.15 Based on his experience in western Victoria, Dawson had proposed a complex system of tribal government, characterised by the existence of chiefs: ‘Every tribe has

---

10 Curr 1886, vol 1: 243–244.  
14 Curr 1886, vol 1: 32.  
its chief, who is looked upon in the light of a father, and whose authority is supreme."\textsuperscript{16} He outlined the various rights enjoyed by these chiefs, including multiple wives and personal servants; he also described intertribal relationships and argued there existed a semi-democratic method for appointing new tribal chiefs. Curr was bewildered:

How comes it that all this authority and state could have existed unperceived by the early squatters, Commissioners of Crown Lands, and Protectors of the Aborigines, none of whom ever mentioned it in their conversations or reports? How was it that the chiefs who are said to have habitually treated with neighbouring chiefs never made themselves known to the Whites?\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Figure 26: James Dawson (1892). Johnstone, O’Shannessy & Co.}

Photograph. State Library of Victoria, H2998/84.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Dawson 1881: 5–6.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Curr 1886, vol 1: 56.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Curr scepticism regarding the extent of Aboriginal government was a common theme in *The Australian Race*. He questioned, for example, the view of the missionary George Taplin that a chief called ‘Rapulli’ governed each of the 18 clans of the Narrinyeri people in South Australia. Curr observed that Taplin took charge of the Aboriginal station near the mouth of the Murray River in 1859 and authored various accounts of the Narrinyeri between 1863 and 1879. Noting that Taplin’s observations regarding tribal government did not appear in his writings until 1874, Curr downplayed the significance of a form of government that took ‘a diligent inquirer’ so many years to discern.\(^\text{18}\)

The question of tribal government provided a further reason for Curr to criticise Smyth, who had suggested the Victorian tribes were ‘governed by regular councils of old men’. In refuting Smyth’s claim, Curr outlined his own views on the subject:

Mr. Smyth has failed to recognize that, outside of the family, the power which enforces custom in our tribes is for the most part an impersonal one, and that the delegation of authority to chief or council belongs notoriously to a stage of progress which the Australian race has not reached.\(^\text{19}\)

In disputing the claims of Dawson, Taplin and Smyth, Curr pointed to the ethnographic work of Edward John Eyre in his *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia* (1845). A pastoralist, explorer, and later the controversial Governor of Jamaica during the Morant Bay rebellion, Eyre had been a protector of Aborigines on the Murray River in South Australia from 1841. He included in his *Journals* ‘an account of the manners and customs of the Aborigines’, in which he asserted ‘there can hardly be said to be any form of government existing among a people who recognize no authority’. Curr explained ‘I entirely concur’ and quoted a large slab of Eyre’s text.\(^\text{20}\)

The existence or otherwise of tribal government became a prominent issue after the Melbourne *Argus* reviewed *The Australian Race* in 1887. James Dawson quickly wrote to defend his position and somewhat tersely remarked: ‘I would not have taken any notice of these reviews had I not, amongst other absurdities, been struck by Mr. Curr refuting the existence of chiefs.’ Dawson had arrived in the Port Phillip District a year before Curr and had extensive pastoral experience. On this basis, he was entitled to defend himself against Curr’s criticism: ‘when I wrote my book *Australian Aborigines* I did so from an intimate knowledge of the habits and customs of the blacks’.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{18}\) Curr 1886, vol 1: 59.

\(^{19}\) Curr 1886, vol 1: 52.


\(^{21}\) James Dawson, ‘Mr. Curr’s work on the Australian race’ (Letter to the Editor), *Argus*, 21 October 1887.
authority upon which Curr relied, which might explain why Curr tended to be milder in his criticisms of Dawson compared to his other rivals. It might also explain why, in this case, Curr chose to stress the potential for ethnographic corruption when Aborigines had come into contact with white settlers. Good ethnography, he suggested, required not only extensive bush experience, but also a healthy scepticism of Aboriginal informants; while Dawson had ‘taken great pains to secure accuracy in his statements’ he had ‘allowed the Blacks, now well versed in our ways, to impose on him as aboriginal a number of ideas which have resulted from their connection with the Whites’.  

James Dawson found support, however, from A.W. Howitt, who wrote to the Argus claiming he had both personal knowledge and evidence from reliable correspondents to contradict Curr’s claim. Howitt noted there were other matters on which he disagreed with Curr and promised an extended critique would follow. A few weeks later Dawson wrote to F.W. Chesson, the secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society in London, expressing concern that Curr’s ‘ponderous work’ would be viewed as authoritative and arguing that Curr’s ‘extraordinary assertion’ brought into question the accuracy of his work more generally. He explained that he had the support of Howitt and of ‘every intelligent person acquainted with the Aborigines in the early days of the Colony’. Crucially, Dawson added a final request that Chesson might forward his letter to the Anthropological Institute. Chesson obliged, sending the letter to none other than Curr’s erstwhile mentor Hyde Clarke. Meanwhile, Howitt prepared two papers – one for the Royal Society of Victoria and one for the Anthropological Institute – in which he refuted several of Curr’s key claims.

### Lorimer Fison and Communal Marriage

Howitt had good reason to question the accuracy of Curr’s work: his friend and collaborator Lorimer Fison had been the subject of a sustained attack in The Australian Race. Fison’s contribution to Kamilaroi and Kurnai (1880) attracted Curr’s derision for its assertions about marriage custom and Howitt was inevitably drawn into the debate. The rivalry between Curr, Fison and Howitt extended back many years. In 1880 Fison had written to the eminent American anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan explaining his decision to seek immediate publication of Kamilaroi and Kurnai in Melbourne, rather than wait up to two years for publication by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. He and Howitt were both wary regarding the work George Taplin and Curr were doing

---

in the same field of inquiry. According to Fison, Taplin had incorporated into his work whole sections of letters from Fison and Howitt, without attributing them to their authors. Curr’s research was similarly a source of concern, as Fison explained:

Another man called Curr is in the field and he is in possession of several of our facts. Moreover, our printed circulars long ago set him on the track. He wrote to Howitt claiming our territory. As Howitt said in his letter to me thereupon: ‘If we don’t make haste we shall be accused of ploughing with the Taplin and Curr heifers.’

Fison and Howitt got their work published in Melbourne, but certainly would have preferred the imprint of the Smithsonian Institution, which had published Morgan’s influential *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* in 1871. Morgan had become a friend and mentor to both Fison and Howitt. A circular letter from Morgan, received by Fison in Fiji in 1869, sparked his interest in kinship systems and Morgan guided his subsequent research in Australia. Fison was among the first converts to Morgan’s social evolutionary model for the history of human marriage and he loyally defended Morgan against his critics.

Morgan had expounded a theory for the evolution of human marriage, which suggested that from an initial state of ‘promiscuous intercourse’ human sexual relationship had evolved through various stages, designated the communal family, the barbarian family, the patriarchal family and the civilised family. Linked to these stages were a series of systems for kinship terminology described by Morgan as ‘systems of consanguinity’. Fison and Howitt sought to defend and expand Morgan’s classificatory system through an analysis of Australian data. In the early chapters of *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, Fison described the system of class divisions among the Kamilaroi, which he argued was prevalent (with minor variations) throughout the Australian continent. He then explained the laws for marriage between classes, which he described as ‘theoretically communal’; in other words, ‘based upon the marriage of all the males in one division of a tribe to all of the females of the same generation in another division’. By ‘theoretically communal’ Fison meant that there was linguistic evidence of communal marriage as a past practice, even if it were no longer prevalent. In making this inference Fison built on E.B. Tylor’s theory of cultural survivals, which he later elaborated in a presidential address for the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science: ‘Our own modern civilisation, too, is full of fossilised anomalies, which by the aid of savage custom can be traced back to a time when they were full of life.’ In the second half of the book Howitt contributed a chapter

---

25 Stern 1930: 425.
26 Stocking 1996: 18–19, 24, 28; Fison and Howitt 1880: 50–51.
titled ‘The Kurnai: Their Customs in Peace and War’, which included detailed observations on marriage custom. To this Fison responded with a ‘Theory of the Kurnai System’. Broadly speaking, Howitt and Fison argued that the Kurnai were at a later stage in the evolution of marriage, but vestiges of communal or group marriage remained, particularly in the laws surrounding ‘marriage by elopement’.

Fison and Howitt had adopted with enthusiasm a social evolutionary model for anthropology. As a Wesleyan missionary, Fison faced some personal anguish in doing so, but Howitt reputedly kept a picture of Darwin above his bed. In contrast Curr showed little interest in the pioneering works of evolutionary anthropology. Moreover, he was clearly concerned by the degree of scholarly credibility that surrounded Kamilaroi and Kurnai. He observed that while Fison’s work exhibited ‘many appearances of thoroughness’, in many respects it was ‘quite at variance with fact’. Curr questioned Fison’s argument that apparently obsolete Kamilaroi relationship terms were vestigial evidence of a past system of communal marriage. Furthermore, Curr argued that Fison’s account was confused, and its lack of clarity had led to a misleading conclusion that group marriage still existed in some cases. He argued there was evidence of this falsely drawn conclusion both in reviews of Fison’s work and in the preface by Morgan.

A key issue here was Curr’s suspicion regarding an overtly theoretical approach to ethnographic writing. He believed that Fison was lured by scientific fashion: ‘it seems to me that, when a statement has been pronounced important in scientific circles, there are not wanting educated White men who will support it on very insufficient grounds’. Curr boldly suggested that Fison’s object had been ‘to demonstrate, right or wrong, a foregone conclusion’ and that he had ‘not hesitated to keep from his readers facts which tell strongly against his arguments’. If a charge of deceptive presentation of evidence were not enough, Curr suggested Fison was blindly devoted to his theories to the point of gullibility. He argued, for example, that care was required when dealing with the evidence of unreliable Aboriginal informants:

> Every one acquainted with the Blacks will, I think, bear me out when I say that the greatest care is necessary in taking their statements; for their desire to please and their disregard of truth are such that, if a White man making inquiries allows his views or wishes to be known, he is almost certain to find the Aboriginal agreeing with him in every particular.

James Dawson had earlier registered a similar concern, when he explained that in his research with Aborigines in western Victoria ‘suggestive or leading questions have been avoided as much as possible’.\(^{32}\) Fison, Curr believed, did not show the same level of care in his inquiries about marriage custom; moreover, his commitment to certain ‘doctrines or systems’ had caused him to ignore ‘what I and thousands of bushmen know to be facts’.\(^{33}\)

Curr’s dismissal of a theory of communal marriage revealed his reluctance to entertain alternative explanations for sexual practices that he viewed simply as prostitution.\(^{34}\) Moreover, his criticisms of Fison derive from a strong belief that ethnographic endeavour was the proper domain of the first hand observer:

> I cannot help remark how strange it would have been had a law of compulsory prostitution existed, and its discovery been left to Mr. Fison, who has no personal knowledge of our tribes, and been overlooked by persons who lived amongst them, were well acquainted with their customs, and published detailed accounts of what they had learnt…\(^{35}\)

For most of his life as an ethnologist Fison lived in Fiji and his research was largely conducted by correspondence through intermediaries. For Curr, he was not a first hand observer and therefore easily dismissed. Howitt, on the other hand, was a true bushman: he famously led the rescue party for the disastrous Burke and Wills expedition in 1861; furthermore, in his work as a police magistrate in Gippsland he had travelled extensively on horseback and interacted with the Kurnai people over a sustained period. Curr apparently had some admiration for Howitt’s ability and experience, which is perhaps why he concentrated his attack on Fison. He did, however, chastise Howitt for allowing the inclusion of Morgan’s preface, which clearly suggested that communal marriage was a prevalent and contemporary custom:

> That Mr. Howitt, who has lived in the bush, sanctioned the publication of this passage I cannot believe, as I should think he is aware that women in our tribes have never been found living with one man one day and with another the next, but that the reverse is a matter of notoriety.\(^{36}\)

Curr simply could not fathom a theory of Aboriginal kinship that differed from his own observations that the Aboriginal husband ‘is the absolute owner of his wife (or wives)’ and that ‘the man was despotic in his own mia-mia or hut’.\(^{37}\)

\(^{32}\) Dawson 1881: iii.

\(^{33}\) Curr 1886, vol 1: 119.

\(^{34}\) Curr 1886, vol 1: 120–122.

\(^{35}\) Curr 1886, vol 1: 128.

\(^{36}\) Curr 1886, vol 1: 126, emphasis in original.

Although Curr did not hold back in his strong criticisms of Fison, his dispute with Howitt played out in more subtle ways. He denied Aboriginal women any role in the selection of a husband, ‘unless Mr. Howitt’s account of the Kurnai be correct, which I doubt’.\textsuperscript{38} In the third volume of \textit{The Australian Race} Curr included several vocabularies of the ‘Gippsland language’, including one provided by Howitt and one he penned himself. Importantly, he used his prefatory remarks to question the accuracy of Howitt’s writings on the Kurnai. While noting Howitt’s ‘interesting account’ he explained that it ‘differs in some important particulars’ from information he had obtained from John Bulmer, a missionary in charge of the Lake Tyers Aboriginal reserve in East Gippsland. Accordingly, Curr wrote his own account of the Gippsland tribes based on Bulmer’s material. Curr explained: ‘As I think Mr. Bulmer an excellent authority, I shall lay before the reader the statements which I have received from him.’\textsuperscript{39} It was a subtle rebuke that was no doubt noticed by Howitt. For the most part, however, Howitt was shocked by Curr’s attack on Fison; he proceeded to defend his friend’s reputation and expose Curr’s errors (as his biographer suggests) ‘with scorn and conviction’.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure27.png}
\caption{A.W. Howitt (1895). Johnstone, O’Shannessy & Co.}
\end{figure}

Photograph. State Library of Victoria, IAN01/08/95/4.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{curr1886a} Curr 1886, vol 1: 108.
\bibitem{curr1886b} Curr 1886, vol 3: 539.
\bibitem{walker1971} Walker 1971: 297.
\end{thebibliography}
In December 1889 Howitt delivered a paper to the Royal Society of Victoria, in which he diplomatically described *The Australian Race* as ‘the outcome of the labour of years’, also noting that it bore ‘the authoritative stamp of publication by the Government of Victoria’. In disputing many of Curr’s conclusions, Howitt explained it would be necessary to draw on material he had previously published in the journals of the Anthropological Institute in London and the Anthropological Society of Washington. This juxtaposition of publication by a settler government with publication by learned international societies was surely not accidental; he further remarked that his and Fison’s theories had been ‘very generally accepted by anthropologists’.\(^{41}\) Although Howitt moderated his criticisms due to the death of Curr only a few months earlier, he argued forcefully that Curr was mistaken in his denial of both Aboriginal government and of group marriage. Providing numerous examples he stressed that group marriage was ‘in actual existence’ in large parts of central Australia. His prime example was the ‘Pirauru’ practice among the Dieri people of South Australia, first described by the police trooper Samuel Gason in 1874.\(^ {42}\) Howitt disputed Curr’s interpretation that there was ‘occasional prostitution’ in Aboriginal tribes: ‘The Pirauru practice is not “prostitution,” but a well recognised and lawful “group marriage,” and to its laws, as Mr. Gason has shown, all the people of the tribe give obedience.’ He also defended Fison’s inference of the past practice of group marriage based on relationship terms. Howitt explained that Curr had failed to understand both the principle of group marriage and the nature of Aboriginal relationship terms: ‘the late Mr. Curr did not study the subject with that analytical care which was necessary in order to place himself in a position to speak with certainty’.\(^ {43}\)

Howitt subsequently pitched his rebuttal to an international audience in an article for the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, titled ‘The Dieri and Other Kindred Tribes of Central Australia’. He noted Curr’s incorrect assumption that Aboriginal languages featured substantive collective terms (‘uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, cousin, and so on’), which were equivalent to English usage. Through a detailed analysis he argued that Curr had misunderstood the nature of the kinship terminology he was attempting to translate. He then noted a passage in Curr’s work ‘which cannot be passed over in silence’. He referred to Curr’s charge that Fison had deliberately withheld evidence contrary to his argument, to which Howitt responded:

> Had he devoted that attention to the question which the nature of the subject requires, he could not have fallen into the error which he has committed, nor would he have so recklessly levelled such a serious charge

\(^{41}\) Howitt 1889: 96–97, 114.

\(^{42}\) Gason’s spelling was ‘Pirraooroo’, which he translated ‘paramour’; see Wood 1879: 260–261, 277, 302.

\(^{43}\) Howitt 1889: 128, 133.
of literary dishonesty against a fellow-worker in the anthropological field. When he comes to see the nature of his own error, it is to be hoped that he will deeply regret the rash and unwarranted assertion which I have quoted.\textsuperscript{44}

Although Howitt’s article on the Dieyeri was published in 1891 it was apparently written before Curr died, which might explain why he was more forthright in his criticisms than he was in the paper he gave to the Royal Society of Victoria. As we shall see in chapter 11, Howitt continued his critique of Curr in \textit{The Native Tribes of South-East Australia} (1904).

Curr was never afraid to argue a controversial point and all his written works display an assured confidence and argumentative style. Moreover, while many of his criticisms of other ethnologists appear self-serving, some are certainly close to the mark. It is true, for example, that the influence of theoretical paradigms on Fison and Howitt was significant.\textsuperscript{45} W.E.H. Stanner has observed that \textit{Kamilaroi and Kurnai} ‘was rightly acclaimed a landmark in anthropology’, even if the subsequent collapse of the evolutionist perspective ‘obscured the merit of this pioneer work’.\textsuperscript{46} Curr’s distaste for Fison and Howitt’s theoretical inclinations might thus be seen as prescient. Nevertheless, his lack of engagement with theoretical questions and preference for ‘facts’ undermined the impact of \textit{The Australian Race} in scholarly circles. Certainly, as the discipline of anthropology emerged, Curr’s name faded from prominence, while Howitt became a key player in the development of a nascent science.\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{Ethnography and Aboriginal Policy}

In addition to asserting his authority over ethnological rivals, Curr used \textit{The Australian Race} to promote his views regarding the likely destiny of Aboriginal people. In this way, \textit{The Australian Race} provides an important insight into Curr’s political and ideological preoccupations and fits neatly with the views he expressed while serving on the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. His ethnological views supported, reflected and complemented his stubborn commitment to a repressively paternalistic policy of protection and his staunch resistance to the emerging ideology of assimilation. The most obvious example of this is Curr’s rejection of any meaningful form of Aboriginal government. Significantly, Curr’s close ally on the Board for Protection of Aborigines, Albert le Souëf, had also refuted the existence of chiefs in his short contribution to

\textsuperscript{44} Howitt 1891: 52–53.  
\textsuperscript{45} McGregor 1997: 34, note 27.  
Smyth’s *Aborigines of Victoria*. Their denial of a complex system of authority within Aboriginal tribes certainly illuminates their response to the Coranderrk Rebellion: the chiefly authority of William Barak could not derive from traditional Kulin culture, but must be the result of contact with the whites – that is, John Green’s ‘outside interference’.

Curr’s view of Aborigines as childlike, voiced so prominently at the 1877 Royal Commission on Aborigines and the 1881 Coranderrk Inquiry, was just as pronounced in *The Australian Race*. In assessing the mental characteristics of the Aborigine, Curr described him as quick of mind, observant and self-reliant, but ‘less steady, persevering, and calculating’ than the English peasant: ‘His mind in many respects is that of a child.’ This observation led Curr to the conclusion that while the education of Aborigines had shown some positive results, meaningful change would be a gradual process. He suggested that the experience in ‘our Aboriginal schools’ had been that early progress in reading, writing, and arithmetic was not sustained into adulthood: ‘instead of advancing, it is doubtful whether he will fully maintain through middle age what he learned in his youth’. On this basis Curr concluded that ‘the savage cannot be raised to the level of our civilization in a single generation’. It was this pessimistic view of Aboriginal advancement that led Curr to advocate supreme power over Aboriginal people for several generations to come.

A nostalgic admiration for the Aborigine in his ‘wild state’ also led Curr to conclude that Aboriginal education schemes had been a mixed blessing: ‘many of us agreed that the schooled generation was not an improvement’. This sceptical view further illuminates Curr’s attitude to both the Coranderrk protests and the broader question of how to manage the ‘half-caste’. He viewed the educated half-caste as a threat to the settler-colonial order: ‘a considerable experience of them, at the Government Aboriginal stations, shows that they have more brains than the full-blooded Blacks and are more difficult to manage’. This observation surely derives from his experiences regarding Coranderrk – perhaps he had in mind Robert Wandin or Thomas Dunolly who used their literacy skills so effectively to oppose the policies of the protection board. While others in the 1870s and 1880s were inclined to emphasise the greater potential for assimilation of ‘half-castes’, for Curr their apparently greater intelligence was simply a challenge to proper discipline on the Aboriginal reserves.

There is some irony in the fact that the Victorian Government published *The Australian Race* in the same year that the parliament revised the *Aborigines Protection Act* to enable the exclusion of ‘half-castes’ from the Aboriginal reserves.

---

49 Curr 1886, vol 1: 42, emphasis in original.
50 Curr 1886, vol 1: 43.
51 Curr 1886, vol 1: 42.
in the interests of assimilation. Curr’s dubious attitude towards Aboriginal advancement was evident most obviously in his resistance to assimilationist discourse. While his opposition to proposals to remove half castes from the reserves derived partly from concerns over their welfare (particularly that of young girls), it was equally based on a rigid belief that Aborigines were almost irredeemably primitive: ‘I am convinced that, were they once more returned to their forests and cut off from communication with the Whites, they would in a single lifetime become again exactly what we originally found them.’ For Curr, high rates of Aboriginal mortality combined with the apparent failure of attempts to educate or civilise those who survived led to only one conclusion, expressed at the 1877 Royal Commission and reiterated in *The Australian Race*: ‘The White race seems destined, not to absorb, but to exterminate the Blacks of Australia.’

Given this, it is hardly surprising that Curr advocated the relocation of all Aboriginal people to a remote reserve, by force if necessary.

When refuting Lorimer Fison’s claims about communal marriage, Curr stressed that his alternative evidence originated from ‘the time when Aboriginal laws and manners were as yet undisturbed by the advent of our settlers’. He made a similar argument against Dawson’s ‘chiefs’, which he insisted did not exist in pre-contact Indigenous culture. Curr implied that only an educated gentleman with early experience of the Aborigines ‘in their savage state’ was qualified to undertake a major work of ethnography. He thought, no doubt, that similar qualifications were advisable in the realm of Aboriginal policy. Among Curr’s key rivals, only Dawson had experienced the Port Phillip District in the 1840s. Smyth, Howitt and Fison were all about a decade younger than Curr and had arrived in Victoria during the Gold Rush – they were the ‘new chums’ who had so irritated Curr when he returned to Melbourne in 1854. Diane Barwick has argued that both Curr and his friend Le Souëf ‘despised the liberal views of 1850s immigrants like Smyth and Howitt’. Howitt had sat on the 1877 Royal Commission that rejected Curr’s plan to close Coranderrk. Curr and Smyth were briefly aligned as members of the protection board, but Curr later blamed Smyth (among others) for the embarrassment he experienced over Coranderrk. Dawson was clearly no ‘new chum’, but he too had a different vision for Aboriginal destiny in his capacity as a local Guardian of Aborigines, as evidenced in his submissions to the Royal Commission. In this context, it is important to note that Curr’s scholarly rivalries were mirrored in the realm of Aboriginal administration. *The Australian Race* provided Curr with a platform to assert his own credentials and to promote his own contentious views on the destiny of Australia’s Indigenous people.

---

52 Curr 1886, vol 1: 105.  
53 Curr 1886, vol 1: 126.  
55 Barwick 1984: 103.  
56 Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877).  
57 Barwick 1984: 103.  