Evidence of four New England corroboree songs indicating Aboriginal responses to European invasion

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To preface this examination of Aboriginal evidence for local contact relations, I will first briefly comment upon selected aspects of the history of those relations as presented by conventional European historical sources such as pastoralists' diaries, official reports, pioneers' reminiscences and so on. I will then introduce descriptions of four corroboree songs (using this musical category loosely), framing them within certain historical and cultural contexts to enable a better grasp of their significance.

The idea of the incompatibility of European and Aboriginal social and intellectual systems, and the consequent inevitability of conflict, has been promoted in academic publications up to the very recent past.¹ Again, some 'broad brush' historical examinations such as Tony Swain's discussed below, run the understandable risk of glossing over significant regional differences in the course of achieving a manageable overview. Still others interpret sketchy historical evidence in a way that perhaps exaggerates the level and extent of frontier conflict.² Hopefully, the following survey will sufficiently highlight both the multiplex nature of the New England frontier situation and the possible uniqueness of this region's historical experience, to contribute useful detail to the discussion of Australian contact relations.

Apart from John Oxley's fleeting visit to the southern edge of the Tableland in 1818, groups of Europeans did not visit New England, as far as is known, until Hamilton Collins Sempill established the Wolka sheep run in 1832. Very little evidence for the course of local black/white relations exists for the period before George Macdonald was appointed Commissioner of Crown Lands for New England in 1839, although the Sydney Herald did occasionally report on conflict with Tableland Aboriginal people, beginning with the following mention in January 1836:

We hear that numerous outrages have been commenced by the aborigines in the newly-discovered country north-east of Liverpool Plains.³

It is possible that conflict occurred immediately upon 'first' contact in 1832,⁴ which may be inferred from evidence Sempill himself gave to the New South Wales Committee on the Crown Lands Bill in 1839:

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¹ Dingle 1988, p. 57.
² Blomfield 1988, pp. 83, 84.
³ Sydney Herald, January 28 1836, quoted in Campbell 1922, p. 245.
After a certain time, a person is as safe in the vicinity of the Aborigines as anywhere else; but on coming for the first time in contact with them, they are invariably hostile; that hostile feeling, however, wears off as soon as they become acquainted with White persons settling among them, and the power they possess. Commissioner Macdonald's first Report on the State of the Aborigines suggests that this may not have been the general rule, and it would be fair to say that, at the very least, such hostility was not at all inevitable, nor did it follow a prescribed pattern. Other reliable evidence indicates that first relations could be friendly, and numerous New England squattages such as Ollera, Clerkness, Oban, Aberfoil, Mihi, Kentucky, Ohio, Rimbanda, Loaanga, Inglebah and Waterloo were known for at least accommodating customary Aboriginal usage of land. Not only this, but certain resident squatters such as the Everetts and Captain S. Darby expressed more than a passing interest in indigenous cultural matters, and displayed some understanding of local Aboriginal thought and languages. Obviously others were not so accommodating, and though the evidence relating to the period before 1839 is scant, the name of the stockman 'Terrible Billy' Stephenson has been associated with a number of pastoral stations at that time, including Saumarez, Gostwyck, Salisbury, Terrible Vale, and Niangala. This man may have held a brief to initiate aggressions that are now spoken of only in the haziest terms (e.g. on Saumarez, Gostwyck and Macdonald River stations), an insight prompted chiefly by the following statement of the Wallabadah pioneer William Telfer:

went through a dense scrub for about four miles Passing mount Terrible Enroute which was called after a stockman named Terrible Billy in the old Times who was a terror to the aboriginals in the New England districts he after Comited suicide on Glydes Corner in 1851.

Unofficial European action towards Aboriginal people in the first decade of contact seems to have followed no uniform policy, and instead depended to a great extent on the attitudes of individuals. Nor did it follow class lines as has been

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4 Oxley considered that the Aboriginal people he met on New England had previous knowledge of Europeans (Oxley 1820, quoted in Gilbert & Elphick 1977, p. 61).
5 N.S.W. Legislative Council 1839a, p. 223.
6 Macdonald 1842, quoted in Gilbert & Elphick 1977, p. 104.
8 Macdonald 1842; the Everett Family Papers. I am indebted to John Ferry of the History Department at the University of New England for drawing my attention to the Everett correspondence and other sources, and for discussing with me some of the ideas presented in this article.
9 Fennell & Gray 1974, p. 84.
10 Gray 1982, p. 89.
11 Bundarra Young 1922, p. 401.
13 Milliss 1980, p. 91.
Figure 1  New England Pastoral District
postulated by I.C. Campbell, who attributes much of the hostility to the generally brutalized character of convict labour.\textsuperscript{14} The opinion of Susan Bundarra Young that:

the convicts were not the hardened ruffians and criminals that they have been represented to be\textsuperscript{15}

has been echoed by Donald Jamieson and others.\textsuperscript{16} Some records portray a close relationship between assigned labouring men and local Aboriginal people.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, evidence given to the 1839 New South Wales Legislative Council Select Committee On Police and Gaols laid the blame for bad relations in the adjacent north-west region as much on the character of station superintendents as on their stockmen.\textsuperscript{18} And in the aftermath of Myall Creek, some of the sharpest disapprobation—issuing from both contemporary newspaper editorials\textsuperscript{19} and the published accounts of informed observers such as Judge R. Therry\textsuperscript{20}—was reserved for several of the local squatters themselves.

Much also must have depended on the varying attitudes of the Aboriginal groups concerned, and even upon individuals within groups.\textsuperscript{21} While it is probably the case that an anti-settler Aboriginal 'confederation' was formed on the north-west slopes between 1836 and 1838,\textsuperscript{22} there is no evidence that Tableland Aboriginal people acted with a similar unity of purpose.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, it is possible that the European presence actually sharpened hostilities between local groups here, an idea supported both by contemporary newspaper reports and by oral historical evidence.\textsuperscript{24}

Relations between black and white also varied over time during this early period. settlers living on Surveyor's Creek station, for example, for some years maintained good relations with local Aboriginal people. Documented familiarity includes the mutual celebration of Christmas in 1842, and the frequent employment of Aboriginal men and

\textsuperscript{14} Campbell 1971, p. 11
\textsuperscript{15} Bundarra Young 1922, p. 294.
\textsuperscript{16} Jamieson 1987, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{18} N.S.W. Legislative Council 1839b, p. 225.
\textsuperscript{19} Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser, 10 December 1838, quoted in Gilbert & Elphick 1974, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{20} Therry, R. 1863, Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Residence In New South Wales and Victoria, London, chapter XVI, quoted in Gilbert & Elphick, pp.120–122.
\textsuperscript{21} Jamieson 1987, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{22} Bundarra Young 1922, p. 399; Gardner 1846, n.p.; N.S.W. Legislative Council 1839b, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{23} Macdonald 1842, described the Tablelands people thus: '...from the widely scattered state of the Tribes—their distrust and fear of each other;—their constant feuds...there is but a very remote probability of effecting any radical change in their moral or social Condition as a people...' (emphasis as in original).
\textsuperscript{24} Although the specific events took place well after initial contact, various issues of the Armidale Express for June 1860 discuss troubles on the eastern border of New England, caused by Aboriginal people from the Macleay River being driven there by the N.S.W. Mounted Police. Current oral historical evidence links these troubles to stories of pitched battles between the Macleay River people and Tableland tribes (Mr. M. Kim 1996, pers. comm; Mr. B. Lockwood 1996, pers. comm; see also Scholes 1971, pp. 54, 57.)
women on the property. But in 1844, the station overseer wrote the following in his journal:

Thursday September 26th. 1844...I keep my gun & pistol loaded in the house. The Blacks attacked a neighbouring station, Rusden's, & nearly killed a shepherd, left him for dead & stole some of the sheep. the damn scoundrels, they ought to be shot. I had some of them here to-day working about the house & I heard to-night that one of the Blacks I had was one of those who attacked Rusden's, they are treacherous dogs.25

Again, white attitudes in New England probably changed markedly after the perpetrators (or their agents) of the Myall Creek massacre were hanged in 1838.26 By this action, sections at least of the colonial government had shown a clear intention to enforce the protection of Aboriginal people, a principle laid out explicitly in the initial general instructions to the Commissioner of Crown Lands for New England.27 A general caveat against large-scale aggression had thus been published abroad before fully one-third of the 45 or so stations in New England had been taken up by the end of 1839.28 An illustration of this effect of Myall Creek, *inter alia*, may be seen in the writings of the ever-hostile Finney Eldershaw of Marooan Station. Although the sheep runs around Ben Lomond were first taken up in about 1837,29 Eldershaw wrote that bloodshed did not occur there until 1841.30 In that year, the murder of shepherds on Marooan resulted in retaliatory action where Aboriginal people were no doubt killed, but probably not on the scale assumed by the historian Geoffrey Blomfield.31 In discussing this action and local relations generally, Eldershaw clearly indicated that he and like-minded squatters felt themselves considerably constrained by British Law in their ability to defend their investments adequately against Aboriginal depredation:

the actual position in which the Squatter of the so-called unsettled districts stands towards the aboriginal tribes...is one of undoubted hostility; in plain terms, it is a position of open warfare; and without presuming to enter into the question of right, by which the British Government...assumes the privilege of taking possession of and inhabiting the wasting territories of such savage tribes; it is surely to be inferred, that the mere assumption of this authority conveys to the subjects of that Government an indisputable right to protection...I deem it manifestly unjust that actual murder must be permitted to be perpetrated before sufficient measures are allowed to be adopted for the removal of the danger. The evident intention to ravage and destroy is the natural signal for protective action.

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26 The Myall Creek massacre is not considered here as an example of New England contact relations. Although Myall Creek itself ran just outside the western border of the New England pastoral district, the massacre was almost certainly a continuing expression of the state of hostility that existed in the north-west region between whites and Bigambal, Kwiambal and Gamilaraay people (see e.g. Muswellbrook Bench Book, August 1838, evidence given before E.D.Day).
27 'General Instructions to the Commissioners of Crown Lands beyond the Boundaries', New South Wales Legislative Council 1839b, pp. 578–582.
28 Campbell 1922, pp. 235–237.
29 Gardner 1854, p. 69.
30 Eldershaw 1854, pp. 62–75.
Figure 2  The languages of New England and northern New South Wales (after R.M.W. Dixon, 'Grammatical Categories in Australian Languages', A.I.A.S., Canberra redrawn by R.E. Barwick). Note: Language names in this map are spelt according to the 1972 recommendations of the A.I.A.S. Convention for the Representation of Tribal and Language Names.
But it seems not. We must wait till we are attacked, remain quiescent until the murderer stalks at our door, and his victims quiver at our feet, and then a warrant may be obtained from the nearest neighbouring justice of the peace; and armed with which precious document, we are permitted to call upon the offender to surrender himself to justice...The manifest absurdity of a warrant at all in such cases needs no comment.\textsuperscript{32}

The type of frontier incident at Marooan was repeated, as far as is known, perhaps six times more in New England (on Bolivia, Dundee, and Salisbury runs),\textsuperscript{33} before hostilities appear to have largely ceased in about 1845.\textsuperscript{34} For various historiographical reasons, I believe these 'skirmishes' were carried out on a smaller scale, and were of lesser consequence, than the putative pre-1839 aggressions mentioned above.\textsuperscript{35}

The main purpose of the foregoing sketch has been to argue the varied nature of the New England contact experience as recorded in European evidence, and to introduce the view that there was nothing inevitable about the course black/white relations would take here after 1832. That course ultimately depended on attitude, opportunity and other historical factors, rather than on any economic, or social determining forces; it can be seen to be a phenomenon that continues throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{36} Again, evidence suggests that the New England experience was different to that of the regions to its immediate west and east, a situation which again may be reflected in the more recent history of the Tablelands. To pursue some of these ideas further, I will now describe four corroboree songs, mainly to show that Aboriginal responses themselves varied, and were the product of creative, flexible historical agents. The first is a corroboree verse, with contextual explanation, recorded by the writer in February 1996 from Mrs. Hazel Vale of Armidale. The second is an account given by Albert Norton of a skirmish, with musical dénouement, that took place on southern New England. The third is a description of Aboriginal singing from the same district in 1842, while the fourth song, from Tenterfield in the region's north, may date from about 1840. The evidence of these four songs represent musical productions from the three main Tableland language groups, who spoke dialects of Gumbainggirr, Anaywan\textsuperscript{37} and Yugambal respectively.

\textsuperscript{32} Eldershaw 1854, pp. 102-105. Further evidence of the restraining influence of Myall Creek is contained in a report from the \textit{Sydney Herald}, to the effect that, during 1842, warriors on the Namoi river repeatedly taunted white stockmen, telling them that 'they are afraid to shoot them as the Commissioner will hang them'. Quoted in Swain 1993, p. 140.

\textsuperscript{33} Irby 1908, quoted in Gilbert and Elphick 1974, p. 125; Frankland 1845, p. 150; \textit{Sydney Herald}, 27 January 1842; 25 October 1844.

\textsuperscript{34} Campbell 1971, p. 6; Norton 1903, p. 81.

\textsuperscript{35} Both Norton and Frankland, for example, in chronicling their travels over the northern part of New England soon after its occurrence, wrote that contemporary European accounts of the alleged massacre at Bolivia were likely to be highly exaggerated.

\textsuperscript{36} While this is not the place to introduce further argument, I believe that, in the absence of missions and managed reserves on New England, the positive relationship between Aboriginal people and certain property owners here continued more-or-less uninterrupted from the 1840s until the Second World War.

\textsuperscript{37} Although the spelling recommended by Terry Crowley for this language is Nganyawana (Crowley 1976), I consider that the historical evidence that has since become available justifies the reversion to a name that the people of central New England almost certainly used themselves.
Mrs. Vale is the eldest daughter of Frank Archibald, who was born into the Baanbai language-group of central-eastern New England. During the latter part of his life, Frank's singing was recorded by several researchers, including Bill Hoddinott of the University of New England,\(^{28}\) and John Gordon, a grantee of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.\(^{39}\) A number of Frank's 'lingo' songs, all of which were learned from much older members of his family, reflect Aboriginal perceptions of European innovations such as the railway and Christian religion. Many of these he taught his own children. While attending a family gathering held in February 1996, Mrs. Vale sang one of her father's songs which had escaped previous documentation:

This is the story I was told...Our people used to live in this little valley you know, and on each side the scrub was, and they used to have the boys or girls there lookin' out for the...white fellers comin' with their guns. And if they'd see them they'd cooe out..."Ai! Yaaban! Yirrali!" That means 'white man'. And they'd look. "Yir!" they'd say, tell 'em to run. They'd start runnin' with their spears and that and plant:

\[\text{Bulagiri wambul-wambul double-barrel li gu djanaa-ya}\]

\[\text{Bulagiri wambul-wambul double-barrel li gu djanaa-ya.}\]

That means the white men comin' with their guns you know, and tellin' them, our people, to plant and get away from them. Yir, that means 'go, you wait for them'.\(^{40}\)

The song is typical of south-eastern corroboree verses, both structurally and in offering resistance to easy translation. Not only does the allusive nature of Aboriginal song-texts usually demand an intimate knowledge of background cultural material\(^{41}\) but the language of this one is only imperfectly understood. It is composed in the Baanbai dialect, and its translation has required educated assumptions to be made from knowledge of the related Gumbainggirr language. This work was kindly carried out by members of Muurbay Language Centre Sherwood, and with their help, I suggest the following rough meaning for the verse: 'Go and tell that there are two white men coming with guns, take fright and go'.

Dating the song has been equally difficult, but it is quite likely that the events described took place between the years 1839 and 1845. The most significant altercation in Baanbai territory seems to have been the 1841 'scrimmage' reported by Eldershaw,\(^{42}\) although other minor episodes did occur later on the tribe's eastern borders.\(^{43}\) Nor does the song's internal evidence offer much assistance to precise dating, as double-barrelled guns are expressly documented as accompanying the first Europeans to New England in the mid-1830s.\(^{44}\) The Aboriginal response outlined in the verse is patently one of cautious fear born of the knowledge of guns—an entirely rational appreciation of the power of European technology—and not a portrayal of some mystical awe of the invader, as Eldershaw and Sempill might have it. While the compound adjective 'wambul-wambul' would normally indicate great fear in Gumbainggirr, I do not feel the

\(^{28}\) Hoddinott 1964.
\(^{29}\) Gordon 1968.
\(^{30}\) McDonald 1996, uncatalogued field tape in the author's collection.
\(^{41}\) Donaldson 1984, p. 240.
\(^{42}\) Eldershaw 1854, pp. 82–105.
\(^{44}\) Gardner 1846, n.p.
possibility that the song describes an ambush should be entirely ruled out, especially as Mrs. Vale's contextualization introduces the idea of hiding in wait for the white men. ‘Wambul-wambul’ might then bear the nuanced meaning of something like ‘great caution’. Whatever the case, it appears that the song suggests rational and wary observation and appreciation of European behaviour.

While a few other Baanbai songs of Frank Archibald are known, no lingo song-texts have been found relating to the musical cultures of the other Tableland groups—the Anaywan and associated mobs, or Yugambal, Gnarbal, and Maabal people. That racial conflict was documented in song elsewhere on the Tablelands, is attested by Albert Norton, a grazier who spent considerable time with Aboriginal people in the Walcha district between 1852 and 1858, and who wrote of a period of conflict which he said had well passed by the time he arrived on New England:

Some of their corroborees are both amusing and clever. On one occasion some settlers with whom I was acquainted had had rations stolen from shepherds' huts. This, of course, was attributed to the blacks, who, it was decided, must be "dispersed." Accordingly, seven or eight angry men started off with their carbines and ammunition in time to reach the blacks' camp in the early morning; one was left behind a hill in charge of the horses, while the rest moved forward to the scene of battle! They had expected to find a few blacks, but about two hundred were in the camp, and they did not immediately run for their lives. Instead of doing this, they rapidly advanced towards the aggressors, who, with nervous fingers, pulled their triggers, endangering their own lives as much as those of the enemy. The cartridges were soon exhausted, and it was the whites who ran for their lives. The blacks might have killed them if they had really wished to do so, but there were no casualties on either side. They arrived in a breathless condition at the spot where the horses had been left, and hastily rode away. "The incident then closed"....It became a favourite corroboree with the blacks, and was "staged" for the benefit of the principal white performers!

The two pieces of musical evidence presented so far are qualitatively different—one is a verse of a corroboree song, the other a description of the circumstances leading to the creation and performance of a corroboree cycle. But it is also clear that they can be regarded as reducible to similar phenomena for the purposes of the present exercise. Corroborees in south-eastern Australia were often of a programmatic nature, organised into a series of discrete sections or 'acts' that were combined to portray a particular event or process. The Archibald song probably represents one such section, chiefly because of its typical musical structure, which in common with much Australian material, strongly implies 'cycle-building'. But even granting structural similarity between the two pieces, one compelling difference remains. This concerns the apparent mood of the corroborees. Both the Baanbai song and its contextualisation indicate an air of caution and hostility, suggesting that these people had previous experience or knowledge of armed conflict with Europeans. A genuine air of Aboriginal hostility is missing from Norton's account. This seems odd, as it is hard to imagine either that those Aboriginal people felt entirely confident in the face of concerted white action, or that they had not yet experienced

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serious conflict. But Norton clearly portrays them as exhibiting little fear, and showing no desire to press home a tactical advantage, nor to exact immediate revenge.

But some revenge was achieved. As Norton intimates, the corroboree he describes was designed to lampoon the defeated whites. The performance of satirical songs has been recorded as an important feature of local Aboriginal music-making. Radcliffe-Brown noted the occurrence of inter-tribal 'singing competitions' on New England, where 'each side prepares a song and sings against the other'. It is unlikely that his informant was describing there a simple match of compositional or performance skills. F.J.E. Bootle observed, from his experience of Gamilraay society in the Moree district, that:

they also make songs up, one tribe against another; but this often leads to fighting...The tribes by making songs about one another have great fun, but they often annoy the tribesmen, when a challenge is sent to fight. 

By composing their corroboree and staging it 'for the benefit of the principal white performers', Norton's Aboriginal people may well have been wielding a time-honoured weapon of derision, and would thereby have gained some satisfaction at the expense of the European transgressors. This not only suggests forceful social action under the circumstances, but also that these people were reacting to the local settlers at least as confidently as they would another Aboriginal group. The fact that Norton indicates that relations were friendly enough for the shared performance of the corroboree is also instructive, in that it comprised a type of public 'discussion' which could elsewhere have easily served as an incitement to further violence.

Contemporary observers of frontier relations typically portrayed Aboriginal people as awe-struck and tractable once they had experienced hostility from whites. Eldershaw clearly overstates the case when he characterises his vanquished opponents as

Imbued with a mysterious and superstitious fear of the stupendous power of the white man,

but it is no doubt true that New England Aboriginal resistance during the 1840s often took alternative forms to belligerent adversarial action. It is argued from the foregoing songs and other evidence, that Guris were eminently capable of employing alternative relational strategies, drawing to varying degrees on a customary repertoire that is barely visible in the historical record. That described by Norton seems to be both a creative and an eminently judicious instance of this alternative strategising, in that some Aboriginal satisfaction was gained without serious risk of an escalation of inter-group violence.

It is also strange that the Europeans in this case did not utilise the strategic advantage of being mounted on horseback—an advantage for which Aboriginal people freely admitted they had no answer in conflict on the north-west slopes (N.S.W. Legislative Council 1839b, p. 253). Perhaps the Walcha Europeans really wished only to frighten or disperse the blacks, and Norton's indication that this term was used entirely euphemistically may be wrong.


Bootle 1899, p. 5.

Eldershaw 1854, p. 74.

Miller 1985 emphasises the continuing historical importance of the concept of passive resistance in New England Aboriginal society.
Creative response can also be seen to characterise the third item that I wish to discuss. This concerns a song performed at a Christmas gathering held on Surveyor’s Creek, and described by that station’s superintendent:

Saturday 24th. December 1842. My birthday...after dinner my health was drunk by them all &...we had some famous songs & amused ourselves very much. A number of blacks were invited into the room...to drink my health—they sang us some of their war songs— one was a very melancholic one, something about 2 picaninies having been killed by the whites & by & by they were to jump up 2 white fellows. The grog began to take effect & some of these, viz. the blacks, were actually falling down. There were about 20 of them singing, it had a strange effect. After tea we all played billiards & amused ourselves the best way we could, the stakes for the games was a fig of tobacco each.

It is possible that it was action associated with the song that induced the singers to fall down in this instance, rather than the effect of the grog. And just as with the last example, the singing of the song to the white people may have been designed to activate some immediate and dynamic communicative power. Whatever the actual intention of the singers or the sensibilities of the audience, the song certainly had a 'strange effect' on the diarist. But what is perhaps most interesting about this item is its evidence of two novel and somewhat discrete Aboriginal cosmological attitudes regarding relations with white people. For upon contact, it was commonly held throughout the south-east that whitefellers were the manifested spirits of Aboriginal ancestors, and further, that black people would henceforth return after death as whites. These are phenomena more complex than might first appear, but which so far seem to have received scant analytical notice from scholars. Indeed, Tony Swain’s historical/philosophical examination of post-contact south-east Aboriginal religious movements may well be the only framework to which evidence of the second belief can be applied at present. Swain’s interpretation is, if I understand him correctly, that far from being a mystification born of ignorance, these beliefs relate to an early and short-lived bid to place whites within an Aboriginal moral universe—to make some moral sense of European invasion. But once it was perceived that whites could not be so easily located, Swain continues, then a succession of strategies was developed—first ‘millennial’, then eschatological, until at last the ‘cult’ of the bora provided the necessary required balance in a reformed Aboriginal worldview:

...there were two options explored by Aborigines of the south-east in response to the emergent unbalanced dualism created by the dislocation of the traditional locative cosmology. Both focused on the future. The ‘millenial’ vision of an end to Whites, while understandably having some attractions, was less prominent than

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54 ‘War song’ was a contemporary generic European term for corroboree song.
55 Surveyor’s Creek 1839-1845, n.p.
56 In the sense of ‘singing’ the whites. This aspect of south-eastern indigenous music is discussed in McDonald in press.
57 Commissioner Macdonald himself was said to have been considered by the members of one group as the reincarnation of a certain head-man, both having shared a similar physical deformity (Macdonald, quoted in Blomfield 1988, pp. 57, 58). Other descriptions of the phenomena can be found in Backhouse 1843, p. 57, and Breton 1834, pp. 181, 199.
58 Swain 1993.
59 Swain 1993, pp. 114–158.
the cults concerned to ward off the coming eschaton...the literature will not allow us to specify exactly how these two orientations were historically and sociologically related...\(^6\)

While there are historiographical impediments to accepting Swain's thesis *in toto*, it does offer opportunities for an increased understanding of early south-eastern Aboriginal cosmology that seem to be unavailable elsewhere in the literature. Swain (and others) adduce enough evidence from all over the region to secure the argument that belief in whites as spirits was at least a pan-south-eastern Aboriginal phenomenon. But quite soon after contact, the perception of whitefellers must have shifted to regarding them as real people, although perhaps different to Aboriginal people in more than just skin-colour. This seems to be the only logical way to read the evidence Swain provides of Aboriginal people at first attempting to drive away the white spirits by ritual means,\(^6\) and later expecting that they could be destroyed by disease or force of arms.\(^6\) The songs discussed above also show that the Baanbai and Anaywan singers were confident they were dealing there with people and not ghosts. I would argue that this third song under discussion again relates to whites as people, and the belief it expresses that contemporary Aboriginal people would 'jump up whitefellers' after death, is not only one step removed from seeing the invaders as spirits, but should be interpreted in other than the strictly millennial or eschatological ways of Swain's scheme. It was mentioned above that Swain's interpretation of Aboriginal 'millenarianism' was that it expected the overthrow and eventual extinction of whites, together with their technology.\(^6\) On the other hand, his eschaton signified the end of Aboriginal existence in the world, which would thereafter be populated by white spirits.\(^6\) Swain illustrates the latter with evidence of a post-contact Yuwaaalinyaay eschatological vision, quoting from the writings of K.L. Parker:

> the oldest wirreenuns could see in their sacred crystals...pictures of the future...they said as time went on the colours of the blacks, as seen in these magical stones, seemed to grow paler and paler, until at last only the white faces of the Wundah, or spirits of the dead, and white devils were seen, as if it should mean that some day no more blacks should be on this earth. The reason of this must surely be that the tribes fell away from the Boorah rites...Byamee...had said that...if they failed to keep up the Boorah rites as he had taught them, he would move and their end would come, and only the Wundah...be in their country.\(^6\)

As Swain nowhere expressly mentions the belief that Aboriginal people, after death, would 'jump up' whites, it is difficult to locate the concept within either of the cosmological schemes examined. Viewed in the light of eschatology, the Walcha Aborigines described above may have been giving despairing voice to a vision similar to the Yuwaaalinyaay one, but I believe, for a number of reasons, that this is far from a necessary reading of the evidence. First, the expression used by the Surveyor's Creek overseer, and quite possibly the singers themselves, is 'whitefellow', not 'ghost' or 'spirit', which may well bear a slightly different nuance to Parker's 'Wundah'. Second, the

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\(^6\) Swain 1993, p. 143.
\(^6\) Swain 1993, p. 124.
\(^6\) Swain 1993, pp. 134, 135.
\(^6\) Swain 1993, p. 135.
\(^6\) Swain 1993, p. 137.
corroboree song gives an impression that this reincarnation is inevitable, and not
dependent on the failure to maintain certain ceremonial obligations, as in Parker's
version, local initiation ceremonies were still very much current around Surveyor's
Creek in 1842). Again, the 'melancholic' mood that is ascribed to the song may relate
solely to the writer's perception of its melody—something that does not translate
accurately across broad cultural boundaries. The fact that he did not grasp the exact
meaning of its text is attested by his describing it as 'something about...'

'Jump up whitefeller' also sits uneasily with Swain's millennial perspective, chiefly
because it clearly identifies the white with the black, rather than signifying any
Aboriginal desire to eradicate the European presence. While one must agree with Roger
Keesing that there is an obvious limit to the ability to translate another culture's
cosmology in terms of our own logic, the evidence of one more New England song
may take the foregoing examination a little further.

This a song from the Warren Fahey Folklore Collection, in the oral history archives
of the National Library of Australia. The puzzling piece was given to Fahey by a
Tenterfield correspondent, Ted Hoskin, together with the rider 'by W.J. Hoskin,
Mingoola 1880', and the following footnote:

On the northern line about 490 miles from Sydney near Sunnyside, Tenterfield, is a
place known as Bullock Dray, where it is said, may still be seen the remains of an
old bullock dray supposed to have been abandoned by early explorers. There was
neither road nor rail nor wire and people steered by the compass. The boss is
supposed to have gone back for repairs to Sydney, leaving the stores and stock in
charge of a few convicts and blacks.

Here is the text of the song:

Good-bye Master, givem you sack
Wheelbarrow broke, wheelbarrow broke,
Can't go no further, can't go back.
Wheelbarrow broke, wheelbarrow broke.
Wheelbarrow broke, wheelbarrow broke,
Can't make it new one, no got it spoke,
No got it chain—no got it yoke,
Wheelbarrow broke, wheelbarrow broke,
Serve it right Master, can't take a joke!
Eat plenty tucker, not work a stroke,
All a-day sit down, fill pipe and smoke,
Wheelbarrow broke, wheelbarrow broke.
Long way to Sydney, all a way bush,
White men muck about, can't make em push,
Bullock go bong-bong, jumbuck 'e croak,
Yarraman tumble down—wheelbarrow broke.
Plenty lot tucker—we do 'em brown
plenty more sugarbag—bush sit down.
Boss 'e go walkabout, bigfeller smoke,
Warrigal, warrigal—wheelbarrow broke!
All a-day sleep it, by-m-by tea
Look out for big fella corroboree.

"Keesing 1981, p. 344."
Like it 'im koala, like it mopoke,
Goo-goo goburra wheelbarrow broke!
White man 'e come along, blackfella die,
Jump up whitefella too by-m-by.
No more possum, good fella bloke,
Goodbye sugarbag, wheelbarrow broke.
No more work it—good time 'e come,
Plenty more bacca, plenty more rum,
Ride about em touri—flash fella moke,
Goolwall Booligal—wheelbarrow broke. 67

The events detailed in the song and its setting may have occurred as early as 1840, and certainly accord with descriptions of the creation of that northern frontier given by Dawson, Gardner and others. 68 For reasons set out below, the song should probably be considered a montage of contributions by several hands—Aboriginal and European—over time, which could explain both the attribution of authorship to Hoskin, and its late date. The text is unlikely to be a purely Aboriginal creation, although European activities certainly formed the basic content of some local syncretic songs, such as those composed by Mrs. Vale's great-grandfather the Baanbai King Bobby. But in length and formal structure—especially in the use of rhyming quatrains—it is quite uncharacteristic of corroboree verses. The song also bristles with examples of the ubiquitous Sydney pidgin, which should perhaps be seen more as a European *patois*, often used by whites to parody Aboriginal expression, than an Aboriginal linguistic phenomenon. But there are elements that do localise the song. Although certain of its lingo words may derive from local dialects, they are not much help in isolating its origin, as words such as 'booligal' and 'gooburra' occur with different meanings in many widespread languages. However, the noun 'touri' (alternatively spelt 'taurai', 'tarri' and 'thary') meaning 'country' is a local Yugambal word, 69 and may also have been used by Anaywan speakers. 70 Of central concern to the argument at hand is the philosophy contained in the song's last two verses, and here the 'author' is likely to be, at the very least, repeating some characteristic Aboriginal expressions of the 1840s. For these reasons I wish to regard the song as both Aboriginal and local, at least in its essence.

Again we see the 'jump up whitefeller by and by' motif, expressed in a way identical to that of the Walcha song. This time it is clearly identified as a post-contact phenomenon, and couched in what could be seen as quasi-millennial terms—that the white man has failed in his pioneering endeavour, and good times will come for blackfellows to utilise the innovations the whites have brought (e.g. horses and tobacco), in a new era of prosperity. While white economic elements will to some extent replace the traditional possum and sugarbag, certain traditional features are retained in the vision, the most important being the concept of 'tourai'. This effectively prevents the 'jump up' concept being read as a simple replacement of the black by the white (either as spirit or incarnation), and keeps it firmly within a non-Christian locative cosmological tradition.

67 Fahey n.d.
68 Dawson 1930, p. 45; Gardner 1855, p. 70.
70 Mathews n.d. series 3/12, notebook 2, p. 53.
Further clues to the possible significance of 'jump up' are given in Swain's discussion of the bora 'cult', which he considers to have superseded and to some extent reconciled the millennial and eschatological visions. There Swain recounts the cult's spread throughout the south-eastern 'region', describes its typical physical ritual expression, and deliberates upon its possible cosmological significance. The main physical features that set the bora apart from putative earlier initiatory rituals, Swain argues, are the inclusion of a centralised earth sculpture of the 'All-Father' Baiame on the bora ground, together with symbolic representations of European goods such as domestic animals (including horses), vehicles and playing cards, and even effigies of whitefellers themselves.\footnote{Swain 1993, p. 141.}

Tapping into a century-long argument concerning the indigenous south-eastern belief in a sky-god, Swain considers the bora to signify both a post-contact shift from a locative cosmology to an ubiety, and an attempt by Aboriginal thinkers to resolve the unbalanced dualism created by invasion.\footnote{Swain 1993, pp. 143, 144.} Swain's descriptions of the use of ritual objects denoting European items certainly resonate with the content of 'Wheelbarrow Broke', and the 'jump up whitefeller' theme twins with an assumed need for a cosmological shift in accommodating the white presence. Swain may well be right in denying the possibility of cargoism developing in Australia, as he says that European goods cannot be shown to have had any soteriological value for Aboriginal people. But his opinion that:

Nor...is there any evidence that Aborigines of the south-east particularly prized the prospect of enhanced access to European commodities,\footnote{Swain 1993, p. 143.}

may be a little over-confident in the light of both 'Wheelbarrow Broke', and the following statement of John Breton in relation to the Aboriginal people of the Wollombi Valley:

Several creditable persons have informed me that the natives imagine they will be happier in a future state than at present, as they are to "jump up" white men, and to possess all the comforts which they see us enjoy, with plenty to eat and drink, and eternal sunshine to keep them warm! If this be true, their theological ideas must be of recent formation, or have experienced some sudden change'.\footnote{Breton 1834, p. 181.}

'Jump up whitefeller' indicates a strong identification of black with white, and thus accords with Swain's theory that a developing Aboriginal cosmology sought a subsumption of dual elements under the one Law. However, although I would agree with Swain that the development of local cosmological thought must have been fuelled by cosmological dislocation, I do not consider that his generalised view of the extent of such dislocation, nor of its violence, necessarily holds good for the New England experience of the 1840s. Over such an abyss of time and communication, it would seem vain to imagine one could gain an entirely accurate grasp of the 'jump up whitefeller concept' as expressed in the New England corroboree song record.

In conclusion, I argue that there may have been considerably greater variation in the style of local response to contact, both black and white, than Swain and others allow
for in their formulations. On the Aboriginal side, the range of attitudes presented in the
evidence includes the entirely rational appreciation of whites as people, strategic
cautions, confident derision, revenge, some desire for European goods, and a
sophisticated attempt to accommodate the European innovation into a long-established
cosmology. Following Swain, these positions and strategies are seen to emanate from
cultures well-equipped to deal with challenges, either by adapting customary action or
developing novel responses. European styles on the other hand, include attitudes that
are often singularly crude in their appreciation of Aboriginal rationality, some
commentators believing that Aboriginal people were either impossible to understand,75
or had nothing to understand, being virtually cultureless.76 Some Europeans are seen as
more willing to communicate, and to some extent share country with Aboriginal people
and gain insight into local indigenous cultures. I believe this variation and complexity
characterises the course of early contact relations that I surveyed at the beginning of this
essay, and provides some evidence to help counter any belief in the inevitable
incompatibility of European and Aboriginal systems and world-views.

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This is a much-expanded version of an article first published in Australian Folklore,
no. 11, 1996, and any common textual material is reproduced with permission. In that
piece, I examined the first two songs I discuss here, without the historical
contextualisation of early contact relations.

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75 Walker 1962, p. 7.
76 Eldershaw 1854, pp. 76–107.
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