

# The Tiwi and the British: an ill-fated outpost

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Much has been published about the early nineteenth century settlement of Fort Dundas on Melville Island, the largest of the Tiwi Islands. In the main, the authors have argued about the reason for the British attempt to colonise this part of Northern Australia, the political or economic aspects of the settlement's disastrous history or the circumstances of convict labour around the fort.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the Indigenous people of the islands and the Europeans in the settlement has attracted less historical research and what has been written is somewhat limited.<sup>2</sup> This paper aims to explore, on the available evidence, the attempts to bring about peace between the Tiwi and the colonisers. Ultimately the result of those attempts was one of the factors contributing to the demise of the settlement. It must be emphasised that while the British presence in the islands remains in the Tiwi memory, in my observation that memory is limited to specific incidents and matters relating to that era. The evidence about the relationship between the British and the Tiwi is therefore overwhelmingly restricted to European sources.

The people of the Tiwi Islands experienced an intermittent exposure to foreign cultures from Asia and Europe, possibly from the seventeenth century. By the early 1820s these contacts had little impact on the Islanders. Apart from a desire for metal tools, the Tiwi developed an awareness of the material possessions of the visitors, a limited understanding of firearms, and had acquired a vocabulary of a few Portuguese words. Possibly by the 1820s, also, the Islanders had incorporated a small number of Indonesian words into their language.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, however, the indigenous culture remained undisturbed, with the Tiwi displaying a mixture of fear and aggression towards the strange visitors who spent brief periods in the island.<sup>4</sup>

Aggression was displayed towards the expedition of Phillip Parker King, the first Australian-born naval officer, as he conducted a survey of the islands in 1818. For the first time, some knowledge of the Tiwi Islands, located off the north west coast of the Northern Territory, came to the notice of the British and New South Wales governments. Within a few years the expansion of Dutch commercial and military interests in East India Archipelago led to a British interest in the northern coast of New Holland

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1. See, for instance, Reid 1995: 37–50; Marshall 1991: 29–46; Cameron 1989: 271–81; Cameron 1985: 88–99; Bach 1958: 222–38; Howard 1933: 21–91.

2. Morris 1999: 55–84; Cameron 1998: 27–48; Morris 1964.

3. Morris 1999: 55, 99; Evans 1992: 64–67; Pilling 1957: 302–3.

4. Morris 1999: 54

(later the Northern Territory). The original advocate for the establishment of a British outpost on the northern coastline was William Barnes, who traded between Sydney and the Moluccas. Writing to the British Secretary for War and Colonies in 1823 he argued for the need to open trade with the Macassans who sailed to Arnhem Land, in particular, to collect trepang. Urged by the East India Trade Committee, the government agreed to the establishment of a military and trading post on 'the North West extreme of New Holland'.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to 1824 most of the documented visits to the Tiwi Islands by outsiders were of a short duration. The longest stay, by Dutch explorers, had lasted for several months. The expansion of British settlement to the north coast of the continent was to give the Tiwi their closest and most prolonged contact with representatives of another culture until the twentieth century. This period in their history impacted on the Tiwi to the extent that some incidents from it are remembered through at least one song, mime, dance and a limited oral history.<sup>6</sup> They also have access to a series of booklets about the fort written for, but not by, the Tiwi.<sup>7</sup>

In New South Wales and Van Diemens Land the newspapers offered regular reports on the frontier conflict in those colonies in the 1820s.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the new military station on Melville Island and the resulting friction between the British and the Tiwi received minimal coverage in the colonial press when infrequent vessels reached Sydney from the new and most remote frontier in New Holland. Unlike the discussions which preceded the foundation of South Australia a few years later, proposals for the north coast settlement gave little, if any, consideration to the rights and welfare of the local Aboriginal population. Policies relating to protectors of Aborigines, ineffectual as they proved to be, would not be implemented for another twelve years. The lifetime of Fort Dundas was to be an era of confrontation, mistrust and conflict.

This collision of cultures gave birth to misleading and exaggerated comments about the Tiwi response to the British occupation of their land, as evidenced in both academic and popular writings. The authors of such works added to the mystique surrounding the Tiwi. The record suggests that, restricted by customary law and poli-

5. Cameron 1985: 95. The reasons for the British interest in the area have been discussed by a number of authors, including Powell, 1988: 47; Harris 1986: 119; Cameron 1985: 88–99; Allen 1969: 293; Wilson [1835] 1968: 123; McIntosh 1958: 409; Howard 1933: 21–91; Wildey 1876: 81. Bathurst 1824: 227–29 sets out the objects in forming the settlement. *Sydney Gazette* 5/8/1824 reported that the object 'principally is, to open and preserve an intercourse between the Malay Coast, so as to encourage and facilitate the spice trade.' Darling 1828: 796, stated that Fort Dundas and Fort Wellington, established in 1827 on the Cobourg Peninsula, were a means of keeping the French out of New Holland.

6. As mentioned later in this paper, I was only able to collect one oral story relating to Fort Dundas. I did, however, observe miming and a dance about an incident in that period of the Tiwi history.

7. Lefort 1985.

8. The *Sydney Gazette* reported on the first Wiradjuri War from 8/1/1824 to 30/12/1824, in addition to other frontier conflicts in other years. Gammage 1983: 3–17, refers to the Wiradjuri War 1838–40. The 'first Wiradjuri War' therefore seems to be an appropriate name for the 1824 conflict involving the same indigenous language group. Turnbull 1948: 49ff incorporates a number of newspaper reports on the Tasmanian Black War.

tics, the Islanders retaliated to the European presence as circumstances permitted. Furthermore, unlike some Aboriginal groups whose land was usurped by the creation of remote European outposts, the Tiwi demonstrated no inclination whatsoever to becoming subservient fringe-dwellers at the new settlement.<sup>9</sup>

In February 1824 the Colonial Office despatched instructions to the Admiralty for the occupation of the new territory. Captain Gordon Bremer, R.N., was to take possession of Bathurst and Melville Islands (the major part of the Tiwi group) along with the Cobourg Peninsula on the adjacent mainland of New Holland, subject to the region being unoccupied by any people except '... the Natives of those or any of the other Eastern Islands' (presumably, the eastern part of the Indonesian Archipelago).<sup>10</sup> In the event of the region being occupied by another force, the Liverpool River on the coast of north-central Arnhem Land was to be possessed and settled. If the region was unoccupied, a site on Apsley Strait, which divides Bathurst and Melville Islands, was to be chosen for the new settlement. A second station was to be established in Port Essington, on the Cobourg Peninsula, if the locality was suitable.<sup>11</sup> Bremer was to seek additional troops in New South Wales to '... secure [the settlement] from any hostile attack on the part of the Natives, who are understood to be of a ferocious disposition.'<sup>12</sup> Due to the need for troops on New South Wales' volatile frontier, Governor Brisbane could release only 30 officers and men to augment the small party of marines sent out with Bremer.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Bremer decided to occupy Melville Island only, considering it to be imprudent to divide such a small force.<sup>14</sup>

After taking possession of 'the North Coast of New Holland' at Port Essington, Bremer anchored in Port Cockburn, at the northern end of Apsley Strait on 26 September 1824. His fleet consisted of HMS Tamar, the transport Countess of Harcourt and the historic colonial schooner Lady Nelson.<sup>15</sup> Within three days the islands had been claimed and King's Cove, on Melville Island, chosen for the new outpost. A fort was commenced at Point Barlow on one side of the cove and a garden started at Garden Point on the opposite side. The Indigenous name for Point Barlow, named after Captain Maurice Barlow, is Punata, while Garden Point is Pularumpi. The site is located in Murnupi, the territory or 'country' of the Murnupula, one of the Tiwi bands. On 24 October the incomplete structure was named Fort Dundas, after the Head of the Board of Admiralty. The accompanying cannon fire must have been mystifying to any Islanders within hearing distance, although no oral history about the incident has apparently survived. It is suggested, however, that it was attributed to Pumwanyinga, the voice of thunder.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Sharp 1992: 78 regarding the fate of the Gudang and Unduyamo people at the Somerset outpost on Cape York.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron 1998: 29.

<sup>11</sup> Bathurst 1824: 759–760. *Sydney Gazette* 5/8/1824, reported the locality of the 'New Settlement that is to be established on the North-west part of our island.'

<sup>12</sup> Cameron 1998: 31.

<sup>13</sup> Brisbane 1824: 338.

<sup>14</sup> Bremer 1824: 761.

<sup>15</sup> Roe 1824a: 2–3; Ennis 1983: 4, 12. A number of authors give an incorrect year for the foundation of Fort Dundas. See for instance Robinson and York 1977: 93; Parsons 1907: 5; and Wilson 1894: 415.

<sup>16</sup> Lefort 1984: 16 calls the Thunder Spirit 'Pumerali'. Pumerali is actually the Lightning Spirit. See for instance Ngingawila Ngapangiraga 1979: 26.

As the toil on the new settlement proceeded, so, too, did exploration of the adjacent country and surveying of the strait. Hunters searched for game for food. Reports from the time provide a picture of the first weeks of the occupation of the islands from a European perspective. On the other hand, it is not possible to ascertain whether any Islanders observed the arrival of the British ships and the activities of the murrintawi (white people) in the early days of the settlement. The Tiwi perform a dance mimicking the arrival of a vessel at Fort Dundas and men rowing ashore. Although, in the 1960s, this was said to portray the arrival of the first vessels at Punata, it is not possible to accurately say whether it is a result of Islanders viewing Bremer's arrival in Apsley Strait or it actually grew out of an observation of ships arriving at the fort at a later date. Klaatsch, who observed the dance in 1906, briefly comments that the dancers adopted the antics of the sailors.<sup>17</sup> He does, however, agree with Major Campbell, the third commandant at Fort Dundas, that the Tiwi are great mimics.<sup>18</sup> Grau, who recorded the dance in 1982, called it 'the warship dance', correctly noting it as a men's dance.<sup>19</sup>

Smoke from 'native fires' was sighted when Bremer's convoy sailed into the strait on 26 September. The fires, on both Bathurst and Melville Islands, appeared to be isolated from each other, but over the succeeding weeks they became brighter, moving towards the new station. While Lieutenant J.S. Roe considered the fires to be a means of signalling, in the view of Purser Henry Ennis, '... the natives were endeavouring to surround us in a body.'<sup>20</sup> The fires were obviously burning before the arrival of the British vessels. It is possible, if not probable, that the Tiwi were practising the traditional burning of bushland (*kimirrakini*) as part of the hunting process and to ensure the regrowth of the vegetation in the coming wet season (*jamutakari*). It is also possible that some of the fires got out of control.

Various signs of the Islanders were noted by the British but no actual sightings of the people themselves occurred for some weeks. A 'coloured' convict, Lorraine, may have come into contact with the Tiwi, but this is not certain. Lorraine and an army sergeant ate toxic fruit from a sago palm while hunting for game, resulting in their becoming seriously ill. When they did not return to camp a search located the soldier but Lorraine and the sergeant's dog were not seen again.<sup>21</sup> The Tiwi knew of Asian men, in particular Indonesians, but how they perceived Lorraine and other 'black convicts' is not known.<sup>22</sup> This raises several other questions. Tiwi custom holds that the Islanders originally believed the murrintawi (people with white skins) were karluwi (ghosts or spirits). After intermittent inter-cultural contact over several centuries, did the Tiwi consider the British at Fort Dundas to be spirit people? Their attacks upon Dutch and British seafarers in the past, together with the treatment they possibly received at the hands of Portuguese slave-raiders, suggests that the Tiwi had realised that Europeans were humans like themselves.<sup>23</sup> James raises a further question when

17. Klaatsch 1907: 590.

18. Klaatsch 1907: 589–90.

19. Poignant 1996: 28, 34.

20. Roe 1824a: 5; Ennis 1825: 14–15.

21. Roe 1824a: 3–4; Ennis [1825] 1883: 13.

22. Lorraine was one of three 'coloured convicts' at Fort Dundas in its first months. Marshall (1991: 34–35) points out that 13 'black convicts' formed part of the labour force during the life of the settlement.

she wonders what the Tiwi thought of the European women in the fort.<sup>24</sup> As far as records indicate, the first European women in the Tiwi Islands were a small number of wives who lived in the settlement at various times.

It must be acknowledged that, given the territorial structure of the Tiwi bands, many people who did not move close to the coastlines of the islands would not have actually seen Europeans in the past. Furthermore, since exploration parties from the fort apparently did not move far into the interior of either of the major islands there would have been Tiwi, especially women, who did not observe the British for some time, if at all. As it was, the Tiwi had obviously learnt to treat European visitors, and their firearms, with suspicion, if not with a degree of fear. Whether the Tiwi failed to make early contact with the Europeans in the new settlement due to their being away from the area or whether they chose to do so for social or historical reasons is difficult to say.<sup>25</sup>

The first recorded meetings between the colonisers and Tiwi people occurred on 25 October 1824, with two separate incidents on the one day. Exploring a small river on Bathurst Island, across the strait from the settlement, Bremer came into contact with a party of ten Tiwi men. There is no previous documented visit by Europeans to that part of the island, Malau (Malawu), the 'country' of the Malauila (Malawila) band. The Islanders demonstrated aggressiveness before making signs of peace. They were clearly agitated and bewildered, even when offered presents by Bremer's party.<sup>26</sup> Bremer named the river Intercourse River and the area where the confrontation occurred, Intercourse Point. The bewilderment of the Malauila can be attributed to the unexpected nature of the meeting.<sup>27</sup>

On Melville Island, and close to the settlement, on the same day two convicts were seized but not injured. The Tiwi, probably Murnupula, retreated when troops appeared on the scene, taking the convicts' axes with them. In Bremer's opinion, the Islanders had been watching the convicts for some time and were aware of the value of metal tools.<sup>28</sup> The aggressiveness of the Tiwi at first contact contrasted sharply with the cooperation of the Iwaidja and the British at the Victoria settlement on the Cobourg Peninsula nearly fifteen years later.<sup>29</sup> Given the customary form of land tenure it is questionable whether the Aborigines recognised the seizure of tools as compensation for the land, as has been suggested.<sup>30</sup> The Tiwi did not claim compensation for the

23. Earl 1853: 210 was told of the slave-raids while in Timor about 1840. Campbell 1834: 155–56 claimed that a term by a Tiwi woman when calling to King in 1818 was a Portuguese one. Harris 1986: 11 argued that Campbell failed to recognise other words he heard the Tiwi using were also of Portuguese origin. Campbell 1834: 155 felt that a fear of hanging by the Tiwi could have resulted from such slave-raids. These claims are open to debate.

24. James 1989: 7.

25. Cannon 1987: 112, takes the view that 'the natives, at first shy, became aggressive', suggesting that the failure of the British to see the Tiwi for some time meant shyness on the part of the Islanders.

26. Bremer 1824: 785–86.

27. Hill 1951: 44, in writing about the incident, inaccurately described the Tiwi as '...holding the ten-foot spears with Egyptian markings, five feet of sharpened barbs, and being 'shock-headed' with 'nose bones a foot long.'

28. Bremer 1824: 773–74.

29. Austin 1992: 10, suggests that cooperation existed between the Tiwi and the British in the early days of the settlement. The evidence offers a different view.

movement of buffalo shooters into Melville Island seventy years later or for the land at Nguuiu occupied by a mission station from 1911. More realistically, the Tiwi saw metal tools not only as weapons but also as a means of producing their solid grave posts and heavy barbed spears in a simpler and more refined manner. To the British in their isolation, the theft of tools and other items was a serious loss, whereas under Tiwi custom sharing of possessions was an obligation.<sup>31</sup> As in the frontier conflict on the mainland, activities considered by Aborigines to be legitimate acts of defence and war were held by the Europeans to be crimes. Colonial authority was seen as paramount, and no thought was given as to how the 'natives' viewed the movement of an outside power into their land. In such circumstances, attempts at reconciliation between the Tiwi and the British were not pursued as they could have been. Bremer attempted to either establish peace with the Tiwi or to bring them into voluntary submission. A vital aspect was missing from Bremer's attempts, however. This was some act of acknowledgment of the Tiwi's traditional ownership of the land. Given the British policy of *terra nullius* in settling Eastern Australia, however, it is not realistic to expect that customary Indigenous tenure would be recognised on the north coast of the continent. A British reliance on power and coercion, to some extent, could only bring on inter-racial confrontation.

If the Tiwi had observed the claiming of the islands by the British, the ceremonies would have meant nothing to them. On the other hand, the appropriation of local resources by the newcomers would have been fully understood by them. The cutting of timber and the quarrying of stone for building purposes, hunting of wallabies and the gathering of marine foods, and the drawing of water from John's River and various creeks, and possibly the clearing of land for the fort and the garden must have affected the thinking of the Tiwi towards the British. Gradually, too, the Islanders must have realised that these Europeans were not like earlier visitors, in that their numbers were much larger and they showed no sign of departing. Instead, for the first time, the Tiwi were confronted with European structures on their land. With the exception of skirmish raids on its outskirts the Tiwi failed to voluntarily enter the settlement throughout its existence.

The first effort to encourage Islanders to visit the settlement occurred on 25 October 1824. Bremer and Barlow met a party of 18 to 20 Tiwi men in the bush soon after the seizing of the two convicts. Passing their firearms to the rear, the officers made signs of peace. The Tiwi threw down their spears and came forward to negotiate. They threw away small gifts and, using sign language, requested axes. They were given four, but refused to enter the settlement despite the promise of more axes if they did so.

Mistrust and enmity were to continue, despite some effort by the British to placate the Islanders. Tiwi women were not seen near the fort and were rarely sighted in the bush by Europeans. There is no documented case of women being misused by the colonisers. There is little possibility, therefore, that such misuse was a cause for the enmity. Unlike mainland Aborigines, the Tiwi have no secret ceremonial grounds. Again, although the islands contain sites of a religious nature none of these are secret. Trespass

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<sup>30</sup>. Austin 1992: 10.

<sup>31</sup>. Cameron 1998: 4. Personal observations demonstrated the extent of the sharing obligation in the Tiwi Islands.

on religious sites could not have led to the confrontation. Apart from the desire for axes, hatchets and other tools, the growing realisation that the intruders planned to remain in the islands appears to be a major reason for the inter-racial aggression that persisted. On the other hand, Reynolds claims that frontier '... conflict seems to have arisen more frequently from competing use of land rather than trespass as such.'<sup>32</sup> If this was the situation at Fort Dundas, the seizure or spearing of domestic stock by the Tiwi was possibly part of a perceived struggle for food resources. It must be acknowledged, however, that stock numbers at the settlement were relatively small, and in comparison with similar incidents by Aboriginal groups on the mainland Tiwi activity in this area was somewhat limited. For the settlement's occupants the loss of any number of stock, no matter how low, was a serious matter, being seen by them as 'some inane depravity' on the part of the Tiwi.<sup>33</sup> T B Wilson was more tolerant than many other colonists but his language is indicative of the British view of the Tiwi:

it is well known to every person who has had the slightest intercourse with savages, that they are invariably addicted to thieving. It is, therefore, not to be denied, that the natives committed many petty thefts; but the policy of being unnecessarily annoyed threat thereat (sic), and the humanity of putting them to death for such offences, may be safely called in question.<sup>34</sup>

The theft of tools and stock aside, the Tiwi response to the British presence was not stepped up to any great degree. Their response was, in fact, restricted by several factors, including their social structure and the fact that, as far as history records, they had never experienced the necessity to launch an attack of any significance upon an enemy of strength. They were aware, too, of the power of firearms but possessed none themselves. Attacks upon the British were of a hit and run nature.<sup>35</sup> With the size of raiding parties socially controlled, the Tiwi did not have the manpower, let alone the weapons, to attack the fort unless its garrison was severely depleted by illness.<sup>36</sup> Nor did their methods of fighting encourage them to besiege the settlement.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, their efforts, as we shall see, did have an effect upon the settlement, '... the density of the forests (enabling) the natives to make their attacks with comparative impunity.'<sup>38</sup>

In 1824, Governor Brisbane proposed the issue of 'a few fowling Pieces and Tomahawks' to the 'Chiefs' in New South Wales and the various islands out from Australia.<sup>39</sup> Fortunately, in the case of the Tiwi, the proposal did not eventuate. Such weapons, though few in number, could have been turned on the British garrison. Surprisingly, there is no report of attempts by the Tiwi to seize firearms and ammunition from the colonisers, and to use these in the conflict as occurred in Tasmania, Victoria and the Kimberleys.

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<sup>32</sup>. Reynolds 1978: 56.

<sup>33</sup>. Marr 19/9/1998.

<sup>34</sup>. Wilson (1835) 1968: 125.

<sup>35</sup>. Robinson and York 1977: 94, for instance, claim that '...faced with the realities of this growing threat the Aborigines stepped up their struggle', but do not explain how this was done.

<sup>36</sup>. Grassby and Hill 1988: 16, claim that the fort was attacked by the Tiwi.

<sup>37</sup>. Lockwood 1968: 9, held that '... the modern fort, armed with powder and shot, ... became besieged by primitive men whose weapons were cut from the bush.'

<sup>38</sup>. Earl n.d. [1856]: 5

<sup>39</sup>. Brisbane 1824: 226.

Following a further incident on 27 November, an order was issued by Bremer that firearms were only to be used against the Tiwi in a case of necessity.<sup>40</sup> In this same confrontation, in which a light-skinned man, possibly of Indonesian origin, was observed with the Islanders. Despite Bremer's effort the aggression continued. In Roe's opinion the Islanders were '... a much finer race of Beings than those in the neighbourhood of Sydney, but very suspicious.' Roe reported further that the Tiwi

began open depredations on every one they met, taking the axes and knives and sickles of those men who were in the woods preparing materials for building, and poisoning their spears on the least symptom of resistance.<sup>41</sup>

'Hostile proceedings having thus commenced', instructions were issued that no individual was to go outside the settlement alone and all were to be armed when going into the bush. Soldiers were to guard the convict workers.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the conflict continued, despite the firing of warning shots and the shooting of a 'chief' and the possible wounding of three other Tiwi during simultaneous assaults upon three small and separate groups of marines and convicts in the early part of 30 October 1824. Several estimates have been offered for the number of Tiwi in the attacks, ranging from 60 to 100 warriors.<sup>43</sup> The targets of the raids included haymakers at Garden Point and a water-collecting party. In spite of the hostilities Bremer was impressed with the speed of the Tiwi, their accuracy with the murukuwunga (the rounded and pointed throwing stick), and aspects of their culture such as coverings sighted on several women and the large grave posts.<sup>44</sup> However, in view of 'much hostility expected from the Natives' and the 'treachery' of the Malays (Indonesians) who were expected to visit the settlement to trade, he realised the need to make the fort as strong as possible.<sup>45</sup>

The fort, though small, was solidly built, being 225 feet (68.60 metres) in length and 150 feet (45.74 metres) in width. The stockade surrounding it was built of large logs laid longways 'in layers five feet thick at the base' on a foundation of rock. Measuring six feet (1.8 metres) in height, it topped a dry moat or ditch 10 feet (3.07 metres deep and 15 feet (4.5 metres) wide, requiring a climb of 16 feet (4.87 metres) from the floor of the ditch to the top of the stockade. Six cannon sat on the stockade, while a field gun was located inside the gate, facing the earthen bridge over the moat. The officer's quarters and the magazine were constructed within the fort, with space for permanent military barracks. Standing in a rough semicircle around the sides and the rear of the fort and further to the east were housing for the soldier convicts and free settlers, a well, a hospital, commissariat store, wharf and other structures.<sup>46</sup>

When Bremer departed on 13 November 1824, Captain Barlow, the new commandant, was in charge of a population of about 120 persons. In addition to a garrison of two lieuten-

40. Bremer 1824: 774–75.

41. Roe 1824a: 4.

42. Roe 1824a: 4.

43. Cameron 1998: 27; Ennis (1825) 1983: 16; Bremer 1824: 775; Roe 1824a: 5–6.

44. Bremer 1824: 775–77.

45. Bremer 1824: 772.

46. Crosby 1978: 9–32; Ennis [1825] 1983: 13–14; Roe 1824b. Cameron 1998: 27, writing of the field gun inside the gate of the fort, states it was a cannon '...placed over the fort's sole entrance'. There was no structure over the gate to hold a cannon. The diagram 'Port Cockburn, Melville Island, Australia' indicates the locality of the field piece inside the gate.



ants, a military surgeon, 30 marines and 22 soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> regiment, the community comprised five free male settlers, four women, four children, about 47 convicts, and the captain and 12 seamen of the *Lady Nelson*, which was attached to the fort.<sup>47</sup>

For the brief time that he was at the settlement Bremer demonstrated restraint in his contact with the Tiwi, offering them presents, which they rejected unless these were metal tools. He was interested enough to record a description of the physical appearance and body art of the Tiwi men he observed.<sup>48</sup> Although Barlow spoke of being unwilling to retaliate against the Islanders and of entertaining hopes of establishing a friendly relationship with them by treating them kindly, there is no ready evidence to indicate how far he went towards carrying out his proposals.

One of the free settlers on Melville Island was trader William Barnes, the instigator of the settlement. On the subject of trade, at no time did the British attempt to trade with the Tiwi. Roe felt that the Islanders had nothing to barter except their weapons.<sup>49</sup> In theory, apart from food items, they could have offered canoes, timber and bark for construction, wallaby and possum skins for bedding, footwear and covers, and pandanus leaves for weaving into mats, rain-covers, hats, baskets and belts. Trade would have required peaceful relations, something that failed to eventuate.

The Tiwi did not pursue their 'war of attrition' towards the British for the whole of each year.<sup>50</sup> As Crosby states, there was '... a discontinuous campaign of harassment against the settlers.'<sup>51</sup> For one thing, any movements against the settlement during the wet season (*jamutakari*) would have been affected by the climatic conditions pertaining to that period. On a cultural level, taking into consideration the customary activities calendar and the associated obligations of the Islanders, the reasons for the irregularity of the raids are relatively clear. These included initiations and *Kulama* (yam increase) ceremonies in the early part of each year, with duels and small funerals possible events at the end of the *jamutakari* or wet season and the early part of the dry season (*kimirrakinari*). The *kimirrakinari* was also the time for families to move into other 'countries' and to take part in *pukumani* (mourning rites) for any 'big men' who had died. Where social laws had been broken, feuds also followed during this time. Overall, then, regular customary activities ensured that many or all of the Tiwi were not in the neighbourhood of the settlement for weeks, if not months, at a time.<sup>52</sup>

When hostilities resumed, from the cover of the bush the Tiwi hurled spears into buildings on the perimeter of the settlement and into the sawpits about one mile (1.6 km) from the fort. Such actions helped to restrict the exploration of the islands to the

47. Campbell 1834: 132; Roe 1824b. There is a discrepancy about the number of convicts assigned to Fort Dundas in 1824. Since the convicts had been originally transported to New South Wales and, in 1824, Governor Brisbane had no authority to force convicts to go to Melville Island, volunteers had to be called for from prisoners whose terms had nearly expired. See Marshall 1991: 32, 34.

48. Klaatsch 1907: 585.

49. Roe 1824a: 5.

50. Robinson and York 1977: 94 use the term 'war of attrition'.

51. Crosby 1978: 2.

52. Knight 1992: 6–7, was not entirely correct in his claim that '...the Tiwi were unimpressed by the visitors and encouraged their departure by frequent attacks and by stealing everything not locked away.'

coastal areas.<sup>53</sup> This led to a misunderstanding of the Tiwi by Barlow who supposed their population to be limited, and the main part of their diet to be fish as the 'kangaroos' were thought to be scarce and small in size. The 'kangaroos' were in reality wallabies, just one part of the Tiwi diet.

A serious barrier to British efforts to placate the Tiwi was the language difference. Unlike other parts of Australia, pidgin-English was not a choice, the only alternative to English being Tiwi and a small number of Malay and, allegedly, Portuguese words adopted by the Islanders. The fact that no contact language developed at the fort demonstrated the state of enmity between the two cultural groups.<sup>54</sup> Barlow hoped to learn the Tiwi language from a 'lad' with Malay features captured in 1825. This failed when the prisoner escaped after three or four days in the settlement.<sup>55</sup>

The Melville Island station went through a number of privations, one of the worst being the capture of the vessels *Lady Nelson* and *Stedcombe* by 'Malay' pirates in 1825, while enroute to Timor and the East Indies to purchase buffalo and food for the settlement. Only one crew member from the two vessels survived the attacks. Joseph Forbes ('Timor Joe') was rescued from slavery on Timor Laut on 31 March 1839.<sup>56</sup>

Barlow's replacement by Brevet Major John Campbell on 19 September 1826, led to an active, if unsuccessful, attempt to placate the Islanders. Whether he recognised and appreciated the causes for the Tiwi aggressiveness cannot be clarified. On the other hand, although Roe, for one, briefly wrote of his perceptions of the Islanders, Campbell was the first Englishman to record his observations of them at any length.<sup>57</sup> These, although valuable to the anthropologist or ethnohistorian, are somewhat ethnocentric. He also wrote of the Tiwi as the enemy, 'treacherous and cunning', with a 'treacherous and hostile disposition' and being 'in a state of barbarous ignorance'. The only two Tiwi women sighted in four years he described as '... old and ugly, and their only garment was short narrow apron of plaited grass.'<sup>58</sup> He did draw up regulations in October 1826, designed in part to protect the Tiwi from the effects of alcohol and from insult or injury, although the Islanders had no knowledge of the regulations. Firearms were not to be used against the Islanders unless the safety of Europeans was threatened.<sup>59</sup> In New South Wales no effective action had been taken by the authorities to combat the consumption of alcohol, which had already become a serious social problem for some Aborigines. Similarly, the colonial administration had failed to protect the Aborigines in New South Wales and Tasmania from indiscriminate shooting by colonists who regarded such action as a legitimate part of the defence of their properties. Fortunately, the centralised and isolated nature of the Melville Island settlement ensured that the regulations were generally obeyed. In 1827, the confrontation widened but not to the extent suggested by some authors.<sup>60</sup>

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53. Campbell 1826: 666.

54. Harris 1986: 118.

55. Campbell 1834: 155.

56. Spillett 1983: 24-39; Campbell 1834: 133.

57. Campbell 1834: 152-58.

58. Campbell 1827: 823; Campbell 1826: 673, 681.

59. Campbell 1826: 671, 676.

The Tiwi launched a campaign of destruction, avoiding sentries posted at strategic locations around the settlement to fire haystacks, spear pigs and sheep, demolish fences and even to steal washing from the hospital clothes-line. A bull was driven away, and six men narrowly missed being speared in August and September. 'Extraordinary vigilance' was required in guarding against attacks by the Tiwi.<sup>61</sup> Robinson and York are partly correct when they say that, '... weekly, often daily, attacks were made upon the aggressor forces which, by this stage, were totally harassed and bedraggled.'<sup>62</sup> Campbell reported that the Tiwi '... committed some daring depredations both by day light and during the night', so that even close to the settlement the convict workmen were '... kept in a constant state of alarm.'<sup>63</sup> Upon occasions the Islanders allowed Europeans to pass unmolested through their extended lines. Nevertheless, they remained '... until the last day distrustful, if not determinedly hostile.'<sup>64</sup> It is not clear whether the Tiwi wore facial and body paintings at all times when confronting the British, but Campbell considered that this produced an 'even hideous appearance' for a people who were 'vengeful, prone to stealing and in their attempts to commit depredations show excessive cunning, dexterity, arrangement, enterprise and courage.'<sup>65</sup> He declined to take revenge on the Tiwi for their hostility. He captured a canoe over 6 metres long when pursuing a group of Tiwi on Apsley Strait. But he later ordered that a village, abandoned as it was approached by soldiers, was not to be plundered or damaged.<sup>66</sup>

Still the Islanders responded in a hostile manner. Lockwood observed that 'the Aborigines were almost out of hand, making weekly if not daily attacks upon the inhabitants' and 'the convicts were little more than beasts of burden ... always in fear of attacks by the Aborigines.'<sup>67</sup> This gives a level of credence to Spillett's statement that 'the men feared to leave the stockade, and would only do so in company and well armed.'<sup>68</sup> Two men did go out without carrying arms and quickly met their death. The incident, which forms an important part of Tiwi oral history, had its genesis in the last week of September 1827. Campbell reported, with the British attitude of the time,

A few days ago I intercepted a party of these audacious Blacks going to attack some Men sawing timber; one of them was made prisoner, and is now doing well in Hospital, where he was sent on account of some wounds he received by his Stubborn resistance when taken; I intended detaining him, and shall endeavour to make him of some use to us.<sup>69</sup>

The man, Tampu (Tambu) Tipungwuti, described by Campbell as '... one of these savages', was held prisoner for several weeks, allowing Campbell to learn a little about

<sup>60.</sup> Robinson and York 1977: 94, claim that '... by 1827, the tide of Battle was moving rapidly in [the Tiwi's] favour, with the colonialists confined to the Fort and its immediate surrounds'. Grassby and Hill 1988: 61, allege that the Tiwi used sophisticated military tactics to put the fort under siege

<sup>61.</sup> Campbell 1827: 700.

<sup>62.</sup> Robinson and York 1977: 94.

<sup>63.</sup> Campbell 1827: 700.

<sup>64.</sup> Campbell 1834: 154.

<sup>65.</sup> Campbell 1834: 153. Tiwi facial art is highly praised, being unique in Indigenous Australia.

<sup>66.</sup> Campbell 1834: 157; Campbell 1827: 808.

<sup>67.</sup> Lockwood 1968: 9.

<sup>68.</sup> Spillett 1974: 4.

<sup>69.</sup> Campbell 1827: 700.

him.<sup>70</sup> The Tiwi account of the episode is more dramatic. A group of Tiwi were on their way to obtain fresh water, presumably from John's River, a creek. They met and clashed with a party of soldiers escorting a water party also going to the creek. Keripu, a small boy, was wounded in the affray, and Tampu, a 'big man' or leader, was captured. Following treatment in the hospital, Tampu was held in chains in a dry well.<sup>71</sup> One day, Islanders hiding nearby saw Tampu marched at bayonet point to a funeral. That evening two Englishmen were speared to death as revenge for Tampu's capture. Tampu then escaped by canoe to Malau (Malawu) on Bathurst Island. One oral history account states that Tampu was strong enough to break the chains and escape. In another account he refused to eat until he was thin enough to slip out of the chains.<sup>72</sup> The re-enactment of Tampu, bent over and shuffling in chains, was observed on several occasions, in the 1960s, as part of the telling of his story.

During the absence of Campbell at the new outpost of Fort Wellington, on the Cobourg Peninsula, Sophia Hicks, the young wife of Lieutenant William Hicks, R N, passed away. Hicks was the master of the vessel Mary Elizabeth. Mrs Hicks was buried on 2 November 1827, storekeeper John Green and Dr John Gold being among the mourners.<sup>73</sup> There is no mention in the reports of Tampu attending the funeral. That evening, near sunset, Gold and Green left the fort to go for a walk. Despite a warning, they went unarmed. Soon afterwards they were brutally killed by the Tiwi, leaving the settlement without a doctor. While Green's body was located immediately after the attack, Gold's remains were not found until next morning. The injuries incurred by the doctor, in particular, were so serious that in his official summing up at the enquiry into the deaths, Lieutenant Hicks stated that '... from every circumstance I should fear he died very hard.'<sup>74</sup> Reporting on the enquiry into the deaths, Campbell declared:

From the many instances of the conduct of the Natives, in showing a determination to do violence, and from their well known treacherous and hostile disposition, I had every caution to protect every individual of the Settlement against receiving any injury.<sup>75</sup>

While some accounts of the incident are inaccurate, credence can be given to Powell's view that '... over all lay creeping fear of the black man' and to Harris' comment that the relationship between the two cultures '... was always tense and sometimes violent.'<sup>76</sup>

In April 1828, not seeing the deaths of Green and Gold as acts of war, Campbell still awaited an opportunity to demonstrate to the Tiwi that murder must be avenged.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>70.</sup> Campbell 1834: 158

<sup>71.</sup> The well, not far from the fort, was pointed out to me in 1960.

<sup>72.</sup> Lefort 1985: 12; Summerhayes 1961: 16; Pilling 1957: 303-4. Tampu's story was told to me on a several occasions during the 1960s.

<sup>73.</sup> Dowsett 1828: 709.

<sup>74.</sup> Dowsett 1828: 709-10; Campbell 1827: 701-5. Some popular and academic accounts give inaccurate versions of the incident. See Morris 1971: 23. Possession of the site of Fort Wellington occurred on 18 June, 1827.

<sup>75.</sup> Campbell 1827: 822.

<sup>76.</sup> Powell 1988: 52; Harris 1986: 120-21. Hill 1951: 48-9 offers an inaccurate version of the incident.

<sup>77.</sup> Campbell 1828: 713.

His view was typical of that common on the Australian frontier. European deaths at the hands of Aborigines were seen as murders, while the pre-meditated shooting of Indigenous by Europeans was considered by many colonists to be legitimate.<sup>78</sup> In a matter of months, Campbell's attitude had changed from that of late 1826. Then, he had declined to take punitive action against the Tiwi following the spearing of a convict Julius Campbell, on the grounds that the Islanders were 'in a state of barbarous ignorance.'<sup>79</sup> Instead, he proposed to capture a 'chief' or several young lads and teach them English as a form of communication. As it was, following the killings of Gold and Green, no further affrays occurred until May of the following year. In the meantime, Governor Darling expressed his fear for the occupants of both Forts Dundas and Wellington at the hands of the Tiwi and the Iwaidja respectively in the event of extensive sickness striking both outposts.<sup>80</sup> Campbell's term as settlement commander ended on 18 May 1828, without the Tiwi being pacified. One of his last actions as commander was to order details of soldiers to pursue and capture a group of Tiwi seen near the settlement. A five-hour pursuit by the soldiers proved to be futile.<sup>81</sup>

In describing the Tiwi, Campbell was observant, as Klaatsch notes.<sup>82</sup> It is clear, however, that these observations were made from a European perspective of the time.

His approach to establishing a peaceful relationship with the Islanders was, nevertheless, a genuine, if futile, one. The Tiwi reaction to the British presence was to launch guerrilla style attacks upon the Europeans. While the troops would have met difficulty in seeking out the Tiwi across the islands, Campbell could have allowed them to fire upon the bands of Islanders encountered near the settlement. Again, he could have punished one band of the Tiwi by allowing the destruction of the village he came upon in 1827. Such destruction, however, would have punished innocent women and children. Campbell's successor, Captain H R Hartley, was not as active as Campbell in trying to placate the Tiwi.

Almost immediately after Hartley assumed command of the fort the Islanders resumed their marauding. Illness in the garrison in September 1828, added to a situation where '... it (was) unsafe to venture out of the camp unarmed', some Europeans falling '... victims to the vengeance of these irritated and undiscerning savages.'<sup>83</sup> The actual extent of the Tiwi's hostilities during the latter part of 1828 is not clear. Hartley did comment, however, that on more than one occasion during this time the Islanders might have 'been fired on with effect, but it would have been under circumstances which would have amounted or nearly so to deliberate slaughter, and the dictates of Humanity averted from them that signal chastisement which on many accounts they must be admitted to merit.'<sup>84</sup>

Hartley enforced the regulations about the use of firearms.<sup>85</sup> In another example, Parsons concluded that 'the settlers experienced great difficulties with the natives, who were

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78. Christie 1979: 45–46, 91, and Reece 1974: 145–61 give examples of colonial thinking.

79. Campbell 1826: 681.

80. Darling 1828: 794.

81. Campbell 1828: 721.

82. Klaatsch 1907: 588–90.

83. Wilson [1835] 1968: 125.

84. Hartley 1828: 760.

hostile and aggressive, and whose spears were too much for the firearms of those days.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, the available documentation does not suggest that Hartley showed any respect for the Tiwi or made any serious effort to communicate with them. He was undoubtedly relieved when on 1 November 1828, the Secretary of State for the Colonies confirmed that the settlement was to be transferred to Fort Wellington.<sup>87</sup> The transfer took place in February and March 1829, in the barque *Lucy Anne*. In June, Hartley reported that he and the 'settlers' (presumably the few free settlers) had arrived in Sydney.<sup>88</sup> Earl tells us that '... all the authorities agree that Fort Dundas, Melville Island, was in 1829 abandoned without regret by its garrison to the treacherous natives.'<sup>89</sup>

The reasons for the failure of the settlement have been discussed by various authors. According to one source, 'the hostility of the Tiwi was such that (Fort Dundas) was abandoned in 1828 (sic) after an incident in which the assistant colonial surgeon and the commissary storekeeper were killed.'<sup>90</sup> Undoubtedly, the hostility of the Tiwi was one factor. Gee, writing in 1926, said that 'the determined and successful hostility of the blacks throughout this occupation is remarkable, and was one of the factors in deciding on the abandonment.'<sup>91</sup> While the view that the ferocity of the Tiwi was the sole reason for the fort being abandoned is widespread, the power of the Islanders is exaggerated in a number of instances. Krastins claims that '... the Tiwi made the Europeans prisoners inside the walls of their own Fort.'<sup>92</sup> The situation for the settlement's population was very uncomfortable, but many troops were not massacred, as Krastins suggests. This strain of thought about siege and fear is put forward by other writers, including a Chief Protector of Aborigines.<sup>93</sup> Very occasionally there is an acknowledgment of the Tiwi's use of guerilla tactics rather than organised warfare, even if this acknowledgment is romanticised.<sup>94</sup>

To what extent the British actually feared the Tiwi is difficult to estimate. It was strong enough to require some convicts to be armed when working outside of the settlement. But, in no way can we agree with the conclusion that

By their fierce resistance, and the clever application of military tactics, the Aboriginal patriots made Fort Dundas a living hell for the aggressors who began to plead with their colonial masters to be taken away from 'this vile island'. In 1829, Fort Dundas was 'abandoned', or more correctly, the British invaders were driven off,

<sup>85.</sup> Wilson [1835] 1968: 125, in contrast, stated that many Tiwi were shot in a very unwarrantable manner.

<sup>86.</sup> Parsons 1907: 5.

<sup>87.</sup> Murray 1828: 521. Murray 1828: 214–15, the initial decision to abandon Melville Island was made in May 1828. Apart from confrontation with the Tiwi, Hartley had to confront convict unrest, public disorder, a shortage of food supplies and useless cannon in the fort.

<sup>88.</sup> Hartley 1829: 765. Several writers have given incorrect years for the abandoning of Fort Dundas, these ranging from 1827 to 1840.

<sup>89.</sup> Quoted in Searcy 1909: 225.

<sup>90.</sup> Horton 1994: 1076

<sup>91.</sup> Gee 1926: 45.

<sup>92.</sup> Krastins 1972: 33.

<sup>93.</sup> Cook 1927: 27. See also Roberts 1981: 6; Hill 1951: 43–46, 38–49.

<sup>94.</sup> *The Age* 12/1/1911: 7, commented that '... the natives so pestered the immobile force of soldiers by ambushing them when they moved out of camp that the attempt to settle on the island was abandoned, and the settlement was transferred to Port Essington (sic)'.

their tails between their legs, after their inglorious and thorough defeat.<sup>95</sup> More realistic is Jarratt's comment that 'for some time, the failure of Fort Dundas was put down to 'hostile Tiwis' but there is little evidence to support such claims.'<sup>96</sup>

The reaction of the Tiwi to the British presence is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the closure of the post. There was deep concern both locally and at government level for the safety of the settlement's occupants. Likewise, the inter-cultural relationship at Fort Wellington was one of concern until Captain Collett Barker took command and brought peace to the settlement. In truth, deaths and injuries on both sides were relatively few in number.<sup>97</sup> Livestock and other property were the major victims of the conflict. The order restricting the use of firearms helped to avoid the large-scale indiscriminate shooting of Aborigines as occurred elsewhere in the Australian colonies.<sup>98</sup>

The hostility of the Tiwi aside, a reading of the correspondence written by the various commanders of the fort clearly demonstrates that the main reasons behind the decision to abandon the Melville Island station were economic and geographic. The settlement was off the main shipping line between the Indonesian Archipelago and the eastern Australia, the expected trade with the Macassan trepangers from Indonesia did not eventuate, and the soil and climatic conditions were considered to be too poor for agriculture. To these disadvantages must be added those of isolation, difficulties in supplying the settlement from Sydney, Timor and the East Indies, damage to the settlement by tropical conditions, and navigation difficulties.<sup>99</sup>

The emphasis of this paper, however, is the relationship between the Tiwi and the British. Apart from regulations to protect the Islanders from indiscriminate shootings and the effects of alcohol, and the distribution of a few presents, including tomahawks and axes, in an effective sense little appears to have been done to bring about peace with the Tiwi. Although Krastin sees Campbell's attempt to secure and use a Tiwi man as an intermediary, this was one of the few practical attempts to bring about some inter-cultural understanding.<sup>100</sup> Realistically, however, given the circumstances could peace have been achieved?

While in Wilson's opinion the '... civilized party was far from being blameless', Earl argues that '... from the general disposition of the natives, it is scarcely probable that a friendly intercourse could ever have been established between them (the Tiwi) and their visitors'.<sup>101</sup> As to the failed relationship between the two people, Gee wrote that the British

were on bad terms with the natives from the start, and I do not think I am expressing too strongly when I say that it seems to me that by their want of tact, their

<sup>95</sup>. Robinson and York 1977: 94.

<sup>96</sup>. Jarratt 1992: 135.

<sup>97</sup>. Wilson (1853) 1968: 153, incorrectly claimed that no record was kept of the number of such fatalities, suggested that 'four or five' Europeans were killed. Meston 1914, wrote that seven Europeans had been speared.

<sup>98</sup>. Allen 1969: 302, points out that Fort Dundas had been '... witness to bloody skirmishes with loss of life on both sides'.

<sup>99</sup>. Howard 1933: 84–85; Gee 1926: 52; Murray 1828: 214–15.

<sup>100</sup>. Krastins 1972: 32.

<sup>101</sup>. Wilson, (1835)1968: 124–25; Earl 1856: 8.

timidity and their brutality (brutality probably caused by timidity) they aroused the bitter hostility which continues in these natives to this day.<sup>102</sup>

The British presence in the islands did not permanently affect the Tiwi. But to what extent do the Islanders remember that period in their history? In Mountford's view, 'it seems incredible that the detailed knowledge of such a brief settlement could have persisted for so long in the tribal memory.'<sup>103</sup> His view is based on 'stories' he heard of men who wore red clothes with shiny buttons (the soldiers), and who made loud noises (the cannon), and of men in dark clothes (the convicts) who did the work.<sup>104</sup> The extent and detail of the stories are not clarified. Harney recounts a song telling the story of the buffalo brought to Melville Island for use in the settlement.<sup>105</sup> On the matter of conflict, a dance portraying an affray between the British and the Tiwi was photographed by Edward (Ryko) Reichenbach at Malay Bay, on the mainland, in about 1916.<sup>106</sup> Unless there was an incident that was not reported by the British, the dance was possibly based on several affrays with the garrison. We must remember, too, the dance about the arrival of the British vessel at Melville Island. Personally, the only oral story related to me, on Bathurst Island, in the 1960s was that of Tampu. Perhaps by that time, the oral history of the Fort Dundas era, as distinct from the dances and the song, was giving way to other memories. The memory appears to be a limited one. Yet today the Tiwi celebrate the Fort Dundas era without any criticism of the British, and as an important epoch in their history.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>. Gee 1926: 52.

<sup>103</sup>. Gee 1926: 52.

<sup>104</sup>. Mountford 1956: 419. Mountford collected this data at Snake Bay, on Melville Island, in 1954.

<sup>105</sup>. Harney 1957: 91. This song was apparently heard by Harney on Melville Island in the 1940s.

<sup>106</sup>. Poignant 1996: 24-28, 34-37. A group of Tiwi were employed by buffalo shooter Joe Cooper on the mainland at the time. Knowledge of this dance would appear to have faded out in the islands.

<sup>107</sup>. Northern Territory News 20/9/1974: 13, the Tiwi welcomed 'all visitors to Garden Point to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Fort Dundas'.



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