

# Settlers and the state: The creation of an Aboriginal workforce in Australia

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White settlement of Australia began a process whereby the Aboriginal people who had settled the Australian continent for 40,000 years were dispossessed of their land, economy, society and often their lives. Henry Reynold's '*Law of the Land*'<sup>1</sup> demonstrates the impact of the application of the doctrine of 'Terra Nullius' on Aboriginal society and the subsequent development of black-white relations in Australia. Land was the foundation of Aboriginal life—of an economic, religious and cultural system centred on hunting and gathering which provided a basis for a sustainable and stable society. The alienation of Aboriginal land and the resulting conflict as Aborigines resisted the spread of white settlement destroyed the economic base of that society and left the survivors in a marginal and dependent relationship with the European society that replaced it.

Dispossessed of their land and facing starvation from the destruction of wildlife as sheep and cattle replaced native animals, how were the Aborigines to survive? There were three main alternatives—by depending on handouts from their conquerors, by activities regarded as criminal such as stealing, begging and prostitution and by means of their labour. These alternatives faced many Europeans affected by the industrial revolution but Aborigines had few effective choices about their future as whites regarded the survivors of contact conflict as potential threats long after settlement had become established in particular areas.

This paper examines how Aborigines were induced into the white workforce in colonial Australia. The role of settlers and the subsequent interventions by the state are emphasised. Our focus is on the ways Aboriginal labour was used and abused, although this can only be understood in relation to the other two means of survival. In doing so we ask questions typically asked by labour economists and labour historians about any labour force: what was the pattern of production, what type of labour did it demand, how was that labour organised to produce, how was it paid and disciplined and what were the work processes and technology within which that labour force operated? In this case questions about the supply of Aboriginal labour and its motivation are also crucial because the majority of Aborigines continued to reject white society long after the process of invasion, resistance, and subjugation was completed.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, Australia, 1987.

We argue that the economic position of Aborigines in settled areas was shaped in particular by the process of land settlement, the effects of the convict system and the legacy of the substantial and bloody Aboriginal resistance to the white alienation of their land. We reject the notion that Aborigines were simply overwhelmed by the white invasion or that they were unable to adapt to European 'civilisation'. There were many instances of successful adaptation and where these occurred measures were often taken by settlers and the state to curb it. More usually though, Aboriginal people neither sought nor were given the opportunity to adapt to or participate in the white economy. Part of their resistance, like that of many indigenous peoples, was to reject the society of the invaders and attempt to maintain a limited or bastardised existence preserving some elements of their past. However, as the nineteenth century developed, this became harder and some involvement with white society became essential for their survival. It is this process that created an Aboriginal workforce on terms totally different from those applied to other workers in nineteenth century Australia, that we examine here.

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The development of New South Wales as a convict settlement was the prime influence on labour relations for the first half century of the colony's history. The free market for labour was subsidiary to a heavily regulated system of unfree labour. Convict labour presented the authorities with problems about how to make it work productively. At first, the Government tried physical coercion through floggings and withholding of rations, but despite acute food shortages, there were frequent complaints about convicts being lazy and sabotaging the work effort by discarding or hiding tools and equipments.<sup>2</sup> Some convicts were assigned to private farmers, mainly members of the NSW Corps, whilst others were retained to work on government projects in Sydney. For the first 30 years of settlement the government did not provide shelter for convicts, so a system arose whereby convicts worked part of the day for the government and had time free to work on their own account after 3.30pm, so that they could obtain shelter and extra rations.<sup>3</sup> This system evolved into one in which convicts could have the rest of the week free once they had accomplished their specific tasks.<sup>4</sup> This helped overcome shortages of labour and although later changed, provided greater incentive to work at the time. Payment for the extra work was in kind, food, shelter or, more likely, rum and tobacco. Until the 1820s, cash was scarce and rarely used for wages. An additional feature of the early convict labour system was that the government continued for many years to provide rations for those convicts employed by private farmers.<sup>5</sup> This subsidy made convict labour attractive to farmers despite its inefficiencies. The task work system also operated in rural areas with convicts working on timber cutting, building and harvesting in their free time.

This unusual combination of unfree and free labour met the colony's labour needs in the first thirty years of settlement. Rewards such as the granting of tickets of leave to

2. R. Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, Collins, UK, 1987, p. 97.

3. Historical Records of Australia 1, i, 35.

4. J.B. Hirst, *Convict Society and its Enemies*, George Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1983, p. 36.

5. R. Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

good workers,<sup>6</sup> task work and the opportunity to earn outside of the convict system offset punishment for crime or breaches of labour discipline. For those who became free, small holdings of land were available as well as casual work. The absence of overseas markets limited growth and enabled New South Wales to manage its semi-closed economy with the available labour force.<sup>7</sup>

Before the expansion of the pastoral industry, the impact of white settlement on the Aboriginal population was limited to the Sydney coastal plain and small areas around Hobart and Launceston. Introduced diseases reduced the number of Aborigines,<sup>8</sup> and with the small European population mainly engaged in agriculture and town pursuits, Aborigines could still manage by hunting and gathering. A few of them gravitated to the towns. Some were domestic servants<sup>9</sup> but most lived by prostitution, begging and doing odd jobs like cutting firewood.<sup>10</sup> Though there was little economic contact, there were a few attempts by the authorities to encourage some Aborigines to become small farmers<sup>11</sup> and hence, according to some ethnological theories prevalent at the time, to move to a higher stage of development from that of the hunter gatherer. Such notions were common in the early 1820s. Anti-Slavery campaigner William Wilberforce wrote to Lord Buxton in 1821, encouraging such measures as would see freed slaves in the West Indies advance 'to the rank of a free peasantry'.<sup>12</sup> However, the Aborigines were not interested and this rejection of 'civilisation' was seen as an indication of their backwardness.<sup>13</sup>

It was the spread of sheep and later cattle which was to have the major impact on the Aboriginal population. The pastoral industry spread rapidly across the dividing range after 1820, and changed the economic foundation of the colony. By 1829, there were half a million sheep, and the value of wool exports rose from £34,900 in 1830 to £566,100 in 1840.<sup>14</sup> The white population increased from about 40,000 to nearly 130,000 in the same time.<sup>15</sup> This led to continuing conflict with the Aborigines as they realised that the white visitors whom they often welcomed at first had not only come to stay but had no respect for traditional customs and practices. The spread of pastoralism in the 1830s from Port Phillip and along the inland rivers of New South Wales led to guerilla war in many areas. The 'pacification' of the Aboriginal tribes, which involved dispossessing them of their land and disrupting hunting and migration patterns, took many years.<sup>16</sup>

6. Historical Records of Australia 1, 2, 625.

7. W.A. Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, Longman Cheshire, Australia, 1983, pp. 22-3.

8. N.G. Butlin, *Our Original Aggression*, Geo. Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1983, p. 19.

9. J.B. Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

10. J. Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, London, 1870, republished as Australian Facsimile Editions No. 87, 1969.

11. B. Bridges, *Aborigines in European Employment in Eastern Australia to circa 1860*, Mimeograph, University of Wollongong, September 1988.

12. Anti-Slavery Society, Correspondence C106/30, Wilberforce to Buxton, 24 May 1821.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Davidson & A. Wells, 'Carving up the Country' in Burgmann & Lee (eds) *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, Penguin, Australia, 1988, p. 43.

15. *Ibid.*

16. M. Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria 1835-86*, Sydney University Press, 1979.

Since the shepherding system was very labour intensive, shortages of labour limited the spread of sheep. Although the sheep-shepherd ratio rose during the 1830s,<sup>17</sup> labour shortages were a major restraint on the expansion of the pastoral industry.<sup>18</sup> Even with this need for labour, only a few squatters considered using Aborigines as shepherds. The Aboriginal resistance was too fresh in people's minds in most areas, and most whites in the interior were always heavily armed. Nonetheless, individual shepherds sometimes came to terms with local Aborigines, exchanging rum and food for women.<sup>19</sup> These exchanges increased as the spread of sheep and the clearing of the land reduced the wildlife, and it became difficult for the Aborigines to survive. Spearing of sheep was common at first, but as settlers massacred Aborigines in reprisal,<sup>20</sup> the practice diminished and small bands of Aborigines had little option but to settle semi-permanently around the homesteads. Sometimes they received food from the squatters and occasional handouts of blankets from the government. In return, they gave some assistance in tasks like tracking animals, but at best only an uneasy truce developed. The abuse of Aboriginal women often resulted in conflict, but the power of the settlers' guns ensured that power passed to them.

This arrangement slowly developed into a bastardised parody of the convict labour system. A tied and reluctant group were partly incorporated into the labour force not through the payment of wages, but by a mixture of coercion and bribes in the form of rations, rum and tobacco. Despite the inequality of power implicit in this relationship, the Aborigines often took free time by simply moving off. In part, this allowed them to follow old patterns of tribal obligation and movement, but increasingly wandering off became a matter of necessity because of lack of food.<sup>21</sup> Later 'walkabout' became a weapon against the settlers as Aborigines removed their labour at times most inconvenient to the employer. The state took only a minimal responsibility for the welfare of the Aborigines, although in some cases they provided rations and blankets for settlers to give to the Aborigines. This system became increasingly the pattern later in the century as the frontier expanded outside of Southeastern Australia.

White settlers rarely considered paying Aboriginal labour in money. In part, this reflected the shortage of money outside the settled areas, which meant that free white labour was often paid by an order on a store or a cheque which was cashed at a shanty.<sup>22</sup> However, the idea that Aborigines could not understand the meaning of money was also common, as was fear that the money would be spent on alcohol.<sup>23</sup> The latter is hardly surprising, given the practice of white bush workers, and the importance of rum in exchanges between blacks and whites from the earliest days of the colony. Even in instances where promises were made of payment, such as those commonly made to the Native Police, money rarely changed hands.<sup>24</sup>

17. W.A. Sinclair, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

18. J.B. Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

19. B. Hardy, *Lament for the Barkindji, the vanished tribes of the Darling River Region*. Alpha Books, 1981, p. 56.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

22. R. Ward, *Australian Legend*.

23. M. Christie, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

In all colonies by the 1840s, Aborigines worked in planting and harvesting as well as cutting timber and bark.<sup>25</sup> White settlers often depended on Aboriginal help for tracking and in moving livestock across rivers, and payment (in kind) ensured a measure of co-operation.<sup>26</sup> Around the towns, the opportunities for independent existence became fewer and domestic service, odd jobs or welfare were the main lawful alternatives. The condition of town Aborigines particularly caused concern both in London and the colonies and led to measures such as the foundation of the Aboriginal Protection Society in 1838 and the extension of the protectorate system in Victoria, following the publication of the Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Aborigines in British Settlements.<sup>27</sup>

This concern did not easily translate into measures to improve their lot. Welfare services in the colonies were almost non-existent for whites as well as blacks. Strong demand for labour and the unusual age structure of the transported population meant that there was little unemployment and few aged persons. There was continual pressure on the colonial administration to cut expenditure so that welfare was among the lowest priorities, with spending on Aboriginal welfare the lowest of all. Some church groups were willing to assume responsibility, but missionaries tended to place spiritual salvation above earthly matters, and to gather Aborigines together and proselytise without encouraging or allowing any independence to their charges. As adult Aborigines continued to reject conversion, missionaries began to concentrate on children, and intensified measures to separate and 'civilise' them.<sup>28</sup> Some settlers such as the Rev. Joseph Docker in northeastern Victoria, tried to use an all Aboriginal labour force to tend their flocks, but despite support from Governor Gipps, harassment from other settlers and native police caused the experiment to fail.<sup>29</sup>

Depression in the pastoral industry in the 1840s, and the declining productivity of pastoral land reduced the demand for labour. The most productive land in New South Wales had been settled by occupying the valleys and waterways. By mid-century, only drier and less productive land remained and the process of expansion had been checked. Shepherds still controlled most flocks, and wool production still required a large permanent labour force. This pattern maximised the impact of pastoralism on the Aboriginal population and intensified the conflict between Aborigines and whites, as access to water was crucial to Aboriginal life.

Under prompting from the British Government, colonial administrations sought to curb the most murderous excesses of the settlers and recognise the equality of Aborigines before the law. Attempts were made to protect Aborigines from the ravages of the whites by gathering them together on missions and reserves, but no attempts were made to allow them to achieve economic independence of the state or missions in settled areas. On the frontier, the law of the settlers dominated with native police conti-

25. A. Pope, 'Aboriginal Adaptation to early Colonial Labour Markets: The South Australian Experience', *Labour History*, No. 55, May 1988, p. 7, A. Haebisch.

26. B. Hardy, *op.cit.*, p. 82.

27. Report of the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements), House of Commons, 26 June 1837.

28. M. Christie, *op.cit.*, p. 130.

29. Joseph Docker to Sir Geo. Gipps 31/12/1840 and Sir Geo. Gipps to Lord John Russell, 9/4/1841. Aborigines (Australian Colonies), House of Commons, 9 August 1844.

gents used extensively to 'pacify' Aborigines in these areas of recent contact. There was limited demand for the induction of Aborigines into a workforce. Where there was demand for Aboriginal labour there was little interest in regulating it apart from British government directions to prevent some of the grosser abuses which came to public attention. Protection and separation were to be the key concepts of government policy towards Aborigines, but few resources were to be applied to enable Aborigines to survive and prosper.

The official discovery of gold in 1851 had a major impact on economic relations in Southeastern Australia, and a devastating impact on the Aboriginal population. Not only did the white population increase from 400,000 in 1856 to 1,150,000 in 1861, but after the initial burst of gold fever died down, this increase led directly to pressures for more land to become available for pastoral and agricultural activities. This accelerated the process of dispossession in the settled areas.

The initial impact of gold, however, was to enhance the economic position of many Aborigines and to lead to their greater involvement in the white economy. Labour shortages became critical as many whites decided to abandon their hard and lonely life as shepherds to try their luck on the goldfields. The only alternative source of labour was the Aborigines, who now were often totally dependent on the settlers for charity.<sup>30</sup> They became crucial to the survival of the pastoral industry and in many areas of Victoria and New South Wales, Aboriginal labour replaced white labour. This change was most complete in the sparsely settled areas of Western New South Wales north of the Murray, where local Aborigines were able to combine sheep tending with elements of their traditional life-style. 'The people proved themselves not only quick learners, but also capable of working out an effective compromise between their dual obligation to the tribe and to the station.'<sup>31</sup> Some already had some experience as shepherds, but now they undertook a whole range of responsibilities. In some cases only two or three whites were left to run up to 18,000 sheep with the help of an Aboriginal workforce which now sheared the sheep, transported the wool in drays and sometimes ferried it across the Murray. Many learned to ride and were able to combine their traditional bushcraft with these newly learned skills.<sup>32</sup>

This work was largely carried out on the Aborigines' own terms with minimal supervision. Rewards in the form of food, clothing and even money were given out more regularly, but even so this Aboriginal workforce was now much cheaper than its white counterpart. White farmers often commented on the suitability of the Aborigines for station work, one maintaining he 'would never employ another European while the Aborigines did so well'.<sup>33</sup> However, other settlers found their refusal to become model European workers irksome, and lamented the failure of employment to bring the settled habits of 'civilisation'.<sup>34</sup> The unwillingness of the Aborigines to accept white society except on their own terms limited the use of a predominantly black workforce to

30. B. Hardy, *op.cit.*, pp. 84-90.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

32. Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council upon 'The Aborigines' Legislative Council of South Australia, 16 October 1860, p. 65.

33. *Ibid.* p. 87.

34. Christie, p. 148.

areas where there were few whites. As the gold rushes subsided, more white labour than ever before was available, and the use of Aboriginal labour declined.

However, some Aborigines used the skills acquired during the 1850s to remain in the workforce on terms not dissimilar to those of white workers. In the Western division, many Aborigines continued as shearers, while Aboriginal drovers were increasingly used to bring herds of sheep and cattle to Melbourne. Cash payment became more common and the tendency of these workers to converge on towns (especially Wentworth) to cash their cheques attracted considerable concern in the white community.<sup>35</sup> Their tendency to celebrate the end of shearing with a drunken spree was no different from the habits of white shearers, although it did cause white citizens to demand restrictions on black drinking. However, from the 1860s these Aborigines came increasingly into direct competition for jobs with whites, and with the employers' tendency to exploit them by short changing and low pay, their employment aroused considerable resentment.<sup>36</sup>

The kind of work that proved most acceptable to Aborigines was contract work or piecework. It did not require the direct supervision and discipline of day labour, and enabled the workers to operate at their own pace with often only minimal attention from whites. It often combined traditional with newly acquired skills. The seasonal and irregular pattern of the work enabled Aborigines to maintain many traditional rites and obligations. In this way, interaction with the white economy provided some Aborigines with a measure of prosperity and independence. Why was this pattern not followed and why did governments not encourage this type of economic independence which minimised the need for State expenditure?

The spread of pastoralism along the watercourses reduced Aboriginal access to rivers and waterholes and gradually destroyed any possibility that their hunting and gathering economy could continue. The Land Acts of the 1860s legalised this process, confirming the hold of the squatters west of the Divide, and spreading small and more intensive farming through coastal areas where maize and sugar could be grown. By the 1870s there was an increasing number of small farmers running sheep and growing crops. These small settlers themselves operated as casual and seasonal workers to supplement the modest earnings from their blocks. Not only did they have little demand for labour, but they were themselves competitors with Aborigines for contract and casual work. In these areas Aborigines were forced into camps and reserves around the towns as no semblance of their economy could co-exist with this more intensive type of settlement.<sup>37</sup>

Only in the drier less closely settled areas could Aborigines live something approximating their former life but even there it became increasingly difficult. The spread of fencing, which replaced the shepherding system, accelerated this process. It reduced the labour constraint on the expansion of sheep and cattle and pastoralism spread to remoter areas where the impact of herds on the environment was catastrophic. Waterholes which had previously only been used by Aborigines during winter

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<sup>35</sup> Hardy, *op.cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 153.

were used all year for watering stock and soon became polluted and dried up. The sharp hooves of sheep destroyed the fragile semi-arid grasslands and made the countryside prone to widespread erosion which compounded the effects on native game. Even in the drier areas Aboriginal groups became increasingly dependent on the goodwill of individual station owners and managers and had to survive on the fringes of the white economy.<sup>38</sup>

After the 1860s, opportunities for Aboriginal independence from within the white economy diminished rapidly. Increasing numbers of whites and more intensive development as a result of technological changes were prime factors, but the rapid fall in the Aboriginal population compounded the process. The impact of European diseases was intensified by the effects of poor nutrition from inadequate rations which they could less easily supplement through bush tucker. Widespread dependence on alcohol and rampant venereal disease also accelerated Aboriginal mortality.<sup>39</sup>

This led to the belief that the Aborigines were a 'dying race', and accelerated measures to isolate them from the debilitating effects of white society, and to the institution of policies of 'protection'. There had been early attempts at isolation of Aborigines around Melbourne and in Tasmania. Aboriginal settlements offered both secular and religious instruction, and to offset costs the Aborigines were required to work in and around the settlement in return for the right to live there. Overseers discouraged Aborigines from seeking paid work, as money provided a means to purchase the grog which they believed was the major corruptor of the race. At first it was difficult to get people to stay voluntarily and many walk outs occurred particularly after conflicts about traditional rites and attempts to separate children from parents. However, the alternatives became fewer, and where white settlement was denser, the protective model became the norm, and was eventually enshrined in legislation.<sup>40</sup>

Protective legislation was ultimately introduced in all states. These Acts reduced the legal status of at least full-blood Aborigines from free citizens to dependents of the state whose rights were severely constrained. They placed restrictions on residence, employment, assets and movement. The legislation was as close as white Australia ever came to the English 'Poor Laws', except that instead of the notion of 'less eligibility' (i.e. that conditions inside the Poor House were to be worse than those outside), there was no alternative outside. Unlike the Poor Laws which were designed to encourage independence, the Aboriginal protection acts were designed to induce dependence, for independence exposed Aborigines to the evils of white society.

But the need for protection was tempered by the need for economy in state expenditures. To minimise these, settlement Aborigines were made to work for their rations and shelter either on or outside the station, but not as free labourers.

Complaints about the capacities and motivation of these Aboriginal labourers were common and their inferiority was blamed on their Aboriginality.<sup>41</sup> Similar com-

38. Ibid, pp. 167-180.

39. Butlin, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

40. *Aborigines Protection Act* (Victoria) 1886; *Aborigines Protection Act* (WA) 1886; *The Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (QLD) 1897; *Aborigines Protection Act* (NSW) 1909; *Aborigines Act* (SA) 1911.

41. Christie, *op.cit.*, p. 148.



plaints about the unfree labour of convicts were forgotten. Still, this reluctant labour came to play a part in the white economy which persisted until well into the second half of the twentieth century. Employers had access to a seasonal labour force which it did not have to maintain at even subsistence levels. The state provided the subsistence and the employers were able to reap the benefits when planting, harvesting, mustering or shearing.<sup>42</sup>

In general, the more remote the area, the greater were the opportunities for Aborigines to go bush and maintain a fragile independence. However in North Queensland and the North West of Western Australia where the cattle industry needed cheap Aboriginal labour, legislation was passed to formalise the *ad hoc* arrangements of the past and ensure that Aborigines had to work for the cattle owners under conditions akin to serfdom. Continuing pressure from the Anti-Slavery Society was unable to prevent the development of a forced and tied labour system adapted from convictism, which grossly exploited Aboriginal labour.<sup>43</sup>

The notions of protection and segregation dominated official policy around the turn of the century but lack of resources meant that many Aboriginal people were able to remain outside of the reach of the oppressive, paternalistic system which developed. For some, this meant that absolute exploitation continued, but for those who could compete successfully with whites in a rural labour force, it meant that they faced increasing restrictions on their activities. Some of the successful Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal shearers and contractors were absorbed into the dominant society, but many after a period in the white economy, ultimately returned to their own people broken by alcohol, illness and disappointment at the empty rewards that nineteenth century Australia offered Aborigines. That process was accelerated by the drought and depression of the nineties, which destroyed demand for labour and pauperised a significant section of small white farmers and contractors. In south-eastern Australia, few Aboriginal people were left outside the grip of protective legislation by 1910. The economic position of Aboriginal people in twentieth century Australia was set and its legacy continues to the present day.

Why did economic relations between Aboriginal and white Australian develop in this way in the nineteenth century? Broadly speaking there have been three major explanations of this process—the exploitation hypothesis through the application to Australia of Wolpe's theory of internal colonialism; the helplessness hypothesis, that a primitive people too backward to comprehend the benefits of white civilisation were overwhelmed; and the adaptive behaviour explanation, that what occurred was a result of deliberate choices by Aboriginal people to distance themselves from white society.

Although a case can be made out for each, we do not believe that any provides an adequate explanation of the development of economic relations between blacks and whites when one focusses on the most important single aspect of that relationship, namely labour. Deprived of their land without compensation, the Aboriginal people had only their labour to provide the means of subsistence. The pattern of land settle-

<sup>42</sup> Castle and Hagan, 'Aboriginal Unemployment in Rural NSW 1883–1983' in Castle and Mangan (eds), *Unemployment in the Eighties*, Longman Cheshire, Australia, 1984.

<sup>43</sup> Castle and Hagan, 'Regulation of Aboriginal Labour in Queensland—Protectors, Agreements and Trust Accounts 1897–1965', *Labour History*, May 1996, (forthcoming).

ment, crops produced, and changing technology played a major role in the development of black-white economic relations as did the roles, both active and passive, played by government. These factors constrained the choices available to both Aborigines and Europeans, and any explanation needs to take them into account.

The theory of internal colonialism argues that European governments exploited a section of their own people in a way that was similar to their appropriation of a surplus from colonies through imperialism.<sup>44</sup> To some extent, this is true of Australian Aborigines, but in the nineteenth century, the surplus they generated was miniscule, and although economic exploitation of Aboriginal labour took place, it was not systematic or effective. There was virtually no basis for an economic relationship in the early years of the colony. Aborigines had little to trade and there was scant need for Aboriginal labour, given the existence of an unfree convict labour force. Even though there was a greater need for labour as the pastoral frontier spread, the resistance of Aborigines ruled out any widescale dependence on their labour until the gold rushes. This period proved the exception to the general pattern of black-white economic relations, but it was only temporary. Nonetheless it provides the most compelling evidence for the rejection of the helplessness hypothesis, although there are numerous other examples that Aborigines could adapt to white society when it suited them to do so.<sup>45</sup>

After the sixties, there was little general demand for Aboriginal labour, except in remote areas where cattle were the main product and with no land to provide even a semblance of their former hunting grounds, a marginal existence on the fringes of white society became the norm. Increasingly, some work became required in return for welfare, but it tended to be not very productive and was mainly seasonal. The model followed was a bastardisation of the convict labour system rather than the more coercive, and direct, systems of exploiting unfree labour used in other parts of the British Empire.

Aboriginal resistance to white civilisation is well documented, and for as long as there was an option, Aborigines tried to maintain their distance from it. This led to a change in the concept of the Aborigine as a 'noble savage' to the stereotype of the stupid, lazy individual who could not come to terms with white society. Evangelical Christianity and contemporary ethnology reinforced this view, and the resulting methods used to control Aboriginal labour inevitably led to the low expectations of the whites being fulfilled.

However, as the century came to a close, 'protective' legislation reinforced the marginal role assigned to Aborigines and dependence became less a matter of choice and more a matter of necessity. The most successful examples of Aboriginal labour operating in the white economy were where payment was by contract or piece work, and Aborigines often excelled as drovers, shearers, scrub-cleaners, fencers, ferrymen, timbercutters and harvesters. These tasks could be more easily fitted in with traditional obligations and lifestyles and were self regulating and under less direct supervision. It was this type of economic relationship, not wage labour, which offered some prospects

<sup>44</sup> M. Hartwig, 'Capitalism and Aborigines: The theory of Internal Colonialism and its Rivals', in Wheelwright and Buckely, *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, Volume Three, ANZ Books, Australia, 1978.

<sup>45</sup> Castle and Hagan, 'Turning Black into White', AHA Conference, Townsville, July 1995, Mimeograph.

for a measure of independence within a white dominated economy. However, this type of work brought Aborigines into direct competition with whites as small selectors striving to pay off their own land undertook contract work to supplement the meagre earnings of that land. The ethos of the Australian bush meant that contract work was prized by whites for precisely the reason that it was acceptable to Aborigines.

Cut off from the land, with few opportunities in the labour market, Aborigines became subject to legislation and institutions which *inter alia* attempted to force some labour from them in keeping with Victorian notions of public economy and the civilising effects of the work ethic. However, cash payments were rarely used to ease this transition and where they were used the State controlled their earnings through compulsory saving in trust accounts. There was no attempt to create a black working class. Indeed, every effort was made to prevent Aboriginal workers competing with white workers. Instead a pattern of paternalist control and Aboriginal dependence and segregation was preferred as a means of 'civilising' Aboriginal people. The process of subjugating the Aboriginal population was carried out by settlers with the willing assistance of the State. The exploitation of Aboriginal labour in Northern Australia was gross and led finally to State intervention. For the most part, whites in settled areas had little use for Aboriginal labour except as a seasonal labour force and it fell to the State to maintain them at other times. White society did not want Aborigines to develop as a working class or even as peasant farmers and the State took measures to prevent both outcomes. Aborigines formed a necessary part of the rural economy but not on terms that could give them equality or independence, and it is this legacy which set the pattern for Aboriginal involvement in the white economy in the twentieth century.

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