ABORIGINAL RESISTANCE ON THE MINING, RAINFOREST, & FISHING FRONTIERS*

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Before looking at the three frontiers indicated in the title of this paper, it is important to focus attention upon Queensland's frontier policy. For the policy of 'keeping the blacks out' and 'letting the blacks in', described by Reynolds in his paper, was not only condoned by the colonial government but actively assisted. A Native Police Force was provided to help break Aboriginal resistance. This combination of settler initiative and government support was referred to euphemistically throughout the Australian colonies as Queensland's policy of 'dispersal'. It aimed at conquering and dispossessing the Aborigines and keeping them subservient by as much force as was considered necessary. The government expected the settlers to use arms and closed its eyes to excesses committed on the frontier. This policy which had evolved from the experience of the squatting movement proved satisfactory for the settlers on the pastoral frontier of North Queensland but inadequate on the other frontiers, i.e. those dealt with in this paper.

Most of North Queensland was colonised by Europeans exploiting its pastoral wealth. However, in much of Cape York Peninsula the discovery of gold, and later tin, attracted large numbers of Europeans and Chinese into inhospitable country then virtually unknown to them. The main frontier goldfields were thus the Gilbert, the Palmer, the Hodgkinson, and the Etheridge while the main tin field was in the Herberton - Tinaroo district. (See map, opp. page 164)

These fields were in terrain suitable for Aboriginal resistance and often the loss of European and Chinese lives alarmed the settlers especially on the Gilberton-Etheridge and Palmer goldfields. The loss of Aboriginal life was of course immeasurably greater. Thus the Barbaram tribe was almost wiped out in the 1880's tin rush to Tinaroo. The normal response of a miner was to shoot on sight. Thus James Venture Mulligan recounted how a party of prospectors approaching a camp at dusk automat-

*This paper is based on research conducted at James Cook University. A much more complete account of these frontiers can be found in the thesis, Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland 1861-1897.
ically fired upon the shadowy figures moving around it only to have their fire returned by members of another prospecting party. The explanation of the intruders that they had thought it was an Aboriginal camp was readily accepted as a reasonable explanation.

The nature of the frontier goldfields was largely responsible for the intensity of the conflict. They were not only situated on watercourses which were as valuable, indeed essential, to the Aborigines as to the miners but also often in mountainous terrain. While this latter fact aided Aboriginal resistance it also meant that there were no predictable refuges to which the Aborigines could retire. Prospectors and even large numbers of miners could suddenly intrude into the most inhospitable fastnesses. This was very different from the pastoral frontier.

Another factor which the Aborigines had to contend with was the highly mobile nature of the digger population. The term 'gully raking' aptly described the prospecting for alluvial gold and surface lodes. Prospectors were always moving into new areas even while a field such as the Palmer was at its height. This must have been disastrously unsettling and provocative to the Aborigines and helped produce their intense resistance.

Added to this was the ephemeral nature of most of the centres of population. A mining camp or town could grow overnight and become a ghost town almost as quickly. In most areas there was not enough time to break Aboriginal resistance or for Aborigines to resign themselves to the presence of miners. Indeed, by 1880, when the period of major rushes was over, Aborigines had not been let in on the goldfields. It was left to the pastoralists and more permanent residents of reefing towns to reach an accommodation with them.

Aboriginal resistance posed very serious problems on these frontier fields. There were poor and often lengthy communications between mining centres and between the fields and the coast. The Palmer and Hodgkinson lifelines to the coast were extremely vulnerable. The Aborigines attacked travellers, bullock teams, and the teams of packers. Camping sites on these roads were few and well known to the Aborigines who repeatedly attacked the animals let out to graze. An additional reason for attacking
North Queensland, showing principal goldfields

the lines of communication was the limited number of cattle the Aborigines could attack as most needed for the mining fields were driven from the often distant pastoral areas. As the natural resources of the Aborigines had been limited by the intrusion of the miners, there was great incentive to attack the vulnerable animals which were so essential to communications.

Frequently such attacks threatened the very existence of the mining fields and an important function of the Native Police was to keep the roads open. In addition, prospecting was often inhibited by aggressive Aborigines. Prospecting entailed small groups of miners, often secretively, pushing out into new areas, splitting up further into ones and twos. Such miners were very vulnerable to attack. Vulnerable too were the miners' tents and camps which were deserted temporarily while the men were gully raking or working their finds. Aborigines could often keep the miners under observation and clean out their tents while they were away working. The miners then were confronted with the expensive and time consuming task of replenishing their supplies from the nearest town.

Perhaps the following extract from the Cooktown Herald of 24 June 1874 best encapsulates the struggle between the frontier miners and the Aborigines:

The recent outrage by the blacks, as detailed in a late issue of our paper, has occasioned some uneasiness among miners and others about to start for the Palmer, and the subsequent appearance of these sable gentlemen in close proximity to the Eight-mile has filled the minds of the more timid with serious apprehension. It seems strange to us that six men should allow a mob of darkies to drive them back in broad daylight, armed as they were - but, nevertheless, the fact remains the same. These men were driven back whilst on a prospecting tour in the immediate neighbourhood of Cooktown, and compelled to leave provisions and horses behind them to the mercy of the blacks. This unfortunate affair is much more serious than it appears, as the very fact of white men giving way to the savage must necessarily tend to increase the importance of the natives in their own estimation, and make them much bolder in consequence. They now find the whiteman is not the terrible apparition which they were accustomed to regard as something supernatural, whilst the terrible weapons borne by him are not used with the same proportionate degree of skill as the darkies spears. Still, the aggression of the natives will mitigate in a
great measure against the prospecting for gold or other minerals by small parties of diggers. When savages are pitted against civilisation, they must go to the wall; it is the fate of their race. Much as we may deplore the necessity for such a state of things, it is absolutely necessary in order that the onward march of civilisation may not be arrested by the antagonism of the aborigines. The miners have difficulties to contend with without having to enter into a guerilla warfare, and risk their lives fighting their sable foes, who are immeasurably their superiors in tactics and bush-fighting.... Therefore in the interests of the miners and packers, it is absolutely necessary to have an increase in the present numbers of the native police, so that a constant and thorough patrolling of the road may take place, and not only of the road to the Palmer, but also our own neighbourhood. This matter is more important than it appears from a casual notice - for as has been said before, the fact of the blacks making raids upon the camps, and spearing unfortunate diggers and their horses, has a deterrent effect upon others who naturally hesitate when they see the risk they run by undertaking these prospecting expeditions. It necessarily causes men to keep together in mobs, and prevents a very great deal of prospecting which would be undertaken by miners singly, or at all events in small parties, if the Government would only step in, and by largely increasing the native police force, so as to have "native contingents" stationed at the worst points of the road, or wherever most required. We believe that this is one of the main reasons why no new ground has been discovered, as every digger coming to Cooktown from the south made it a point to reach the Palmer, and on arrival they never ventured very far from the main camps, except in very few instances, and when a move was made it was in large numbers. Men did not care to isolate themselves with the chance of a spear terminating their existence suddenly. Therefore, prospecting on the Palmer has not been carried on to the extent it ought to have been simply because, as has been stated hundreds of times, "The niggers were bad" and the little or no protection afforded to the miners by the Government.

It should be noted that the Queensland government was never able to offer miners the protection required. The Native Police were nowhere near as effective in intimidating Aborigines on the goldfields as on the pastoral frontier. Indeed the Police Commissioner pointed out that he would have needed ten times the number of Native Police to pacify the mining frontier. The diggers mainly had to protect themselves as Queensland's frontier policy could not cope effectively with these frontier mining fields.

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The facility of some Aboriginal groups to find refuge in extensive areas
of thick scrub or rainforest is a recurrent theme of Aboriginal resistance in eastern North Queensland. Thus, near Woodstock and on the lower Herbert River the Aborigines were able to defy the pastoralists for many years while between Bowen and Mackay, near the present village of Bloomsbury, they had successfully raided squatters' herds for twenty years by using such favourable environment. However, it is the extensive area of rainforest north of Townsville from the Herbert River to just south of Cooktown that I am most interested in, especially that of the Atherton and Evelyn Tablelands. (See map.) It was in this area that Aboriginal resistance produced a response from pioneer farmers that led to a completely new government policy to pacify the frontier.

To travellers, the fringe of the rainforest imposed often an almost impenetrable barrier of ferns, young trees, and herbaceous nettles, while beyond this, the taller trees with their canopy of foliage produced a gloom which limited travelling to the midday hours when the sun was overhead. Through the foliage canopies protruded giant red cedar, kauri pine, and others that caught the attention of the early timber getters, the tallest trees growing near to water courses on the most fertile alluvial soils. The soft soil surface, covered by fallen logs and leaves and humus, made the early settlers' transportation very difficult.

Within the forest occurred pockets of open schlerophyll forest. It is probable that at least some of these clearings were made and many extended and maintained by the rainforest Aborigines. Christie Palmerston noted in his diary of his expedition from Herberton to the Barron Falls in 1884:

We reached a pocket - that is a piece of open country about a quarter of an acre in size, circular shaped, used by the aborigines for war dances and fighting. They take particular care to keep the place free from jungle, which would creep over it in a few seasons if allowed. There were several gunyahs around its margin...

The early settlers found well defined paths connecting the pockets. James Venture Mulligan approached the western fringe of the rainforests and described the network of tracks he found linking Aboriginal 'townships'.

167
A splendid track, the best native track I ever saw anywhere. There are roads off the main track to each of their townships, which consist of well thatched gunyahs, big enough to hold five or six darkies. We counted eleven townships since we came to the edge of the scrub, and we have only travelled four miles along it... Their paths are well trodden, and we follow them sometimes for miles.

The Aborigines of the rainforest were pygmoid i.e. 'A people characterised by a high incidence of relatively and absolutely small stature, crisp curly hair, and a tendency towards a yellowish-brown skin colour'. There were probably twelve tribes of between 1,500 and 2,500 pygmoids fringed by tribes of semi-pygmoid Aborigines.

As early as 1874, timber getters were attracted to the Tully, Johnstone and Daintree Rivers. They revealed the land's fertility and were soon followed by small selectors anxious to take advantage of the 1876 Land Act. The 1884 Land Act and its amendments further encouraged small selectors of limited capital. By 1880, much of the best cedar of the Johnstone and Daintree was exhausted and in 1881 the timbermen turned to the tablelands behind Cairns and revealed its agricultural potential. This penetration of the rainforest produced conflict with the Aborigines but the timber and land made the intruders determined to overcome it.

On the western side of the Great Divide, miners encroached on the rainforest of the tablelands when the Herberton tin field was discovered in 1878. On the coast, gold was discovered in the rainforest on the Mulgrave, Russell, and Johnstone Rivers. After 1886 when most of the available land around Cairns and on the Barron River had been taken up, the selectors' invasion of the Atherton and Evelyn Tablelands quickened.

The Aborigines, more and more restricted, more and more hungry, saw their ancient homelands producing maize, potatoes, and bananas in abundance. The settlers' huts, miners' camps, and timber getters' camps beckoned enticingly and were regularly raided. The Cairns Post of 11 April 1888 reported: "A revolver and rifle are as necessary to the miner as a pick and shovel". Roads from Herberton to Cairns and Port Douglas became dangerous trade routes and requests for police protection were frequent. Some settlers, especially miners, were killed and the Chinese were reported working for security in groups of twenty on the Johnstone River. In fact the local correspondent to the Queenslander reported
"the scrub and the blacks are 'terrors' ". On the Daintree in the 1880's, Aboriginal raids were so incessant that the Port Douglas local authority suggested that the Police Commissioner withdraw the Native Police as they only deluded the settlers into a false sense of security.

In some districts, such as Cairns in 1886, the Aborigines found were 'let in' but in many areas they found refuge in the least accessible parts of their tribal land as they were denied the river valleys, the sea coast, the more open fringing areas, and the newly cleared farmlands.

On the Atherton Tableland, the Aborigines seriously inhibited the expansion of farming. In 1884, the *Wild River Times* lamented that Aboriginal raids had become so frequent in the neighbourhood of the scrub in the vicinity of Herberton (being indeed of almost daily occurrence) that their recital wearies us as well as our readers and it is only the more sensational cases that now find any interest outside the victims of their thieving, destruction and blood-thirsty propensities. (Quoted *Port Denison Times*, 1 January 1885.)

From 1885 until early 1889, the pages of the *Herberton Advertiser* and *Cairns Post* are studded with reports of horses and bullocks killed, sheds, huts, and houses broken into and robbed, and crops of corn and potatoes stolen. Selectors eloquently and unashamedly described their constant fear. Thus, one selector complained he was unable to meet the residence regulations of the Land Act:

> There are many of us who are compelled to live away somewhere in the immediate vicinity of our selections, not only for convenience and economy, but for safety's [sic] sake, on account of the well known danger we are in from marauding and murdering blacks.

Needless to say the inability of the Native Police to prevent such raids was vigorously criticised yet the problems confronting them were immense. Most of the time they could not use horses in the dense scrub and rainforest. Yet there were only two officers who were regarded as having the constitution to lead the foot-patrols in the tropical conditions. Even the Aboriginal troopers had to be rested after such exertions.

What then was the government response to this situation? To cope with the problems posed by such closely settled frontier areas eight of the thirteen Native Police detachments were broken up into nineteen units,
each with an ordinary policeman and three trackers. Yet neither this proliferation of police protection nor settler retaliation could prevent rainforest Aborigines from successfully raiding the selections. Once again Queensland's frontier policy had failed in North Queensland.

The selectors near Atherton urged the government to try to conciliate the Aborigines. As a result, a policeman known for his concern for and skill in dealing with the Aborigines, Constable Hansen, was sent to make contact with the rainforest Aborigines. When this was effected, it was found that the Aborigines were starving, or would have been, if they had not robbed the settlers. Food was provided for the Aborigines on the understanding that they stopped their raids. The scheme was an immediate and dramatic success. Depredations ceased almost entirely. Selectors were able to clear more land and profit by the harvests and very soon Aborigines were working for the settlers and providing a plentiful source of very cheap labour which was always available to be tapped. Other areas asked for rations and soon a number of food distributing centres were set up in North Queensland to pacify the Aborigines of other districts. This policy was continued beyond 1897 when the first protection act was passed.

Thus the Atherton initiative produced a frontier policy, which, given the colonists' determination to dispossess the Aborigines, may have been an effective alternative in some areas of Queensland and, probably, could have been an effective complement to Queensland's customary policy of dispersal. The problems posed by the rainforest resistance also focused the government's attention on the Aborigines in a peaceful, bureaucratic manner. The scheme that developed extensively involved the police force, police magistrates, and senior government ministers and their senior departmental officers. A base was thus established to build on after 1897. Finally, Aboriginal resistance in a suitable terrain had once again shown the inadequacy of Queensland's frontier policy.

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It was very early realized that the waters of North Queensland contained easily exploited wealth in the form of beche-de-mer, tortoise
shell, guano and, after 1868, pearlshell. The earliest accounts of exploitation date from the 1840's and by the early 1860's "a little trade" had developed in and near Torres Strait which was based on Singapore and Sydney.

By far the most important products of the North Queensland Fisheries were bêche-de-mer and pearlshell. Bêche-de-mer required a large supply of cheap, unskilled labour. It was collected at low tide by hand, gutted, dried and smoked, and then despatched through the nearest port to the Chinese market. Pearlshell fishing also required a large supply of cheap, unskilled labour before the introduction of diving suits in 1874. Between 1874 and 1885 swimming divers gave way to those using diving dress which allowed the exploitation of deeper and more remote waters. However, whenever new banks were opened up (e.g. near Batavia River in the late 1890's) shell was still collected by swimming diving.

The Pearlshell industry was based on Thursday Island and the bêche-de-mer industry on Thursday Island, Cooktown, and, to a much lesser extent, Cairns, Townsville, and Mackay.

Bêche-de-mer crews could be fairly described as the scum of the earth and, unfortunately, it was in this industry that Aborigines were mainly used. Southern and partly-acclimatized Aborigines were employed first and obtained from such areas as Fraser Island and Townsville. However this labour supply was not sufficient and obviously not as attractive a source as the Aborigines adjacent to the fisheries who could be picked up and disembarked cheaply. What is more they were not sophisticated enough to realize the value of their labour or the value of the food, tobacco, clothing, and blankets etc. they were normally paid in.

In the 1880's and 1890's there were probably between 300 and 500 Aborigines working in the northern fisheries. There were many similarities in the recruitment of such labour to that of the Kanaka labour trade. Boats called into islands such as the Palm Islands, Hinchinbrook, and Dunk and into convenient mainland areas. Contact was made with the Aborigines who were lured on board with gifts. Sometimes they were forcibly taken or kept on board. Aborigines who had had little or no contact with whites had no chance of understanding the nature of their
projected labour or the time they would be away. Thus each new recruiting area was opened up by trickery, kidnapping, and brute force.

When Aborigines were returned and the other members of the tribe became aware of the nature of the work and its rewards, a regular labour trade developed. The young men, especially, were willing to go to sea. They were less held by traditional ties and recruiting opened up a way of avoiding the dominance of the elders and of experiencing a novel way of life that offered previously unimagined excitement and interest. As well the older men soon began to exploit this new source of tribal wealth by trading their young kin whether they were willing or not for bags of flour and tobacco. As the male population of the fisheries were sexually dependent on Aboriginal women, the males who had authority over them traded their services with the fishermen.

The taking of the young and able and the prostitution of the women had an obvious disastrous effect on traditional life. Aborigines were introduced to the worst elements of European and Asiatic society. For many, traditional diets were replaced by unbalanced diets. Diseases were introduced and the nature of the work in the fisheries made the Aborigines particularly vulnerable to illness. Venereal disease was introduced and this plus the withdrawal of many young and able Aborigines from the tribe for lengthy periods lowered the birth rate. The cumulative effect of introduced diseases, a lower birth rate, and Aboriginal vulnerability to such diseases was great depopulation. This was so marked that the fisheries had to progressively shift their recruiting ground as the older ones became worked out. By 1897, the Batavia River area, at Mapoon Mission, was most resorted to and contact was just beginning to be made with the tribes near the present town of Weipa.

For the Aborigines, life in the fisheries was a gamble. The dependence of the fishermen on Aboriginal labour had some limiting effect but the industry became notorious for its abuses. If one considers that even in settled areas of Queensland, extensive legislation and supervision was required to control abuses associated with the Pacific Islanders, it would be foolish to expect that there would not be greater abuses in the almost totally unsupervised fisheries. Thus many Aborigines were
imprisoned in the fisheries. They were not returned to their tribal areas and were unable to return from places where they were disembarked because of the hostility of intervening tribes or simply because of the distance involved. Thus, stranded in such places as Cooktown or Thursday Island, they were forced to reship. The crude and often brutal exploitation of Aboriginal women was a feature of the labour trade. In the court cases reported in the Cooktown papers, almost every fisherman had his 'gin' who was treated as a property and retained or discarded according to the whims of the fisherman.

The kidnapping of Aboriginal men and women was so common that in 1884 the Liberal government of Samuel Griffith introduced the Native Labourers Protection Bill. The immediate motivation was fear of Imperial criticism. 1884 was probably the peak year, in which Queensland received unfavourable publicity for abuses associated with the Pacific Islander labour trade. A Royal Commission was set up to investigate kidnapping of labour from islands adjacent to New Guinea. Later that year Griffith discovered, to his horror, that abuses as bad as those in New Guinea were being committed within Queensland's territorial limits on its black but British citizens. Indeed, the abuses were reported to him by an officer in the service of the Imperial government.

The 1884 Bill was thus modelled on the imperial Kidnapping Act of 1872. It was, however, emasculated in the Legislative Council largely because of the actions the government had recently taken with regard to the Pacific Island labour trade. The 1884 Act was a very weak instrument to curtail the abuses, was hardly policed at all, and did little or nothing to restrain kidnapping or the retention of labourers beyond the time they really wished to remain in the fisheries.

Yet there was another aspect of the fishing industry in North Queensland that can be easily overlooked. This was the revolutionary impact it had on traditional Aboriginal life. A wholly new multi-racial society was forming in the north. European, Asiatic, and Pacific Island fishermen had formed an integral part of the way of life of many coastal or island tribes. Aborigines from, say, the Batavia River who had not previously seen a white man could be at sea for six months, or even several
years, putting in at Thursday Island or Cooktown for lengthy periods and observing and sharing in the unique life-style of the fisheries. Indeed the rapidity with which Aborigines adapted to this new force in their area is quite surprising. Missionaries at Mapoon and Yarrabah had to fight against the attraction of the fisheries. Thus at Batavia River in 1897, 90% of the eligible Mapoon Aborigines were working in the fisheries. The missionary, Nicholas Hey, claimed that about half of these were absent because they had been traded by their elders but as the missionaries had been trying to dissuade the Aborigines from recruiting, it is most probable that more were willing to enlist than he believed. An old Aboriginal on Palm Island referred to life on the bêche-de-mer boats as golden days.

The accounts of individual Aboriginal responses that have survived show a lively creativity. The Aborigines often wished to return home before the fishermen were willing to release them. Consequently, Aborigines frequently ran off with boats and often had to attack and even kill the fishermen restraining them. Quite often Aborigines recruited with the intention of running off with a boat to gain possession of its cargo. Indeed, there was a well established refugee trail across Cape York Peninsula from Cape Melville back to the Batavia River. As well, some inland Aborigines were attracted to coastal areas to exploit this new source of wealth.

As with the whole of Aboriginal-European relations in North Queensland in the nineteenth century (and I suspect in other areas of Australia) the physical reality of depopulation obscured the less obvious reality that Aborigines were mentally adapting to the presence of the colonists and modifying or even abandoning their traditional way of life. The problems associated with such acculturation have often obscured such dramatic and even revolutionary changes. The 'doomed race' theory thus has cast its shadow over the whole of Aboriginal society and, indeed, upon the very nature of Aborigines. Moreover, anthropologists, fascinated by the traditional Aboriginal society and deploring the obvious problems associated with contact have until recently helped to perpetuate the concept of unadaptable Aborigines. A much stronger case could be put
ABORIGINAL RESISTANCE ON THE MINING, RAINFOREST & FISHING FRONTIER

for the inflexibility of the dominant white society in the demands it has made of Aborigines.

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In conclusion, it can be seen that on none of the frontiers dealt with in this paper did conflict lead to conquest and dispossession. When this occurred, it was for other reasons. On the mining and rainforest frontiers, Aboriginal resistance inhibited European colonization whereas on the sea frontier a working relationship with the Aborigines was necessary for the exploitation of its wealth. All three frontiers posed challenges that Queensland's frontier policy could not adequately encompass and provided the Aborigines in varying quantities, with room to move. The nature of the invaders' industries coupled with the environment being exploited thus allowed the Aborigines some freedom to respond without surrender.