NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The sixth General Meeting of the Society for 1983 will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide at

8.00 p.m. MONDAY, 22nd AUGUST, 1983.

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held Monday, 25th July, 1983 to be confirmed. A copy of these Minutes is attached.

3. New Members:
   No new members were elected to the Society for this month.

4. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and Journals from other Societies and Organisations will be tabled at the Meeting.

5. Business:

6. Speaker:
   Janet Delaine of the Classics Department, Adelaide University, will address members of the Society. The title of her address will be 'Roman Architecture – Baths'.

7. Trading Table:
   The success of the trading table at the last General Meeting has encouraged the Council to hold another at this meeting. Plants, cakes – even barbed wire, will be on sale.

8. Supper:

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This paper is based on a thesis presented for an Honors Degree in the Department of History, University of Adelaide.

CONFLICT BETWEEN ABORIGINES AND EUROPEANS ALONG THE MURRAY RIVER FROM THE DARLING TO THE GREAT SOUTH BEND (1830-1841)

by

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Introduction

Before the arrival of Europeans the land along the upper reaches of the Murray River in South Australia and stretching across the border to the Darling Junction, belong to possibly six different "tribal" groups. During the early years of contact between Europeans and Aborigines in this area, conflict was common, intense and violent. In some cases expeditions led by police and other officials were sent to deal with the aggression being shown by the Aborigines.

This thesis examines the nature of this conflict and using predominantly white written sources seeks to provide an understanding of the Aboriginal role in the conflict by employing an ethnohistorical approach. Ethnohistory, as described by Isabel McBride concerns "historical literary accounts of contact situations relating to the culture and life of non-literate societies...". This combined with a conventional examination of the white man's position should allow for a more balanced view of the violent conflict period along the Murray River. James Axtell in an article, Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint provides an excellent discussion which illustrates my reasons for using an ethnohistorical element:

But many, perhaps most, of the historians who have taken to ethnohistory in recent years have come from the study of frontiers, in which a two-culture focus is a necessity as well as a virtue ... By emphasising that each culture must be understood in its own terms, as these change over time, ethnohistory insures that the history of the frontier will cease to be the short 'pathetic' story of the "Inevitable" triumph of a "booming" white "civilisation" over a fragile "primitive" culture.

I am particularly interested in the Murray River frontage, Aboriginal groups who came into conflict with explorers, and overlanders during the early years of contact. They were the first to experience the violence of white intrusion because of their proximity to a constant supply of water and other resources required by the various groups of whites invading their territories. An examination of the aggression and resistance shown by the Aborigines to these intrusions will be a central concern in this thesis.

With very little direct evidence of Aboriginal attitudes and feelings about the early contact situation, an analysis of the nature of the conflict and particularly Aboriginal hostility is difficult and to some extent restricted. However, using ethnographic information as a background and then drawing information from circumstantial evidence and from the extensive European sources available for this area, certain valuable conclusions about the nature of conflict can be reached. For example, the areas around Lake Victoria and the Darling Junction were traditional meeting places for large groups of people at certain times of the year. Often more than one tribal group was involved and ceremonies, trade, wife exchange and various other functions were served. The communication and co-operation which existed at these large seasonal gatherings were important traditional facets of the cultures of the groups who occupied the Murray River frontages.
Their economic and social organization, particularly during the seasonal gatherings, was such that large numbers of warriors could be available to attack groups of intruding Europeans, if the situation called for such action. With this type of information established, some of the reasons for the high incidence of attacks upon white parties at localities like Lake Victoria and the Darling Junction, became apparent.

The patterns of contact and conflict between Aborigines and Europeans were examined in 1951 by A.P. Elkin in his article Reaction & Interaction: A Food Gathering People and European Settlement in Australia. He identifies the period of clash with the arrival of the first settlers and the realization by the Aborigines that their stay was intended to be a permanent one. In the area under examination in this thesis, the peak of Aboriginal violence towards white intrusion occurs before the arrival of the first settlers and therefore presents the opportunity for a different pattern of contact to be explored.

The European sources available for this area make it possible to undertake a case study of conflict, which has as its major themes, the nature of the Aboriginal role in the conflict. Henry Reynolds provides a useful analysis of Aboriginal resistance and aggression in his recent book The Other Side of the Frontier. He examines it in terms of objectives, motives, tactics and traditions and I will use a similar approach, but within the chronological framework of this thesis. This framework consists firstly, of an examination of the conflict between the Aborigines and the explorers. Secondly, its steady increase with the arrival of the overlanders and finally, the government's intervention and the peak of the conflict during the Rufus River incidents.

Introduction & Notes

1. Norman Tindale, Aboriginal Tribes of Australia (Canberra 1974).
2. J.W. Bull, Early Experiences of Life in South Australia (Adelaide 1884); He gives an account of the official expeditions of 1841.
7. Ibid., No. 2.

The Sources

An analysis of the sources is a most necessary precursor to a study of this nature, where the response of pre-literate peoples to invasion by a European power is a major theme for investigation. A variety of sources are employed and apart from a small amount of oral tradition, white records are the major source of evidence. Henry Reynolds describes the raw material of Aboriginal contact history in the following passage and makes an interesting observation relating to oral tradition:

As a preliterate people the Aborigines have left almost no written evidence of their part of the contact situation. Historians have only recently begun to seek out an Aboriginal oral tradition which, its value notwithstanding, will probably prove to be fragmented and uncertain. At present the researcher views the Aborigine through the distorting medium of European observations.

One of the complexities of using European sources becomes apparent when trying to extract information about a conflict situation between Aborigines and Europeans because of the contemporary pressures, often emanating from official policies, upon whites to distort the facts. Officials involved in government instigated expeditions, under instructions to capture Aborigines guilty of aggressive acts against whites, could, if involved in a situation where Aborigines were killed, be likely to exaggerate details relating to the cohesiveness, aggression and numbers of their opponents.
Exaggerations of this nature would assist explanations relating to violence against the indigenous groups. A great deal of caution must be observed when using sources of this variety and a lesson can be learnt from criticisms levelled by historians like D.N. Beach and J. Cobbing at T.O. Ranger's classic study of resistance in Southern Rhodesia. They suggest that Ranger was not careful enough to recognize, when using official sources, that it was in these sources best interest to exaggerate the themes of pre-planned conspiracy and cohesiveness among the Aboriginal inhabitants. D.N. Beach has the following to say about Ranger's argument:

There was a basic similarity between the way in which Rhodesian colonial historians looked at the central Shona chimurenga (rising) of 1896 and T.O. Ranger's seminal Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7; both thought in terms of a pre-planned conspiracy led by religious authorities and a simultaneous outbreak on a given signal. Ranger's reconstruction of the organisation of the chimurenga, however, depended partly upon the misreading and misquotation of the sources.

The accuracy of reports detailing numbers of Aborigines killed in clashes with official parties is often open to question and the government's strong disapproval of violence towards Aborigines commonly produced very conservative estimates. However, when examining conflict, one factor in the historian's favour is the tendency for most European reports of early experiences to include some details of any skirmishes - if they include no other information relating to the indigenous inhabitants, they usually include accounts of skirmishes.

Diaries of overlanding expeditions and other non-government exercises, often produce evidence of a much freer nature, with less indulgence in self-justification and engineering of facts to suit official policies. R.H.W. Reece in an article in, Historical Disciplines & Culture in Australia says:

Only in the writings of explorers, casual observers and "old colonial hands" can there sometimes be found a comparatively disinterested point of view.

From diaries and reminiscences, it is often possible to glimpse the reality of the European role in conflict situations without the effects of official attitude, although, even in casual records evidence of censorship can be found. Andrew Buchanan, an overlander, was mostly unafraid to record in his diary, the violent events that occurred on his 1839 trip to Adelaide. However, he makes a very clear statement in his diary which illustrates the gulf between official opinion and that of possibly the majority of settlers:

The first boat came to the side and asked what party we belonged to and asked if the blacks had been troublesome. We told them they had been pretty quiet except at the Darling they had annoyed us a little. Did no say we had shot any.

The boat that Buchanan met as he reached the Murray was said by him to belong to the Governor's expedition to the Great North-West Bend.

Reminiscences are also frequently useful as reflections of the opinions of early settlers, but they can be plagued with inaccuracies and affected by circumstances and attitudes belonging to a period, sometimes long after the events. A. Tolmer's reminiscences are to some extent an example of this and seem to be little more than a patchwork of the official reports of T.S. O'Halloran.

Published journals of expeditions, for example Sturt's and Mitchell's were tailored to meet with the establishment's tastes. Any acts of aggression against Aborigines were justified at length and treachery and cunning, as characteristic elements of Aboriginal behaviour, were usually highlighted. Mitchell's account of the murder committed by his men during one of his expeditions is significantly different to accounts of the same event from other sources.

However, if treated critically, the sources available for the early contact period in the Upper Murray area in South Australia and across the border to the Darling Junction area, provide a wealth of data concerning conflict. Sufficient information is certainly available to attempt an analysis of the Aboriginal role in the contact period.
The First Contacts: Aborigines and Explorers

Charles Sturt and T.L. Mitchell were the first white men to lead expeditions into the area along the Murray River from the Darling Junction to the North-West Bend. In their journals they both described the populous nature of the land along the Murray River and Sturt particularly emphasized the areas near the Darling Junction and Lake Victoria. In a famous passage from Sturt's journal of his expedition in 1830, he describes the thickly populated nature of the country near Lake Victoria and the Rufus River:

We had found the interior more populous than we had any reason to expect; yet as we advanced into the interior the population appeared to increase ... From the size and number of the huts, and from the great breadth of the foot-paths, we were still further led to conclude that we were passing through a very populous district. What the actual number of inhabitants was it is impossible to say, but we seldom communicated with fewer than 200 daily.

This information did not stop the phrase "waste and unoccupied" from being applied to South Australia, in the Foundation Act of 1834. With this failure to consider the evidence presented by explorers like Sturt, the stage was set for conflict between Aborigines and Europeans in South Australia.

This chapter will examine the conflict situations between the explorers Sturt and Mitchell and the Aboriginal groups of the Murray River frontages from the Darling Junction area to the North-West Bend. Although well read, Mitchell and Sturt's journals have never been used to try and determine whether or not a pattern of conflict existed in these early conflict situations. However, an attempt will be made here to identify any patterns and particular attention will be given to discovering some of the reasons for Aboriginal aggression. Certain aspects of the Aboriginal cultures of the area, which had an impact on the nature of contact, will also be examined. For example, the seasonal land use patterns of the Aboriginal groups along the Murray affected the size and structure of the groups encountered by the explorers and this in turn affected the nature of their meetings. Both Elkin and Reynolds see the period of contact between the first explorers and the Aborigines as a relatively peaceful time when Aborigines did not feel threatened and conflict was uncommon. In the case of Mitchell, conflict seems to have been the characteristic element and Sturt's expedition appears to have been constantly on the brink of disaster. In one of many incidents Sturt's boat became grounded and as described by Sturt, the following situation developed:

A crowd of blacks rushed into the water and surrounded us on every side. Some came to assist us, others, under a pretence of assisting,
pulled against us, and I was at length obliged to repel them by threats. A good many of them were very much disposed to annoy us, and, after the boat was in deep water, some of them became quite infuriated, because we would not return. Had we been within distance, they would assuredly have hurled their spears at us.

Before examining Sturt's expedition of 1830 a discussion of traditional Aboriginal land ownership is necessary to provide a better understanding of what the white man's intrusion meant to the Aborigines. The Aboriginal groups who occupied the land in the area relating to this study have been assigned names and boundaries by various people. Tindale's tribal boundaries have already been included and although they possess inaccuracies and the very existence of tribal boundaries have been questioned, there exists no comprehensive alternative. George Woolmer uses predominantly E.J. Eyre's data to draw conclusions about boundaries and names of the Aboriginal "tribes" of the Upper Murray in South Australia. However, it is extremely difficult to determine whether Eyre's "tribes" were anything more than local economically based groups or whether they were perhaps larger units of organization based on language and cultural similarities. The use of the word tribe to describe the largest unit of organization in Aboriginal society has been increasingly avoided by many anthropologists who have decided that the word and its connotations seem ill suited to the traditional Australian situation. However, for convenience, I propose to adopt the phrase "tribal group" when compelled to deal with a unit of organization larger than the economic based units.

According to N.B. Tindale, the tribal group areas, in regions where natural resources were rich, were smaller and more clearly defined than in areas where resources were poor and continual movement was required for survival. In these areas - areas such as the Murray River - there is evidence to suggest that from the highest down to the lowest unit of social organization, the individual, there existed clear ideas of boundaries combined with a sense of land ownership. E.J. Eyre makes the following contribution to the subject:

As far as my own observation has extended, I have found that particular districts, having a radius perhaps of from ten to twenty miles, or in other cases vary according to local circumstances, are considered generally as being the property and hunting-grounds of the tribes who frequent them. These districts are again parcelled out among the individual members of the tribe. Every male has some portion of land, of which he can always point out the exact boundaries.

As Eyre points out, his views are contrary to those of the majority of his contemporaries and although they would obviously be, to some extent, coloured by his European attitudes of land ownership, his experience in Australia most definitely led him to the belief that Aborigines possessed a strong connection with their land.

Graham Jenkin uses George Taplin's descriptions of the Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray Lakes: "Each Lakalinyerar (tribe) had its own closely defined territory." Eyre's description of land ownership and boundaries, a description which almost certainly applies to the Aboriginal people around his government station at Moorunde and further up the river, is very similar to that provided by Taplin. The Ngarrindjeri were a group of Aboriginal people who lived in an environment comparable to that of groups further up the river and it would seem highly likely that they possessed a similar sense of land ownership. The knowledge of personal or family ownership of particular tracts of land, seems to have persisted to the present day. There is a recent case of a Ngarrindjeri woman obtaining land that she says belonged to her family traditionally. A similar situation is mentioned in the report of the Crown Lands Commissioner for the District of Lower Darling, 1849. He says:

...and it is common to hear the natives remark that the ground on which the settlers have formed their stations belongs to a particular individual and which they naturally consider gives the Aboriginal Proprietor a certain claim on the European occupant.
Personal and group ownership of land by Aborigines was entirely ignored by some Europeans and misinterpreted in terms of European ideas of ownership by others. However, today a better understanding of the strong religious attachment to the land, experienced by Aborigines, provides us with a clearer insight into the loss experienced by Aboriginal groups since white invasion.

Information about the Europeans had probably arrived along the Murray River prior to the visit of Captain Sturt. The Murray and Darling Rivers were major communication and trade routes and according to F.D. McCarthy, goods, ceremonies and information moved along these rivers. Information and objects were not the only things to move freely between the groups on the Murray and there is evidence that European diseases also followed the river inflicting a severe toll on the population. Eyre has the following to say with respect to disease:

A disease very similar to the small-pox, and leaving similar marks upon the face, appears formerly to have been present, but I have never met with an existing case, nor has Mr Moorhouse fallen in with one. It is said to have come from the eastward originally, and very probably may have been derived in the first instance from Europeans, ...

Sturt witnessed the effects of disease on the Murray Aborigines and from the Darling Junction particularly, he observed "increasing evidence of blindness, skin infections, an ailment resembling leprosy, and syphilis." There is also reason to believe that venereal disease moved up the Murray from the contact with sealers in South Australia. Jenkins refers to the discovery, by Edward Stirling in 1911, of a "crowded burial-ground" near Swanport, which combined with evidence from contemporary Ngarringijeri people relating to a pandemic - possibly smallpox - occurring prior to Sturt's expedition, strongly suggests the presence of European diseases along the Murray prior to exploration. The Aboriginal groups who came into conflict with the Europeans, would previously have experienced the effects of European disease and suffered considerable population reduction and therefore capacity to resist invasion.

In early 1830 Sturt was on his way down the Murrumbidgee River heading for, as he later discovered, Lake Alexandrina and the Murray mouth. He was travelling by boat and brought no live-stock with him. These two factors combined with Sturt's willingness on many occasions to act in accordance with some of the Aboriginal laws of reciprocity, helped him to avoid conflict with the Aborigines. That Sturt and his party were the first white men to enter the area may also have helped, the Aborigines may have suspected that they possessed supernatural powers, or perhaps believed them to be reincarnated ancestors, as argued by Reynolds and B. Hardy. However according to his journal of 1830, Sturt was often on the brink of disaster and numerous situations of conflict occurred during which he was lucky to escape without loss of blood on either side.

Sturt recorded the existence of many large groups of Aborigines, on his trip down the Murray River in 1830, especially from the Darling Junction area onwards. Large groups appear to be the norm for this area if one takes Sturt's observations on their own. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that at the time of the year when Sturt passed along the Murray, the resources available on the river and its lakes and lagoons were capable of supporting very large gatherings and the local Aboriginal tribal groups took full advantage of this situation whenever it occurred. The Murray River experienced reasonably regular fluctuations in its flow and R. Lawrence, whose paper Aboriginal Habitat and Economy is particularly useful on this subject, states:

...the Murray reaches its maximum volume in the summer months of December and January when its flow is supplemented by snow-melt. The "freshes" on the Darling result from tropical rain falling on the northern section of the catchment during December.

When the conditions were favourable for the gathering of large groups the opportunity was usually taken for the staging of various social activities. Eyre describes this situation in the following passage:

At certain seasons of the year, usually in the spring or summer, when food is most abundant, several tribes meet together in each other's
territory for the purpose of festivity or war, or to barter and exchange such food, clothing, weapons, implements or other commodities as they respectively possess.

The Darling Junction, Lake Victoria and Lake Bonney were areas where Sturt observed large groups of people and these would have been the types of area where the activities Eyre describes occurred.

Sturt, therefore, had chosen the time of year when the Aboriginal groups were gathering in large numbers to exploit the natural resources provided by the river. This pattern of seasonal land use was still evident to local Crown Lands Commissioner, Lockhart, in 1857, when he observed that "... the Maraura frequented Lake Victoria during summer, and the back plains in winter after rains had filled shallow depressions." It was therefore to be expected that Sturt meet with large groups of Aborigines along the Murray and it was probably due to traditional economic reasons, rather than to see the white intruders, that they gathered. If Sturt had travelled down the Murray during the winter, there would have been less opportunity for conflict situations, with fewer and smaller groups frequenting its banks.

Reciprocity, one of the basic conventions in Aboriginal society, applied strongly to travel within the land of strangers. The Berndts discuss this situation and give an example of an Aboriginal group repaying strangers for access to their land by performing ceremonies for their entertainment. Sturt managed on many occasions to fulfill the requirements expected of him, as an alien visiting the land of an Aboriginal group. If when first coming across a group, he made clear his friendly intentions and engaged in gift giving and exchange, particularly with the oldest, most influential members, relations would remain friendly and assistance would perhaps be offered by the Aboriginal groups. A tomahawk was often promised as a gift in exchange for assistance, particularly for Aborigines to act as messengers carrying news of the Europeans' friendly intentions to the next group along the river. "Fraser had promised them a tomahawk to induce them to accompany him, I fulfilled the promise," says Sturt.

However, Sturt was interested in moving as quickly as possible and he did not want to spend time with the various tribal groups who owned the land along the Murray and perform the tasks expected of visitors. He expresses clearly his feeling towards the people with whom he met during his 1830 Expedition, in the following passage:

Their sameness of appearance, the disgusting diseases that raged among them, their abominable filth, the manner in which they pulled us about, and the impossibility of making them understand us, of obtaining any information from them, - for if we could have succeeded in this point, we should have gladly borne any inconvenience - all combined to estrange us from these people, and to make their presence disagreeable.

He further added that any demands from the inhabitants were to be suffered if a "chain of communion" was to be kept up and his party receive a safe passage. Sturt was very practical in his relations with the Aborigines in Australia. He was, however, willing to resort to force if threatened and on a number of occasions he came very close to using firearms against the Aborigines.

The following example of a series of events that occurred during Sturt's expedition to central Australia in the mid 1840's, provides an insight into some of the problems that arise when trying to gain a clear picture of a situation from a source such as a journal. When camped at Lake Victoria in 1844, during his expedition to central Australia, Sturt received news of what he at first believed to be a massacre of whites by Aborigines on the Darling. Daniel Brock recorded Sturt's reaction to the news in his diary, "the Captain says he will revenge the murder to the greatest extent." According to Brock, Sturt was more than willing to use violence against the Aborigines, however, in his journal Sturt records his emotions and reactions quite differently:

I certainly feared that some sad butchery had taken place, and became the more anxious to push my way up to the supposed spot, where it was stated to have occurred, to save any one who might have escaped.
In despatches to Governor Grey, he expressed great fear for the safety of his party and writes: "If the blacks had an easy conquest your Excellency may rest assured that they will attack us and try to secure whatever we may have." Sturt then makes it clear that if at all threatened he will make the decision to attack. Perhaps Daniel Brock, a member of Sturt's party, recorded something of Sturt's true reaction to the news of a massacre and in Sturt's despatches some of the emotions and fears of the moment can be experienced. However, by the time the situation reaches the pages of his journal it has become tame and conservative and any feelings of revenge or fears for personal safety have dissipated.

On two particularly distinctive occasions during Sturt's 1830 expedition, he almost used his weapons on the Aborigines, but at the very last moment he was saved from doing so. A pattern of contact can be seen emerging from Sturt's account of these incidents and the importance of messengers and gifts, in determining the outcome of meetings between Aborigines and Europeans, can be seen from the following examination of these two events.

In January 1830 Sturt's party was approaching the Darling Junction area when a large and aggressive group of Aboriginal men made an appearance on one bank of the Murray. According to Sturt their bodies were decorated for war and they threatened violence with their numerous weapons. When another equally hostile group arrived on the other bank, placing Sturt's boat in a seemingly dangerous position between the two, he decided that it was time to disperse them - with some gun shots. However, before he could pursue this avenue, one group swam across the river to join the other, thereby relinquishing their tactical advantage, much to Sturt's surprise and allowing him to avoid the use of aggression. The Aboriginal group continued to follow, in the same aggressive mood and when Sturt made camp he tried to placate them from across the river. He finally succeeded in convincing them of his friendly intentions and distributed gifts to those Aborigines who had been first to accede to his advances. These gifts were probably seen by the Aborigines as payment for Sturt's trespass on their land and as Hardy points out as a part of the ceremony of showing good will. It is possible that the approach of Sturt's party had been preceded by news of the Europeans and their attractive gifts and that the interest shown towards them was produced by an attraction for European goods. However, it seems more likely that passing through an Aboriginal group's land without permission or first establishing friendly relations and providing payment in goods, was the cause of the aggressive behaviour shown towards Sturt's party.

Sturt was confronted with a very similar situation at the mouth of the Darling. At least six-hundred Aborigines, many of them armed males with body decorations, blocked the river by occupying a sandy spit which protruded into the water. In his journal Sturt emphasizes the aggressive behaviour of these people and their striking body decorations. As previously discussed, it was to be expected that large groups of Aborigines would be observed along the Murray in January and the Darling Junction was an important meeting place. The large group that Sturt encountered may have been engaged in ceremonial activities and only during certain times of the year would he have met with such a large group possessing the ceremonial leaders and social organization capable of calling upon so many warriors with which to confront Sturt's party.

Sturt organized his men to repel the expected attack and he prepared to fire upon the Aborigines. He says in his journal:

I took up my gun, therefore and cocking it had already brought it down to a level. A few seconds more would have closed the life of the nearest of the savages.

However, four ambassadors from the previous group arrived across the river from the aggressive Aborigines and one swam over and convinced them not to attack Sturt. The Europeans had escaped, once again, from a very dangerous situation and upon landing his boat, Sturt said that the Aborigines became very curious and aggression seemed to cease. Therefore, with the ambassadors or messengers to explain their friendly intentions and as Reynolds says, very likely bring word of the attractions of European goods, the way was prepared for a friendly encounter. However, Sturt refused to supplicate the elders of
the aggressive Aboriginal group, by providing gifts, and only rewarded his old acquaintance who had arrived to save the situation. This action created problems and resulted in an aggressive welcome for the explorers on their journey back up the river.

Violence was used on a number of occasions by Sturt; when he became impatient with the usual Aboriginal curiosity and their wish for him to remain and exchange gifts and establish friendly relations.

Indeed, in several instances, we were obliged to resort to blows ere we could disengage ourselves from the crowds around us, and whenever this occurred, it called for the most sullen and ferocious scowl—such, probably, as would be the forerunner of hostility, and would preclude every hope of mercy at their hands.

However, it seems that conflict with Aboriginal groups could have been avoided by Sturt, if he was prepared to follow certain rules of conduct. If messengers first took news of his arrival to the new groups that he came into contact with and he stopped to establish his friendly intentions through the provision of gifts, which may have been considered as payment for his trespass by the Aborigines, he usually received assistance and a friendly greeting. When he arrived unannounced, he was met with an aggressive show of force and if goods were not provided as an exhibition of friendship, then conflict could be expected to occur. Henry Reynolds provides an assessment of the attraction of European goods and the role of guides in the following passage:

But the attractions of European goods provided a powerful incentive to establish friendly contact and an awareness of firearms dampened enthusiasm for confrontation. The provision of guides was probably a deliberate policy to resolve the contradictory objectives of seeking access to the white man's possessions while hastening the departure of potentially dangerous sojourners.

Reynold's assessment of the attraction of European goods and the motives for the provision of guides is probably reasonably accurate, although, as he points out elsewhere in his book, the adherence to traditional rules of reciprocity was probably more important to the contact situation than the nature of the goods exchanged for access to Aboriginal land. If ignored or provoked, the tribal groups along the Murray were seldom scared to show aggression towards the European intruders, especially on Sturt's downward journey, when it appears that they understood less the potential danger of firearms. Sturt says:

Yet, I was often surprised at the apparent indifference with which the natives not only saw the effect of the shot, but heard the report.

On his return journey up the Murray, Sturt received a number of less than friendly welcomes - no doubt the results of slights to the Aborigines committed on his downward trip. He reports that somewhere on the Upper Murray in South Australia, Aboriginal women were used as decoys to try and attract his party to the shore, where, in the reeds armed warriors were observed waiting with spears. It appears from this situation that this Aboriginal group, had probably, previously experienced contact between Aboriginal women and members of Sturt's party. Near the Rufus River, on his downward journey, he reports that it was common for the Aborigines to offer their women to the Europeans. Women in traditional Aboriginal society were the property of their husbands and it was considered normal practice to trade their sexual favours for friendship or goods. Hardy incorrectly interprets this situation as a sign of the unfortunate effects of civilization:

It was clear enough that the Aborigines of the lower Murray were already on the downgrade to civilization, for they were diseased and repulsively dirty, and only too willing to trade their women to Sturt's party, had they found an interested customer. As always, Sturt strictly forbade this form of barter, knowing it for a potent cause of trouble.

Hostility increased as Sturt's party came closer to the Darling Junction area, and whenever the threat of firearms was used the Aborigines reacted in a cautious manner; often stopping their aggressive behaviour and retreating.
They had, it seems, learnt of the potential dangers of firearms and it was also clear that they had decided that the white men were not adverse to partaking in the pleasures of the flesh.

However, Sturt did not encounter as many people in the Darling Junction, Rufus River area as on his downward trip. This may be accounted for by the rainy weather he was experiencing, which tended to keep the Aborigines sheltering in their gunyas. Or perhaps, by the coming of autumn which meant the movement of some of the Aboriginal groups away from the river to areas like Lake Victoria where opportunities for fishing and other subsistence activities were better at this time of the year.

Sturt, during 1830, had been shown much hostility by the Aboriginal groups from the Darling Junction area and further down the river and he had often been close to engaging in violent clashes. He certainly did not leave the area on friendly terms and it appears that the Aboriginal groups had begun to understand some of the strengths and weaknesses of the strange white men, and developed a keen interest in their attractive goods.

Major Thomas Mitchell and his party were the next white men to enter the area dealt with in this study. On his expedition down the Darling in 1835, Mitchell was continually, in his eyes, besieged with curious and thieving Aborigines who sought too much from his person. As Hardy points out, he did not fully understand the obligations he was expected to fulfil, as an alien on Aboriginal soil and his men, who seemed to be engaged in using Aboriginal women without providing due payment, did so, according to Mitchell’s journal, without his knowledge. This would have led to incidents in which Aborigines seeking payment for the previously mentioned services, would have appeared to Mitchell as troublesome and greedy. Unlike Sturt he did the majority of his travelling by land, thus greatly increasing the possibility of conflict with the Aborigines. He did not have the convenient escape route provided by the river that Sturt possessed, and his party’s movements would have surely transgressed sites of particular significance to the Aborigines and totally off limits to strangers. Also, the livestock that he brought with him would have damaged water-holes and created an economic temptation for the Aborigines. It seems that these factors combined with his men’s disregard for Aboriginal rights and his own readiness to use force, doomed his expedition to a violent course.

Mitchell’s men clashed violently with the Aborigines during the 1835 expedition; at Laidley’s Ponds, an important economic and ceremonial meeting place for many Aboriginal groups. Mitchell felt that a group from the south east was behind the hostility - he had observed their arrival at Laidley’s Ponds. During the incident a lubra was killed by one of Mitchell’s men. This man’s explanation and the one provided by Mitchell in his journal, laid the blame on the hostility of the Aborigines and an accident of circumstance, which took the lubra’s life. Mitchell also suggested that premeditated cooperation was exhibited by the Aborigines and that his men’s inhumanity was a continuing block to friendly relations. He was particularly anxious to avoid receiving any blame for the matter.

Daniel Brock, in his diary, provides an alternative version of the Laidley's Ponds incident, which he obtained from an Aborigine of that district, during Sturt’s expedition into central Australia. He says that the blame lay entirely with Mitchell’s men, in particular, one individual who, when approached for payment in return for sexual favours he had received, reacted by killing the woman concerned and her baby.

The white fellow came up to her and finished his butchery by taking the child by its heels, and dashing its brains out against a gum tree; and then observing the natives (who were with the unfortunate female) crouching behind a tree on the opposite bank, he fired a volley at them.

Thus, the Aborigines who were never pleased to have Mitchell’s party in their country now had this violent incident to add to their grievances and revenge had become a high priority.

Mitchell made another attempt to follow the course of the Darling in 1836-37, however, on this occasion he intended to travel upstream from the
Junction. Before reaching it his party had once again clashed violently with the Aborigines; at a spot he named Mount Dispersion. He was convinced that from his entry on to the Murray he had been followed and harassed by the same Aboriginal group that he had clashed with at Laidley's Ponds and that they were seeking revenge for the previous killings. On one occasion he was told that this group was involved in the incident with Captain Sturt at the Darling Junction and that they had intended to kill Sturt. Mitchell was certainly doing his utmost to portray the Aborigines as the aggressors and provide as their motive a thirst for revenge. He makes the following comment after killings at Mount Dispersion had occurred:

Such was the fate of the barbarians, who, a year before, had commenced hostilities by attacking treacherously a small body of strangers, which had it been sent from heaven, could not have done more to minister to their wants than it did then, nor endured more for the sake of peace and good-will.

G.H. Birt later wrote about the incident at Mount Dispersion, describing the wounds incurred by two of Mitchell's "hostile barbarians":

...I knew of Dan's relatives that were shot by Major Mitchell's party where he made a scatter amongst the natives at Mt. Dispersion, one a baby at the time being carried over the river on the back of his mother got his hand shattered, his mother escaped without much injury, the other a young lubra had her foot shot...

Mitchell, according to a note left by him under a marked tree and discovered by Hawdon on an overlanding expedition in 1838, was surrounded by hostile tribes at the Darling Junction and had decided to end his expedition and return to civilization. He was afraid that his situation could become even more perilous during the drought season when, "the whole savage population" would be assembled on the banks of the Murray. He was leaving behind him, over a very large area, an unpleasant memory for many Aboriginal groups of contact with Europeans and no doubt many unfulfilled desires for revenge.

The explorers Sturt and Mitchell had both experienced conflict during their exploratory expeditions and from the information contained in their journals various patterns, in this conflict, can be observed. Sturt who was travelling by boat and without destructive herds of stock, created less disturbance on the Aboriginal landscape. He also discovered the value of establishing friendly relations with the indigenous inhabitants, using the provision of gifts or perhaps as the Aborigines may have viewed them, payments for trespass. When this situation had occurred messengers were usually provided to introduce the Europeans to the next tribal group. However, if this pattern was broken the Aborigines usually became hostile.

Mitchell's expeditions were characterized by conflict. He often, unknowingly, transgressed tribal customs and as a result was continually harassed and threatened. The murders committed by his men and the subsequent hostilities experienced by his party, clearly illustrate the strength of the convention of revenge in traditional Aboriginal society.

Chapter 1 : Notes


3. Ibid., No. 1 Sturt, pp.125-126.


7. Ibid., No. 1, Sturt, pp.138-139.

Chapter 1: Notes Cont'd.

8. The debate concerning tribal boundaries can be examined in: N. Peterson (ed.) Tribs and Boundaries In Australia (Canberra 1976).


11. E.J. Eyre, Journals of Expedition of Discovery into Central Australia and overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound in the years 1840-1 ... Vol. 2, (London 1845), p297.

12. Ibid., No. 4, p13.

13. The woman in question is Mrs. Val Power of the Ngarrindjeri People.


16. Ibid., No. 11, p379.

17. Ibid., No. 19, Hardy, p37.

18. Ibid., No. 4, p29.

19. Ibid., No. 5, Reynolds, Ch. 2;

B. Hardy, Lament for the Barkindji, (Adelaide; 1976), Ch. 2.

20. R. Lawrence, Aboriginal Habitat and Economy. Occasional Papers No. 6, Department of Geography, A.N.U. (June 1968).

Lawrence uses the accounts of early contact to determine seasonal land use patterns.

21. Ibid., p86.

22. Ibid., No. 11, p218.

23. Ibid., No. 10, p11.


27. Ibid., No. 1, Sturt, Vol. 2, p79.


29. Ibid.


34. Ibid., No. 30.

35. E.J. Eyre, Letter to the Colonial Secretary, 24th Sept. 1844. Forwarding dispatches from Captain Sturt..., GRG 24/6, D1085, Sturt dispatch, p9.

36. Ibid., No. 33.

37. Ibid., No. 30.

38. Ibid., No. 26.

39. Ibid., No. 19, Hardy, p35.

40. Ibid., No. 1, Sturt, pp104-105.

41. Ibid., No. 1, Sturt, p105.

42. Ibid., No. 5, Reynolds, p21.


44. Ibid., No. 42.

45. Ibid., No. 5, Reynolds, pp56-57.


47. Ibid., No. 1, Sturt, Vol. 2, p194.


49. Ibid., No. 5, Hardy, p37.


52. Ibid., No. 1, Sturt, Vol. 2, p199.

53. Ibid., No. 20.


55. Ibid., No. 5, Hardy, pp72-73.
Chapter 1: Notes Cont'd.

56. Ibid., No. 5, Hardy, p42.
57. Ibid., No. 1, Vol. 2, Mitchell, p270.
60. Ibid., No. 33.
61. Ibid., No. 33, pp50-51.
64. Ibid., No. 1, Mitchell, Vol. 2, p93.