RESISTANCE AND RETALIATION: ABORIGINAL-EUROPEAN RELATIONS IN EARLY COLONIAL SOUTH AUSTRALIA

ALAN POPE. PUBLISHED BY HERITAGE ACTION 1989. 150 PAGES.

Most libraries in South Australia have a copy of Kathleen Hassell's book The Relations between the Settlers and Aborigines in South Australia 1836-1860. This thesis, written in 1927 and reprinted by the Libraries Board of South Australia in 1966, is easy to spot with its faded and fraying brown cover and its pages somewhat grubby and dog-eared after almost a quarter of a century of handling. The sorry state of the tome can be understood when one considers that Pope's book is one of the few narrative histories of Aboriginal-European relations in South Australia to appear since Hassell's thesis.

Pope's book is essentially an analysis of conflict between Aborigines and Europeans during the first decade of settlement in South Australia. The author proposes a "six stage model of inter-racial relationships." The first stage is described as initial contact - "a time of confidence, restraint and considerable tolerance" on both sides of the frontier (p. 9). The second stage is described as a time of close relationships, ranging from simple friendships to inter-racial sexual relations and employer/employee relationships. It was a period, according to Pope, when both sides were educating "the other in their respective traditional customs" (p. 9). Following the breakdown of these 'second stage' relationships came a period described as the outbreak of violence, i.e. initial clashes such as the theft of stock. According to Pope, "Aborigines now called for more open and determined resistance" (p. 10). This brings us to the fourth stage of Pope's scheme, "determined resistance to the invasion and occupation of their land" (p. 10). The fifth stage, retaliation and revenge, involved both officially sanctioned violence against the Aborigines and vigilante retaliation by settlers. The final stage of Pope's model is "defeat and widespread acceptance of white domination" (p. 10). The six sections of the book deal with each of these stages in Pope's model of inter-racial relationships.

Retaliation and Resistance is written in a clear, engaging style and is obviously the product of patient research on the primary sources. Pope begins with a discussion of the liberal ideals espoused by the founders of the settlement and, through the exposition of his paradigm of inter-racial relationships, demonstrates the failure, if not the betrayal, of those ideals. By and large, I enjoyed Pope's narrative but I was not at all convinced of the accuracy or the value of his model, nor did I always agree with his interpretations.

Pope writes that Aborigines mounted "determined resistance to the invasion and occupation of their lands" and that it was "characterised by concerted attacks on the frontier settlers' lives and property" (p. 10). It is apparent that by 'resistance' Pope means violence directed against Europeans and their property motivated by a desire on the part of the Aboriginal people to drive the invaders off, or at the very least, to defend their country. This definition needlessly oversimplifies both the nature of Aboriginal resistance and the conduct of inter-racial violence on the colonial frontier.

One of the abiding problems in any discussion of inter-racial violence, especially in the early colonial period, is to establish Aboriginal motivation. Voices from the 'other side of the frontier' are rarely heard, often the best a historian can do is to analyse the patterns of violence, informed by evidence from other places and times, and aided by an understanding the way conflict was carried out in pre-European Aboriginal society. Pope, too often, deals with the question of Aboriginal motivation with unsupported generalisations of what Aboriginal people 'must have' or 'were probably' thinking. For instance, in discussing the shift toward more determined resistance, Pope writes:

Aborigines who had counseled cooperation with the newcomers, assuming that compromise could be
reached, now neither realised their mistake or were shouted down by more militant voices. They had been too trusting, too flexible and perhaps overly willing to adapt to the new situation. (p. 77)

Aborigines may well have been thinking like this, but Pope presents no evidence for it. The danger here is one of importing European notions. Evidence of what Aboriginal people thought about Europeans and explicit statements about resistance to invasion are not lacking in the historical record, but they tend to come from a period when settlers, especially the protectors and missionaries, were better acquainted with Aboriginal languages and culture.

It is important to recognise that not all Aboriginal violence against the settlers was resistance, nor was all resistance violent. As Aboriginal groups were increasingly denied access to their country, by violence and threats of violence, thefts of stock and property became acts of necessity. In the Lower South East of South Australia, as well as in Western Victoria, there are examples of local Aboriginal groups stealing sheep and then penning them in enclosures made of bush - perhaps in imitation of the settlers' stockyards. It is apparent that these groups planned to use the stock they had stolen as an economic resource. It is interesting to note in this regard that a missionary at Rivoli Bay recorded a local woman as saying she couldn't understand why the whites shot at them for taking sheep, they had always hunted the animals on their land and sheep were no different from kangaroos and emus (Smith 1880:41). It is clear that not all cases of sheep theft were motivated by an ideological desire to 'hurt the invaders'.

An examination of violence in the Lower South East also reveals a correlation between the intensity of inter-racial violence and the seasonal cycle of the Aboriginal economy. During the summer months many Aboriginal groups moved to the coast - a region relatively free of European settlement - to exploit the abundance of summer fruits, seafood and birdlife. Summer was a period of little inter-racial conflict during the frontier period in this area. During the winter months, the harshest season in the economic cycle of this region, Aboriginal groups moved to higher ground away from the coast and above the swamps. This brought them into close contact with the white settlers and inter-racial violence reached a peak. Again it is apparent that economic necessity was an important factor in conditioning the nature and extent of violence.

Aboriginal people also faced unremitting attacks upon their culture by government functionaries, missionaries and ordinary settlers - all arrogantly convinced of their own cultural superiority. Aboriginal people, especially the elders, fought hard to maintain their languages, important ceremonies such as initiation and burial, and beliefs. Aboriginal culture may have been devastated by these attacks but it was by no means destroyed. While white settlement may have denied Aboriginal people autonomy in their own land, to talk of defeat and domination (Pope's sixth stage) is to adopt a very narrow view of history.

Pope's book deals with Aboriginal culture only fleetingly and yet it is crucial to an understanding of Aboriginal-European relations. Aboriginal economic life, and the ethos that governed it, had an important influence on Aboriginal attitudes toward ration distribution and employer/employee relations. Aboriginal beliefs conditioned early attitudes toward the settlers and might have partly explained the relatively peaceful early period of settlement in some regions. The principles of kinship and exchange had an important bearing on inter-racial sexual relationships and the betrayal of those principles was one of the most important causes of frontier violence.

I am not convinced of the value of Pope's six stage model of inter-racial relations, it presents too simple a picture of a complex process. From my own work on Aboriginal history I recognise most of the facets he describes but I would baulk at presenting them in such a rigid fashion. In his introduction Pope himself states that the pattern he presents is 'oversimplified' and 'not as distinct in practice' as his outline would suggest. I think the book would have been much stronger had the author dealt with period chronologically and made his interpretations where appropriate.

I thought the strongest chapters in the book were those dealing with government violence and vigilante retaliation, they clearly illustrated not only the brutal treatment meted out to Aboriginal people who chose to stand up against the invaders, but also the relative impunity
with which it was carried out.

For too many years the significance of frontier violence and Aboriginal resistance was downplayed, if not ignored, by historians of this country. It is only in the last fifteen to twenty years that a serious re-assessment has been undertaken. Pope's book is an important contribution to this process.

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