George Dutton, 1964.
Photograph by Jeremy Beckett.

GEORGE DUTTON'S COUNTRY: PORTRAIT OF AN ABORIGINAL DROVER*

Jeremy Beckett

I first met George Dutton in the winter of 1957. I had come to the little town of Wilcannia, on the Darling River, in the course of a study of part-Aborigines in the far west of New South Wales. My assignment was to investigate their place in 'outback' Australian society. I had not intended to search for remnants of the indigenous culture; indeed, my advisers had led me to believe there would be none. But I found that there were a dozen old men and a few women who had been initiated, and I was soon devoting a part of my time to working with those who were ready and articulate enough to tell me something about the 'dark people's rules'. It was frustrating, time-consuming work, and I might not have attempted it had it not given me an occasion for being amongst Aborigines who were suspicious and more or less uncomprehending of my interest in their present-day affairs. I found, moreover, that it provided the basis for a closer relationship than I could achieve with any of the younger generation.

I had already heard of George Dutton when I was working on the Lachlan. When I came to Wilcannia everyone agreed that he was the man to see: 'He knew forty lingos!' They directed me to the outskirts of town where a score or so of scrap iron humpies stood scattered in the salt bush and mallee scrub. Some youths in cowboy hats and high-heeled boots led me past the wrecked cars, over the broken glass and rusty tins, to a rough single-room shanty, just big enough for the two beds in which he, his small son and two daughters slept. Dutton was sitting outside playing cards, a tall emaciated half caste of about seventy, his long, sallow face sunken with the loss of his teeth, under his broad brimmed stockman's hat. I stated my business, but he was unresponsive, saying he might come and see me tomorrow.

*This is a much revised and expanded version of an earlier piece (Beckett 1958). I carried out the initial research as a Goldsmiths Company Travelling Scholar. Later visits were funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. I would like to acknowledge a particular debt to Professor Russell Ward who, at the beginning of the project, showed me the manuscript of his *Australian Legend* (1962). Without it I should have had little understanding of outback history, or the Aborigines' marginal situation in the rural working class. I must also thank Dr Luise Hercus for comments on this piece and for allowing me to use some of her material. Last but not least, I must thank Myles Lalor, whose letters kept me in touch with George Dutton while I was overseas, and who spent many evenings talking over our old friend's career.

I felt I had been fobbed off, but he came. He explained that he wasn't going to talk in front of the young people because they only made fun of the old ways. He dictated a few myths and then drifted away to a poker school. Rather to my surprise, he didn't ask me for any money or even seem to expect payment. But I had to pursue him to get more. It took some time to convince him that I wanted more than the few folk tales that had proved enough to satisfy the tourists he had met before. Perhaps also it took time for him to marshal the knowledge that had lain so long untapped. I kept off ritual, having found other old men very reticent on the subject. At last one day, when we were drinking in the hotel, I asked him whether he had been 'through the rules', which was the way Aborigines in these parts described initiation. He answered non-committally, as I feared he would. But when we stopped by the lavatory on the way out he showed me that he had been circumcised. He then gave me a detailed account of the young men's initiation, though it was some time before he would discuss the higher rites.

As time went on, the character of our work changed. I was still eager to learn what I could about tribes that had gone undescribed, but I was becoming interested in the man himself and ready to let him take his own course. The culture was dead, but its exponent was alive and accessible. Much of his talk was about the country which he knew both in its mythological associations and as a drover. I had to send for large-scale maps to follow the tracks that the dream-time heroes — the *muras* — and he had followed. In the arid back country, both Aboriginal and stockman must be able to recognize landmarks which to others seem nondescript, and they travel slowly enough for each feature to make its impression on them. I have heard drovers in bars rehearsing each step of a route, remembering what had happened here and there along the way, as though they were Aborigines 'singing the country'. The country provided the link between George Dutton's life as a stockman in white society and his life as an initiated man in black society. For him at least it seems to have mediated the conflict between the two worlds.

George's country was not Wilcannia but the 'Corner', the arid country to the north-west where the three States meet. He had not been there for some years and we were soon seized with the idea that he should 'show me the country'. He also had the notion that we should find opals at the end of some *mura* track, since the old people used to say that opal was *mura's* blood. Unfortunately I had no car. We managed to get a lift as far as Tibooburra the following January, but that was as far as we could go. Even so, the trip was worthwhile. We saw a few of the places that had been no more than names till then. And though many old timers were dead, while others had left in the general drift from the region, there were still a few of George's generation with whom I could hear him reminisce and talk myself. It was not until several years later that the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies provided me with a

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land-rover to go up to Cooper's Creek. George was in his eighties by then and frail. I was half-joking when I asked him if he was coming. 'By Jesus Christ, I'm coming!' And he persuaded his youngest son to join us. Despite his enthusiasm, he found the heat and the journey grueling. With his failing sight he could barely recognize the drought-ravaged country he had not seen for forty years. At Innamincka Station there was not one Aboriginal where once there had been hundreds.

After 1958 I was caught up in other work and able to make only brief and infrequent visits to the far west, in 1961, 1964, 1965 and finally, in 1967. One by one the old people died, and each time I left him wondering whether I would see him again; but each time I came back he was there, thinner, coughing more and seeing less, but mentally alert as ever. His friend, Myles Lalor, who had droved through the same country and who took down many of his letters, predicted in 1964 that we wouldn't have the old man with us much longer; later he said, 'He's nearly died a dozen times but he won't give up'. George never lost his zest for the old stories, especially when he was recording them on tape. He was by now a seasoned informant, working with N.W.G. Macintosh, Stephen Wurm and Luise Hercus.¹ In 1968 I sent Harry Allen, a prehistorian, to see him, but this time it was too late. He was too ill, though he dictated a short letter: 'Me and Harry can't do much here now. I can't get around to help him along, but I'll send him a word when I get strong...'. He died in November of the same year, the last initiated man in the far west.

I found the same restlessness and love of travel among other Aborigines of George's generation, though none had travelled so widely as he. This does not, of course, support the notorious 'walkabout' myth. They had not grown up as hunter-gatherers, and I doubt whether they were much more peripatetic than white pastoral workers, whom Anthony Trollope had earlier called the 'nomad tribe'.² Though the white settlers exploited the country in ways unlike their Aboriginal predecessors, they nevertheless reproduced the conditions for nomadism, at least among the proletariat. The prevalence of seasonal and contract work, the need to drive stock across vast distances, the monotony of life on remote stations and the shortage of women, were all conducive to moving on. And the way of life acquired for some at least a certain glamour. There are Australian folk songs that are little more than lists of places where shearers have shorn or drovers have travelled.³ These conditions survive today only in the remotest areas, but they were still active when Dutton was a young man. Aborigines, in addition, had to cope with periodic official harassment, forcing them to move on or take flight.

More than others, Dutton responded to the combined pressures of white and Aboriginal society in his zest for travel. And in his old age it

¹ McCarthy and Macintosh 1962; Hercus 1970.

² Ward 1962:9.

³ Ward 1962:177-179.

mattered more to him than it did to others. Once when he was arguing with another man who had misremembered my name, he clinched the matter by saying, 'Dammit, I've *travelled* with the bloke!'

When George Dutton was born the traditional order still held; but it was breaking up by the time he reached maturity, and the memory of it died with him. Yet he was not a tribal Aboriginal. His parents' generation had already made the adaptation to pastoral settlement, grafting the institutions that they valued onto station life. They had, in Elkin's words, '... woven station activity and certain European goods into their social and economic organization and into their psychology without upsetting the fundamentals of their social behaviour or belief'.⁴

This adaptation appears differently according to whether it is viewed from the settlers' perspective or that of the Aborigines. Elkin sees the Aborigines as pursuing a strategy of 'Intelligent Parasitism'.⁵ The term has unfortunate overtones — doubtless unintended — and the notion credits them with more freedom of choice than they necessarily had. They were indeed able to use European resources to underwrite Aboriginal activities, but only because the arrangement suited the settlers.

In terms of the wider system we have what may be called internal colonialism, a regime that preserves traditional institutions in order to maintain a supply of cheap labour.⁶ The pastoral industry, in New South Wales as elsewhere, could not have survived recurrent droughts, recessions and labour shortages without Aboriginal help. Many stations supported permanent communities so as to be assured of a supply of cheap but skilled labour that could be taken on and laid off at will. Aboriginal women, for their part, provided domestic labour and sexual release for the solitary males who made up the white work force. Thus the pastoralists had nothing to gain and something to lose by disrupting their peons' ties to community and country, or teaching them the virtues of monogamy and thrift. Cultural difference obscured and legitimized exploitation; but at the same time it assured Aborigines of an area of autonomy.

When the *modus vivendi* broke down Dutton's people moved into the phase which Elkin has called 'Pauperism'.⁷ This refers to an indigence that is as much cultural as economic, a net loss of material and mental things, and a life that is wholly mundane. Also lost are the occasions for self-determination. Until they can reconstruct their identity Aborigines

⁴ Elkin 1954:324.

⁵ Elkin 1951.

⁶ I have applied Wolpe's model of internal colonialism to the northern Australian pearling industry and suggested its applicability to the cattle industry (Beckett 1977). In work as yet unpublished Heather Goodall, a graduate student in history at Sydney University, has shown its value in explaining the situation of New South Wales Aborigines into the 1930s.

⁷ Elkin 1951.

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are distinguished from other Australians by external factors: the colour bar and the uninvited attentions of welfare and protection agencies.

The transition is poorly documented and little understood. Ultimately the determining factors are to be found in the white sector, and there are many instances of direct suppression of custom, even of language. But sometimes the agents of destruction have been the Aborigines themselves, responding to diffuse and indirect pressures from within the community, as well as from without.⁸ Often, as in the far west, the decimation and dispersal of Aboriginal population have been crucial.⁹ But the dispersal must be understood in terms of changes in the rural economy of the far west, which were themselves reproduced in other parts of Australia. I refer to the subdivision of the large pastoral properties and the decline in the proportion of wage labourers to self-employed small-holders. In those parts of northern Australia where population has been neither decimated nor dispersed, and indigenous institutions have not been suppressed, the transition may not take place.

Although many anthropologists have worked among Aborigines at the first stage of integration, few have described them in these terms. Ronald and Catherine Berndt have given some impression of it in the early pages of their South Australian study¹⁰ and Mervyn Meggitt has stressed the settlement environment of his *Desert People*.¹¹ However, W.E.H. Stanner has given it the most direct and vivid treatment in his biography of a Port Keats Aboriginal, Durmugam.¹² In the far west of New South Wales the phase had ended at or before 1920 and there was no question of my observing it, but it was the setting for the early years of Dutton and his generation. By the time they were born Europeans had already settled the land, which may explain why none of them could give me a coherent account of local organization. Theirs was a world of sheep stations, wayside hotels and rare, dusty townships, but also of regulated marriage, bush camps and secret rituals.

During these times Aborigines had the freedom and occasion to travel further afield than their forebears. This increased mobility brought into contact tribes that had hitherto been separate. There were more cups from which to drink even if the contents were somewhat adulterated. The white sector likewise offered new experiences and opportunities, as well as restrictions. Some Aborigines made more of their opportunities than others. The half caste was perhaps better able to penetrate the white sector and, in this part of Australia at least, suffered no disabilities in the Aboriginal community.

⁸ See, for example, Berndt 1962; Stanner 1960.

⁹ Elkin 1951:170.

¹⁰ Berndt and Berndt 1951.

¹¹ Meggitt 1962.

¹² Stanner 1960.

Map 1

Distribution of language groups, western New South Wales.

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The names and location of the tribes of the far west are a matter of some confusion. Dutton's own account (Map 1) does not coincide exactly with that obtained by Tindale from field and documentary sources, and there seems to be no way of resolving the differences at this date. However, the general picture is clear enough. The tribes to the east of the Darling were linguistically and culturally homogeneous and may be classified together under the heading of Wiradjeri.¹³ They do not concern us here except to note that they differed from the people of the Darling and the country to the north and west, who may be classified as Bagundju. According to Dutton, Bandjigali, Danggali, Bulali, Wiljali, Wiljagali, Wainjubalgu, Barundji and Bagundji proper all spoke variants of the one language. They also employed the same kinship terminology which Elkin recorded under the name Wiljakali.¹⁴

The people of the 'Corner' — Maliangaba, Wadigali, Gungadidji and Wonggumara, differed again. They are mentioned only in passing by earlier writers and Maliangaba is the only group about which I could obtain much information.¹⁵ Though their languages were not like Bagundji, their kinship terminology and social organization were similar. But like the peoples of south-western Queensland and north-eastern South Australia, they practised circumcision and a form of the *wiljaru* rite. Elkin has classified them with these northern and western neighbours as part of the Lakes Group,¹⁶ but since some of the northern members of the Bagundji group also practised a variant of the *wiljaru* without cicatrizations (*jama* — i.e. 'clean' — *wiljaru*) one should be wary of setting up boundaries. Mythical *mura* tracks run from the Paroo to Lake Frome in South Australia, and from White Cliffs to Bulloo Downs in Queensland. Aborigines around Tibooburra travelled over into South Australia as far as Parachilna for red ochre and exchanged grinding stones with people on the Cooper. Dutton and other informants made little mention of contacts with the Darling River people, but this may have been due to the disrupting and decimating effects of white contact upon the latter, already advanced by the time they were born.

Hardy¹⁷ has documented the settlement of the far west in detail. Europeans began to establish pastoral runs along the Darling early in the 1860s. By the end of the decade the banks of the river had been taken up and newcomers were pressing into the arid areas to the north and west. By 1880 almost all the country to the State borders had been carved up into vast pastoral properties. Wilcannia was a flourishing town of substantial stone buildings, its prosperity based on its situation as a port for the river traffic which linked the region with the coastal cities.

¹³ Capell 1956:42.

¹⁴ Elkin 1939:43.

¹⁵ Beckett 1968.

¹⁶ Elkin 1931:53.

¹⁷ Hardy 1969.

But the backcountry stations were so far from such centres that they were obliged to be self-supporting for long periods. Stations that had become established and prosperous employed scores of workers, maintaining their own workshops, smithies and store. C.E.W. Bean, who explored the region before the first World War, described such stations as more like villages.¹⁸

During the 1880s, discoveries of gold in the Tibooburra area and of opals at White Cliffs created a brief mining boom bringing hundreds of prospectors, Chinese as well as European, into the area. The boom was short lived and towns such as Tibooburra, Milparinka and White Cliffs soon dwindled into tiny centres, serving the vast pastoral hinterland. Only Broken Hill proved to have the deposits to support a large scale permanent mining industry. With its more or less static population of around thirty thousand it has been the region's only city, though one which has offered few openings to Aborigines.

Here as elsewhere, settlement resulted in some violent clashes between white and black. Dutton had heard of several (see below p. 25) and Hardy has found documentation for many more.¹⁹ The settlers did not go out of their way to publicize such things, but Bean's account of events along the Darling is indicative: 'It did not matter who was shot. Every blackfellow that was killed was considered a pest. He would get you as soon as he possibly could ... The law at this time could hang a man for killing a blackfellow. But there was nobody to enforce the law if the squatters did not take it into their own hands'.²⁰

In the long run white settlement was incompatible with the Aborigines' hunting and gathering economy. Intensive grazing, interference with water supplies, and the shooting of game undermined the old mode of existence. But the Aborigines had become dependent upon European goods before they lost their access to wild foods. Their eagerness for such things as flour, tea, tobacco and sugar was as intense here as elsewhere, and as potent a source of friction as the conflict over land. In other parts of Australia the economy had no place for Aborigines, but the pastoral industry of the far west could make use of them. By December 1882 the newly-appointed Protector of the Aborigines could report that 'The males are employed by the squatters in the district, bringing in the horses and general knockabout work for which they receive food, clothes and tobacco'.²¹ Aborigines camped near the homesteads, providing a pool of cheap labour which could be tapped as the need arose, and expert knowledge of the country. Aboriginal women worked in the homestead kitchens and became the concubines and casual sexual partners of white men. An old white stockman told me

¹⁸ Bean 1945:73-76.

¹⁹ Hardy 1976:117-122.

²⁰ Bean 1911:259-261.

²¹ Protector of the Aborigines 1883.

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that 'All the jackaroos had two or three gins in those days, and if you looked cross-eyed at them you were sacked on the spot'. One can scarcely assess the extent of miscegenation at this date. Half castes were a sizeable minority in the Aboriginal population by 1915 (see Appendix 1). Persons with some European ancestry outnumber 'fullbloods' by approximately ten to one in the present population, but often both parents are of mixed descent, and miscegenation seems to have occurred less frequently over the last twenty-five years.

It seems unlikely that the 'station blacks' would have commanded much status or respect in the eyes of white people,²² but from their ranks there emerged a new generation — mainly half caste — who were not tied to the one station, but formed part of the region's itinerant proletariat.²³ They had been reared by their black mothers and ignored by their white fathers; in most cases they had been initiated, but they had acquired the manners and style of the white stockman. This is not to suggest that they became indistinguishable from their white work mates or that they were accepted on terms of equality. It seems unlikely that they could escape the pervasive Australian prejudice against 'mongrelization', but it may be that with enough 'cheek' they could achieve acceptance in the egalitarian setting of the roadside hotel and the stockman's camp. In Tom Collins' *Such is Life*, a novel set in the western New South Wales of the 1880s, the half caste is a sturdy fellow, as capable as any of treating his employer with cool insolence.²⁴ Neither employers nor workers confined Aborigines to any particular class of occupation. In 1911, Bean wrote:

... the Australian worker of his own accord regularly recognizes his obligation to the blacks, drawing a firm distinction between him and other dark-skinned people. Shearers who will not work beside a Hindoo or American negro, will work readily with an Australian black or a New Zealand Maori.²⁵

The New South Wales *Rural Workers Accommodation Act* of 1926, section 16 (I)(g), required separate accommodation for Asiatics and Pacific Islanders, but not for Aborigines. The old practice of serving Aborigines their meals 'on the woodheap' instead of in the men's huts had gone by the time Dutton began working, though it persisted up in Queensland.²⁶

By the 1880s, white population had increased and black population had declined to the point where Aborigines were no longer a numerical threat. There is no way of estimating the Aboriginal population before

²² See Ward 1962:186; Hardy 1976:183.

²³ Hardy 1976:199-200.

²⁴ Collins 1944:10.

²⁵ Bean 1911:264; also Ward 1962:122.

²⁶ Myles Lalor tells me that at least one station persisted with the 'woodheap' practice into the 1950s.

contact, but the first police enumeration for the Protector in 1882 reported a mere 561, including twenty-eight half castes, from the Darling to the Queensland and South Australian borders (see Appendix 1). Even allowing for some omissions, notably in the Paroo area, the figure could scarcely have exceeded seven hundred, which was less than the population of Wilcannia alone. It seems safe to conclude that bullets and disease had already accounted for many, and the decline continued as Appendix 1 shows. But for the moment the survivors were still able to hold ceremonies and marry according to the old rules. It was into this world that George Dutton was born.

Dutton was born on Yancannia Station some time during the 1880s. Yancannia, situated about fifty miles north of White Cliffs, was one of the first stations to be established in this part of the country. Aborigines had attacked it a number of times in earlier years²⁷ but now all was quiet. His father, after whom he was named, was a white stockman, his mother Aboriginal.

I don't know much about my father. I just seen him. They reckoned he was a good feller. He left me money, but I never got it. People wanted me to fight for it, but I never bothered. He was run over by a dray up in Queensland. My stepfather was living with my mother all the time. He reared me. Him and my father used to work together, they were great mates. Of course, a lot used to sell their women. My mother died when I was about seven. My old step-father and I, we travelled up into Queensland, two or three times to Cobham Lake, down this way [i.e. Wilcannia], through Wonominta. We travelled for the pleasure of it. The Gaiters [a white family] wanted me to go to school in Tibooburra. I was about ten then. My old father would have left me behind, but I didn't like it and cleared off after a week. This was all the education Dutton ever had. Looking back, he considered this action decisive: 'I might have been doing all right for myself now, but I'd never have known about the dark people's stories'.

This was his education during the next few years as he travelled about the country with his step-father who taught him all he knew. The old man was a Maliangaba. George's mother had been a Wonggumara, but he himself was Bandjigali, because he was born in Bandjigali country. Tribal boundaries did not restrict their travels 'for pleasure', but Tibooburra, Milparinka and Yancannia were the main centres. The station was his father's place of work and the two townships were in his father's tribal country. It was here, when he was about sixteen, that he went through the *milia* circumcision ceremony.

They were chasing me for a year before they got me. I was keeping away from them, working down at Connulpie. Someone came and said:

²⁷ Hardy 1969:141.

"Your father wants to see you. He's in Milparinka". When I came there they were holding a big meeting in a barn. I ran outside. "Don't try those bloody capers on me", I said. They told me not to worry. My father said, "Let's go down to Mt Brown". We set off, but there was a big mob following behind us. "What's happening?", I said. "They're going to put me through". "No", he said, "Don't worry, it isn't for you. You'll be *dalara*, you'll have to go back to Yancannia for that".²⁸ We camped and the other mob came up and joined us. The next morning they started a game of *gudjara* [played with throwing sticks] and every now and then someone would make a grab at me, but I was too bloody quick. "Don't try these capers on me", I said. There was another young feller, about sixteen, they were going to put through with me. I said to him, "Let's get away". We sneaked off early the next morning, but they followed us. "Where are you going?", they said. "Rabbiting", we said — of course we weren't. "You better come back, your father's sick", they said. We came back. My father was lying down and the doctor, the old clever man, was sucking things out of him. It was only a trick, he wasn't sick really. "I'd like you to go through while I'm alive", he said. Then my *malandji* [a male cross cousin who serves as the guardian during the ceremony] said, "You ought to go through the rules. I've been through". So I agreed. But they kept us there two months till a mob came down from Queensland.

I have published Dutton's account of the *milia* elsewhere²⁹ and I shall not repeat it here. As he described it, it was a solemn affair but revealed no mysteries. There was no attempt to terrorize the neophytes and the operation was painless.

When the two boys were released from their seclusion and had gone through the final rites, they set off for Queensland with some Wonggumara and Gungadidji friends. Years later the old man showed me the spot where they had been surprised by a station owner, eating one of his sheep.

I travelled from Cobham Lake right up through Milparinka, Tiboorra, Nerialco. We stopped off at the stations on the way. We were going up to Conbar where they were going to put a Bundamara boy through. It was like showing you how to circumcise so you can get your own back. They compel you to go. When we got up there they had him caught and everything. That night they had the singsong. They speeded things up. We sang the *milia* all night and put the feller through. We came home then, stopping round Nockatunga for a few

²⁸ Dutton's stepfather meant that he would be put through the Bandjigali initiation which, like that of the Darling River Aborigines, involved tooth avulsion and hair depilation. Dutton subsequently participated in these rites as an initiated man and recorded the songs for me.

²⁹ Beckett 1968.

weeks.³⁰ They had a big corroboree there. Then my mate got a job there. They asked me to take two hundred head of goats from Nocundra to Windorah... .

In these last few sentences we have foreshadowed the pattern of George Dutton's career for the next twenty-five years. He went through the *milia* around the turn of the century and from then until the 1920s he roamed far and wide, droving and participating in the ceremonies of the various tribes he encountered. Early in our acquaintance he insisted on my taking down a list of the places he had gone, the names of his employers and the work he had done. He dictated without a pause and had evidently worked it all out at some time. His account is interesting to follow with the assistance of Map 2.

I was working on Cobham Lake one time. I started from Cobham Lake in 1902 and went right off to Windorah. I got a job off Mr Hackett to go to Balkarara Station.³¹ We picked up a thousand head of bullock there and took 'em off to the Bluff [near Birdsville]. Then I left Mr Hackett. I took a job at Haddon with Mr Frew but he sold the place so I had to shift over to Arrabury Station and worked there with Mr Lindsay for twelve months, breaking in horses. I went to Farina with a mob of horses, with McLean the drover. I left him and went with Jim Sidi the Afghan, carting copper from Nunamudner³¹ mine with twenty-five head of camels. After I was finished there I came back to Nockadoo³¹ Station. I worked there twelve months. Then I left there and went over to Durham Downs Station, to put the horse paddock up. After I'd finished there I went to Orient Station to work for Mr Eastern. I left there and I came back to a place they call Nerialco Station to work with Mr A.C. McDonald as a stockman. After I was finished there I took a team of bullock on, working for the same station. Then I went down with fifty head of horses to Meningie in South Australia, other side of Adelaide. I left A.C. McDonald down there. I worked for the Council there for about three months. Then Mr McDonald wanted me to come back to Grasmere Station [N.S.W.]. I caught the boat at Meningie and came across to Adelaide. I caught the train there to go up to Broken Hill and took the mail to Carungoo Tank where the boss met me. I handled fifty head of horses for the sale and twenty head of riding hacks. I went to Nerialco Station and took five hundred head of cattle from there to Maree with a feller called Billy Hillston. I stayed at Finnis Springs for about eleven months. Then I got a job with eight hundred bullocks from Crown Point [N.T.]. We brought them to Yandama Station [N.S.W.]. Then we picked up a mob there to take to Cockburn and we came

³⁰ Nockatunga Station seems to have had the largest concentration of Aborigines in southwestern Queensland at that time.

³¹ I have been unable to locate these places on the map and it is possible that my spelling is incorrect.

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Map 2

George Dutton's country.

back to Yandama Station. I done five mile of fencing with another dark chap. I went from there to Mount Pool Station. I done six mile of fencing there with another dark bloke, friend of mine. Then I went to Eurithinna scrub cutting. Then I went up to Bransbury Station. I got a job off the owner, Mr Charlie Austin. We had two bullock teams, me and a feller named Ted Baldwin, and we came across to Yandama Station. We picked up eleven ton of wool there and took it to Broken Hill. When we were finished we went across to Langawira Station in New South Wales and picked up eleven ton of wool there and took it to Broken Hill. Mr Austin sold the teams in Broken Hill and took me across to Olary Down in South Australia, to pick up sixty head of poor cattle. I took them out for Mr Austin to Mootwingie Station — Mr McFadden owned it. From there I went to Polamacca Station. I stopped there two days, then carried my swag up to Tibooburra. I got a job on Yancannia Station. Then I went from there with a fellow named Tom Larkin to Lake Elder [S.A.] with two thousand sheep. I left there and I went back to Tibooburra and stayed there prospecting for gold. It was 1914 and I enlisted there to go to the war — me and a dark fellow named Albert Hebsworth. We couldn't pass^{3 2} so we went back to Nerialco and got a job there again with Mr McDonald. We both stopped there for twelve months. Then we parted and I went down to Finnis Springs. I did some dogging down there for about twelve months... .

For some reason, related perhaps to his marriage, he did not leave New South Wales after 1925, working still as a drover but mostly within a 150 mile radius of Wilcannia, which presently became his home. Apart from his one visit to the coast at Adelaide, George Dutton's country could be roughly bounded by the Flinders Range in the west, the Channel Country in the north, and the Paroo in the east, with the southern boundary running through Wilcannia and Broken Hill. This is all more or less desert country in which the oases are rare stations and even rarer townships, like Birdsville, Farina, Maree and Windorah. Broken Hill is the metropolis, but for stockmen a place of transit. Many of the stations named were Kidman property at some time, though Dutton never encountered him.^{3 3} For much of the time he was working the droving routes, sometimes called the 'Y', which linked the relatively lush but isolated Channel Country with the rail heads at Maree and Broken Hill.

It would seem that Dutton had no lack of employers, and his white contemporaries remembered him as a 'smart man', which is to say,

^{3 2} It seems that the Australian Army rejected Aboriginal volunteers during the early years of the first World War, though they accepted at least a few part-Aborigines later on. There is a story among older Aborigines that the army adopted this policy after the Kaiser had sneered at them for using black troops.

^{3 3} See Idriess 1936; Hardy 1976:195. Several of my own informants encountered Kidman and spoke well of his treatment of Aboriginal workers. According to one, he believed that Aborigines brought good luck.

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skilled in his handling of horses and stock. He was 'flash' too, with his clothes made to measure for him in Broken Hill and long necked spurs. He worked with Aborigines, Afghans and whites. A.C. McDonald gave him a state school boy to 'train up' for a while. He claimed to have had a short spell as a head stockman somewhere, and when a white worker refused to take orders from him the boss backed him up. He addressed the station owners as 'Mister', but this seems to have been the general practice at that time³⁴ and it didn't stop him from answering them back:

A.C. McDonald was a good old fellow, but I had a barney with him once. I'd just unyoked the bullocks for the night when he came and asked me why I was camping there. "I'm the bullock driver", I said. "Don't give me any of that talk", he said. I told him to go and get fucked and left him the next day, but we made it up later. He left Albert Hebsworth and me two blood horses, but we missed out, someone burned the letter.

It does not seem that Dutton made any lasting friendships among his white work mates. But during the years that I knew him, I never saw him more at ease than when he was among his old droving associates. Late in the evening when he had become a little drunk, he prefaced a contradictory remark with, 'Well, I'm only a poor old blackfeller, but...', to be reassured with, 'You're white enough for us, George'. But there were whites who would 'call your colour' in the hope of starting a fight. George recalled several such incidents, though he said he had never been directly involved. He said that on some Queensland stations they tried to give him his meals 'on the woodheap' with the local blacks: 'I told them if I wasn't good enough to eat inside I wasn't good enough to work on the place'. Initially he told me that he had gained his point, but years later implied that he had walked out.

Dutton's travels, though usually prompted and directed by his participation in the pastoral industry, had a dual character. The routes he followed as a drover were often those travelled by the *muras*, who had created the waterholes at which he watered his stock. The stations where he worked often had Aboriginal camps where he heard new languages and saw new ceremonies. 'I saw corroborees at Innamincka, Durham Downs, Cobham Lake. I started learning then. Only after I came back I started to learn our own stories'. In 1965 Luise Hercus met a Point McLeay man who remembered George Dutton, and said that he was a 'special mate' of Albert Karloan. Ronald and Catherine Berndt later used Albert Karloan as their principal informant, writing down the same myth³⁴ that Dutton had heard years before and remembered ever after.³⁵ But it was his time in the northern Flinders Ranges that seems to have been the high point of his career:

³⁴ Berndt and Berndt 1964:203.

³⁵ Hercus 1970.

When I went down to New Well [on Stuart's Creek Station, near Finnis Springs] among the Arabanna mob, they asked me if I was a *wiljaru*. "No", I said. "Have you been through the first rule?" "Yes". I told them my father and all my people were *wiljarus* and I had to go through then. They offered me a wife, wanted me to marry bad, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to marry from a strange country. Too far away. Too far for me to take her back to her own country to see her relations.

Although he used to say, 'Where I put my hat down, that's home', Dutton, like most of the Aborigines I know, could not consider living away from his own people permanently. Perhaps, also, he felt uneasy among strange tribes. He told me grim tales of *kadaitcha* men in these parts and claimed to have seen a man killed for revealing *wiljaru* secrets. He was amazed and disgusted to see Arabanna eating fat cut from the chest of a corpse, as part of a funerary rite. And when I asked him about subincision he just laughed and said, 'Bugger that game!' But he stayed long enough to master the language and to learn several of the song cycles, which he could remember more than half a century later.

When he was back amongst his own people he found he was a senior man. 'Two or three of my mob saw me lying down with the marks on my back. "He's a *wiljaru*!" They were pleased then and asked me to come out with them. Then they started singing the song in our way and I started singing the way I was taught'. This was about 1905, when ceremonial activity was drawing to an end in New South Wales with the decline and dispersal of population. The survivors, whether they had been through the *milia* or *dalara*, whether they were *wiljarus* or *jama wiljarus*, joined together. Which form they followed depended on who was running it. Whether as an innovation or by tradition, if a boy from one tribe was put through the rule of another tribe, the latter must reciprocate at a later date. Dutton thought that the last *dalara* ceremony had occurred about 1902 and the last *milia* in New South Wales around 1914. But there were still new ceremonies to see up in Queensland and over in South Australia, and he pursued them long after his other countrymen had given up. Speaking of one he remarked:

Yes, well, poor old bugger, he didn't know anything. He was my countryman too, you know, but he knew bloody nothing, though he was a *jama*. Now look, I'm the only man in New South Wales — and old Hebsworth that died up there in Bourke — we're two bloody half castes, but we been through more bloody *muras* than any other man. We went through the *milia*, through the *waradjeri* with the Jandruwanda mob; then he went through the *maragandi* — that was up on Bulloo Downs — and I went through the *wiljaru*. He beat me by one, and I beat him by one. It's like that song, "I've been everywhere..."

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Dutton saw his last ceremony, the *dulbiri mura*³⁶ at Yandama Station in 1925. By 1930 he was the only surviving ritual leader in New South Wales. About this time the Queensland Government removed the Nockatunga Aborigines to a settlement further east, thus depriving the region of one of its main centres. Everywhere the numbers were declining. He knew that somewhere to the west the life was still going, but too far from home where he now had a wife and children. He was married twice:

The first one I was just living with her. I met her at Nerialco. She was a fullblood, had three kids. I went with her about ten years. Reared the three boys — there's one living now up in Queensland. I came down to Gnalta to see my auntie [his mother's sister]: I always had to look after her and give her money. When I got back she had a kid. I said, "Fuck it, the father can have her". The grandmother was mad after me so I said all right. The man came back, but he said it was all right, he'd had enough. I went up to Nockatunga with this woman. Then I started taking cattle down to Maree. When I came back me and her had an argument — she was a terrible jealous woman, didn't even want me to talk to other men. So I left her and went off to Maree. She took another bloke then. My second wife was a half caste girl, born on Yandama Station. I'd just come back from South Australia in 1925 to see her father — I knew him, he'd come from Yancannia. Her father and uncle wanted me to marry her. She was booked up for me. I didn't want to, but the old feller said, "You better stop with us and help us out".

He stayed with this wife, having three sons and three daughters.

When George Dutton married for the second time the country was different from what it had been in his youth. Both the Aboriginal life and the pastoral economy had changed. The most dramatic change was the disappearance of the Aboriginal population. The decline between the first New South Wales police enumeration of 1882 and the last of 1915 (Appendix 1) is dramatic and, if anything, understates its extent. Dutton knew it well enough: 'At Polamacca in 1901 there was a big mob of blackfellers, two hundred men without the women and kids. When I went back in 1910 there were only two boys left and graves all round'. The 'Spanish Flu' epidemic of 1919 accounted for more lives. When we looked about the old Tibooburra camping ground, now occupied by one old couple, he recalled the two hundred who had lived there in his youth. When old Frank Miller, a Wonggumara, sang a *mura*, George wept to hear the names of so many who were dead.³⁷ But the final dispersal was effected not by natural causes, but by white people.

³⁶ Beckett 1968:458.

³⁷ Personal names were taken from those of sites along a *mura* track. A name thus brought to mind a place, a mythical event and a human being, living or remembered.

The sub-division of pastoral properties, already begun before the Great War, intensified after it in the soldier settlement programme. The small, family-sized blocks needed few if any permanent workers, and with the hazards of drought and fluctuating prices had neither the need nor the means to support an Aboriginal camp. Yandama Station supported a small community into the 1930s, but in the west, as elsewhere,³⁸ the 'station blacks' were becoming fringe dwellers or clients of the Aborigines Protection Board.³⁹ Hitherto the Board had left the Aborigines of the far west to the care of the station owners and the police, but it now began to extend the policy of bringing them onto settlements. As the depression set in, Aborigines who had supported themselves all their lives had to go onto the settlements because the agencies distributing unemployment relief considered them the Board's responsibility.

Economic hardships also brought about a deterioration in relations between white and black. In Tibooburra, where the two were about equal in number, tension became apparent in late 1934. A Mr Allan Angell wrote to the local M.L.A. asking whether it was compulsory to admit Aborigines to a registered hall, and to admit Aboriginal children to public school where they would be 'intermixed in classes of white children'.⁴⁰ The enquiry was referred to the Department of Education and the Aborigines Protection Board. The Department replied that Aboriginal children were required to attend school, but added that 'Their attendance at public school with white children is allowed by the department unless objection to their presence is lodged by the parents of the white children'.⁴¹

Early in 1935 Mrs J. Angell submitted a petition, with seventeen other signatures, requesting the removal of Aboriginal children on the ground that they were physically unfit to sit with white children in a small classroom, being subject to many diseases that whites did not have.⁴² In May the minister approved the removal of all children of Aboriginal descent.⁴³ But evidently Mr Angell had not intended that Aboriginal children of white appearance, from decent and respectable homes, should be excluded.⁴⁴ Several part-Aborigines who had been among the signatories were dismayed to find their children shut out along with the rest. A meeting of parents then requested the minister

³⁸ Hausfeld 1963.

³⁹ Hardy 1976:176,186,194-195.

⁴⁰ The correspondence is to be found in the Tibooburra Public School File in the archives of the N.S.W. Department of Education. I am indebted to Mr Jim Fletcher for bringing these to my attention. Mr Angell's letter was dated 19/12/1934. For a less informed account of the affair see Hardy 1976:219-221.

⁴¹ Tibooburra File, item dated 6/2/1935.

⁴² Ibid. 16/3/35.

⁴³ Ibid. 3/5/1935.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 28/5/1935.

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to readmit all children until the Protection Board could provide alternative facilities.⁴⁵

The Protection Board took no action until 1937, when Mrs Angell submitted a second petition, with nine other signatories, requesting either separate facilities for Aborigines or their removal to the Menindie settlement.⁴⁶ In April 1938 the Board responded to this clamour by sending a truck and forcibly removing the Tibooburra Aborigines three hundred miles east to the Brewarrina government settlement.⁴⁷ Dutton and his family were among those deported. His account of the place tallies closely with that of its longterm resident, Jimmy Barker.⁴⁸ The labour market was already saturated and employers preferred the workers they knew to strangers, who consequently had to live on the meagre Board rations. To a man like Dutton the situation was intolerable: 'I told the manager, "This is no good to me". "You can't go", he said. "I'm going to", I said, and we loaded up the turn-out straight away'. When he saw Tibooburra again George sought out the man who had led the agitation to have the Aborigines removed. 'I called him out of the pub. "You're the bloody bastard that had all the people turned out of their homes", I said. But he said he didn't have nothing to do with it'.

The Duttons were not the only ones to leave the settlements. Once economic conditions improved, many of those who had earlier lived independently moved off, if only because so great a concentration of Aborigines in one place ensured a high level of unemployment. However, Wilcannia now became the focus, both for the Darling River people who had been on the Menindie settlement, and for the people from the Paroo and the 'Corner' who had been on the Brewarrina settlement. Few returned to Tibooburra or the other townships of the 'Corner', which were all sadly reduced in population.

Wilcannia itself had fallen below one third of its three thousand peak. With the laying of the Sydney – Broken Hill railway through Menindie and the termination of the river traffic, it dwindled into a small service centre for the surrounding stations. Its own Aborigines had vanished long before, but it now, within a few years, found itself with an immigrant population of some two hundred, no longer on the decline but increasing rapidly. The government, having failed to draw the Aborigines to its new model settlement near Lake Cargellico, built a number of cottages, but sited them across the river at the insistence of the white population. The Aborigines soon tired of the black soil that turned to mud as soon as it rained and the periodic floods which cut them off from

⁴⁵ Ibid. 31/5/1935.

⁴⁶ Ibid., item undated.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 29/4/1938. The Tibooburra deportation was not an isolated case. The Pooncaira Aborigines were deported to the Menindie settlement about the same time and under similar circumstances (Pooncaira Public School File, Department of Education).

⁴⁸ Mathews 1976:154-160,212-216.

supplies. Many preferred to squat on the drier ground of the town's outskirts, even if it meant living in scrap iron humpies and doing without a water supply or sanitary service. It was here that I found Dutton in 1957.

Wilcannia at that time still depended on the pastoral industry, and most of the inhabitants were directly engaged in it. No one was obviously wealthy; the majority were working class. The main division in town followed racial lines. The Aborigines were pastoral workers too, mostly unskilled and in such casual contract work as fencing and mustering. A few were drovers, but motor transportation had deprived the drovers of much of their work in this part of the country. Although young Aborigines affected the dress of the mounted stockman, few had much to do with horses. The land rover had replaced the horse, and there was no scope for 'smart' horsemen. I found it hard to assess work opportunities. What was clear was that many Aborigines, particularly adolescents, were not working for a considerable amount of the time. During the late 1960s, when the far west was gripped by drought and the adolescent population had increased, there was no doubt about the lack of work. Subsequently unemployment has exceeded 70 per cent.

Black and white bought their food at the same stores. Their children attended the same schools. The Greek cafe was open to everyone. But Aborigines always sat down the front in the cinema. There was a separate lavatory for Aboriginal children in the State school and there was segregation in the hospital. A few young Aborigines played in the football team, but they could not join the team for a beer after the match because the law then forbade the supply of liquor to Aborigines. It was effective to the extent that it kept them out of the bars, but it did not prevent the back-door supply of cheap wine in large quantities. The police were never able to catch the suppliers, but they kept busy rounding up Aborigines for being drunk or in possession of liquor. I have described elsewhere the endless running battle between Aborigines who were determined to drink and the law whose reprisals set off renewed defiance.⁴⁹ It was a part of a general pattern of police harassment. The police in addition to their normal duties had to act on behalf of the Aborigines Welfare Board, issuing rations to the indigent, reporting on cases of child neglect, enforcing school attendance, dunning defaulting husbands and fathers for maintenance, pursuing vagrants and so on. I could not see the police records, but there was no question that the Aborigines were their most regular customers. As often happens, constant interaction had produced a sardonic familiarity between the two, but it was the kind of familiarity which allowed the police to enter Aboriginal homes uncere- moniously or sit with their truck headlights shining on a group talking, for as long as they cared.

⁴⁹ Beckett 1964.

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From 1943 it was possible for Aborigines to obtain a Certificate of Exemption from the disabilities normally imposed on them by the New South Wales *Aborigines Protection Act*.⁵⁰ The Certificate was commonly known as a 'dog licence', but a number of men and women had obtained one. Most of them, like Dutton, were old people who could not otherwise become eligible for a Commonwealth age pension. Since it was winter, we spent quite a lot of our time yarning round the fire in the hotel bar. The townspeople were not particularly friendly, but there was a motley collection of transients who would sometimes join the circle.

Later the government repealed the liquor prohibition in the Act, but the situation did not change much. As George said in one of his letters, 'It's open slather in the bar for the dark people and they are no better off as there seems to be more in gaol now than before'. After several riotous months the hotels established their own colour bar and George wrote: 'The pubs are closed on us again but we can buy as much wine and beer by the gallon and dozen at the store. It makes one think doesn't it'. In the end only one hotel served Aborigines and the publican issued and revoked his own exemption certificates. For the few who had once been assured of their rights the situation had deteriorated. George, thinner, bearded and ragged, may have seemed less presentable than in earlier years. He told me with bitterness how the owner of one of the other hotels had refused even to allow him to warm himself at the fire.

Had life continued as it was when he was young, Dutton would have been a man of some standing. Among his own people he would have been a senior man and a ritual leader. Among whites he would have been an 'old timer', or what is known in Australian country towns as 'an old identity'. In the event he was neither. He had tried to set himself up as 'King of the Darling', but such honorifics — hollow at the best of times — meant nothing to the younger generation, white or black. The Aborigines knew he could speak a lot of languages, but even if they could understand some of the languages themselves they were more embarrassed than pleased to hear them spoken in public. His stories of strange tribes and customs had no appeal. He tried to teach his sons, and one young man he had taken droving complained that George had kept him awake

⁵⁰ At that time Aborigines (as defined by the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909-1943*) could not legally purchase or possess alcohol, and under a 1936 amendment the Board had acquired power to remove campers to a reserve or managed station. The Aborigines' Welfare Board's 1952 *Annual Report* noted that Aborigines living off reserves were now eligible for Commonwealth unemployment and sickness benefits and age, invalid and widow's pensions, but these rights were not extended to reserve and station residents for some years. Exemption from the provisions of the Act, a policy change stemming from the adoption of an assimilation goal in 1940, was granted on an individual basis, ostensibly as a recognition of attainment of a suitable manner of life, but certificates could be withdrawn by the Board. In the far west exemptions were often granted to avoid the inconvenience of supplying Board rations to individuals dispersed in towns.

all night with his stories, but he could make no impression on them. Children fell into uncontrollable giggles when he sang the old songs. I would have expected him to take consolation among the few survivors of his own generation, but he did not. He dismissed them, sometimes unjustly, as know-nothings. He resented any time I spent with them and would ask, sardonically, whether I had picked up anything good. Often, too, he would dismiss them as *myalls* – timorous, unsophisticated black-fellers, unable to stand up to white people. Possibly, having at last found white people who would actively seek him out and provide an appreciative audience, he feared rivals. He relished the status of expert, frequently rounding off a recording with a remark like, ‘Now if there’s anyone who knows more stories than me, he’s a good man’.

Many Aborigines have the notion that anthropologists exploit their old people, extracting their lore for a few packets of tobacco and selling it to the newspapers for large sums. The notion is exaggerated, if it is not quite false. I gave George something when I could, more by way of a gift than as payment. He never asked for money except once when he was in trouble, and somehow a gift seemed a more appropriate expression of appreciation for his ‘helping’ me. Yet there were times when I wondered whether I was exploiting our friendship. I was reassured when, fairly late in our acquaintance, he told me how a white man, seeing us in the bar together, had suggested he was taking me for a few quid by spinning tall stories. ‘You know’, he said, ‘they don’t understand what we’re doing’. He had a mission to get his knowledge recorded. When he was dictating something he considered important, the sense of urgency and authority was unmistakable.

What Dutton considered important were certain rituals and myths. They were always connected in some way with the country. He had no interest in yarns about rainbow serpents and hairy men which the other old people told. There was no strain of speculation or mysticism. His delivery was matter-of-fact and his approach dogmatic. (An example of Dutton’s narrative style appears in Appendix 2). All the same, he did not lack feeling for sacred places. He adamantly refused to camp overnight at Mootwingie and prevented his son and me from finding the rock engravings there. Discussing his nominal conversion to Catholicism, Dutton said he ‘squared it’ with certain myths, but he attempted no syncretism. He was unimpressed by the attempts of his cousin, Walter Newton, to integrate the whole corpus of myths and restate them in terms of a battle between good and evil.⁵¹ Of Catholic beliefs he remarked: ‘Of course, a man can’t be sure; it’s only what you hear’. In one letter he wrote to tell me of the rumour that the people of another settlement had ‘turned

⁵¹ See Beckett 1958. Newton’s was one of the few attempts I have seen at syncretism. However, it does not get very far before encountering the problem of the geographical particularism of Aboriginal myth, and its absence in Christian myth.

Christians':

There is one bloke got bit by a snake down there. Well the first thing he done was pull out his Bible and started to read. At that the snake started to cough and the bite did not affect the man. Then there was an old lady looking after a child and didn't have any milk to give the child so she looked around and there upon the table stood a tin of milk... . Well old pal, if they don't hit the Lunatic Asylum shortly I don't know nothing. I don't think the God done anything for me.

He seemed to have no such scepticism about 'the dark people's stories'.

Whatever the old ways meant to him, Dutton clearly had an acute sense of cultural deprivation in the modern setting. Around 1927, when the old order was dying, he had been baptised into the Roman Catholic church, perhaps as a substitute. 'I like their way. Hymns were like the *mura* and the *guluwiru* was like God. I squared it up with the story of Crow and Eaglehawk...'.⁵² Despite his scepticism, he liked attending Mass. But he never went near the church in Wilcannia. He objected to the way the priest 'wanted to boss the dark people around'. Referring to the priest's attempt to check drunkenness, he tartly remarked that the man drank himself. In search of cultural variety he turned to the 'Ghans' and Chinese and, as they disappeared, the Greeks. He had found his way to the Greek Club in Broken Hill and loved to hear strange languages and customs discussed. But in Wilcannia he found life empty and featureless. His own people lived without order or meaning. Discussing the old ways, one night, he said:

The dark people take no interest in it, don't want to learn. And a lot of the dark people round this part of the country, Jerry, between you and I, they don't know what they are. They don't know whether they're *gilbara* or *magwara* [the moieties], you understand what I mean? That's how they come to marry into one another, but they don't know. All they know is how to read a comic. [At this point his son interjected, "Can you read a comic?"] but the old man brushed aside this jibe.] And furthermore, they don't know anything about it, they can't tell you. They go down to the picture show and have a look at the picture. Tomorrow you ask them what did they see? They couldn't tell you the story, what it was or anything, nothing.

One of his contemporaries had put it even more succinctly: 'They know nothing and they don't talk about anything'.

The reader may find a certain irony in an Aboriginal turning to white people to preserve the culture which his own people were rejecting. He knew well enough what the early settlers had done and the effects of white contact. Discussing a massacre near Wilcannia, he said: '... those poor fellers didn't know anything. They fired into 'em. They tried to get away but they couldn't. Just for nothing. Raped the bloody women,

⁵² Hercus 1970.

one thing and another, rode 'em and shot 'em as well. All for nothing'. He had heard of similar shootings round Tibooburra and Cobham Lake. I asked him if the settlers had used poisoned flour. 'Oh yes, round Coongee Lake, there's bloody thousands died there. Paddy-paddy water hole... . There might have been a bit of bloody spearing, and they had to defend their bloody selves, but no need for 'em to go on that far. They only had to shoot one or two and scare 'em. But they shot the whole bloody camp'.

In these last few sentences is evidence of the accommodation which had already set in when Dutton was born, not a sullen accommodation to superior force, but a recognition that the settlers 'had to defend themselves...'. At another time he remarked:

It's not so bad that the whitefeller came, but it spoiled the people. It made 'em ashamed to talk their own lingo, and marry wrong. They don't learn from the old people; can't talk their own lingo. Some of them can't even ask for a bit of bread or meat. They were better off in the old days, camped on their own, working on stations. They always had a bit of money. They knew who their aunties and cousins were. Now they got educated they think they're better than other people. They're always telling lies.

Even in this, he laid part of the blame on his own people: 'There was too much boning and poisoning'. And explaining the disappearance of *clever men*, he said 'The grog settled it'. Dutton, then, was not harking back to some golden age of tribalism which he never experienced, but to the time of the big pastoral holdings, a period of accommodation to white settlement in which his people still retained their own social order and cultural resources. Now the Aborigines had abandoned their identity only to find themselves in the position of delinquents and outcasts in Australian society. In 1914, when he volunteered for the army, there seemed to be a place for men like himself. In 1957 he said: 'These darkies have got no right to go fighting for the whites that stole their country. Now they won't let 'em into the hotel. They've got to gulp down plonk in the piss house'.

His view of life may have been soured by the sickness and family troubles that increasingly beset him. His wife had gone insane. His eldest son died suddenly, following an encounter with the police, and the old man spent all his savings bringing the body back to Wilcannia. It was the only time he asked me for money. Cataract was destroying his sight and he suffered from chronic bronchitis that several times turned to pneumonia. In the last years infirmity confined him to the settlement, where the only visitors were the police, no friends of the Dutton family.

Strangely, in the last year of his life he was able to re-establish contact with some of his old friends in South Australia. Luise Hercus, while working in Marree and Port Augusta, recorded a number of messages for

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him, recording his reply when she visited Wilcannia. She played him a Southern Aranda man singing the Urumbula (native cat) cycle, which George had learned at New Well. Between verses, the singer said, 'Tom Bagot singing now. The Urumbula. You remember, George?' George replied, 'Well Tom, it's a long time since I left New Well, and the time we had the Wandji-wandji corroboree, you remember that? You was a smart man and I was a smart man... I hear a lot of them went out to it, a lot of the people. That's one of my songs now, Tom, but I am getting very short-winded now'.

He also heard the voice of Andrew Davis, the Banggala-Gugada man who had been his sponsor in the *wiljaru*. Davis, with Tom Bagot, sang part of the Wandji-wandji cycle. 'That's the Wandji-wandji. George Dutton knows it. I put him through it. He knows. You get a big hiding in that corroboree, you have a rough time in that corroboree...'. George replied: 'Well Tom, I'm really glad you and Andrew Davis singing that Wandji-wandji corroboree and I am very glad to hear yous. I can't sing a song for you just now, but I'm very sorry to hear that Tom Marsh [a southern Aranda] went off. Well, some day we might meet again — course I'm crippled now, old fellows. Well, I'll say goodbye to you once more, Tom, Andrew'.⁵⁰

The European settlement of the far west brought about the cultural as well as material dispossession of the Aborigines. Dutton, however, grew up in a period of temporary respite, with his people continuing to regulate marriage, initiate young men and perform rituals, under conditions of cultural dualism. The settlers were now secure in their possession of the land, but still dependent on a reserve of cheap black labour. The stations of the 'Corner' region were big enough to support small Aboriginal communities, which served as the knots of the social and ceremonial network. The missionaries and school teachers who were suppressing traditional activities elsewhere had not yet reached the far west, and the pastoralists did not care. If anything they stood to gain, for the cultural difference facilitated the economic exploitation of black men and the sexual exploitation of black women. However, cultural difference did not mean an insurmountable social barrier. Some Aborigines, particularly half castes, were able to enter the ranks of the drovers and shearers and become 'smart men'. Nor did this require a drastic change in their identity, for in the fluid conditions of the frontier, work was the primary mode of identification, and the society made few other demands.

Dutton travelled both as a drover and as an Aboriginal. The country provided the unifying ground for this dual life, but the two perceptions of it were distinct and unassimilable. For the Aboriginal the land was an artefact that had taken final form through the deeds of mythical heroes: songs and ceremonies celebrated their deeds and gave renewed particular-

ity to places. The European's purpose was to change the country, which he saw as virgin: it was an economic resource, to be measured and bounded, but as yet outside the sphere of human action and meaning. His equipment for giving particularity to place was of the most rudimentary kind; often he took a native name that meant little or nothing to him.

This dissociation⁵³ of the two worlds gave Aborigines a defence in their accommodation to conquest. While accepting as they must the white man's law, they could also plead their continuing need for black-fellow law. Maddock has explained such two-law thinking among Northern Territory Aborigines as assertion of 'human equality and cultural value and of the need to remain in touch with one's past if one is to remain truly human'.⁵⁴

By the time Dutton reached maturity, the dual order was disintegrating. As Aboriginal life failed he tried to extend his foothold in the European sector, only to find that this too was changing. The depressed townships of the 'Corner', that had now become the centres of Aboriginal life, placed demands that many — the Duttons among them — could not meet. Officialdom moved in, and they began their descent into economic and social marginality, their only defence a self-destructive defiance.

Under these conditions, cultural dualism meant nothing. But with the arrival of anthropologists Dutton once again could proclaim its validity. He was not primarily interested in serving as informant: strings of seemingly unconnected questions exasperated him. He had his own message and his own way of communicating it. In showing us the country he was telling us who he was, and what his rightful place was in it.

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⁵³ Stanner noted the same dissociation in Durmugam (1960:96).

⁵⁴ Maddock 1977:27.

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APPENDIX 1

*Location of Aboriginal population in far western New South Wales,
1882 and 1915 (number of half castes shown in brackets).*

<i>Location</i>	<i>1882</i>	<i>1915</i>
Milparinka	152 (2)	33 (7)
Mt Gipps Station [near Broken Hill]	61 (3)	—
Tibooburra	187 (21)	17 (10)
Pooncaira	52 (2)	26 (4)
Menindie	—	21 (7)
Wilcannia	109 (—)	5 (—)
Torrawangie Station	—	16 (8)
Cal Lal	—	11 (11)
Broken Hill	—	5 (3)
Wanaaring	—	32 (9)
White Cliffs	—	13 (—)
	561 (28)	179 (59)

Sources: Police enumeration, by police sub-districts and stations, in the second report of the Protector of the Aborigines, to 31 December 1882, and in the Aborigines' Protection Board's *Annual Report* for 1915. No enumeration was reported for the Paroo region in 1882, although it seems likely that there were Aborigines living there. If this assumption is correct, the population decline is greater than the totals indicate.

APPENDIX 2

The bronze-wing pigeon, told by George Dutton

One time when the old pigeon came down — the *madi* they call him, but he was a man then — he came down all the way from the Bulloo right away down to Mt Brown. He camped there and he come over to Mt Pool. There was a big mob of people camped there, all mixed. Then a kid said: "Who is that skinny looking man?" (He was talking Wonggu-

mar.) He turned round and he said: "I'm only just travelling". An old feller said to him, "Come closer, make your camp". Anyway, he had a feed — they give him the tucker. "Good!" he said. (He was talking Gungadidji now.) He turned in that night. He took the water bag down. Then he said to the water: "Come this way, water". So all the water came in from three water holes into the bag and the bunyip too. He started off that night. When he got to Good Friday: "I think I will camp here". Then he went on to Tibooburra: "I think I'll camp here". Then he went on from there to Ngurnu. When the Mt Pool fellers got up next morning — no water. "Hey, get up! No water here. Come on, we'll follow that bloke". So they set to work and followed him. "Oh, bugger him!" Anyway, away he went. He went from Ngurnu to Jalbangu. He went from Jalbangu to Woodburn. Then he went from there to Tickalara. Then he went from there to Little Dingara. Then he went from there to Draja [Bransbury Station]. Then he went from there to Warali. Then he went from there to Graham's Creek. Then to Paddy-paddy, then just this side of the *Wipa* hole. He camped in the creek and made his camp there. He hung his water bag up. The snake started to move: he bust the bag. Then the old Bronze Wing away he goes and banks the water up so the water won't get away. Then the water washed the bank away. He tried to bank it up with a boom. "Ah, bugger it, let it go". It all ran into Paddy-paddy. He called it the *gugu* then. Then he went on to Madawara (*gidgee*) Creek. He went on from there to what they call *Wipa* hole. He left all his feathers at Widhu [Hook Creek]. Then he went up from Hook Creek to Walbinja and this is where he died. He's standing up as a stone, but the gold is away to one side.

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