'BEFORE THE INSTANT OF CONTACT': SOME EVIDENCE FROM NINETEENTH-CENTURY QUEENSLAND

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How much did Aborigines normally know about Europeans before the arrival of the first permanent settlers? The amount and nature of that information was probably a vital influence on Aboriginal behaviour and, as a corollary, coloured European perception of indigenous society at the 'instant of contact'.¹ But as with any question about the far side of the frontier this is difficult to answer conclusively. Existing evidence is scattered and inadequate and while oral history may uncover new sources of information much of it will relate to the twentieth century and the more remote parts of the continent. This paper considers material about nineteenth century Queensland found in the accounts of castaway or runaway Europeans, explorers, pioneer settlers and the early ethnographers.

We know that Aboriginal groups were using European commodities long before the arrival of pioneer settlers, a fact confirmed by many accounts of explorers and frontier squatters. Thus on his expedition into Central Queensland in 1846 Mitchell noted the dissemination of steel axes. 'Even here', he wrote on the Belyando, 'in the heart of the interior on a river utterly unheard of by white men, an iron tomahawk glittered on high in the hands of a chief'.² Lumholtz, who lived with the Aborigines in the Herbert River hinterland in the 1880s, observed how sought after steel axes were. He also remarked that tobacco was bartered over long distances, wrapped in leaves, and was therefore 'known among remote tribes who have never themselves come into contact with Europeans'.³ While on his expedition into Cape York Robert Jack noted how 'the natives fashion, with infinite pains, such unconsidered trifles of old iron as shovels, broken pick heads, scraps of iron hoops, ship's bolts, telegraph wires, nails, cartwheel tires, and the like into weapons and implements'.⁴ A North Queensland pioneer referred to spears and many other steel tools which the blacks kept in 'a wonderful state of sharpness, and have fitted to handles in a very neat and artistic manner'.⁵ Other writers mentioned such 'transitional' artifacts as shear blades sharpened at both edges with handle affixed, spears edged with bottle glass chips let into grooves, axes made from old

¹ Birdsell 1970:130.

² Mitchell 1848:325.

³ Lumholtz 1889.

⁴ Jack 1881:239.

⁵ Palmer, *Queenslander*, 31 January 1873.

horse shoes, three pronged fishing spears barbed with sail needles, wooden clubs studded with iron nails. But clearly material objects were not the only things which were passed back beyond the frontier of European settlement.

In traditional society words, ceremonies and information were exchanged over wide areas of the continent. Ethnographers like Howitt and Threlkeld described the role of the tribal messengers, 'their living newsmongers',⁶ who quickly conveyed information from tribe to tribe. Writing of north-western Queensland Roth explained how

ideas are interchanged, superstitions and traditions handed on from district to district, and more or less modified and altered in transit... new words and terms are picked up, and... corroborees are learnt and exchanged just like any other commodities.⁷

But is there any direct evidence of the passage of information about Europeans?

In the earliest period of contact Europeans were often thought to be spirits returned from the dead.⁸ This was especially true when whites arrived from the sea. But as settlers pushed back the land frontier this belief was rapidly dispelled: pastoralists and their servants were only too corporeal. Bracewell, the convict escapee, reported that in 1842 there was a large meeting of Aborigines from a wide area of south-east Queensland, many with no direct experience of Europeans. Aborigines from the south

made mention of a great number of Blacks belonging to different Tribes... perhaps 30 men, women and children, having died in consequence of food given them by white men at a station in the mountains where there were many sheep, horses and a tent: They described the following symptoms with minuteness: swelling of the head, foaming at the mouth, violent retching... trembling of the limbs and sudden prostration.⁹

James Morrill, who lived for seventeen years with the Aborigines of the Townsville-Bowen region, described the way in which news of the Europeans passed back and forth among North Queensland Aborigines before settlement overflowed across the Kennedy district in the early 1860s. As soon as Morrill and his fellow castaways began to pick up the local language they were told that news of their unexpected arrival had already been disseminated widely and that when the dry season came 'a great many other tribes' were coming to see them.¹⁰ During the 1850s information about several European expeditions reached Morrill,

⁶ Gunson 1974:I, 48; see also Howitt 1904.

⁷ Roth 1897:136.

⁸ Evans and Walker 1977:39-42.

⁹ Return of Mr Petrie from excursion to the North (N.S.W. Col. Sec. 42/4284).

¹⁰ Morrill 1863:12.

for he found that 'news soon spreads from tribe to tribe'. From 1850 to 1860, he wrote,

before the whites commenced destroying the blacks indiscriminately, the northern tribes were very well disposed towards the whites. In 1855 it was reported among the tribe I was with, that a party of whites were to the north... . About six months after this I heard of another party of whites; they were said to be to the North-West of Mount Elliot, half way between that and the Gulf, and were described as having a large number of horses and cattle.¹¹

About three years before he was 'discovered' by two frontier shepherds, Morrill heard from a distant tribe information about a white man who had been seen with two horses. The interloper fired in amongst a mortuary party, killing one young man, but was subsequently lured from his horse and killed in turn by the avenging Aborigines. Another report followed, concerning further killings by a group of both white and black men on horseback. When the news arrived Morrill was told about the saddles for the men to sit in, the stirrups and bridles, about guns, and the noise and smoke they made when fired. Information reached Morrill with increasing frequency as the wave of settlement washed closer. He remarked that from this time forward he received almost daily reports of the whites:

I shortly after heard of the cattle being on the river in great numbers, and of a man being on horseback with a stock-whip which he cracked, and they thought it was a gun. They saw him get off the horse and drink some water with his hands, but the water being hot, he scraped the sand aside and got some cool water; a little black dog was with him lying on the sands.¹²

Barbara Thompson, a castaway contemporary of Morrill, reported a similar rapid dissemination of information about Europeans in the Cape York-Torres Strait area, where 'news went at once throughout the islands'.¹³ John Jardine, writing from the Somerset settlement, confirmed her testimony. 'The communication', he wrote,

between the islanders and the natives of the mainland is frequent, and the rapid manner in which news is carried from tribe to tribe to great distances is astonishing. I was informed of the approach of "HMS Salamander" on her last visit two days before her arrival here. Intelligence is conveyed by means of fires made to throw smoke up in different forms, or by messengers who perform long and rapid journeys.¹⁴

Howitt made similar observations in the opposite corner of the colony. While camped on the Barcoo in 1861 he found that messengers from up

¹¹ Morrill, *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 1 July 1865.

¹² Morrill 1863:15.

¹³ Moore n.d.:99.

¹⁴ Byerley 1867:85.

to 150 miles away had on several occasions arrived to inform the local Aborigines about the progress of McKinlay's contemporaneous expedition:

The first reported that he was surrounded by flood waters, and, after some time, that the waters had fallen and that he had "thrown away" his cart, and was gone northwards they knew not where. These messengers came from the tribe living where Birdsville is situated. The account given on McKinlay's movements was correct... This shows how news is carried from one tribe to another, in this case for a distance of about a hundred and fifty miles at least.¹⁵

Roth found that the blacks from Glen Ormiston in the north-west knew all about the central telegraph line three hundred or so miles away to the west.¹⁶ Archibald Meston, an enthusiastic collector of Aboriginal oral history, met an old man near Townsville in 1881 who related how news of an expedition (Meston assumed Kennedy's) had come down the coast from Cardwell many years before. His informant was able to relate precise details about the party, including the number of men, horses, sheep, drays and dogs.¹⁷

Other relevant scraps of evidence can be adduced. Explorers and pioneers often found that previously uncontacted Aborigines knew about and were terrified of guns, a fact corroborated by oral testimony collected by Dick Roughsey on Mornington Island. His father heard of guns well before he had seen any Europeans. Mainland Aborigines related how 'these white people could kill a man with thunder that sent down invisible spears to tear a hole in his body and spill his blood in the sand'.¹⁸ Recent linguistic studies suggest an early spread of information about guns. The word *markin* or *makini*, derived from musket, was used over a wide area of Queensland, by the Gugu Badhun in the Upper Burdekin, the Dyirbal in the northern rainforest, the Kalkatungu of the Mount Isa region and the Budjara of the Charleville area.¹⁹ Thomas Mitchell and the pioneer pastoralist Alan Macpherson both reported from southern Queensland that Aborigines with no previous direct contact used the words 'white-fellow' when talking among themselves, along with such pidgin terms as 'wheelbarrow' for dray and 'yarraman' for horse.²⁰ Leichhardt found that Aborigines on the Comet uttered a cry, on seeing the explorers, resembling the word 'whitefellow, whitefellow'.²¹

¹⁵ Howitt 1904:685.

¹⁶ Roth 1897:136.

¹⁷ Meston 1893.

¹⁸ Roughsey 1971:13.

¹⁹ Personal communication with Peter Sutton.

²⁰ Mitchell 1848:185, 270; MacPherson 1897:14.

²¹ Leichhardt 1847:90.

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Many Aboriginal groups would have had experience of European animals which strayed out beyond the frontiers of white settlement. Morrill described how four stray cows were seen in his district but his kinsmen obviously examined the arrivals with the keen observation of the hunter-gatherer. They showed him the tracks and described the teats, big ears and horns. Morrill

questioned them about them; they said three had teats and one had none... I told them they were what we ate, and they chaffed me about the great size, long tails, big ears and horns.²²

Previously uncontacted Aborigines were often terrified of horses but in some places they appear to have had prior knowledge of them, either from direct experience with stray animals or by means of information passed on from groups in contact with Europeans. Mitchell noted this when on the Belyando in 1846. 'It was', he wrote, 'remarkable that on seeing the horses they exclaimed "Yarraman", the colonial natives name for a horse, and that of these animals they were not at all afraid'.²³ The Dyirbal people of North Queensland tell a story relating to their ancestors' discovery of a stray horse. Though awed by the animal's size they eventually killed it, closely examined it, and then experimentally cooked and ate some of the flesh.²⁴

Aborigines were often made rapidly aware of the ecological impact of the exotic animals. Morrill's tribesmen described to him how a herd of cattle had drunk all the water in a favourite water-hole and that they had been too frightened to dash forward and pick up the stranded fish.²⁵ Mitchell made similar observations. With an Aboriginal guide he was looking for small secluded waterholes only to find that they had been trampled into hard clay by a herd of cattle. 'Thus it is', he mused, 'that the aborigines first became sensible of the approach of the white man'.²⁶

With settlers establishing themselves the Aborigines appear to have often adopted a policy of cautious surveillance. A Crown Lands Commissioner noted on a journey along the Dawson Valley that his camp was 'occasionally visited and watched by natives prowling about secretly in the middle of the night'.²⁷ It seems that old women or children were often sent to spy on the Europeans on the assumption that they would arouse less suspicion. Morrill related that with the arrival of the first party of settlers old women were despatched to watch the newcomers. They returned with a detailed report:

²² Morrill 1863:14.

²³ Mitchell 1848:270.

²⁴ Tape 12a, Murray Upper, Oral History Collection, History Department, James Cook University.

²⁵ Morrill 1863:15.

²⁶ Mitchell 1848:69.

²⁷ W.H. Wiseman to Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands, 5 January 1865 (QSA, CCL, 7/61).

They brought word back that there was a large hut, and that they had seen red and white blankets hanging on the stockyard fences and heard a dog bark, and an old sheep bleating tied to a tree, they also heard the report of a gun twice, but could not see where it came from.²⁸

Accounts of explorers and pioneers contain many reports of sudden and unexpected meetings with small groups of blacks. Perhaps the Aborigines concerned were less surprised by such encounters than the whites imagined.

White-Aboriginal relations did not begin anew in every district despite the pioneers' widespread perception about entering an untouched wilderness. European commodities had preceded the bullock dray along with information about the settlers' weapons and behaviour. Aborigines responded to the newcomers armed with knowledge and expectations about them. Any interpretation of the contact situation must keep this fact constantly in mind. Serious doubt must also be cast on the value of projects which aim to collate reports of explorers and pioneers in order to reconstruct a picture of traditional society as it was at the instant of contact. Aborigines were almost certainly aware of the approach of overlanding parties and reacted in advance to the intrusion with clans scattering to avoid contact or coalescing from fear, or curiosity, or a desire for European goods. It seems most unlikely that accounts of explorers and frontiersmen will provide, as Birdsell has argued, 'valid materials about group size under specified circumstances of place and season'.²⁹ We must seriously ask if encroaching Europeans were ever able to examine Aboriginal society in its pristine condition, to observe things as they would have been if they themselves had not been there.

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²⁸ Morrill 1863:16.

²⁹ As projected by Birdsell and Stanner (Birdsell 1970:130, 136).

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