A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WESTERN FRONTIER: OR 'I MET A MAN WHO WASN'T THERE . . .'

Sylvia J. Hallam

Meetings between different Australian communities were, before the coming of Europeans, (and remain for Aboriginal Australians) highly structured affairs, with elements of ceremonial preparedness for conflict, formal peacemaking, reciprocal exchange of gifts, and sometimes actual conflict and resolution of conflict. The formal rules for the conduct of these public displays are structured by relationships between kin. Different age-grades have different roles, and male and female have different roles. Before strangers can approach each other, it is essential that each person knows where he or she stands relative to other individuals in these matters. The conduct of meetings between those who are not habitually in face to face contact seems to follow similar patterns all over Australia. It is part of a pan-Australian patterning, so that each party to an encounter knows what types of responses to expect, how to interpret them and the appropriate modes of reaction.¹

The European intruders must have caused bewilderment and consternation by totally inappropriate actions and sequences of reactions. I propose to examine a number of encounters, and to view them, as far as possible in the light of *Australian* (i.e. Aboriginal) expectations, and examine the extent to which Europeans met or fell short of those expectations, or reacted in inexplicable ways that lay outside the appropriate public structures for conflict or accord. My examples will be drawn from the southwest of the continent during the years when Aborigines were becoming increasingly aware of more and more intrusive groups regularly moving through and into their territory.

I begin with an account of an encounter between Aboriginal groups (although in the presence of European observers), which gives some of the dimensions of expectation. Although this meeting is from a different area and time, many elements of this fuller account are repeated in the more fragmentary accounts from the southwest, enabling us to fit those fragments into a wider synthesis.

A MODEL FOR MEETINGS

Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen were with an Arunta community near Alice Springs in 1901. They give a fascinating picture, in words and photographs, of an encounter which can serve as an archetype for the elements of such meetings:

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¹ See Sansom 1983.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WESTERN FRONTIER

... just at midday word came that a mob of strange natives was coming up. There was much excitement in the camps as strange natives may mean a big row. As usual when coming in to foreign territory the strangers sat down some distance off down the creek until they were invited to approach by one or two of the men of the camp.

After about half an hour, during which time no notice had apparently been taken of the visitors, though, in reality, the local men had provided themselves with their weapons and gone to the spot where visitors were received, one or two of the older local men went to them, squatted down on the sand in front of them, and invited them to come up. After being thus invited they formed themselves into a solid square and approached at a fairly quick run, every man with his spear aloft and all of them adopting the curious high knee-action.

Then they came up — about 30 of them — all toggled up with decorations — great bunches of eagle hawk feathers stuck into their waist belts in the small of their backs, flaked sticks in their hair and each man carrying spears, boomerangs and spear throwers . . . they approach[ed] a small gap in the hills leading on to the open space. First of all one or two old women came out and began dancing about wildly in front of them, then two men armed with spears and shields appeared over the top of a low hill, standing out sharply against the sky and brandishing their long spears. Then the men in camp here came out and fell into line with the visitors and all of them came into the open space at a quick run and . . . like a regiment of soldiers danced wildly along brandishing their spears and boomerangs and led by one man who pranced along in front.

For a few minutes nothing was done or said, and all this time the local people, men, women and even children, were gathering on the ceremonial ground. Then without a word the leader of the visitors went round his party, collected all the flaked sticks from their heads — every man had two and some three and four — and solemnly presented them to the head man of the local group. This was a sign that the visit was meant to be purely a friendly one. The head man made a fire and at once burnt them.

... One of the local men had accused one of the visitors of having killed his brother some years ago . . . The accused man stood up with his shield and the other man hurled three boomerangs at him one after the other. The former did not attempt to retaliate but stood still warding the boomerangs off with his shield, but one of them shattered this and wounded him in the arm, whereupon justice being satisfied some of the old men interfered and stopped the encounter.²

A number of critical features emerge from this account:

1. The meeting is at least partially pre-arranged. The visitors are decked out in finery; their hosts expect them.
2. The encounter is between groups who know each other or know of each other (one of the local men will later accuse one of the visitors of having killed his brother, etc.). The proponents thus stand in defined kin and classificatory relationships to each other. But the meeting is a rare and special occasion.

² Baldwin Spencer, in Mulvaney 1982:42-46.

3. At first the visitors sit quietly at a distance, and for half an hour their hosts ignore them. The event is to be public and ceremonious, in an open space, and it cannot begin until an audience is ready to attend the proclamation.

4. It would follow that if the encounter were not properly arranged; or the hosts chose to continue to ignore the approach of the strangers; or the two groups were so distant they could not know the appropriate relationships and behaviour, then real meeting could not occur. A meeting is an event, a staged event. A chance encounter cannot become an event without deliberation. If two groups do not know how to behave to each other, they can either ignore one another, or owners may resist encroachment on their territory, or take advantage of the strangers to exact retribution for a death.

5. The entire proceedings are formalised, ritualised, ceremonious — a staged drama. The strangers advance in formation, with choreographed motions. And both visitors and hosts join in the movement.

6. The meeting revolves around the recognition by all concerned of the authority and status of the dignified old men who take leading parts in the conduct of proceedings. (Old women may also play a leading role.)

7. The possibility of conflict is inevitably present when strange groups meet. The formalised proceedings are designed to resolve conflict symbolically (for example, the destruction of the 'flaked sticks' indicating willingness to fight). Conflict may nevertheless occur, but there are formal mechanisms to keep violence within strict limits — in this case verbal abuse; then a fight in which the defendant does not retaliate, and the old men intervene once a minor injury has been inflicted and honour satisfied. The young men's role is to be prepared for conflict and indeed invite it, so that antipathies may be resolved and they may exhibit their prowess in defence of the group.

8. The defence of family and rights in territorial resources are central concerns, and potential conflict can become actual if these are seriously threatened.

9. If meetings are properly conducted they create reciprocal obligations, and may lead to amicable arrangements for land usage and exchange of goods, and marriage ties.

I shall examine the recurrence of some or all of these features in meetings in the southwest before 1850, following a logical rather than a chronological order.

MEETINGS IN THE SOUTHWEST

Invitation to approach: protocol and intermediaries

Pre-arranged encounters between Aboriginal landholders and European visitors only became a possibility once Europeans had established a foothold in the southwest and their presence had become known to neighbouring groups, who could assess the potential benefits of amity, and risks of enmity, with the new-comers. Early accounts reveal Aborigines staging, or attempting to stage, formal meetings with these strangers, who often show little appreciation of the honour proffered. Some Europeans, however, showed more empathy than others to the nuances of Aboriginal intentions. From the accounts of George Fletcher Moore, Sir George Grey and Bishop Salvado we can gain insights which other less sensitive writers lack. All the encounters are concerned, as was Baldwin Spencer's Arunta ceremony, with reaffirming rights to land, defusing or

or actualising potential conflict and hostility, and establishing links of reciprocal obligations and amity.

A most sophisticated Aboriginal appreciation of European intentions occurs in 1835 when Weeip, of the Aboriginal group based on the Upper Swan area, accompanied George Fletcher Moore's reconnaissance party seventy kilometres northward, where Moore and his neighbour Lennard were to take up grants. Weeip had kin ties with a group centred on the locality where 'Lennard's Brook' emerges from the hills, an area rich in yams and supporting intensive Aboriginal usage. Weeip had clearly described this to Moore as fertile land; and conversely had told his Aboriginal kin of access through settlers to the new plant food, wheat, and wheaten flour. Moore was already known to some of the northern group, who had encountered him in his previous expeditions up the Chittering Valley and along the Brockman River. People were gathering to greet the visitors. 'Natives began to arrive and their numbers continued to increase until they amounted to nearly one hundred, men, women and children'. They were gathering for a formal meeting like Spencer's Arunta ceremony: '... all appeared pleased to see us; but it must be confessed that their pleasure seemed mixed up with the idea of sharing our provisions', recounts Moore.

As the European visitors examined the soils of the area with a farmer's eye, they were offered food:

"Gigat" invited us to eat some "Baio" along with him. This fruit, which is esteemed by them as a great delicacy, is the red-skinned nut which is contained in the fruit cone of the "Zamia". The fleshy skin, for it can scarcely be called pulp, is the only part which is edible, and even this is considered poisonous until it has been steeped so long in water, or buried in earth, as to arrive at a state approaching decay. The flavour is something like that of a "medlar", or the taste of old cheese. By evening a full-scale reception had been arranged. The guests were offered plenty of kangaroo meat, creating formal reciprocal obligations.

We found the natives all encamped near us . . . at night they entertained us with a corrobber, which was got up on our account . . . The several figures did not differ materially from those which were familiar to us, but the words which accompanied each change contained strong allusions to passing events . . . these ceremonials . . . serve the purpose of historic records. It had been told to them that Mr. Lennard and myself had grants here, and were likely to form establishments on our respective grounds. This was alluded to in one of their songs, and was expressed to the following effect: "That the fires of "Dyandala" and "Millenden" (the names of our places on the Swan River) would soon be removed to Coonarup, and that we should have plenty of wheat, and they would have plenty of bread'.

The songs were accompanied by dance, and the participants wore elaborate body-decoration, for example, arm-ornaments of "Gnow" (mallee-bird) feathers.³

Similarly, in December 1838, Jenna, whose favourite haunts lay just north of Lake Joondalup and eastward to the Swan, escorted Sir George Grey to meet his kin some sixty kilometres to the north, near the junction of the Gingin Brook and the Moore River, and organised his reception by that group. Again in 1846 Bishop Salgado's

³ Moore 1835.

Aboriginal friends were solemnly granted usage rights by the old men of the Bindoon area, through a young man who acted as intermediary (see p.148).

Occasions such as these, in which an intermediary succeeded in achieving rapprochement between Aborigines and intruders, were balanced by others in which Aboriginal emissaries made similar generous offers, but were misunderstood or brushed aside by Europeans intent on other business.

In 1829, when Aboriginal Australians near King George Sound had come to terms for three years with the European military presence there, Mokare guided a party under Dr Wilson some sixty kilometres northward. They 'received a visit from a native who came up to us with much confidence, and partook of our repast'. He must have been a man of status, empowered to make a formal approach on behalf of his group. 'He invited us', said Wilson, 'to accompany him to the eastward, where the best lands lie, and where we would shortly meet "Will" with a number of his friends, who would be glad to see us'. This was not a casual invitation to drop in. A situation had been set up, between the Aboriginal kin groups, whereby Europeans would gain access to the rich Kalgan valley; and the Kalgan people, like the Lennard's Brook people, would have expected to create reciprocal obligations. Wilson seemed quite unaware that he was turning down a serious diplomatic overture and slighting Mokare. 'To this request Mokare added his earnest solicitation, and was exceedingly chagrined to find his eloquence of no avail'.⁴

Similarly in 1831, a European party travelling northward along a native path alongside the Leschenault estuary, were met with delight by six men who knew them from a previous visit. Increasing numbers gathered in welcome. They were accorded the rare privilege of being taken to see the fifty or sixty women and children. The Europeans, however, wished to press on northward to the Murray. Again their Aboriginal hosts were much chagrined, pressing their guests to remain, when 'they would bring the women, and get us some fish'.⁵ Whether both were on offer is not clear. Certainly the Leschenault group would have found it incomprehensible that the Europeans should have rejected this offer of formalising usage rights.

A correct placing: kin and Dreamtime kin

When Jenna and his companions took Sir George Grey to meet their kin to the north in 1838, they themselves had to make due preparation for an encounter with kin they rarely met. The function of their body decoration was no doubt similar to that of Baldwin Spencer's Arunta visitors 'all toggled up with decorations' — it created a sense of occasion, turning an encounter into a formal meeting, and heightening everyone's awareness of the importance of the occasion and the role of the emissaries. Impressing potential sexual and marriage partners was part of this, perhaps overstressed in Grey's account:

The country we passed over was still of the same sandy nature; and after travelling about ten miles, we made another lake. The natives here saw the recent signs of strange blacks, and insisted upon my coming to a halt, whilst they painted

⁴ Wilson 1833.

⁵ Anon 1833:129.

themselves, and made sundry additions to their toilette. I urged my remonstrances upon this head, but it was in vain. They said that we should soon see some very pretty girls; that I might go on if I like, but that they would not move until they had completed their preparations for meeting their fair friends. I therefore made the best of it, and sat myself down, whilst they continued adorning themselves. This being done to their satisfaction, they came and requested my opinion as to their appearance; and as I intimated my most unqualified approval, they became in high spirits, and gave a very animated description of the conquests they expected to make.

This weighty affair having been completed, we again moved on, the natives keeping a careful look out for the friends they expected to see.

It is essential that the parties to a meeting know where they stand in relation to each other. At the Moore River Jenna had to establish his own placing in the scheme of things before he could arrange a suitable reception for his friend Grey. And, furthermore, Grey also had to be 'placed' by his hosts into their classificatory kin structure — with surprising results. As Jenna and his companions continued northward after decorating themselves:

They at length espied one sitting in the rushes, looking for small fish; but no sooner did he see the approaching party than he took to his heels, as hard as he could, and two others, whom we had not before observed, followed his example.

Our native comrades now commenced hallooing to the fugitives, stating that I had come from the white people, to bring them a present of rice and flour. Moreover, Jen-na shouted out to his uncle, "Am not I your nephew, why then should you run away?" This, and similar speeches, had at length, the desired effect. First one of them advanced, trembling from head to foot, and when I went forward to meet him, and shook hands with him, it re-assured the others, and they also joined our party; yet still not without evident signs of fear. An old man now came up, who could not be induced to allow me to approach him, appearing to regard me with a sort of stupid amazement; neither horses or any other of those things, which powerfully excited the curiosity of the others, had the least charm for him, but his eyes were always fixed on me, with a look of eagerness and anxiety which I was unable to account for.

Grey continues:

The oldest of the natives, who appeared to regard me with so much curiosity, went off for the purpose of collecting the women, whilst we proceeded to our place of halt.

The setting was impressive. The river . . . lies in rather a deep valley, and at this point consisted of large pools, connected by a running stream about 20 yards wide. There was plenty of wild fowl upon these pools.

The scenery here was very picturesque: high wooded hills were upon each side of us, and the valley was open and rather thinly timbered; but the few trees it contained were of considerable size and beauty. After we had tethered the horses, and made ourselves tolerably comfortable, we heard loud voices from the hills above us: the effect was fine, — for they really almost appeared to float in the air; . . . the wild cries of the women, who knew not our exact position, came by upon

the wind . . . Our guides shouted in return, and gradually the approaching cries came nearer and nearer.

The ceremony of acceptance was equally impressive:

. . . A sort of procession came up, headed by two women, down whose cheeks tears were streaming. The eldest of these came up to me, and looking for a moment at me, said, — “Gwa, gwa, bundo bal,” — “Yes, yes, in truth it is him;” and then throwing her arms round me, cried bitterly, her head resting on my breast . . . the other younger one knelt at my feet, also crying. At last the old lady, emboldened by my submission, deliberately kissed me on each cheek, just in the manner a French woman would have done; she then cried a little more, and at length relieving me, assured me that I was the ghost of her son, who had some time before been killed by a spear-wound in his breast. The younger female was my sister; but she . . . did not think proper to kiss me.

My new mother expressed almost as much delight at my return to my family, as my real mother would have done . . . As soon as she left me, my brothers, and father (the old man who had previously been so frightened), came up and embraced me after their manner, — that is, they threw their arms round my waist, placed their right knee against my right knee, and their breast against my breast, holding me in this way for several minutes. During the time that the ceremony lasted, I, according to the native custom, preserved a grave and mournful expression of countenance . . . The men next proceeded to embrace their relation, Jen-na, in the same manner they had before done me; and this part of the ceremony was now concluded.⁶

This method of dealing with strangers who were difficult to fit into the system was by no means unusual. As Grey saw clearly, the Australians:

themselves never having an idea of quitting their own land, cannot imagine others doing it; — and thus, when they see white people suddenly appear in their country, and settling themselves down in particular spots, they imagine that they must have formed an attachment for this land in some other state of existence; and hence conclude the settlers were at one period black men, and their own relations.⁷

Similar beliefs go far towards explaining the ambivalence in the Aboriginal attitude to initial European settlement. George Fletcher Moore was taken into the confidence of the Swan River Aborigines during the 1830s. He learnt the native tradition that their early ancestors, the men of the Dreamtime, were large men who came from over the sea (though others saw them as reaching the Swan coastal plain from the interior). The word *djandga*, *djanga* (or *netingar*) was used of the dead, and also of Europeans.⁸ It carries the sense of reappearance of those who have died. The Aborigines were so firmly assured of the close and indissoluble tie between them and their land that they could not envisage others coming, as the Europeans did, to take up an attachment to an area, unless they already knew it. So Europeans were ‘supposed to be aborigines, under another colour, restored to the land of their nativity’.⁹

⁶ Grey 1841:I, 299-303.

⁷ Grey 1841:I, 302-303.

⁸ Moore 1884b:60, 94, 20.

⁹ Moore 1885b:20.

Ambivalence in southwest Aboriginal attitudes to Europeans was consistent with the ambivalence in their attitude to the dead, who were feared but at the same time respected. The fingers of the dead were bound at burial so that the spirit could not dig its way out of the grave, and return to plague the living.¹⁰ A fire was lit between the grave and the camp so that the spirit would come to comfort itself there, and not return to the hearths of the living.¹¹ Fear and propitiation are both appropriate.

Similarly, then, the Aborigines feared the Europeans, as they feared the dead. In several incidents in the early nineteenth century Aboriginal men bravely attempted to ensure that the strangers did not approach their camp, to harm those there. And yet, initially at any rate, they refrained from offering real physical violence, for one would *repel* rather than attack returned spirits; as, for example, Baudin's expedition at the Vasse in 1801.¹²

Initial reactions to newcomers from the sea were predominantly terror. For men of the southwest, who had no watercraft, this reaction was exaggerated by the sight of the great sail-winged monster out of whose jaw the white ghosts emerged. Men on the Swan River described to Moore with great vividness their impressions when they saw the first ship approach the land. They imagined it some huge winged monster of the deep, and there was universal consternation: 'One man fled inland for fourteen miles without stopping, and spread the terrifying news among his own friends'.¹³ The occasion may have been the visit of the *Naturaliste* under Hamelin in June 1801 (the first to disturb the Swan Aborigines since Vlamingh's foray in 1697). While the great mother-monster stood offshore, lesser monsters left it, one to Rottneest, one to ascend the river. From the heights of Gargatup (Mount Eliza/King's Park) the Aborigines could have watched the strangers settle for the night on the flats by the river below them, and in the morning climb the limestone bluff to view the promontory at the junction of the wide waters of the Canning and the Swan estuaries.¹⁴ They would have seen the intruders labouring across the shoals of Matta Gerup where the Aborigines habitually crossed the Swan River between Byerbrup (the ridge on which Perth was to stand) on the west side, and lands towards the mountains. They would have watched them penetrate upstream to the narrow portion of the Swan beyond the Helena entrance; and then return downstream becoming emeshed in the sand and mire of the shallows of Matta Gerup.

Was it only a brown bittern whose strange cry so alarmed the French that they stayed all night in their boat? Or was the 'terrible noise . . . something like the roaring of a bull, but much louder' which seemed to come from the reeds in fact a bull-roarer? Were the kin of Yalaganga, (who controlled the area where the city of Perth was to be founded) using their best 'boylyas' (or men of power), to drive away these disturbing phantoms from the neighbourhood of the ridge which controlled the flats and the ford?

¹⁰ Moore 1884b:11, 12.

¹¹ Curr 1886:I, 339; Hallam 1975:79-87.

¹² Peron 1809:70-73; and below.

¹³ Moore 1884b:79.

¹⁴ Peron 1809:142-145.

Keeping a correct distance

At the Alice Springs meeting recorded by Baldwin Spencer in 1901, the first thing the strangers did was nothing. They sat conspicuously, giving their hosts time to inspect, assess, prepare a reception. The hosts took no notice for half an hour. And even when the visitors had been invited to advance to the ceremonial ground they waited quietly for the formal ceremony of greeting.

There are the same elements in the Grey episode. The party were taken to an impressive arena to wait until the participants, led by the women, approach from the hills around; just as the Arunta visitors had entered an open space through a gap in the surrounding hills and awaited the old women who initiated the welcoming ceremony, armed men then appearing on a low hill against the sky line.

The Aboriginal Australians must have found Europeans barbaric, for they ignored the proper rules regulating meetings between groups. Bishop Salvado, who headed a mission to the Aborigines on the northern limits of the settled area just before 1850, and was himself a ceremonialist, gives a clear account of the correct procedures:

When two or more natives go to visit a distant family, they do not simply announce themselves forthwith, even though they are on friendly terms. Instead they stop at a correct distance, and when they have been noticed, sit down and put their weapons on the ground, or lean them against a tree — this being a sign of peace. The head of the host family and one other able-bodied man, both armed to the teeth, go to meet the new arrivals, and after ascertaining that all is well, bring them back with them to the campfire. When friendly families meet, either by arrangement or chance, they do not exchange greetings, or indulge in any conventional courtesies. They sit down together for a while in silence, and then strike up a conversation and pool their catch, or any yams they have been able to find.¹⁵

Europeans sadly lacked the restraint in movement and speech the Aboriginal code required. Occasionally some instinct led them to do the right thing, as when Salvado with his Benedictine monks first arrived at the Spring near Badji-Badji. They recited their prayers, 'cut and dressed timber' and did not interrupt their labours when 'a few natives appeared and looked on suspiciously from a distance', then 'took up a position near the pool, perhaps forty yards from us, lit a fire, and after a while lay down to sleep' while the monks sang Compline with full monastic solemnity, tried to sleep, and continued work in the morning. 'Two hours after dawn the natives disappeared without attempting to meet us'. But the monks had shown proper nonchalance. 'Towards evening they [the Australians] came back and more of them this time, with weapons in their hands'. They had had time to assess and discuss the newcomers, and reach consensus on their own course of action. 'They came a bit closer than before and lit a fire about thirty yards from our hut'. Still the monks went on working, and again 'the natives disappeared a little after sunrise'. At midday, while the monks consumed boiled rice and tea 'a crowd of natives appeared, armed with half-a-dozen or more spears (or gidjis . . .)'. The monks offered tea and bread, but 'they ignored us and sat down near the pool, where they palavered a great deal between themselves'.

¹⁵ Stormon 1977:165.

Eventually the monks approached with food and drink, and although 'the men resolutely seized their weapons and the women and children ran off howling' this show of protectiveness and armed resolve was sufficient to satisfy honour.¹⁶ Essential to rapprochement were restraint, dignity, a ceremonious display of armed power and the exchange of gifts.

But in many instances Europeans simply strode up to the landholders, without awaiting an invitation, totally ignorant of the need for ceremonious affirmation of friendship and formal working out of conflict. The Aborigines were left with few options – they could ignore such unmannerly intrusion, avoid encounters altogether, or as a last resort they could enter into hostilities, even with the *djanga*, the dead, whom they would more properly respect and fear.

Thus in November 1830 a party under Ensign Dale penetrated the forested uplands east of the Darling Scarp through to the Avon valley and beyond. On their return they crossed the Avon and then its tributary, the Dale River, and headed up its rich valley towards the watershed of the Canning (a rich area of swamps and wandoo woodlands which formed the core territory of groups ranging towards York on the one hand and the coastal plain on the other). Dale's party 'passed a party of natives sitting round a fire; they did not appear to take any notice of us, and we did not disturb them'.¹⁷

The man who wasn't there: decorum and avoidance

Many were the occasions on which Aboriginal Australians simply kept out of the way in order to avoid an encounter with men they did not know, where there were no correct forms to be followed. Salvado remarked that, even in the 1840s, 'Europeans travelling in the bush often fail to see a single native, whereas there are numbers of them hidden behind trees watching their every movement'.¹⁸ Before actual European settlement, many early explorers' descriptions of 'traces' of natives, fires alight, meals prepared, but no people, chronicle such avoidance.

In 1658, the Dutch ship *Elburgh* on its way to Batavia 'struck the South-land in 31½ degrees S.L.' (South Latitude), and a fortnight later in 33°S, 'round a projecting point . . . found a good anchoring-place . . . where the skipper, together with one of the steersmen, the sergeant and 6 soldiers landed round Leeuwinnen Cape, finding there three black men with skins like those at Cape de Bonne Esperance (Cape of Good Hope) with whom however they could not come to parley'. The Dutchmen found a burning fire round which the men had been sitting, spears, three 'hammers' (*kodjas*), each a heavy piece of stone mounted in gum on a wooden handle, and further inland a number of huts.¹⁹ From an Australian point of view what happened? A gigantic bird or a huge fish sailed into the bay just east of Australia's southwest tip, a smaller offspring left and reached the shore, and white ghostly manlike spirits moved up the beach. The three indigenes evaded the intruders, but no doubt observed them closely.

¹⁶ Stormon 1977:37-38.

¹⁷ Dale 1833:71.

¹⁸ Stormon 1977:52.

¹⁹ Heeres 1890:81; Major 1859:65.

Willem de Vlamingh reported in 1697 that his ship and crew had 'diligently skirted, surveyed and observed' the southern part of the west coast of the Southland 'without meeting any human beings, though now and then they have seen fires from afar, some of the men fancying that two or three times they have seen a number of naked blacks, whom however they have never been able to come near to or to come to parly with'.²⁰ So elusive were the Australians that Vlamingh's men were uncertain whether they were fact or fancy. Perhaps the Australians may have had the same doubts about these pale ghosts from the sea westward, who came briefly and then vanished.²⁰

On 5 January 1697 a party of eighty-six European men crashed their way through the bush across the narrow neck which separates the present coast from a meander of the Swan estuary, pushing on east to its wide reaches (probably Rocky Bay) where they found 'Several footsteps of men, and several small pools in which was fresh water' (i.e. native wells) but, in spite of repeated searches, no men. They slept that night by 'a fire which had been lighted by the inhabitants but whom, nevertheless we did not see'. Next day they saw huts and footsteps, but still no men. After sunset on the 10th they ascended the river in the ship's boat 'seeing several fires, but no men'. On the 11th they once more made their way upstream seeing swans, geese and a quantity of fish — 'we thought we saw a crowd of men; but after rowing on shore we found none'. They found, however, every sign that men had been there: a pit with freshwater made fragrant by herbs, recent footprints and handprints in the sand, 'a fire which had been just lighted, and three small huts' with bark beds,²¹ even 'fish lying on the coals to be roasted'.²² They reached the shallows, the first crossing point on the river where Perth now stands, and here they observed many footprints in the water and on the bank at the ford. Towards midnight they tried to approach the fires of an Aboriginal camp by stealth, but could not take the inhabitants by surprise; so they drifted downstream by moonlight. Two hours before sunrise, again seeing fires, Vlamingh and a few of his men crept ashore, and found eight fires 'and around each of them a heap of branches of trees, but no men'. Quite a large group had disappeared into thin air. 'The men, the birds, the swans, . . . the geese, the cockatoos, the parroquets, etc., all fled at the sight of us'.²³

Leaving the Swan, Vlamingh's two ships sailed northward along the coast, seeing great smokes. On 15 January they went ashore (near Jurien Bay) 'but found neither people nor fresh water, only several footsteps of Men and prints like that of a Dog and Cossawary'. Again on the 16th (near the Hill River) foraging parties went inland, finding 'fresh water with a little hut close by' and 'several footsteps of people' and some three miles inland 'many fires but no people'.²⁴

On the 23rd (near the Hutt River) Vlamingh's men reported ten men on the beach and the dunes, and saw them walk inland. But by the time the party landed and went

²⁰ Heeres 1899:84; compare Robert 1972:163.

²¹ Major 1859:91-93.

²² Robert 1972:165.

²³ Major 1859:91-94; also 85; compare with Robert 1972:60-77.

²⁴ Robert 1972:81-82.

inland, none was to be seen. And so it went on. Near the mouth of the Murchison on 25 January, five huts were reported, footprints and paths converged on a fresh water pit, but no people were to be seen.²⁵ By another account the five huts were an hour's walk from the sea, and outside was 'burning wood with some fish on it or near it, ready to be cooked, also some fish already eaten, only the bones were left so that the natives must have left in a hurry'. The puzzled explorers commented 'it is interesting that, though many fires are seen, you see no people at all. It seems they are easily frightened and hide themselves in the woods'.²⁶ It would be even more interesting to have the Australian comments on these brash intruders.

It was not until late in the eighteenth century that the English began to show interest in Western Australia. Captain George Vancouver's ship *Chatham* entered King George Sound in 1791. Like the French explorer D'Entrecasteaux he noticed the absence of shell mounds, and inferred that 'the land principally supplied their wants' although he also remarked on the Aboriginal use of 'fish wears [*sic*] on the shores' (of Oyster Harbour) and deduced from this and 'from the mouths of the brooks near the villages being stopped up' (i.e. the King and Kalgan rivers) 'that they sometimes resort to the rivulets and the sea for provisions'. Vancouver took an archaeologist's interest in deducing subsistence and social patterns from material culture. 'The natives appeared to be a wandering people', he concluded, 'who sometimes make their excursions individually, at other times in considerable parties; this was apparent by their habitations being found single and alone, as well as composing tolerably large villages.' He noticed the settlement spacing — two miles between neighbouring hut groups (probably near the mouths of the King River and the Kalgan River on Oyster Harbour) and that one or two huts were larger than others; the artefact technology — how wooden spears were manufactured; the absence of canoes; and the use of firing for 'encouraging a sweeter growth of herbage in their hunting grounds'.²⁷ One of the villages had been 'lately inhabited', but once more the inhabitants had avoided an encounter. Ten years later they would be less cautious.

Due ceremony: 'earnest and silent attention'

It was only when the participants had come to know each other that a chance encounter could become a formal meeting. The earliest recorded ceremonial occasion in the southwest involving Europeans occurred in 1801 at Albany.

After Vancouver in 1791 the next Europeans observed by the Aborigines of King George Sound were Captain Matthew Flinders and his crew. A month's stay gave him extended contacts with the holders of the land. Flinders had anchored in the Sound on 9 December 1801, and though 'marks of the country being inhabited were found every where' it was not until the 14th that he eventually 'met with several natives . . . shy but not afraid' and next day 'two (natives) approached with much caution' and gifts were exchanged.²⁸ Much later Europeans were to learn that the Aborigines

²⁵ Robert 1972:90-97.

²⁶ Robert 1972:75, 176.

²⁷ Vancouver 1801:170-177.

²⁸ Flinders 1814:57-58.

believed these strangers to be their ancestors returned. Twice now the King George Sound Aborigines had observed the white ghosts come from the sea in winged monsters, and they had done no harm. Although the Aborigines had avoided contact a decade previously, this second visit must have made it clear that the strangers were not malignant and were seeking contact. After a week of observation and discussion the local Aborigines must have decided on the status and probable identification and kin placement of at least the apparently most prominent Europeans. They made a tentative approach, and followed it next day with a more formal greeting, to which Flinders' group responded correctly with an *exchange* of compliments and gifts. The Aborigines did not regard the Europeans as in any way their superiors, rather the reverse. Indeed Flinders commented that 'they left us, after the first interview, with some appearance of contempt for our pusillanimity; which was probably inferred from the desire we showed to be friendly with them. This opinion . . . seemed to be corrected in their future visits'.²⁹

Gradually fuller relationships were established. On 17 December 1801, recorded Flinders, 'one of our former visitors . . . brought two strangers; after this . . . they and others came almost every day'. Each new meeting had brought more of the senior men of the Aboriginal group into the slow process of discussion and assessment, and now at last they had reached consensus, and relations would proceed on a proper footing.³⁰

Flinders and his companions were punctilious in observing the social niceties. On the 23rd they encountered 'an old man [who was] very anxious we should not go further, . . . [we made] a circuit round the wood where it seemed probable his family . . . were placed'. This again was a correct response. The Aborigines were still not sufficiently confident of where the strangers fitted into the kinship system, to let them have any dealings with their wives and children.

Finally the strangers were ready to leave. Flinders recounts:

Our friends the natives continued to visit us, and the old man, with several others, being at the tents this morning, I ordered the party of marines on shore, to be exercised in their presence . . . when they saw these beautiful red-and-white men with their bright muskets, drawn up in a line, they absolutely screamed with delight; nor were their wild gestures and vociferation to be silenced, but by commencing the exercise, to which they paid the most earnest and silent attention . . . the old man placed himself at the end of the rank, with a short staff in his hands, which he shouldered, presented, grounded as did the marines their muskets . . .

The hosts were joining in the almost military manoeuvre of their guests, just as the Arunta hosts 'fell into line with the visitors . . . like a regiment of soldiers'.³¹

And so, in a blaze of splendour, Flinders took leave of the natives, having staged for them a magnificent spectacle which they must have seen as a suitable gift bequeathed in exchange for their hospitality — they were being taught a new

²⁹ Flinders 1814:66.

³⁰ Flinders 1814:58.

³¹ Baldwin Spencer, in Mulvaney 1982:46.

ceremony! The delight of these colourful red-and-white men was to remain long in Aboriginal folk memory on the south coast. Daisy Bates found the new corroboree still being performed more than a hundred years later.³² It was called the *Koorannup* ceremony, the ceremony from heaven, for the King George Sound Aborigines had seen the white men as their dead ancestors returned, said Daisy Bates' informant.³³

These intruders had not thrust themselves upon their hosts. Each group had shown respect for the other, and the leaders of each acted in a dignified and restrained fashion, so that the difficult process of fitting the new comers into the established scheme of things could proceed step by step with due deliberation.

'Courtly seeming': authority and status

We have seen that the Arunta ceremonial greeting between Aboriginal groups was conducted in a solemn and ceremonious fashion by the old men who had reached the highest ritual and social status, and carried themselves with the dignity and assurance of their position of power. There were numerous other occasions on which Europeans, ignorant though they were of Aboriginal social structures and procedures, recognised and acknowledged such formal dignity.

In the early 1830s, on the rich coastal plain alongside the lagoons through which the Vasse and other rivers reach the sea in Geographe Bay, three Aborigines encountered John Bussell, reconnoitring northward from the establishment he had set up on the River Blackwood, some eighty kilometres south. Perhaps they knew of the strange settlers. They waded across to meet him. Bussell supposed that they were 'fearful probably that we were likely to interfere with some snares for fish which they had constructed near the spot where we were' but continues 'they carried spears, but approached withall with such friendly guise and courtly seeming, that I did not hesitate to advance to meet them alone and unarmed'.³⁴

In 1846 Bishop Salvado reported the same sense of gracious formality in an encounter in the Bindoon area, an open valley within the forest, midway between the most northerly penetration of European settlement on the coastal plain (at Gingin) on the one hand, and the grants in the open country east of the jarrah forest (York, Toodyay, Bolgart) on the other. Salvado was surveying the line of a new road to halve the travelling time between New Norcia and Perth:

On the morning of the second day we came across a large number of natives who were complete strangers, except to one of my companions who was born in this vicinity and had helped me greatly in fixing the direction of the road. This man came forward and explained to his fellow-tribesmen who we were and why we were going through these parts. Thereupon the oldest of the natives came to meet us, first embracing the oldest in our group and then all of the rest one after another, with his arms around each of them for more than eight minutes on end.

³² Hallam 1975:21-22; White 1980.

³³ White 1980:34-35.

³⁴ Bussell 1833:192-193.

They all followed suit, with the most profound silence reigning throughout the entire ceremony. The embracing over, there was a mutual exchange of weapons and products of the hunt. Then in a solemn tone the oldest of the strangers addressed our oldest member: 'Here is my fire, now it is yours, too. I stay here; you come and go, then you come back to go away and come again, and then you stay; now we are great friends.'³⁵

Salvado was most impressed by the solemnity of the occasion, the formality of the 'exchange of compliments' and 'demonstrations of courtesy'. There was nothing casual or offhand about the granting of usage rights. The approach was made through an intermediary known to both parties. The compact was sealed through 'mutual exchange of weapons and products of the hunt', and the lengthy solemn embrace between men of authority. The proprietors must already have known of the presence of European intruders to the north of them for some months, and have had time to consider their attitude to them and their protégés. Clearly what they were granting was an 'easement' in European legal terminology. The road makers were expected to pass to and fro. This occasion represented in no sense a ceding of territory. Usage rights of various sorts interdigitated and criss-crossed the Australian landscape, no one right obliterating the others. Nonetheless, there were very real proprietary rights, and the most extreme sanctions against infringement without formal granting of rights by the proprietors.

It is clear that not only the senior men, but also the old women, had an authoritative role in formal encounters. In the desert meeting described by Spencer 'one or two old women' initiated the proceedings. In the Moore River meeting with Grey the old man took no action until, in full ceremonial setting, his oldest wife had publicly proclaimed her identification of Grey as her son. It was often also the women who incited men to fight or desist from fighting.

The Bindoon and Lennard's Brook incidents show the senior men of Aboriginal groups negotiating from their position of advantage as landholders to ensure that Europeans would be put under an obligation, thus hoping to secure support for their group in difficult and changing times. Europeans, however, often did not acknowledge such obligations. An alternative strategy for the defence of kin and terrain lay in hostile rather than amicable encounters.

'Armed to the teeth . . .'

The potential for conflict was not accidental but essential to meetings between distant groups; and ceremonial provided not only for the *avoidance* of conflict, but also for the channelling and *control* of that conflict which necessarily must occur.³⁶

In the Arunta meeting described by Baldwin Spencer, the two groups were explicitly ready for hostilities. The visitors were decorated for battle, and fully armed,

³⁵ Stormon 1977:66.

³⁶ Only a few examples of formalised conflict can be given here, as this could be the topic for an entire paper. Examples are numerous in the records of the first decade of the Swan River Colony (*W.A. Dictionary of Aboriginal Biographies*, in preparation) and occur not only between groups some distance apart, but between families ranging over much the same terrain as each other.

the local men had their weapons. Although the decorations were given up as a sign of friendly intent, the weapons were retained. Following the greeting ceremony several incidents occurred in which men with offences to revenge satisfied the honour of their kin by inflicting non-mortal wounds.

Similarly at Moore River, after the initial joyous ceremony of greeting came a time to undertake responsibilities for retribution:

It appears that a sister of the native Jen-na had been speared and killed by a man, who at present was resident with this tribe; and although most of them were on friendly terms with this native, they conceived that Jen-na was bound to revenge her death in fair and open fight. The old lady (my mother) went up to him, and seizing his merro, or throwing-stick, told him, that the man who had killed his sister was at a little distance; "and if," she said, "you are not a man, and know not how to use this, let a woman's hand try what it can do," at the same time trying to force it from him. All the time that she was thus pretending to wrench his merro away, she indulged in a most eloquent speech, to endeavour to rouse his courage.

The initiative to do the right thing came from the women. The exhortation from the old woman set the scene.

. . . it had . . . a great effect on Jen-na; and some young ladies coming in at the conclusion, his mind was instantly made up; indeed, the certainty that bright eyes were to look upon his deeds, appeared to have much the same effect upon him that it had upon the knights of old, — and jumping up, he selected three good spears (all the men being willing to lend him theirs), and hurried off to an open space, where his antagonist was waiting for him.

Such affairs were very formal:

The combats, one of which was now about to take place, much resemble the ancient tournaments. They are conducted with perfect fairness. The combatants fight in an open space, their friends all standing by to see fair play, and all the preliminaries, as to what blows are to be considered foul or fair, are arranged beforehand, sometimes with much ceremony.

Taking into account the fantastic ornaments and paintings of the natives, the graceful attitudes they throw themselves into either when trying to avoid the spears of their enemy, or about to throw their own; and the loud cries and wild motions with which they attempt to confuse and terrify their adversaries, I must confess that if any exhibition of this nature can be considered showy or attractive, this has no ordinary claims to admiration.³⁷

Such displays were indeed impressive, but they might also be lethal.

As on this occasion, it was most often the young men of the group who had the most active role in conflict — carrying out retribution, or defending rights in territory, resources or women.³⁸ As Aboriginal men were under an obligation to exact

³⁷ Grey 1841:1, 304-305.

³⁸ Retribution is another topic which cannot be adequately treated here. It occurred between members of groups which were quite close, geographically and in kin terms, as well as between distant groups in the southwest of W.A. (*W.A. Dictionary of Aboriginal Biographies*, in preparation.)

retribution for *any* death of a mature person (not only deaths from violence), and as many had little compunction about killing total strangers to whom they had no kin obligations, there was always real danger when an individual or group moved outside the circle of their close kin and acquaintance. Such danger extended to Europeans, unless they were 'placed' as kin.

'Desired us to return': defence of land and kin

Although Aboriginal groups sometimes proved willing, after due deliberation, to offer usage rights in land in return for benefits and obligations, they resisted any unauthorised encroachment on their preserves. It was this aspect of chance encounters which most impressed Europeans.

In June 1801 at Geographe Bay a dignified and self-assured old man, with a long grey beard and clad in a kangaroo-skin cloak, encountered the French naturalists of the Baudin expedition, who were reconnoitring southwest Australia at the same time as Matthew Flinders. At first he very properly ignored these apparitions from the sea, but when they landed near him 'he left the water and, without hurrying too much, reached a sand-dune opposite him. I noticed that although his step was assured, he frequently looked towards us', reported Baudin. From a position of advantage on top of the dune, the patriarch tried to stem the continued advance of the strangers from the sea. They had no place in this country and its scheme of things. 'Presenting himself before them with great spirit, he addressed them in a very animated manner pointing often to our vessels, and seeming to desire us to return to them'. Avoiding, ignoring, repulsing are the Aboriginal reactions which form a repeating pattern, and sometimes a sequence, in these encounters. The final movement was retreat. M. Depuch offered a glass necklace, 'the shine of which appeared to excite the most lively admiration [wonder] in the old man, but nevertheless . . . when M. Depuch attempted to advance, he retreated', snatching up his three spears, 'and disappeared with a degree of swiftness which astonished our party'.³⁹

The old man had not, however, abandoned defence of territory and kin. This area of coast comprised low dunes parallel to the coast, with brackish lagoons and estuaries in the swales between them, alive with wildfowl. It became the heart of European settlement on Geographe Bay, settled by the Laymans at Wonnerup and the Bussells at Cattle Chosen. It was equally frequented by Aborigines. Baudin's party found 'several well-worn tracks' through 'a plain . . . at the edge of an immense forest . . . scattered throughout with fullgrown trees', to large circular places where fires had just been freshly made, though the fire makers were nowhere to be seen. He concluded that 'There were so many traces of fire every where and the paths were so well-worn, that it looked to me as if this place were much frequented'. On the shores of the Inlet, with its 'large numbers of birds' Heirisson found 'a sort of well, dug by the natives'. He also reported that the mouth of the inlet was 'barred across with rough wooden stakes that the natives plant there to catch fish brought in by the rising tide'.⁴⁰ The land was fully taken up and developed. No wonder its owners feared, resented and repulsed the unmannerly intrusion of strangers.

³⁹ Peron 1809:59-60; Cornell 1974:173-174.

⁴⁰ Cornell 1974:174-178.

These Europeans also provoked hostility by their insensitivity in failing to observe due caution in any approach towards women folk. M. Leseuer and M. Ronsard encountered two people on the beach. When they were near enough to think they could prevent the pair escaping, the French ran forward 'but with all their speed they could not prevent one of the two . . . a man, from getting over the sands, running among the brambles, and disappearing in the middle of the marsh'. His unfortunate pregnant wife however, was petrified with terror: 'Despairing . . . of being able to escape from the strangers, . . . she stopped . . . and sitting down on her heels and hiding her face in her hands, she remained as one stupefied and overcome with fear and astonishment, perfectly without motion, and seemingly insensible of all that passed around her' while the Frenchmen examined her naked physiognomy in detail and at leisure, found her unattractive, opened her kangaroo skin bag and identified the orchid bulbs she had gathered, and left presents beside her, as the poor woman lost control of her bowels from fear.⁴¹

Meanwhile a little boat from the *Naturaliste*, under Captain Hamelin, was reconnoitring the maze of channels, in the area for which Europeans later used the Aboriginal name Wonnerup. The boat party was sighted by several Aborigines emerging from the shelter of the forest of magnificent tuart trees, two or three hundred meters east across alluvial flats from the waters of the inlet. 'Shrill and repeated cries' rang out, 'directed to us' M. Depuch reported. The Aboriginal men looked at the Europeans with much curiosity. They kept their eyes upon the intruders 'and ran about on the shore in every direction, continuing to scream and make a great noise'. When Messrs Depuch, Freycinet, Leschenault, Heirisson and L'Haridon waded through the shallow water, the Aborigines drew back into the forest. Depuch and Freycinet, somewhat incautiously, made their way to the edge of the forest.

By now the natives 'seemed to be calling to each other; they spoke in haste and extremely quick'. The French distinguished only the word which they transcribed as 'velou', repeated. This may be *Welo* or *Waylo*, men from the north, or possibly *waullu*, the sky (the heavens?), or *welle*, a dream.⁴²

The Aboriginal group had almost certainly discussed the source of the intrusion since the encounter between the old man with the fireband and these aliens. The strangers could not have come from neighbouring groups; all these were known, and each individual could be placed in a scheme of kin and cult-lodge groupings, so that the right reactions and responses would be known. The visitors were perturbing because no one knew how to place them and how to react. Why did they come? Were they alien groups, total outsiders, from the north? Or did they have some prior attachment to this land — ghosts from the past or the Dreamtime? Either way, they threatened the stability and order of the universe.

A dog began barking, the animal was commanded to be quiet, and the barking ceased. The four Europeans by now realised they had been rash, but they nonetheless tried to buy peace by leaving trifling 'presents' on the ground as they made their way back towards the inlet. However 'seven or eight natives . . . were advancing in a hasty

⁴¹ Peron 1809:67-68.

⁴² Moore 1884b:75-76; Grey 1840:126-127.

manner to cut off our retreat towards the river'. At a distance of sixteen or so metres the natives 'brandished their sagaies with all their strength, shaking their clubs . . . in a threatening manner, and calling in a terrible tone of voice, *mouye! mouye!*' They managed to get their meaning across. 'In their gestures', reports M. Depuch, 'they appeared to invite us to retrace our steps; they even seemed to point out the way we had come, and that which we supposed led also to the sea'. The Europeans, perhaps fortunately, did not realise that the 'sagaies' or spears were 'very formidable weapons' and so were not fully aware of the danger of the position in which they had placed themselves. They continued to draw back to their landing point, but the Aborigines pressed their advantage. The intruders retreated into the water, but 'neither the noise nor the menaces ceased, the sagaies threatened us nearer and nearer, and the clubs were brandished at us with more violence than before.' The Aborigines halted at the water's edge, but though the four Europeans were now reinforced by the captain and crewmen, the Aborigines kept up their defiance. Fortunately for the Europeans they were issuing a formal challenge, rather than launching a physical attack. A single champion advanced:

. . . one of them, who seemed to be the youngest, and consequently had more temerity, advanced to a third part of the distance between us and then, taking the attitude of warrior, placing one sagaie behind his back with his club, and brandishing another sagaie with all its force and suppleness, looking at us with much assurance, and at the same time with great contempt, seemed to provoke us to single combat. The others 'soon applauded him with all their voices and actions'. Note the role of the young man here, and the public nature of his performance in repulsing intruders. But they did not lose their curiosity and sense of humour. The Frenchman called out 'friend' and the champion 'repeated the word to himself . . . and then repeated it to his companions, who also repeated it, at the same time laughing with all their might'. The exchange continued, the Europeans 'called to them a few words of French, which they repeated, looking at each other as if asking the meaning, and again laughing heartily, they repeated our words with great exactness'. It might seem that the Aboriginal threat had been a pose, and so it was in its formality; but it was also a proclamation of the determination of the whole group to repulse intrusion, and it was understood as such by the French. Despite the laughter, 'they did not move, and their champion kept his post, and maintained the same contemptuous and martial air'.

Depuch tried demonstrations of friendship, laying down arms and carrying green boughs, but 'the natives repelled every attempt'. Even after the Aborigines had picked up and examined a mirror and a snuff box 'the noise and menacing gestures were renewed with as much frenzy as ever'. Eventually the Aborigines were successful. The Europeans fled to their boat and 'all got into it without any attempt of the savages to prevent us. Probably it was what they wished'.⁴³ It was indeed. The intruders had at last been successfully repelled.

It is noteworthy that there was no real attempt on the lives of the Europeans, who would have fared badly (as they afterward realised) if the Aborigines had launched

⁴³ Peron 1809:70-73.

their spears. Fortunately the Europeans did not open fire either, though they were on the verge of doing so.⁴⁴

The French were forced to remain encamped themselves for three nights behind the dunes when a violent storm prevented them from returning to their vessels. They felt, and were, totally exposed to Aboriginal attack.

The first night the Aborigines continued to howl defiance from the forest, but they did not attack, while the French did not intrude further.⁴⁵ But almost certainly they kept the strange sea-creatures, and the ghostly intruders who came ashore from them, under constant surveillance. Baudin describes how he sailed along the coast close inshore, looking for his stranded men, seeing first 'several thick columns of smoke from behind the dunes'; then two people on the beach who immediately vanished among the dunes; then 'four or five other people walking along the beach' who also 'reached the dunes and disappeared' as did the smoke to which he had been heading.⁴⁶ All this time the stranded naturalists were still camped in the shelter of those same dunes, and indeed, as Baudin feared, at the mercy of the indigenes. But while the white ghosts did not approach people, and particularly the camp with women and children, they were left strictly alone.

When the Europeans were finally rescued a seaman named Vasse was swept overboard and drowned. The speculation that he reached the beach and lived two or three years with the Aborigines seems to have no foundation,⁴⁷ though a paragraph to this effect had appeared in a French newspaper before Peron's account was published.⁴⁸ If this did happen, he was no doubt accepted as a long lost relative, and this would accord with the Aboriginal attitude of fear and repulsion, but no real violent hostility.

The unwillingness of Aborigines to embark on *unnecessary* violence should not lead us to assume that they did not fully claim and defend their lands. Perhaps the best known, and certainly the most quoted, account of Aboriginal and European encounters concerns Dampier's brief call on the western shores and islands of King Sound in the Kimberly region in January 1688. Although it lies outside the southwest, Dampier's description has been quoted so often that it should be put in the context of what actually occurred. The Aborigines on this coast depended on fish as a major source of protein, gathering them from stone fish traps at low water, and garnering also shellfish in the vicinity. It is clear that this made possible, and indeed necessitated, a semi-sedentary pattern of occupation in the neighbourhood of the fish traps, which yielded their produce ('as many fish as makes them a plentiful Banquet') with little effort on the part of the people, except the maintenance of the traps. We need not believe Dampier's deduction that the diet did not include vegetable food, or bird or mammal flesh, particularly as his observation that the Aborigines had no

⁴⁴ Compare Peron 1809:73 with Marchant 1982:139.

⁴⁵ Peron 1809:75.

⁴⁶ Cornell 1974:180.

⁴⁷ Marchant 1982:144-145.

⁴⁸ Peron 1809:81.

weapons of the chase is immediately disproved by his own account of their use of spears and clubs. The Europeans landed initially near one of the fishtraps, and the Aborigines immediately tried to frighten them away by a show of force, using a type of 'wooden Sword' (clubs) and 'a sort of Lances' — 'a long strait pole, sharp at one end, and hardened afterwards by heat'. The later sequence of incidents is not clear from Dampier's account, but it seems that on the first day that boats and white men were observed, the inhabitants hid themselves. On several occasions various Aboriginal groups made a show of hostile force, once to defend their fishtraps; once, in the Archipelago, the men 'threatened . . . with their Lances and Sword' when the Europeans made to land on a small island where women and children were present. The men stood their ground, while the women fled. On another occasion, a mainland group 'came just against our ship, and standing on a pretty high Bank, threatened us with their Swords and Lances, by shaking them at us' until they were scared by the beating of a drum. Dampier stayed a week, but although eventually hostility cooled, the Aborigines very wisely would not be persuaded to take on the role of underlings, and the Europeans were compelled to carry their own water supplies, though from Aboriginal wells.⁴⁹

Eleven years later the Shark's Bay Aborigines were visited by Dampier only a year or two after they had observed Vlamingh's men on their shores. He sailed on north and, in the Archipelago which now bears his name, saw smoke which may have warned of his approach; 'many great smokes' again heralded his landing in Roebuck Bay (just south of Broome) to search for water, at the end of August 1699. 'Three tall black naked men' spotted the Europeans approaching, and went to tell others. With eight or nine companions they watched the strangers from a hilltop, and when they saw them digging into their land, came to a nearby vantage point and tried to drive the intruders away 'menacing and threatening . . . making a great noise'. Eventually one of the Aborigines made an approach, perhaps trying to identify the strangers with deceased relatives. He was not more charmed by appearance of the Europeans than they with him, and eventually made his retreat and repulsed further approach. However, the Aborigines followed the movements of the Europeans closely and thwarted a foolish European attempt to ambush and capture one of their number. A European youth received a spearwound and one of the Aborigines was also wounded, by a shot from Dampier's gun which they had at first despised. One young Aborigine, painted perhaps for a ceremony, stood out as the most active and courageous, leading the defence of the shell-gathering grounds.⁵⁰

One particular excerpt from the story of Dampier's visit has been told and retold, and children (and adults) continue to accept his perjorative description of Aborigines as justifying later European takeover of supposedly 'unused' lands. On the contrary, the events he describes show a landscape fully peopled and exploited, with permanent structures for using the resources of sea and land, and a people ready to repel unmannerly intrusion and defend their wives, children, installations and land.

⁴⁹ Dampier 1697 in Major 1859:77-80.

⁵⁰ Dampier 1729 in Major 1859:118-120; also 1981 reprint 120-123.

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There have been many accounts of early European contact with Aborigines in the Australian continent, including the west. Most have concentrated on the content of European thought in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from 'the noble savage' to 'social Darwinism'.⁵¹ Recently some attempts have been made to redress the balance — to see the significance which the long prior Aboriginal presence had in shaping the landscapes Europeans entered; their vegetation, resources, wells, tracks, fords, zones of open country, and possibility of movement; and to gauge Aboriginal reaction to European intrusion.⁵²

To see contact situations through Aboriginal eyes is a difficult and perhaps impossible task. Nearly all of the records, even accounts of Aboriginal statements, have been filtered through European minds and given a gloss of European concepts and terminology. I have tried here to look for patterns in the ways that Aboriginal groups responded to non-Aboriginal intruders. And I have tried, wherever possible, to use illuminating accounts of some of these reactions, and to use these to elucidate other, less clear accounts of similar reactions.

In this attempt it has become apparent that reactions *do* follow certain patterns: a careful *lack* of response; avoidance and observation; fear and flight; hostility and defence of families and land; formal challenge; formal assessment and greeting; rapturous greeting or extreme fear of those who are seen as long-dead relatives; cautious and carefully staged approach, leading to exchange of civilities, goods, and even ceremonies; and sometimes a calculated establishment of reciprocal social and economic obligations. Any one or any combination of these approaches might be shown by Aborigines in any given area, or at some stage from the initial sighting of Europeans to the realisation that their coming was not an ephemeral visitation.

First encounters with visitors who did not make appropriate responses almost invariably brought to the fore the fear and hostility Aborigines felt towards unknown intruders who might put their families and land at risk. But once the intruders were settled on Australian shores, and known by repute, they found themselves encountering elders who were willing to seek a formal rapprochement. European reportage has many biases, yet these accounts reveal a common theme: in deliberate and formal meetings, Aboriginal people invariably made public declamation of their authority over the corpus of land, knowledge and society.

⁵¹ For example Mulvaney 1964; Crawford 1981.

⁵² Hallam 1975; Reynolds 1980; 1981.

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