I

Beginnings

How and when did Australia begin? One version of the country's origins – a version taught to generations of school children and set down in literature and art, memorials and anniversaries – would have it that Australian history commenced at the end of the eighteenth century. After several centuries of European voyaging in the southern oceans, the English naval lieutenant James Cook sailed the eastern coast in 1770, named it New South Wales and claimed possession in the name of his monarch. Within twenty years the British government dispatched an expedition to settle New South Wales. On 26 January 1788 its commander, Arthur Phillip, assumed government over the eastern half the country. The thousand officers, troops, civilian officials and convicted felons who came ashore from the eleven vessels of the First Fleet anchored in Sydney Harbour prepared the way for later immigrants, bond and free, who spread out over the continent, explored and settled, possessed and subdued it.

This is a story of a sleeping land brought to life by *Endeavour*, the name given to Cook's sturdy ship and the quality attributed to those who followed him. The chroniclers of the First Fleet recorded how a landing party unloaded the stores, cleared a space on the wooded slopes of Sydney Cove and erected their first habitations. They were describing the advent of civilisation. The sound of an axe on wood, English steel on antipodean eucalypt, broke the silence of a primeval wilderness.

The newcomers brought with them livestock, plants and tools. They also brought a mental toolkit fashioned from the objective rationality of the Enlightenment and a corresponding belief in human capacity, the moral certainty and stern duty of evangelical Christianity, and the acquisitive itch of the market. Those ways of thinking and acting made possible the establishment of European dominion over the rest of the world. That accomplishment in turn shaped the understanding of economics, resources, navigation, trade, botany, zoology, anthropology – and history.

History served the new drive to control and order the natural world, to understand and even direct events. A new awareness of geography and chronology, of space and time as fixed and measurable, encouraged an understanding of history as a branch of knowledge independent of the standpoint of the observer, while at the same time it disclosed an insistent process of improvement and progress that legitimated the replacement of the old by the new. Seen thus, the history of Australia formed a late chapter in British, European and world history.

This version of Australia's beginning emphasised its strangeness. The plants and animals, even the human inhabitants, confounded existing taxonomies; they were both old and new. The monotremes and marsupials, warm-blooded animals that reproduced by egg or carried their offspring in a pouch, seemed to be primitive forerunners of the placental mammal, and at the same time a bizarre inversion of nature. Hence the puzzlement of the early New South Wales judge and rhymester, Barron Field:

> Kangaroo, Kangaroo!
> Thou Spirit of Australia!
> That redeems from utter failure,
> From perfect desolation,
> And warrants the creation
> Of this fifth part of the Earth
> Which would seem an after-birth...

In this version of Australian history, the novelty of the place – it was New Holland before it became New South Wales – was softened by attaching its destiny to imperial origins. Colonial history took British and European achievement as its point of departure.

Behind the rude improvisation on the furthest frontier of settlement of the British Empire was the inheritance of institutions, customs and expectations. A naval officer who in 1803 watched a team of convicts yoked to a cart that was sunk up to its axles in the unpromising sand hills of a southern bay comforted himself with the vision of 'a second Rome, rising from a coalition of Banditti . . . superlative in arms and arts'.

This settlement was abandoned, and the officer returned eventually to England, but others stayed and reworked his anticipation. These subsequent visionaries thought of Australia not as mere imitation but as striking out anew. They believed that the vast island-continent offered the chance to leave behind the Old World evils of poverty, privilege and rancour. With the transition in the middle of the nineteenth century from penal settlements to free and self-governing communities, the emphasis shifted from colonial imitation to national experimentation. With the gold rush, land settlement and urban growth, minds turned from dependency to self-sufficiency, and from a history that worked out the imperial legacy to one of self-discovery.

During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the sentiment of colonial nationalism served the desire to mark Australia off from Britain and Europe. Then, as the last imperial ties were severed, even that way of distinguishing the child from the parent lost meaning. In its place arose the idea of Australia as a destination for all-comers from every part of the world, which served the multicultural attitudes that formed in the closing decades of the twentieth century and further undermined the foundational significance of 1788.

The blurring of origins turned Australian history into a story of journeys and arrivals, shared by all and continuing right up to the present. But such smudging was too convenient. It failed to satisfy the need for emotional attachment and it left unappeased the pricking of conscience. The desire for a binding national past that would connect the people to the land was frustrated by the feeling of rootlessness, of novelty without depth. The longing for belonging to an indigenous culture was denied by the original usurpation. A history of colonisation yielded to a realisation of invasion.

By the end of the twentieth century it was no longer possible to maintain the fiction of Australia as *terra nullius*, a land that until its settlement in 1788 lacked human habitation, law, government or history. An alternative beginning was apparent. Australia – or, rather, the earlier landmass of Sahul, a larger island continent that extended northwards into Papua New Guinea and embraced the present island of Tasmania – was the site of an earlier way of life that had evolved over many millennia. The growing recognition of this vastly extended Australian history spoke to late-twentieth-century sensibility. It revealed social organisation, ecological practices, languages, art forms and spiritual beliefs of great antiquity and richness. By embracing the Aboriginal past, non-Aboriginal Australians attached themselves to their country.

They did so, however, not simply out of a desire for reconciliation and harmony but because they were challenged by the Aboriginal presence. The rediscovery of this longer history occurred alongside the revival of indigenous organisation and culture, the one process feeding into the other and yet each possessing its own dynamic. For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the European invasion was a traumatic event with lasting consequences for their mode of life, health, welfare and very identity. But theirs was also a story of survival – the survival of their customs and practices and of the stories and songs through which they were maintained. While the sharing of their culture drew attention to their survival and entitlements, they were reluctant to surrender control of it.

For non-Aboriginal scholars, even the most sympathetic, it thus became necessary to find new terms on which their studies could be conducted. Anthropologists were no longer able to assume they could take up residence among a local community, observe its ways, record its testimony and speak on its behalf. Archaeologists could not excavate sites without regard to Aboriginal sensitivities, and museums had to give up collections of artefacts and human remains. Even as researchers pushed back the earliest known date of the Aboriginal presence in Australia, they were forced to accommodate these constraints. The second version of Australian history, the one that begins not at 1788 CE but at least 50,000 and possibly 60,000 or more years before the present, is at once more controversial, more rapidly changing and more compelling.

It is controversial not simply because of issues of cultural ownership but because of the intellectual and emotional challenges it poses. Even if it is permissible to appropriate other cultures, is it possible to comprehend them? The older history noticed Aborigines only as a tragic and disturbing presence, victims of the iron law of progress. The Latin term *Ab origines* means, literally, those who were here from the beginning: its persistence, despite attempts to find other, more specific designations such as are used for aboriginal peoples in other parts of the world, attests to their abiding presence.

The remnants of this Aboriginal way of life were therefore pieced together and fitted into the jigsaw puzzle of prehistory to disclose a hierarchy of peoples at different stages of complexity, sophistication and capacity. Aboriginal traditions were of interest for the light they shed on this prehistory for, in the absence of written records, chronology and effective political authority, the Aboriginals were deemed to lack a history of their own. Denied agency in the events that began in 1788, they were no more than objects of history.

It is precisely that idea of history that is now cast into doubt by the new understanding of the Australian past. In 1992 the country's highest court found that the application of the doctrine of *terra nullius* when the British government claimed sovereignty 'depended on a discriminatory denigration of indigenous inhabitants'. Speaking six months later before an Aboriginal audience, the prime minister went further. 'We took the traditional lands and smashed the original way of life', Paul Keating stated. 'We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.'

Keating cited these past wrongs in a spirit of reconciliation, insisting 'there is nothing to fear or lose in the recognition of historical truth'. Yet over the following decade every one of his statements was contested. His successor, John Howard, dismissed the recommendations of the Reconciliation Council. Howard's government rejected the findings of an official inquiry into the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children taken from their parents, and restricted the operation of native title. Others have insisted that the original inhabitants of this country were a primitive people incapable of serious resistance and that the British settlement of Australia 'was the

least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World'. The question of national origins has never been so fiercely contested.

The island-continent of Australia, so the scientists tell us, formed as the great supercontinent of Pangea broke up in the remote past. First Laurasia in the north separated from Gondwana in the south. Then what would become India, Africa, South America and New Zealand broke free from Gondwana and drifted north, and later still – perhaps 50 million years ago – Australia and New Guinea did the same, until finally they stopped short of the island-chain that extends from Indochina down to Timor. Although the oceans rose and fell with periods of warmth and cold, this vast land-raft was always surrounded by water. The deep channel that today separates South-East Asia from the north-west coast of Australia narrowed at times to as little as 100 kilometres but it never closed. The sea always separated Sahul, the continental shelf that encompassed Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea, from Sunda, the archipelago that took in Malaya, Sumatra, Borneo and Java. The separation came to be known as the Wallace Line, after the nineteenth-century scientist who showed that it was a permanent zoological divide that demarcated the Eurasian species from those of Australia and New Guinea.

Australia was thus isolated. It was also remarkably geologically stable. There was little of the buckling and folding of the earth's crust that elsewhere produced high mountain ranges or deep rifts. Together with the relative absence of glaciation and the infrequency of volcanic activity, this left an older, flatter landmass, rich in mineral deposits but shallow in soil covering. Weathering and erosion leached the soil of nutrients. The remarkable diversity of plants and animals that evolved and flourished in this environment had to adapt to major climatic changes. Rainforests expanded and contracted, inland lakes filled and emptied, carnivores were less durable than herbivores.

When the last ice age ended some 10,000 years ago, and the present shoreline formed, Australia extended 3700 kilometres from the northern tropics to the southern latitudes, and 4400 kilometres from east to west. Much was arid plain, and much of the rain that fell on the line of mountains running down the eastern seaboard flowed into the Pacific Ocean. More than any other landmass, this one was marked by the infrequency and unreliability of rain. Scientists

Map 1.2 Sunda and Sahul

have recently identified the El Niño Oscillation Index to measure a climatic phenomenon that occurs when the trade winds that blow from the east across the Pacific Ocean fail. With that failure, warm water accumulates off the South American coast and brings fierce storms to the Americas; conversely, the colder water on this side of the Pacific reduces evaporation and cloud formation, and thus causes prolonged drought in eastern Australia. The El Niño cycle lasts from two to eight years, and climatologists can detect it in

records going back to the early nineteenth century. It is probable that it has operated for much longer, and shaped the evolution of the Australian environment.

The natural historians who marvel at the rich diversity of this singular environment find in it an ingenious anthropomorphism. The plants best suited to such circumstances sent down deep roots to search for moisture, used narrow leaves and tough bark to minimise evaporation and loss of vital fluid, and scattered seeds capable of regeneration after lying for long periods on the dry earth. They were frugal in their eking out of nutrients and prodigal in their reproduction. Some of them, such as the stands of eucalypts that spread a blue haze under the hot sun, actively enlisted the assistance of the conditions by strewing the ground with incendiary material to burn off competitors and stimulate their own regeneration. In the pyrohistory of Australia, the vast and sleeping continent is reconfigured as an arena in which the gum trees triumphed by kindling a fiery vortex.

Such fires would have been ignited periodically by lightning strikes or other natural causes, but by this time there was another incendiary agent – humans. The acquisition of control over fire by *Homo sapiens* provided protection, heat, light and power: the domestic hearth became site and symbol of human society. It might well have been the sight of columns of smoke rising on the northwest shore of Sahul that attracted people on island extremities of Sunda to cross the intervening sea. We do not know when this passage occurred, why or even how. It was probably achieved by bamboo rafts, as the result of population pressure and at a time when the Timor Sea was low. The most recent low-point, 100 metres below present sea level, occurred about 18,000 years ago; but the evidence of occupation before then is clear. The same low-point occurred about 140,000 years ago, probably too early. In between these two approximate dates, the sea receded to some 60 metres less than today about 70,000 years ago and did not regain its present level until the last ice age ended in the last 10,000 years.

The archaeological evidence for human presence in Australia remains frustratingly close to the limits of reliable dating. Arrival more than 40,000 years ago is now generally accepted; there are strong arguments for 60,000 years, and a still longer presence

cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, a mounting body of evidence suggests a rapid occupation of Australia, with human habitation extending from the lush tropics of the north to the icy rigours of the south, the rich coastal waterlands and the harsh interior. Whenever the first footprint fell on Australian soil, it marked a new achievement by *Homo sapiens* – maritime migration out of the African-European-Asian landmass into a new land.

The truth is, of course, that my own people, the Riratjungi, are descended from the great Djankawa who came from the island of Baralku, far across the sea. Our spirits return to Baralku when we die. Djankawa came in his canoe with his two sisters, following the morning star which guided them to the shores of Yelangbara on the eastern coast of Arnhem Land. They walked far across the country following the rain clouds. When they wanted water they plunged their digging stick into the ground and fresh water followed. From them we learnt the names of all the creatures on the land and they taught us all our Law.

The Djankawa story told by Wandjuk Marika is only one of many Aboriginal stories. Others tell of different origins, of ancestors coming from the land or from the sky, and of the mutability of humans with other life forms. This story is of origins that begin with a journey, of the signs that led the ancestors to their destination, and of the bounty of the land that sustained them.

Such creation stories are to be found for other peoples, as with the books of Genesis and Exodus in the Old Testament, but they bear lightly on the consciousness of those who still read them. Ancestral events, as recorded in stories, songs and rituals, have a particular significance in Aboriginal lives, for they express a particularly close relationship to the land. The events that occurred during the Dreamtime or the Dreaming – both English terms are used as inexact translations of that used by the Arrernte people of Central Australia, *altyerre* – created the hills and creeks, plants and animals, and imprinted their spirit on the place.

The preservation and practice of this knowledge thus affirms the custodianship of the land. Here is how a Northern Territory man, Paddy Japaljarri Stewart, explains its importance:

My father's grandfather taught me the first, and after a while my father taught me the same way as his father told jukurrpa [Dreaming], and then my father is telling the same story about what his father told him, and now

> he's teaching me how to live on the same kind of jukurrpa and follow the way what my grandfather did, and then teach what my father did, and then I'm going to teach my grandchildren the same way as my father taught me.
>
> When my father was alive this is what he taught me. He had taught me traditional ways like traditional designs in body or head of kangaroo Dreaming (that's what we call marlu Dreaming) and eagle Dreaming. He taught me how to sing song for the big ceremonies. People who are related to us in a close family, they have to have the same sort of jukurrpa Dreaming, and to sing songs in the same way as we do our actions like dancing, and paintings on our body or shields or things, and this is what my father taught me. My Dreaming is the kangaroo Dreaming, the eagle Dreaming and budgerigar Dreaming, so I have three kinds of Dreaming in my jukurrpa and I have to hang onto it. This is what my father taught me, and this is what I have to teach my sons, and my son has to teach his sons the same way as my father taught me, and that's way it will go on from grandparents to sons, and follow that jukurrpa. No-one knows when it will end.

Paddy Japaljarri Stewart recorded this testimony, by tape-recorder, in his own language in 1991. He evokes the continuity of Dreaming from grandfather and father to son and grandson, down the generations and across the passage of time; yet the insistence on the obligation to preserve and transmit his three jukurrpas attests to the corrosive possibilities of secular change. He goes on to aver that the maintenance of the Dreaming has to be 'really strict', so that his family will not 'lose it like a paper, or throw it away or give it away to other families'. The overlay of new technology on customary knowledge heightens the contrast between a binding tradition and a fragile, disposable past. The history that is recorded on paper, like other documents such as land titles, can be lost or surrendered to others. The history that is lived and renewed within the ties of the family remains your own.

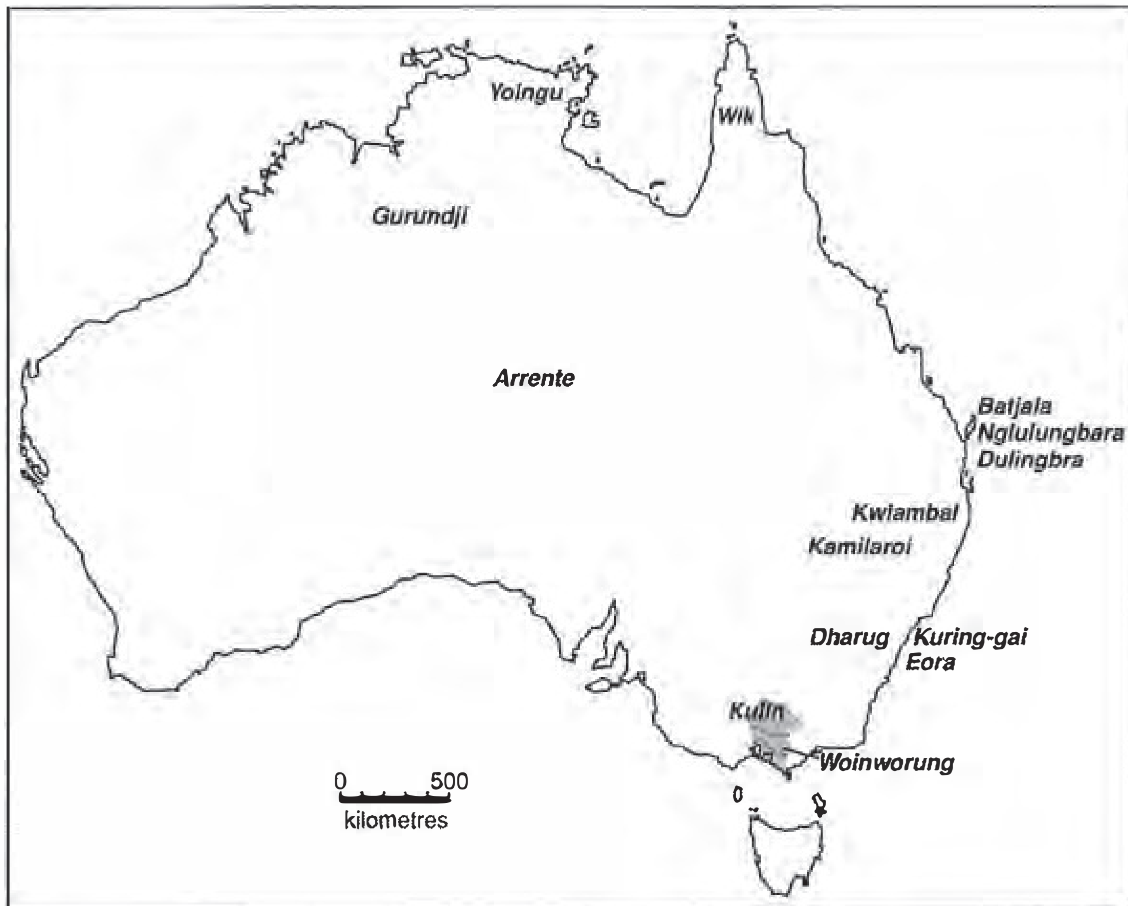
The Aboriginal people who occupied Sahul encountered radically different conditions from those they left in Sunda. The absence of predators, for there were few carnivorous competitors here, gave them an enormous initial advantage. They spread over an extraordinary range of ecologies – tropical northern forests, Tasmanian glaciated highlands, the dry interior – and had to adjust to major climatic changes. Over hundreds of generations they adapted to these different, changing environments, and in turn they learned how to manipulate them to augment the food supply. As hunter-gatherers,

they lived off the land with a precise and intimate knowledge of its resources and seasonal patterns. They organised socially in extended families, with specific rights and specific responsibilities for specific country, and rules to regulate their interaction with others.

Hunter-gatherer is both a technical term and something more. It refers to a mode of material life; it signifies a stage in human history. Forty thousand years ago, when Australia was populated by hunter-gatherers, every human society in every part of the world practised hunter-gathering. Subsequently, agriculture replaced hunter-gathering in Europe, much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Agriculture enabled greater productivity, sustained higher population densities, gave rise to towns and the amenities of urban life. As it became possible to produce more than a subsistence, wealth could be accumulated and allow a division of labour. Such specialisation fostered technological improvement, commerce and industry; it supported armies, rulers and bureaucrats who could control large political units with a corresponding extension of capacity.

When British and other European investigators first encountered the Australian Aborigines, they fitted them into a ladder of human progress on which the hunter-gatherer society occupied the lowest rung. The nineteenth-century historian James Bonwick, who wrote extensively of Aboriginal history, emphasised the Arcadian virtue of their way of life but always assumed that they were doomed to yield to European ways. For him, as for most of his contemporaries, the indigenous people represented a primitive antiquity that lacked the capacity to change: as he put it, 'they knew no past, they wanted no future'.

More recent interpretations suggest otherwise. Prehistorians (though the persistence of this term indicates that the new sensibility is incomplete) are struck by the remarkable longevity and adaptability of hunter-gatherer societies. Demographers suggest that they maintained a highly successful equilibrium of population and resources. Economists have found that they produced surpluses, traded, made technological advances, all with far less effort than agriculturalists. Linguists are struck by the diversity and sophistication of their languages. Anthropologists discern complex religions that guided such people's lives and movements, encoded ecological wisdom, assured genetic variety and maintained social cohesion.



Map 1.3 Aboriginal Australia, showing location of groups mentioned in this history. (D. R Horton (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Auslig 1994). The editor warns that 'this map indicates only the general location of larger groupings of people which may include smaller groups such as clans, dialects or individual languages in a group. Boundaries are not intended to be exact. For more information about the groups of people in a particular region contact the relevant land councils. This map is not suitable for use in native title and other land claims.'

With their egalitarian social and political structure, far-flung trading networks and above all their rich spiritual and cultural life, the celebrated French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss described the Australian Aborigines as 'intellectual aristocrats'.

These reappraisals overturn the rigid hierarchy of historical progress through sequential stages, from primitive to modern, and enable us to appreciate the sophistication of a civilisation of greater longevity than any other in world history. Yet there remains the challenge to explain the apparent incapacity of the Aboriginal

Australians to withstand the invasion of 1788. For all its advantages, and its capacity to meet challenges over more than forty millennia, the indigenous population could not maintain sovereignty when confronted by British settlers. It was by no means alone in this incapacity, of course: other hunter-gatherer societies, as well as agricultural ones and even those with more extensive commercial institutions, succumbed to European conquest in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Australian experience points up the particular vulnerability of an isolated civilisation to external aggression.

The Aborigines were not wholly cut off from external contact. The native dog, the dingo, reached Australia some 4000 years ago; it was the first and only domesticated animal. Traders from South-East Asia were visiting the northern coast before European settlement, bringing pottery, cloth and metal tools. Such external influences were far less significant, however, than internal processes of change wrought by the Aborigines themselves. Their arrival had almost certainly hastened the extinction of earlier megafauna. Their use of fire to burn off undergrowth and encourage new pasture for the remaining marsupials, as well as their systematic harvesting of staple plants, had altered the landscape. Their technological innovation accelerated with the development of new tools, the digging stick and the spatula, fishing net and canoe, boomerang and woomera, net and spear, hafted axe and specialised stone implements. The construction of weirs and channels to trap eels supported populations of several hundred in semi-permanent housing.

The evidence of this inventiveness is confirmed by the absence of many such items from the island of Tasmania, which was separated from the mainland some 10,000 years ago, while the disappearance of Aboriginal communities on the smaller Flinders and Kangaroo islands attests to the fragility of remote settlements. The intensification of the hunter-gatherer economy probably supported larger numbers – we do not know the population history, but recent estimates suggest perhaps three-quarters of a million people lived here in 1788.

The way of life held the population at a level determined by the food that was available at the times of greatest scarcity, but it was far from a constant struggle for subsistence. The hunting of

game, fishing, snaring, and harvesting of foodstuffs were part of an elaborate system of environmental management; and this essential activity was undertaken along with other activities to provide shelter and clothing, renew equipment, conduct trade and communication, maintain law and order, and practise ceremony and ritual. The Aboriginal way of life is seen as affording a large amount of leisure time for cultural and artistic pursuits, but such a distinction between work and leisure separates domains of life that were conjoined. Equally, artistic expression entered into the most central forms of material practice, and Aboriginal religion encompassed all aspects of life. It is this organic character of belief and social practice that attracts so many present-day admirers of a Dreamtime wisdom: a cosmology that prescribed the necessary knowledge of a people and saturated their every action with spiritual significance.

Did the deep respect for tradition stifle more radical transformations that might have allowed the Aboriginal people to resist the invasion of 1788? The passage of time and temporal change, so central in Western thought, do not have that status in Aboriginal ontology. If the land is primary and place immutable, then history cannot have the same determinate role. For the Europeans who took possession of the land, history exercised a powerful forward momentum of constant change and improvement. For the Aboriginals, the pattern of events was rhythmical as well as linear. The Dreamtime was not a time but a set of abiding events. In a society made up of small groups whose members set their feet carefully in the footsteps of those who had gone before, change could only be incremental.

It would certainly appear that their economy and forms of organisation set limits on the capacity to concentrate resources or mount a concerted resistance. The basic unit was the extended family, linked by intermarriage, belief and language into larger territorial groups.

Europeans described such groups as tribes, but that term has now fallen into disfavour and the preferred designation is people – thus the Eora people of present-day Sydney, or the Wajuk people of present-day Perth. These peoples in turn interacted with neighbouring peoples through trade, alliance and antagonism: there were some 250 distinct language groups but most Aboriginals would have been multilingual. They came together in enlarged numbers from

time to time for ceremonial occasions that were constrained in size and duration by the availability of food. Crops and herds would have relaxed those constraints and allowed greater density of settlement, larger concentrations of wealth and power; but Aboriginals did not domesticate animals, apart from the dingo, and they did not practise agriculture.

The failure to do so was not for want of precedent. The movement of humans into Sahul occurred when Australia was continuous with New Guinea, and the two countries were still joined by a neck of land near Cape York up to 8000 years ago. By that time pigs were kept and gardens cleared to grow taro in the Highlands of New Guinea. The Aboriginals of the Cape York region continued to hunt for their meat and gather their plant food. The preference – it can only have been a choice between alternatives since the Cape York Aboriginals possessed such New Guinean items as drums, bamboo pipes, and outrigger canoes – might be explained by differences of soil and regional climate.

For the rest of Australia, the environment probably made the necessary investment in agricultural production and storage uneconomic. Unless the El Niño phenomenon is a recent one, the periodic lack of rainfall over the eastern two-thirds of the continent made dependence on crops too risky. The Aboriginals were mobile firestick farmers rather than sedentary slash-and-burn agriculturalists; they tended their plants as they visited them, fed their animals on open grassland rather than by hand, and killed their meat on the range instead of in the pen. They tracked the erratic sources of their livelihood with simplified rather than elaborate shelters, and a portable tool-kit that met their needs. This was an ingenious and closely calibrated response to a unique environmental challenge.

2

Newcomers, c. 1600–1792

The stories of the Dreaming tell of beginnings that are both specific and general. They narrate particular events that occurred in particular places, but those events are not fixed chronologically since they span the past and the present to carry an enduring meaning. Archaeologists and prehistorians seek a different sort of precision, yet their hypotheses and conjectures can provide only broad approximations for the first human habitation in Australia. By contrast, the story of the second settlement is known in minute particularity. It consisted of 1066 people who had sailed in eleven vessels to New South Wales from the southern English naval town of Portsmouth, via Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town, on a marathon voyage of just over eight months; thirty-one died during the voyage. The survivors reached the north shore of Botany Bay on 18 January 1788, but landed 12 kilometres to the north in a cove of Port Jackson eight days later. On a space cleared in the wooded slope that is now central Sydney, the British flag was hoisted as the commander, Captain Arthur Phillip, took formal possession of the new colony.

We have his account of the voyage and settlement, as well as other published accounts, and the official instructions, dispatches, logs, journals, diaries and letters of those who accompanied him. We know the names of every person, their status and duties, the stores they brought with them and the livestock, plants and seeds, even the books, that they brought ashore to establish the colony. We can plot the actions of the colonists with an amplitude of detail beyond almost all other similar ventures, for this was a late episode

in European expansion and the most powerful of all the European states brought an accumulated organisational capacity to it. Furthermore, the settlement at New South Wales was the bridgehead for British occupation of the whole of Australia, the landing at Sydney Cove the formative moment of a new nation that would afterwards re-enact its origins in the celebration of 26 January as Australia Day.

Yet in the marking of the anniversary, as well as the unending stream of writing on the foundation of European Australia, there is constant disputation. On the centenary of British settlement in 1888, radical nationalists attacked the official celebrations for sanitising the past of the convicts who made up the majority of Phillip's party. Fifty years later Aboriginal critics boycotted the reenactment of the landing and declared 26 January a Day of Protest and Mourning. During the bicentenary in 1988 the official organisers arranged a passage up Sydney Harbour of ships from around the world in preference to the unofficial flotilla that retraced the voyage from Portsmouth; but this did not assuage the Aboriginal protesters who flung a copy of a new bicentennial history into the waters of Sydney Cove. As with public ritual, so with the scholarly interpretation of British settlement: its initiation, purpose, efficacy and consequences are all debated more vigorously now than ever before. Was it part of a larger imperial design or an improvisation? Was Australia meant to be a dumping-ground for convicts or a strategic and mercantile base? Did it begin with an 'indescribable hopelessness and confusion', as the country's most eminent historian put it, or was it a place of order and redemption? Was it an invasion or peaceful occupation, despoliation or improvement, a place of exile or hope, estrangement or attachment? The accumulation of research brings more exact knowledge of the formative events, while the passage of time weakens our connection with them and allows a multiplicity of meaning to be found in them. With the end of the age of European empire and revival of the indigenous presence, the story of the second settlement of Australia is no clearer than the first.

The expansion of Europe began with internal conquest. From early in the second millennium of the Christian era warriors were subduing barbarian and infidel peoples in the border regions, creating new

settlements and rehearsing the methods that allowed movement north into the Baltic, east over the Urals, west into the Atlantic and south down the African coast and across to East Asia. These excursions gathered pace from the fifteenth century onwards but initially involved only limited numbers. Acquisition by trade and conquest was the object, and European adventurers absorbed the knowledge (compass and gunpowder), techniques (crossbow and printing press) and products (potato and tomato) of other civilisations.

In Asia, where the Europeans encountered literate societies with highly developed economies, they established garrisons and trading centres for the acquisition of spices, coffee, tea and textiles. In the Americas they reaped windfall gains of precious bullion, and in the Caribbean they worked sugar and tobacco plantations with slave labour shipped from Africa. Only in North America and the temperate regions of South America did they settle in significant numbers: as late as 1800 just 4 per cent of Europeans lived abroad.

There were non-European empires, those of the Manchus in China, the Moghuls in India, the Ottomans and Safavids, Aztecs and Incas, but none of them withstood the growth of European power. They were built on large, contiguous territories with a coherent unity; the European ones were far-flung networks thrown across oceans, more mobile and enterprising. Spain, Portugal, Holland, France and Britain – the principal maritime states on the Atlantic fringe of the European peninsula – jostled and competed with each other, spurring further growth and innovation. Yet the same rivalry imposed a growing cost. Britain and France, which emerged during the eighteenth century as the two leading European powers, taxed their strength as they fought repeatedly on sea and land. From the Seven Years War (1756–63) Britain emerged victorious with control of North America and India. In the following round of hostilities, France took several of the West Indian islands and Britain lost most of North America to its own colonists in the War of American Independence (1774–83). By then France was on the verge of revolution and Britain strained under the remorseless demands for revenue and lives needed to sustain its imperial garrison state.

The British loss of its American colonies at the end of the eighteenth century signalled a new phase of empire. Britain turned of necessity away from the Atlantic to the East, and settlement of

Australia was part of its expansion in Asia and the Pacific. The same reverse also encouraged a reconsideration of how the empire should be conducted. After the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, there was a shift from the expensive military effort needed to protect trade monopolies, with its accompanying burden of domestic taxation, towards self-sustaining economic development and free trade. The transition was less marked in India, where the cost of expanding the empire was transferred from the British taxpayer to the local peasant, than in settler-colonies such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

These colonies of settlement, like the former British colonies in the United States and the Iberian colonies in Argentina and Uruguay, mark out a distinctive zone of European expansion. There was little effort in them to maintain the existing order, to enter into commercial relations with their inhabitants or recruit them as labour; instead, these lands were cleared and settled as fresh fields of European endeavour. Their temperate climates were sufficiently similar to support European livestock, pasture and crops; their local biota were less diverse and less resistant to the weeds and pests the Europeans brought with them; their indigenous inhabitants were decimated by imported diseases. Before the nineteenth century the settler colonies played a minor economic role in the European imperial system; thereafter, as large-scale industrialisation created a mass market for the primary products of their virgin soil, they became the wealthiest and most rapidly growing regions outside Europe.

An account of the colonial settlement of Australia that relies on the logic of economic and ecological imperialism leaves too much unexplained. The implication that the Australian Aborigines simply disappeared with the advent of European pathogens is as unpersuasive as the suggestion that the Maori provided no effective resistance to the Pakeha in New Zealand. It required a substantial European effort to subdue the indigenous peoples of the regions of settlement, and no less an effort to justify their expropriation. Notions of providence and destiny dignified images of the native based on cultural difference and racial inferiority. The British came to the Pacific with their sense of superiority as the inheritors of Western civility and bearers of Christian revelation enhanced by the further

advantages of scientific knowledge, industrial progress and liberty. The last of these might seem an unlikely claim for a colony that began with convicts, but was no less influential for that. A Briton's freedom was based on obedience to the Crown under a system of constitutional government that safeguarded the subject's rights. The example of the American colonies and the republican doctrines proclaimed there as well as in France served as a salutary reminder of the consequences of violating such rights.

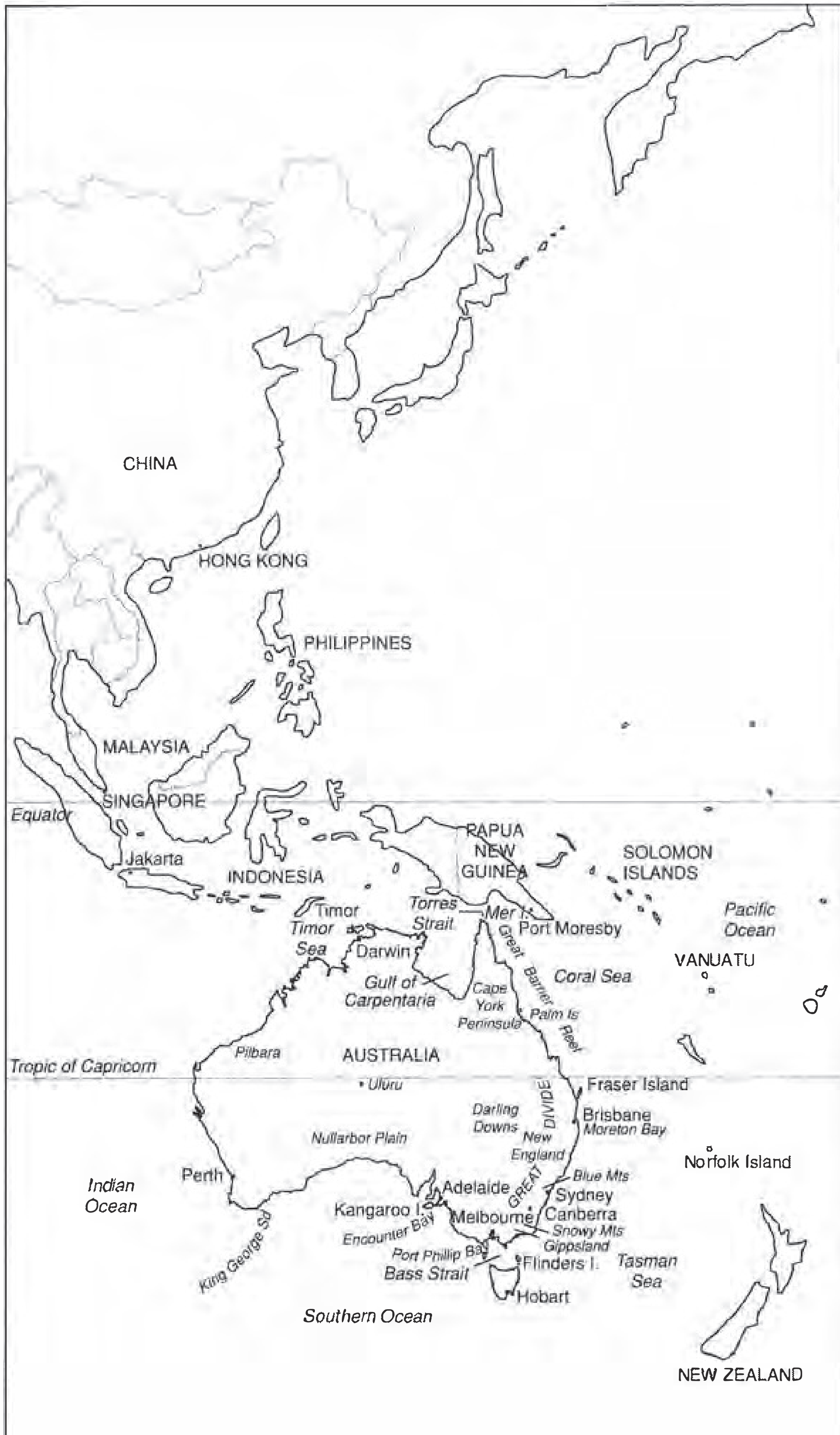
The settler societies spawned by Europe were thus extensions and new beginnings. They applied and adapted technologies with prodigious results, cultivated principles as well as plants, and sent them back to where they had come from with enhanced potency. Yet even in the United States, and the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies of Central and South America that threw off their tutelage to forge the distinctive features of the democratic nation-state, the settler-citizens remained tied to their origins. The new republics defined themselves as white brotherhoods. However much they emphasised their difference from their metropolitan cousins, whatever their conscious and unconscious adaptation to local ways, they remained estranged from the indigenous peoples. The nation that arose on the grasslands of Australia, like those on the North American plain and the Argentine pampas, was a creole society insistent on its place in the European diaspora.

The British were laggards in the Pacific. The Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch preceded them into the archipelago that extends down its western fringe. Spain alone held the eastern extremity from the Strait of Magellan up to California. Between these two sides of the Pacific basin stretched 15,000 kilometres of water dotted with thousands of volcanic or coral islands, few of sufficient size or wealth to attract European attention. They had already been navigated and settled in a series of movements that began with the human occupation of Sahul more than 40,000 years earlier and culminated at the beginning of the last millennium with the occupation of Easter Island in the east and New Zealand in the south. These people of the sea practised agriculture, kept domestic animals and sustained a mosaic of polities. In 1567 the Spanish dispatched an expedition in search of gold to the Solomon Islands, but that ended in massacre and counter-massacre. In 1595 and 1605 they repeated the venture

in the Solomons and Vanuatu – which Pedro de Quiros named La Australia del Espiritu Santo – with the same result. In 1606 his colleague Torres sailed west through the strait that separates Australia from New Guinea.

Meanwhile the Portuguese had pushed south from India as far as Timor, and possibly to the Australian coast. After them came the Dutch, who in the seventeenth century established a trading empire in the East Indies. The route from Holland to Batavia took their ships round the Cape of Good Hope and then east with the prevailing winds across the Indian Ocean before they turned north for Java. Given the difficulty of establishing longitude, many of their vessels encountered the western coast of Australia, sometimes with fatal consequences – the location, study and retrieval of the contents of Dutch wrecks makes Western Australia a centre of marine archaeology. By the middle of the seventeenth century the Dutch had mapped the western half of Australia, which they called New Holland, and traced some fragments of coast further east. In 1606 Willem Jansz sailed east through the Torres Strait and unwittingly along the north-east corner of Australia. In 1642 Abel Tasman led an expedition that charted the southern part of the island now named after him and the east side of New Zealand.

Whether these shores were part of a single land mass remained unclear. It was apparent only that the great south land was separate from the Antarctic, and that it straddled the Indian and Pacific oceans. This location continues to create uncertainty. Since 1788 the great mass of the Australian population has always lived on the eastern seaboard, facing the Pacific, and its islands have drawn them as traders and missionaries, administrators and adventurers. Australians commonly regard themselves, along with the New Zealanders, as part of Oceania, and they have liked to think they enjoy a special relation with the most powerful of all English-speaking countries on the other side of that ocean; hence they have embraced its formulation of the Pacific rim. Yet for those who live in Western Australia, Indonesia is the most proximate neighbour, the historical links with India, South Africa and even Mauritius more significant. As the balance of regional power has shifted, so Australians increasingly claim they are part of Asia and regard their earlier presence in the Pacific as a romantic interlude in tropical islands far removed from the business hub of the Asian tigers.



Map 2.1 Australia and the region

The difference is not simply one of economic opportunity. The Pacific signifies peace, a far-flung constellation of island people living in harmony with nature, where the colonial imagination could find a soft primitivism of noble savages predisposed to friendship and hospitality. Asia, on the other hand, presented a dense tangle of peoples with polities, cultures and traditions even more deeply embedded than those of Europe. As the late-developing nation-states on the Atlantic seaboard imposed control over the older civilisations of the Eurasian continent, they hardened a distinction between the West and the East. The lands to the east of the Mediterranean became known as the Orient, the place from where the sun rose. The Orient came to stand for a whole way of life that was inferior to that of the West and yet disturbingly threatening: indolent, irrational, despotic and decayed.

Such typification of the alien other, which the critic Edward Said characterises as Orientalism, had a peculiar meaning in colonial Australia where geography contradicted history. Fascination and fear mingled in the colonists' apprehension of the zone that lay between them and the metropole. As a British dependency, Australia adopted the terminology that referred to the Near, Middle and Far East until, under threat of Japanese invasion in 1940, its prime minister suddenly recognised that 'What Great Britain calls the Far East is to us the near north.'

For early European navigators, Australia was Terra Australis Incognita, the south land beyond the limits of the known world. It was a place of mythical beasts and fabulous wealth in the imagination of those who had long anticipated it, a blank space where their fantasy could run free. Early mapmakers inscribed an indeterminate continent and decorated it with lush vegetation and barbarous splendour. Yet just as the Spanish expedition to the Solomons found 'no specimens of spices, nor of gold and silver, nor of merchandise, nor of any other source of profit, and all the people were naked savages', so Tasman reported 'nothing profitable' in the island he named Van Diemen's Land (which is now Tasmania), 'only poor, naked people walking along beaches; without rice or many fruits, very poor and bad-tempered'. Once its commercial prospects were discounted, the great south land served merely as a place of invention. In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) Jonathan Swift located his

2.1 A sketch of Aborigines in canoes made in 1770, possibly by Joseph Banks. His use of art as an aid to scientific knowledge is suggested by the careful attention to boat construction and the method of spearing fish. (British Library)

imaginary Lilliput in South Australia, and in a final chapter he satirised the conventional account of New World settlement:

> A crew of pirates are driven by a storm they know not whither; at length a boy discovers land from the topmast, they go on shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless people, are entertained with kindness, they give the country a new name, they take formal possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten plank or a stone for a memorial, they murder two or three dozen of the natives, they bring away a couple more by force for a sample, return home, and get their pardon. Hence commences a new dominion acquired with a title by *divine right*.

It was a strangely prescient prediction of the foundation of New South Wales.

French and British interest in the Pacific revived from the middle of the eighteenth century with a renewed sense of the region's possibilities. The two countries sent a series of ships whose names – *Le Géographe, Le Naturaliste, Endeavour, Discovery, Investigator* – suggest their purpose. The expeditions were dispatched by the respective governments in conjunction with the

2.2 An idealised portrait painted by Augustus Earle and entitled *A Woman of New South Wales.* The classical beauty of the form and features contrasts with the derogatory caricature of Aborigines exposed to European vice by the same artist, which appears in the following chapter (p. 50). (National Library of Australia)

savants of the French Academy and the scientists of the Royal Society. They tested new navigational aids and advanced cartography to new standards. They carried natural historians, astronomers, landscape painters, botanical draftsmen; they measured, described, collected and classified flora and fauna, searching always for plants that might be propagated and utilised. They sought out the islanders and endeavoured to learn their ways. These were men of reason hungry for knowledge rather than bullion.

The most celebrated of them is James Cook, a merchant seaman who joined the Royal Navy and led three expeditions to the Pacific. On the first (1768–71) he sailed to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the sun, then headed west to make a detailed circumnavigation of the two islands of New Zealand and trace the east coast of Australia into the Torres Strait. With only one ship, a converted collier renamed the *Endeavour*, and that just 30 metres

2.3 Cook is borne aloft as the hero-victim of European discovery in the Pacific, with Universal Fame on one side and Britannia on the other. (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand)

in length, he charted more than 8000 kilometres of coastline and established the limits of the Australian island-continent. On the second voyage (1772–4) he went further south into the Antarctic seas than anyone before him and tested a new chronometer to fix longitude at sea by lunar tables. On the third (1777–9) he was killed by islanders of Hawaii. Cook became a model for a subsequent generation of maritime explorers. He was a hero for his time – a practical

visionary, resourceful and courageous, a man who restrained his hot temper, eschewed conjecture for accurate observation, fused curiosity and moral certainty – and for some time after he was hailed as the founder as well as the discoverer of Australia. A posthumous engraving shows him ascending to the clouds after his death with a sextant in his hand.

He had with him on the first voyage Joseph Banks, a young gentleman-scientist who would become director of Kew Gardens and make it the central collecting and distributing point in a botanical imperium, as well as the president of the Royal Society, member of the Privy Council and patron of the colony of New South Wales. There was also Daniel Solander, a pupil of the Swedish botanist Linnaeus, whose system of classification provided a framework for interpreting the hundreds of specimens gathered during the voyage. Cook's instructions were that after observing the transit of Venus he was to sail south from Tahiti, where 'there is reason to imagine that a Continent or Land of great extent may be found'; should it not be found he was to proceed west and navigate New Zealand. He did both those things, the first fruitlessly, the second superlatively, and then decided to continue west.

On 19 April 1770 the *Endeavour* sighted land at the entrance of Bass Strait on the south-east corner of the Australian mainland. As the ship coasted northwards, the country struck Banks as bare as a 'lean cow' with 'scraggy hip bones' poking through the rough timber covering. On 28 April the *Endeavour* entered a large bay fringed, according to Cook, by 'as fine meadow as ever was seen', and Banks and Solander were kept busy for a week collecting plant, bird and animal species hitherto unknown to European science. They named it Botany Bay. For a further four months the company travelled north, surviving accident in the Great Barrier Reef, and marked their repeated landfalls with inscriptions cut on trees. Finally, at Possession Island off the northernmost tip of Cape York, Cook laid claim to the entire eastern coast under the name of New South Wales.

The idea that Cook discovered Australia strikes many today as false as the British claim to sovereignty over it. How can you find something that is already known? His voyage to New Zealand was preceded by that of Polynesian mariners some thousand years

earlier; his Australian landfall came more than 40,000 years after the original human presence there. Cook's description of the Aborigines, frequently quoted, attests to the European Enlightenment apprehension of the noble savage:

> From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland, they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans; being wholy unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition; the Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life.

Those Aboriginals whom Cook encountered certainly seemed uninterested in European conveniences. They spurned the trinkets he offered, resisted his overtures and fired the bush where he landed: 'all they seem'd to want is for us to be gone'. Cook's presence in the Pacific as an explorer and an appropriator, his endeavour to transcend cultural difference with a mix of conciliation and force, ended with his death on a Hawaiian beach. He figures in international debates among anthropologists in a postcolonial age as a crucial test case of the limits of one culture to comprehend another. In white Australian histories Cook is a fading hero, in Aboriginal oral narratives he is a powerful and disruptive intruder. He did not so much discover Australia as make it accessible to European travel, available for British settlement.

The decision to settle was taken by the British government fifteen years after Cook and Banks returned with their reports of New South Wales. By this time Britain had lost its North American colonies and was no longer able to transport convicts there as it had done for most of the eighteenth century. A plan to establish a new penal colony was prepared. Initially it was to be in Africa, but when no suitable site was found there, Botany Bay was chosen in the 'Heads of a Plan' submitted to the Cabinet by Lord Sydney – the minister for the Home Office who then had responsibility for colonial affairs – and adopted in 1786.

The reasons for this choice are keenly debated. Some would have it that the purpose was to get rid of a dangerous social problem, and the farther away the better. Others contend that Botany Bay had

strategic advantages. Situated on the blind side of the Dutch East Indies, it could provide a naval base for British expansion into the Asia–Pacific region. After the loss of Nantucket in the United States, it would allow a resumption of southern whaling. Most of all, they claim, it offered two precious commodities, timber and flax. Both were in keen demand by the navy for masts, sailcloth, ropes and cordage, and Cook's second voyage had reported that both grew in abundance on Norfolk Island, which lay 1700 kilometres east of Botany Bay.

The dispute over the motives for settlement is necessarily difficult to resolve because the official documentary record is so circumstantial. The 'Heads of a Plan' provides support for both parties when it justifies the scheme as 'effectually disposing of convicts, and rendering their transportation reciprocally beneficial to themselves and the State'. The British official who probably prepared the plan coupled the availability of flax and timber with 'the removal of a dreadful Banditti from this country'. Those who argue that Australia was settled as a dumping-ground for convicts see in these inauspicious origins the necessity of a new beginning. Those who hold to the geopolitical design seek a more affirmative continuity with imperial foresight.

The new colony was a product of maritime exploration, trade and penology. While the cost of imperial expansion weighed heavily on the British economy, the commercial benefits were shared unevenly. New wealth and new ways of increasing it, the spread of commerce and cupidity into all corners of human relationships, strained the bonds of social station and mutual obligation, with a corresponding increase in crime. The government, which remained a makeshift combination of property-owning legislators, tiny administrative departments and local squires, responded by extending the criminal code to make even the most minor transgression a capital offence. Between the insufficient deterrent of summary punishment by fine or infliction of pain and the intolerable recourse to wholesale execution there was the intermediate penalty of extended imprisonment, but the ramshackle system of local prisons could not accommodate the swollen numbers of convicts. Hence the earlier recourse to transportation to the American colonies, where the convicts could be set to work by the sale of their labour to local

entrepreneurs. Those who came before the assizes and were spared the gallows would now provide the basis of a new settlement.

To found a colony with convicts was a more ambitious undertaking. Since there was no-one to buy convict labour, they were expected to become a self-sufficient community of peasant proprietors. Of the 759 who were selected, the men outnumbered the women by three to one. Since they would have to be controlled, four companies of marines were sent with them. Since there was no government, it would be a military colony, but the rule of law would prevail, courts would be established and customary rights would be maintained. Its governor, Arthur Phillip, was a naval captain but he held a civil commission.

The First Fleet, consisting of two warships, six transports and three store ships, carried seeds and seedlings, ploughs and harnesses, horses, cattle, sheep, hogs, goats and poultry, and food for two years. An initial inspection of Botany Bay revealed that it was sandy, swampy and unsuitable for settlement; Cook and Banks had seen it in late autumn but Phillip arrived in high summer when the green cover was bleached to reveal its poverty. Immediately to the north, Port Jackson offered a superb harbour, a large stretch of sheltered water opening into smaller coves and surmounted by timbered slopes in a majestic amphitheatre; Sydney Cove had a fresh water supply. Even here, however, the land was poor and the first-sown vegetables quickly withered and died. Axes lost their edge on the gnarled and twisted trunks of the blackbutt and red gum, shovels broke on the sandstone beneath the shallow soil, stock strayed or died or was eaten. The marines refused to supervise the convicts, most of whom did not take up smallholdings but worked on public farms for rations. The women, who were encouraged to take partners, were fortunate if they found a reliable companion. Meanwhile the party that had been dispatched to Norfolk Island found the native flax could not be processed and the pine was hollow.

In October 1788 Phillip sent a ship to the Cape of Good Hope for additional supplies and reduced the ration; it returned in May 1789 with provisions but a large supply ship sent from Britain failed to arrive. The rations were reduced and reduced again, until by April 1790 the weekly distribution consisted of a kilogram of crumbling salt pork, a kilogram of rice alive with weevil, and a

kilogram of old flour that the exiles boiled up with local greens. These were the hungry years when men and women fought over food and listless torpor overtook even the most vigorous. The fact that the rations were distributed equally, with no privileges for rank, alleviated resentment. Even so, the colonial surgeon wrote of 'a country and place so forbidding and so hateful as only to merit execration and curses'.

The arrival of the Second Fleet in mid-1790, with fresh supplies – though fully a quarter of its prisoners had died on the voyage and those who survived were incapable of work – and then a third fleet in the following year, eased the crisis. The cultivation of fertile soil at Parramatta on the upper reach of Sydney Harbour guaranteed survival. By the end of 1792, when Phillip returned to England, there were 600 hectares under crop, and thriving vegetable and fruit gardens. There was fish in the harbour, pasture on the Cumberland Plain. Once the newcomers adapted to the scorching summer heat – the temperature reached 44 degrees centigrade in December 1788 – the climate was benign. Bodies and minds attuned to higher latitudes, hard winters and damp, green fecundity were coming to terms with the heady smells of hot, dry scrub and the sparse canopy that filtered a dazzling brightness. The commanding officer of the New South Wales regiment that was sent in 1792 discovered 'to my great astonishment, instead of the rock I expected to see, I find myself surrounded with gardens that flourish and produce fruit of every description'.

Phillip had held the colony together through the early years of desolation until kidney stones forced him back to England. He took with him in December 1792 kangaroos, dingoes, plants, specimens, drawings and two Aboriginal men, Bennelong and Yemmerrawannie. His greatest failure was in relations with the Aboriginal people of the region. He had been instructed to 'open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them'. He had endeavoured to comply, offering gifts as a token of goodwill and punishing any of his party who molested the inhabitants. Even when he was himself speared, in 1790, he forbade reprisals. Frustrated in his attempts to establish closer relations, he captured several Aboriginal men. The first, Arabanoo, died of the smallpox epidemic that swept the

Aboriginal people of the region within a year of the European arrival. Another, Bennelong, escaped but returned to Sydney Cove following Phillip's injury to restore relations. Only when his huntsman, John Macintyre, was speared did the governor resort to indiscriminate vengeance: he ordered troops to bring back six Aboriginal heads.

That military expedition failed and Phillip returned to his fruitless endeavour to keep the peace. Not all encounters were violent. Aborigines helped the newcomers with their fishing, and exchanged their tools or weapons for hatchets, mirrors or clothing. Europeans cared for those Aborigines who sought treatment for smallpox. Such transactions occurred across a gulf of language and perception that was painfully apparent when those on one side seized the possessions or violated the customs of those on the other. European firearms and European disease gave the invaders a lethal advantage, and the 3000 or so inhabitants of the land around Port Jackson came to shun the huddle of buildings on Sydney Cove as well as the foraging parties that spread out from them. 'Our intercourse with them was neither frequent nor cordial', wrote an officer of the marines. He thought at first that the spearing and clubbing of stragglers was caused by 'a spirit of malignant levity', but subsequent experience led him to 'conclude that the unprovoked outrages committed upon them by unprincipled individuals among us caused the evils we had experienced'. Another perceived that as long as the Aborigines 'entertained the idea of our having dispossessed them of their residences, they must always consider us as enemies'.

In striking contrast to its practice elsewhere, the British government took possession of eastern Australia (and later the rest of the continent) by a simple proclamation of sovereignty. The colonisation of North America had proceeded by means of treaties with the native population, for settlement there began on a small and tentative basis, and for some time relied on co-operation with the powerful Indian nations. Treaties were used to secure friendly relations, delineate boundaries of settlement, facilitate trade and resource exploitation, and establish military alliances against competitors — as the British, the French and the rebellious colonists jostled for control between 1763 and 1774, North American natives were signatories to no fewer than thirty treaties. None of these

circumstances applied in Australia, and instead Britain relied on a legal doctrine that allowed the firstcomer to claim a vacant territory. This doctrine would become known as *terra nullius*, land belonging to nobody, and its operation would distinguish Australia from other settler societies.

We see its origins in the instructions given Cook when he sailed in 1768 to search for the great south land: 'with the consent of the natives to take possession . . . or if you find the country uninhabited take possession for His Majesty by setting up proper marks and inscriptions, as first discoverers and possessors'. From their observations along the east coast in 1770, he and Banks judged that the Aborigines were incapable of negotiating a treaty, and accordingly they hoisted the flag on its northern tip at Possession Island to proclaim dominion. Fifteen years later, when a parliamentary committee quizzed Banks about the suitability of establishing a colony in New South Wales, he explained that there were 'very few inhabitants' along the coast who relied on fishing and hunting. The absence of agriculture led Banks to conjecture that the interior might be 'totally uninhabited'.

Phillip and his officers were therefore surprised by the number of Aborigines round the settlement. They quickly came to appreciate that these people had social organisation, settled localities, customary law and property rights. The whole claim of sovereignty and ownership on the basis of vacancy was manifestly based on a misreading of Australian circumstances, but his instructions did not allow for recognition of prior occupancy. The Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia were deemed to be in a state of nature without government, law or property. Not until the High Court gave its Mabo judgement in 1992 was there a legal recognition that Aborigines had owned and possessed their traditional lands. A similar recognition of prior or continuing sovereignty has yet to occur.

We do not have the direct testimony of those Aborigines who dealt with the first European newcomers, and cannot recapture how they understood their usurpation. We know from contemporary descriptions that Arabanoo, Bennelong and others were horrified by such barbarous excesses as flogging, terrified by demonstrations of musket fire, amused by European manners and forms of hierarchy. We can only guess at their reaction to violation of sacred

sites, destruction of habitat, the inroads of disease, and the growing realisation that the intruders meant to stay. Their society was characterised by a shared and binding tradition. Familial and communal restraints imposed order, mutuality and continuity. They were confronted by a new social order in which the autonomy of the individual prevailed and a form of political organisation based on impersonal regularity. Its freedom of choice and capacity for concerted action brought innovation and augmented capacity. Its self-centredness and moral discord generated social conflict, criminality and exile. Such an encounter could only be traumatic.