

Black and white discoverers

c. 60 000 B.P. – A.D. 1770

Black Australians' progenitors were the first human beings to cross oceanic depths between continents. When Cro-Magnon people were creating their magnificent cave art in southern France and northern Spain about fifteen thousand years ago, the first Australians had been living – and painting – here for at least thirty-five millennia. On present evidence, men and women first entered the Americas about twenty-five thousand years ago and Australia at least 50 000 B.P. (i.e. before the present (time), as archaeologists say). In 1989 Rhys Jones and others excavated two ancient Aboriginal campsites at the foot of the western escarpment of the Arnhem Land plateau. Using both thermo-luminescent and radio carbon dating techniques, they established that men and women had first occupied the sites between 60 000 and 50 000 B.P.¹ Less ancient but more detailed evidence of how the first Australians lived comes from the shores of the long dried-up bed of Lake Mungo in western New South Wales. The most exciting find was the skeleton of a graceful young woman who had been cremated, the first instance of human cremation found so far anywhere in the world. There J.M. Bowler and his colleagues established the fact of continuous human occupation from at least 32750 to 24000 B.P., a period when the 25-kilometre-long lake teemed with fish and bird life, for the earth's climate and sea-levels have changed vastly over the ages.²

During the long cold spells, millions of tonnes of ice accumulated around the poles and on continental highlands. As nearly all of this ice came ultimately from the evaporation of salt water, sea levels fell and shore lines extended outwards – for many hundreds of kilometres in some places. At those times the world's land masses extended roughly to the edge of the present continental shelves, where today the oceans are about 180 metres deep. Australia, New Guinea and Tasmania constituted one large continent known to historical geographers as Sahul. A sub-continent known as Sunda jutted southeast from Asia, taking in present day Burma, Indo-China, Malaysia, Sumatra, Java, Bali, Borneo and the seas between and around them. Sunda was bounded on the east by Wallace's Line, a narrow strip of deep ocean named after the great nineteenth-century British naturalist, Robert Wallace, who first noted that Asian fauna and flora predominated in islands west of the Line while Australian plants and animals flourished to its east. Between the two ancient continents there stretched chains of islands – the Celebes, Moluccas, Timor and others, somewhat larger than they are today.³

Perhaps human beings first reached Sahul during a glacial period when it was possible to walk most, though not all, of the way? But even at periods of peak ice-age cold, there was one sea crossing of about 90 kilometres and several of 30 kilometres or so to be negotiated. We may never know exactly how or when men and women first discovered Australia. Did they cross the water purposefully in dugout or bark canoes or on log rafts, or were the first landfalls made accidentally by fisherfolk blown to the new land by storms? Probably both kinds of voyage were made, for it is very unlikely that the colonisation of Sahul was a unique event.⁴ To the question "when?" we can answer only "before 50000 B.P.", but how long before? The date 60 000 B.P. falls long before the last ice age, at a time of quite high sea levels, but this does not prove that a crossing could *not* have been made. Not the least puzzling aspect of this discussion is that there is little agreement among prehistoric geographers and geologists as to just when glacial periods, prior to the last one, took place. There is, nevertheless, some consensus that a minor glacial peak occurred at about 70000 B.P., and that another ice age ended at about 120 000 B.P. as shown in Figure 2. On the face of it, this last seems the most likely date for humanity's arrival in Australia, and work by botanical historians provides cogent supporting

evidence that people may have reached Sahul near the end of the antepenultimate ice age.

By the shore of Lake George near Canberra, scientists in 1978 bored a hole 8.6 metres deep in the sedimentary deposits and then analysed the core, at regular intervals, for fossilised pollens and charcoal. They were able to determine quite precisely the number of years B.P. represented by each layer of the core's contents: the surface centimetre held the detritus of the last century or so, while the bottom layer held that of 350 000 B.P. The percentage of fossil pollen from different kinds of plants found at each level gave a picture of how some species had flourished while others had wilted at different periods. The percentage of carbon found at successive levels in the core showed how bushfires had waxed and waned over the whole span of time. The duration of each glacial age was also indicated partly by the relative scarcity of carbon remains. Fossil pollen analysis and carbon counting both suggest that there have been five ice ages in the Southern Hemisphere since about 350 000 B.P. The first, extending back for an unknown time, ended at about 347000 B.P. The second seems to have lasted from about 297 000 to 251 000 B.P., the third from about 195 000 to 120 000 B.P., the fourth from about 75 000 to 64000 B.P., and the last of most recent from about 20 000 to 8000 B.P.

There is a marked correlation between the quantity of carbon remains and the prevalence of different species of plants at successive periods. During all five ice ages, traces of carbon almost disappear from the core, as does pollen shed by eucalypts and other fire-resistant plants, while at the same time pollen from cool-temperate, fire-sensitive plants becomes more plentiful. During the long inter-glacial periods the carbon count increases, as does the abundance of both dry and cool-temperate kinds of vegetation, but a great change in the pattern occurs at the end of the third or antepenultimate ice age, about 120 000 B.P. To that time, fire-sensitive plants like casuarina grew prolifically while eucalypts were only sparsely represented, as were signs of bushfires. Thereafter bushfires raged more furiously than ever before and continued to do so up to the present. It is hardly surprising that gum trees have flourished with forest fires. Some botanists hold that eucalypts do not merely tolerate fire well but require it to grow their best.⁵ But why did bushfires and eucalypts proliferate so mightily from about 120 000 B.P. onwards? To that question no one has yet been able to suggest a plausible answer other than the explanation that human beings carrying fire sticks may have first reached this country at that time.⁶

Later evidence supports this. In 1986 R.V.S. Wright re-examined the Lake George core materials which had been radio-carbon dated. It is well known that dating by this method rapidly becomes increasingly less reliable before about 20000 B.P. On the other hand, Wright showed that plotting an age-depth curve on the core-material back until that time gave an almost perfect correlation. Extrapolation of this curve back beyond 20 000 B.P. gives something in the order of 120 000 B.P. as the time when newly raging bushfires began to produce the ubiquitous eucalypt vegetation which has been so familiar ever since to all Australians. On the other hand, as Rhys Jones observes, other archaeological evidence makes 60000 B.P. a much "more believable date" for the arrival of fire-stick bearing people in Australia.⁷ Where did these pioneering explorers come from and who were they? The only safe answer to the first question is a rather vague one – from Southeast Asia. The earliest stone tools, lost or discarded by the first Australians, conform to a certain type known to many archaeologists as the "core tool and scraper tradition". Some artefacts of similar type and antiquity have been excavated in the Philippines, in many places in the eastern Indonesian islands and, more remotely, in Indo-China, south China and even Japan. However, this is rather tenuous evidence. From finds in Arnhem Land we know that edge-ground stone axe-heads were hafted there long before this technique was used anywhere else in the world, except possibly in Japan. So we can really say little more than that the first Australians most probably came from some region or regions of Southeast Asia, though *their* progenitors may well have taken a coastal path thither from the cradle of humanity in Africa.⁸

It is less difficult to answer clearly the question of who they were. Anthropologists hold that people from two distinct racial stocks, Australoid and Mongoloid, were the first human occupants of the Pacific Islands, including New Guinea, Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. Archaeological evidence shows that the first named group colonised New Guinea, Australia and most of Melanesia before –for the most part, long before – about 10 000 B.P. Then Mongoloids, emanating perhaps from southern China and Taiwan, spread through Micronesia and Polynesia, surrounding and mingling to varying degrees with the earlier Australoid populations of New Guinea and Melanesia, but not, to any considerable extent, of Australia. Thus black Australians are probably the “purest” living representatives of the Australoid race. Their skin is dark chocolate brown to black in colour, but their body hair tends, as with Caucasoids, to grow more luxuriantly than in other races. Head hair may be straight, wavy or curly, as among Europeans, but seldom “woolly”, as among Negroes. Occasionally young children of undoubtedly “pure” Aboriginal descent, especially in the central desert regions, have blond hair.⁹

All this does not mean that Aborigines conform to a physical pattern identical throughout the continent. Birdsell and Tindale have shown that northern Aborigines as a rule were taller and darker than the stockier people in the south, and archaeological discoveries show that at least one group of immigrants, in physical conformation very different from all the Aboriginal people who survived into historic times, lived at Kow Swamp for thousands of years after the period when Aboriginal culture flourished at Lake Mungo only about 250 kilometres away. Yet the Kow Swamp people, or at any rate their bones, were shaped rather differently from those of the Lake Mungo people or other Aborigines before and since the Kow Swamp dwellers flourished from about 14 000 to 10 000 B.P. Kow Swamp skeletons, particularly the crania, appeared to be much more robust or “primitive” than those of other Aboriginal people. The average thickness of their skulls was approximately 4 millimetres, compared with 2.5 millimetres for other Aborigines. Their foreheads receded much more sharply, while the jaws and mouths projected forward. The bony ridges above their eye stocks projected upward and outward very much more than the same features do in Aborigines – or in modern Europeans. Some scholars think these anatomical differences suggest that the Kow Swamp people belonged to a race quite distinct from the Aborigines and other Australoid peoples and more akin to *homo erectus*, the “Solo man” of Java who lived probably at least 100 000 years ago.¹⁰ Others have compared them with the Neanderthal people of prehistoric Europe, but what happened to both races? Were they absorbed by miscegenation into the surrounding race of *homo sapiens* people in the last ten or twenty thousand years? Or were they exterminated by the majority group? We may never know, but the apparent absence of wounds in the remains of the first forty Kow Swamp people excavated perhaps makes assimilation more likely.¹¹

Despite the Kow Swamp data, it is clear that the Aborigines were essentially one people, descended from perhaps several waves of settlers, not all of them necessarily Australoid. Of course, there were very considerable differences between tribes in different areas and at different times. Linguists have identified well over two hundred separate languages, for example. Some tribes were ignorant of the boomerang. Some practised circumcision, some sub-incision and some neither operation. However, the basic elements of Aboriginal culture were common to all mainland tribes, though possibly not to the Tasmanians. A linguistic map of Aboriginal Australia emphasises the point.

The 250-odd languages, mutually unintelligible though many of them were, all belonged to one linguistic stock. Within this stock there are twenty-eight families of languages, twenty-seven of them spoken by tribes living very close to each other in the Kimberley district of Western Australia and the “top end” of the Northern Territory. The twenty-eighth family, comprising more than 150 different languages, covers the rest of mainland Australia. So it seems at least likely that the people, like the languages they spoke, all derived from a common

stock, though this stock was itself the result of an earlier mingling of at least two populations.¹²

It now seems clear that the extinct Tasmanian languages also belonged to the mainland Australian linguistic family. Though few words seem related to words used on the mainland, the structure and sounds of Tasmanian languages show that they almost certainly belonged to the general Australian group.¹³ Can the same be said of the black Tasmanian people? Probably. Archaeologists have long agreed that the first Tasmanians walked to the island about 21 000 B.P., soon after the onset of the last ice age.¹⁴ Tasmanian technological and cultural equipment included a great many artefacts which were common on the mainland before about 6000 B.C., but none of the many new elements which were common in Australia after that date. One very important aid to living which the Tasmanians – and the early Australians – did not possess was the dingo. Intensive excavation has so far failed to turn up any sign of this invaluable hunting dog before about 5000 B.P., or to find any conclusive signs of where its ancestors must have lived in Asia. About that time the dingo turned up in Australia, perhaps with a new wave of migrants from the old world, and over the next few thousand years it no doubt helped to exterminate on the mainland the thylacine, or Tasmanian wolf, and the Tasmanian devil. That these animals continued to flourish in Tasmania until the arrival of Europeans is one of the surest proofs that Tasmania must have been settled long before the dingo's arrival in Australia.

A great many other interesting things occurred at about that time. Indeed, we might almost speak of a kind of prehistoric renaissance in Australian life during the fifth and sixth millennia B.P. Up until then, excavation has revealed only a relatively simple and limited armoury of implements belonging to the “core tool and scraper” tradition. There is reason to suppose that these early Australians possessed, with only one exception, the same implements as the Tasmanians: simple (but not crude) hand-held axes and hammer-stones made from cores and struck off flakes, trimmed on one side to make scrapers. The exception, already mentioned, is the discovery from at least 20 000 B.P. in Arnhem Land of edge-ground axes which look as though they were made to be hafted to wooden handles; however, there is so far no evidence that edge-grinding or hafting spread early to the rest of Australia, or that hafting of stone knives, spear heads or other implements was practised long ago, even in Arnhem Land. It seems likely that until about the fifth millennium B.P., as in Tasmania at the time of white contact, there were no edge-ground stone, or bone-tipped spears, but only pointed wooden ones, no spear-throwers, no boomerangs, no dogs and no small, deftly made stone implements or microliths.

These things all appear fairly suddenly in the archaeological record from about 5000 B.P. onwards. Together they brought about a technological revolution in Australian life. The geographical pattern and time sequence of the very scattered finds made so far suggest that the new techniques may have spread outwards from the central northwest to the east and south of the continent. The language map of Australia is consistent with this possibility. The northwestern desert languages contain by far the greatest number of “common Australian” words, which become fewer and fewer in other languages roughly in proportion to their distance from the central northwestern area occupied by the Pintubi. It is difficult to account for the dingo's arrival at this time unless we suppose it was brought here by human beings. Perhaps a new wave of Australoid immigrants landed on the northwest coast bearing with them the new technology, dingoes and their own variant of the Australian languages – and perhaps not. Most scholars think that, despite the puzzle of the dingo's genesis, new techniques, new ideas, and not new people, were diffused. Within one or two thousand years, new ways spread all over the mainland to improve a culture, variegated in detail but the same everywhere in essentials, that endured until the British invasion of 1788.¹⁵

The Aborigines lived, as did all other human beings until about 9000 B.P., entirely by hunting and gathering food from nature. Consequently, white observers for a long time assumed them to have been ignorant of the arts of agriculture and animal husbandry. However,

we now know that agriculture, based on extensive terraced irrigation works, was practised in the New Guinea Highlands (then part of Sahul) at least as long ago as 9000 B.P.¹⁶ So the first Australians *chose* to live as hunter-gatherers. Over a century ago, the American anthropologist Morgan, followed by Engels, V. Gordon Childe and others, characterised the people of such societies as “savages” or “primitive communists”. To think of them in this light is still the best way to understand them today, and particularly to understand why the new white Australians and the old black ones in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could seldom begin to understand each other. The white invaders’ society was based on the sanctity of private property. The white invasion of Australia was launched in the first place to punish those who stole private property. The ancient black societies were based equally firmly on the sanctity of communal or public property. In 1688, exactly a century before the “First Fleet” discharged white immigrants on the shores of Sydney Cove, William Dampier, the English pirate, spent about nine weeks careening his ship on the northwest coast near where Broome now stands. His description of Aboriginal life was so misleading in many ways that few have noticed how accurate it was in others. He saw clearly that all members of a horde shared equitably, as far as they were able, in the work of finding food and in the pleasure of eating it:

They live in companies – twenty or thirty men, women and children together. Their only food is a small sort of fish, which they get by making weirs of stone across little coves or branches of the sea ... In other places at low water they seek for cockles, mussels and periwinkles ... At their places of abode the old people and infants await their return; and what providence has bestowed on them they presently broil on the coals and eat it in common. Whether it be much or little every one has his share. When they have eaten they’ lie down till the next low water, and then all that are able march out. Be it night or day, rain or shine, ‘tis all one; they must attend the weirs or else they must fast...¹⁷

In all Aboriginal societies everyone shared in the work of food-gathering and everyone was entitled to an equitable (though not of course an equal) share in the products of this social labour. The implements used for food-gathering – spears, spear-throwers and boomerangs for the men, digging- sticks, coolamons and such like for the women – seem generally to have been regarded as personal property, though a given tool or weapon was often made by the co-operative labour of several individuals.¹⁸ Larger implements such as bark or dug-out canoes seem to have been both made and, used cooperatively and to have been regarded as group or tribal property. Above all, the fountainhead of life, the land itself (and the adjacent sea and inland water) was regarded as communal property. That a large piece of country should belong to any individual, or even that it could be held in some sense by a chief or head-man on behalf of the tribe, was inconceivable to an Aborigine. The land belonged to the whole tribe but no more firmly than the whole tribe belonged to its land. Mervyn Meggitt has expressed perfectly the relationship between Aboriginal individuals, their tribe and their land (nature) thus:

[Their] view of the universe ... regarded man, society and nature as interlocking and interacting elements in a larger, functionally integrated totality. According to Aboriginal belief, each variable in the system had an eternal, moral commitment to maintain itself unchanged for the benefit of the others and to contribute to the proper functioning of the system as a whole.¹⁹

The tribe, its people and its territory belonged to each other so completely that Aboriginal Australians saw the three as one entity, just as Christians conceive of the Holy Trinity.

At the time of white contact there were about 600 tribes in Australia. Every tribe had its own kinship system, its own distinctive ceremonial life, and its own language, though often some elements of the culture, particularly the language, of neighbouring tribes might be very similar or even identical. Tribes ranged in size from one or two hundred to one or two thousand people, varying of course with the extent of the tribal territory and the natural resources it contained. Perhaps the average size of a tribe was about five hundred. Within each tribal area, extended family groups, or “clans”, moved about searching for food, usually in their own part of the terrain, but coming together with other clans at certain times to participate in initiation

ceremonies and the like. Each clan might number twenty, thirty or more people.

The fact that Aboriginal economic life was based entirely on hunting, fishing and gathering wild plants and insects had important consequences for tribal organisation. Food gathered from nature, particularly in the hot Australian climate, must be eaten promptly. Though Aborigines did store some foods for short periods, they did so rarely, because in a communal or “sharing” society there is no point in hoarding things, and very few things are of a kind which can be hoarded. In farming societies, the existence of storable wealth inevitably meant that some individuals became richer and more powerful than others. People counted their sheep and cattle and their quantities of grain. Richer or stronger individuals became head-men, or chiefs, or medicine-men, or priests, or kings. Men began to specialise in different tasks, including the tasks of ruling and being ruled. Classes and “government” came into existence. In Aboriginal societies, because there was no storable wealth, none of these developments had taken place. As W.E.H. Stanner wrote:

The Blacks did not fight over land. There were no wars or invasions to seize territory. They did not enslave each other. There is no master-servant relation. There is no class division. There is no property or income inequality. The result is a homeostasis, far reaching and stable.²⁰

There were no chiefs, hereditary or elected, in any Aboriginal tribe and no classes except two – males and females. In all tribes the male lords of creation hunted larger animals and birds while the exploited women were forced to do the much more laborious work of gathering edible vegetable matter, insects, roots and so on. One early white male observer wrote:

The men walk along with a proud and majestic air; behind them, crouching like slaves, and bearing heavy burdens on their backs, with their little ones astride on their shoulders, come the despised and degraded women. They are the drudges in all heavy work; and after their lords have finished the repast which the women have prepared for them, these despised creatures contentedly sit at a distance, and gather up the bones and fragments, which the men throw to them across their shoulders, just as we should throw meat to a dog.²¹

Of course, some men were naturally better spearmen than others, some better “witch doctors”, some more skilled in corroborees, and so on; but all men were expected to do everything proper to their sex for themselves, as were all women. No individual lived solely by performing a specialised task and no one grew rich or “different” from or “superior” to his fellows.²² The best proof of the reality of this egalitarian, classless society is that no Aboriginal language had words for any numbers beyond two or three. If there is no private property, there is no need to count its worth and no one felt the need of words to do so. Some tribes, when they engaged in trade with “Macassar men” from the Indonesian archipelago, or with Europeans, quickly developed a system of numerals.²³

During the last century, most white invaders simply could not conceive of a human society in which there were no kings, priests, chiefs, nor any other kind of formal authority structure. Usually they decided that the man who seemed the most influential and charismatic individual in a clan or a tribe *must* be its chief, and accordingly hung around his neck a brass plate inscribed “King Billy” or some such European nickname; but William Buckley, who lived with the Port Phillip Aborigines for over thirty years, knew better. In fact, the only kind of “government” or leadership was completely informal and was seen by the tribesmen as “natural”.²⁴ Males generally dominated and exploited the females. Older, more experienced men, especially those learned in tribal lore, were listened to more respectfully than younger men when a group was coming to a consensus by informal discussion of a question; but it would be just as true to say that the function of these elders was to apply the immemorial custom or law of the tribe as to lead or guide it. In particular circumstances leadership was exercised by different persons according to “custom”. For instance, all Aboriginal tribes had extremely complex kinship systems with strict rules governing the classes of persons whom an individual might marry. The rules were broken at least as often as in modern European societies, but the penalty was much more severe – usually death. The man who led such a revenge, or “pay back”,

or execution party was not necessarily one of the most influential people in the group or even one of the best warriors, but the man who stood in a certain relationship to the wronged person.²⁵

Transgression of marriage rules was by no means the only way in which an Aborigine might incur punishment or death at the hands of his fellows. Aborigines believed, for instance, that a person never died from “natural” causes. Not illness, but malign sorcery, was the cause of death, and honour demanded that certain of the deceased’s relatives should wreak vengeance on the sorcerer or his relatives. A great many Aborigines died in these blood feuds, probably more than were killed as infants by their parents. Infanticide and other forms of “birth control” also tended to keep the population at a level where the number of tribespeople rarely outstripped the natural resources of the territory. Yet most of the murder and mayhem took place within the tribe, and this violence seems more akin to what civilised people call the administration of justice than to warfare. Often justice was administered to members of neighbouring tribes, and people who entered another tribe’s territory without invitation or excuse were often killed, but there is very little evidence to suggest that Aborigines ever engaged in what “more advanced” people call warfare. No Aboriginal tribe ever seems to have conceived the notion of exterminating or enslaving another, or of stealing any part of its collective property or territory.

Of course, the British invaders could no more conceive of a human society without war than they could imagine one without chiefs or war-leaders. Early accounts frequently refer to inter-tribal wars and battles, but these bloody clashes, like the “chiefs” who fought in them, were creations of the white men’s imagination. Eyewitness accounts differ in detail according to the tribes concerned, but all agree that few if any people were killed in these meetings, though a great deal of hostility was expressed in ritualised ways. Here is an account, typical of many, of an inter-tribal “battle” which took place in the Bathurst district in 1831:

When about to fight, the contending parties, except where treachery is employed (which I believe is not very often practised), encamp opposite each other. At dawn of the following day two young men, one from each side, advance in front of their respective friends, and, after using the most opprobrious epithets to each other, mutually throw a spear, and then retire to procure others, which are thrown in the same manner. If neither is wounded, they then commence a battle with the club, using sometimes an eleman, or shield, made of wood; while the women, particularly those advanced in years, who are, probably, more crabbed than the younger ones, excite them to the utmost. When one is worsted, another advances to succour him, and others to aid his adversary, until a general melee takes place, and broken heads, and sometimes bad spear wounds, are the result; but the latter do not occur as often as might be expected. The conquered are allowed to depart without molestation; and they will even frequently join the victors, so that a person would not know that there had been any animosity between them. There is certainly more talking than fighting in their battles, and it is, therefore, to be hoped they will some day send over a few of their people as missionaries, to convince civilised nations that it is far worse to cut the throat of a man while alive, than to eat his body when dead!²⁶

Such meetings are reminiscent of international football matches or other sporting contests, rather than of wars between civilised nations. Aboriginal tribes were simply not organised to fight defensive or other wars. Without any form of hierarchical social structure, they had no representative person or body to lead them against the whites in war, or to negotiate with them in peace. Tribal social structure was ideally suited to Aboriginal life for scores of thousands of years, but it was just as big a handicap in resisting the European invasion as was the inferior armoury of Aboriginal weapons.

All tribes were not equally unwarlike however. They differed in martial prowess just as they did in other aspects of their culture. Generally speaking, Aboriginal bellicosity increased from south to north. There is a good deal of evidence to show that the Tasmanian tribes, though perhaps the bravest, were certainly equipped with the worst weapons and were the least warlike in outlook. Consequently, almost all the Tasmanians were slaughtered within forty years of the first permanent white settlement at Risdon Cove in 1803. The most warlike tribes, conversely, were those nearest the northern Australian coasts in Queensland, the Northern Territory and the

Kimberley. Their resistance was bloodiest and lasted longest – naturally, because it was there that most pre-European invaders, including Australian immigrants themselves, first entered the continent.

We now know that “Macassar men” had fished for trepang along the northern coasts for at least one or two hundred years before the British invasion.²⁷ Chinese and other visitors may have preceded them, at least transiently, to say nothing of thousands of years of sporadic contact with aggressive New Guinea tribes which *had* practised the arts of agriculture, husbandry and warfare. It would have been astonishing if these north coastal tribes, and some inland groups in contact with them, had not quickly learnt to fight more effectively in defence of their ancient culture, just as some of them who traded with the Indonesian trepang fishers had quickly learnt to count. That warlike skill among the tribes increased as one went north was obvious to white observers a hundred years ago and more, though it seems to have escaped the notice of some modern scholars. In 1849 an English student of early Aboriginal-white contacts wrote:

In examining carefully the reports of those observers, on whom ... the greatest confidence may be placed, the general conclusion is, that the inhabitants of Australia are naturally of an unoffending and pacific disposition. In every place where there has been reason to conclude that the visit of Europeans was a first one, and the conduct of the visitor was kind, or even equitable, there is no evidence of primary aggression on the part of the natives ... [but] the man who had been plundered, or had seen his brother or countryman carried off captive, by strangers whom he had never offended, would teach his children vengeance for the wrong, and hatred for whatever strangers might arrive ... In like manner, the nearer the region of the Malays is approached, the more do the Australians seem disposed to attack, and, generally speaking, the better are they provided with weapons. From what is known of the natives of New Guinea, they seem to be of the same family with those of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land; and they are so disposed to be hostile, that no foreign race, probably not even the Malays, have settled in their country.²⁸

The first non-Australoid visitors to Australia may have been Chinese. Ancient records state that between 1405 and 1433 the eunuch, Ch'eng Ho, made seven voyages to the south with a huge fleet of junks. It is certain that Chinese merchants reached East Africa during the fourteenth century and that some settled in Indonesia to exploit the sandalwood forests in Timor.²⁹ That some of the Ming emperor's ships may have visited Australia is suggested by the discovery in 1879 of a small Chinese statuette, embedded in the roots of a banyan tree more than a metre underground in Darwin, and in 1948 of a shard of Chinese pottery on the beach at Winchelsea Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Both the little soapstone statuette of Shou Lao, the god of Long Life, and the piece of blue and white pottery are said by experts to belong to the Ming period, but they *could* have been brought to Australia by Macassan trepang fishers or modern Chinese visitors.³⁰

When Ch'eng Ho's fleets first visited the Indonesian archipelago, Arab sailors and the Muslim religion had been established for some years in the main ports. We know that they visited the Aru Islands, only about 480 kilometres from Australian beaches. It would be surprising if these greedy merchants, having made their way from Red Sea and Persian Gulf ports, did not visit the northern coasts of Australia either purposely or accidentally, though so far no shred of archaeological evidence has been found to suggest that they did.

It would be even more surprising if, having come twice as far from Europe by way of the Cape of Good Hope, Portuguese sailors had not had the curiosity to explore the Australian coastline. By 1516 they had established themselves firmly in the fabulous Spice Islands, the Moluccas, and in Timor – only 456 kilometres from Melville Island near where Darwin now stands. There is evidence to suggest that Portuguese seamen did explore our northern and eastern coasts about two hundred and fifty years before James Cook's better known voyage in 1770. The most persuasive documents are the “Dieppe Maps”.

Ten of these world maps were made by a French school of cartographers in Dieppe between 1536 and 1567. They all show a southern continent with its northern and eastern coasts

approximately in their true positions and they all resemble each other in such a way as to make it likely that all were copied from an original map, or maps, lost long ago. Perhaps the best of them is known as “the Dauphin map” because it was ordered by King Francis I of France as a gift to his son, the Dauphin, later to become King Henry II. It was drawn in 1536 and later came into the possession of Joseph Banks, who may or may not have had this map with him aboard the *Endeavour*.³¹

Like the other maps from Dieppe, the Dauphin’s present must have been copied from Portuguese charts. Portuguese mariners were the only Europeans in the East Indies at the time when the original of the Dieppe maps must have been made. Moreover the French copyists put many place names on their maps in the original Portuguese and many more in incorrect Portuguese. Anyone who has seen the outline of Australia in a school atlas will find familiar the representation of the east coast of Australia on the Dauphin map. From Cape York to Nelson’s Bay in New South Wales the “Dieppe” and modern coastlines correspond quite closely. From there south and west again to the region of Port Fairy the line of the coast is distorted by a great sweep to the east, though Port Phillip Bay seems to be marked in its correct position.

The distortion may spring from the Old Portuguese method of calculating longitude and also from the fact that the Dieppe maps are not drawn on Mercator’s projection or any other projection ever seen by a modern reader. It is possible for skilled mathematicians to correct the distortion in the Dauphin’s map and carefully to calculate exactly what it would look like if “transposed” to Mercator’s projection. When this is done, the Dauphin’s map looks like a very good map indeed of the eastern Australian coast and one that strongly suggests that Portuguese mariners charted it at least some years before 1536.³²

K.G. McIntyre, who has studied the matter closely, believes that the whole eastern coast round to Port Fairy was charted between 1521 and 1523 by three ships commanded by Cristoval de Mendonca. It may be true, but it seems at least that *some* Portuguese ships visited the Kimberley coast and also Port Phillip, which appears on the Dauphin maps as “Gouffre”, before Cook’s great voyage. In July 1916 a landing party from HMAS *Encounter* discovered two bronze cannon on an unnamed island in the entrance to Napier Broome Bay at the northernmost part of the Kimberley district. It has been claimed that one cannon was embossed with the “rose and crown of Portugal” and that both were made at Seville in Spain in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. In 1982, alas for Lusitanophiles, both cannon were proved to be of Asian manufacture not earlier than the late eighteenth century. They were possibly left *in situ* by Macassan Trepong fishers not long before Cook charted the eastern coast.³³

The Port Phillip evidence is more prosaic. In August 1847, at Corio Bay, a workman discovered a bunch of keys in a hole he was digging for shells to make lime. The keys were found at a depth of 4.5 metres and about 12 metres inland from the shoreline. Next day the superintendent of the Port Phillip District, Charles Joseph La Trobe, a keen geologist, visited the site. He obtained three of the keys and wrote a detailed account of the find accompanied by a diagram. He had no doubt that they were old European keys “just of the description still used for a box or trunk or seaman’s chest”. When La Trobe returned to Britain he left the keys for safekeeping with the Melbourne Mechanics’ Institute, which lost them when it went bankrupt. All the Dieppe maps end effectively in the vicinity of the present Port Fairy and Warrambool, about 120 kilometres west of Cape Otway.

Perhaps the original cartographer, whoever he was, turned back at this point. He could have been forced to do so because one of his ships was wrecked there. In 1836 two sealers found the wreck of an old-fashioned ship on this part of the coast lying in a hollow between the first and second line of sandhills. Hundreds of other people must have seen it in the last century, for there are extant reliable records of twenty-seven who did so and most of these left descriptions of it. For instance, Mrs T.C. Manifold wrote that in 1860, when she saw it, “the sides, or bulwarks, [were built] after the fashion of a pannelled door, with mouldings (as in a door) stout and

strong". Captain John Mason, a practical seaman, estimated that it must have been "of about 100 tons burden". Both descriptions fit sixteenth-century Portuguese caravels. A great storm towards the end of last century was said to have buried the wreck in sand, but it seems more likely that the last timbers were burnt by whalers or others in search of firewood.³⁴ Intensive recent efforts to locate the wreck have been fruitless. Of course, discovery of the "Geelong keys" and of the "Mahogany Ship" does not conclusively *prove* that Portuguese seamen visited the northern shore of Bass Strait long ago any more than their loss proves the negative. Another piece of suggestive evidence which has not disappeared is an atlas of the world, *Speculum Orbis Terrae*, published in 1578 by Cornelis de Jode in Flanders. The charts in this work derive ultimately from the "Dieppe Maps". On the title page, a large engraving of a horse is positioned, apparently to symbolise Europe, a camel Asia, a lion Africa and a kangaroo with two "joeys" in its pouch Australia. The weird looking marsupial could have been drawn only from a description by someone who had seen a kangaroo at least thirty years before the first recorded Dutch landing in Australia. If Portuguese explorers discovered and mapped much of the Australian coast in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, why did they not proclaim their achievements to the world? The reason may be simple. At that time, and for long afterwards, any discovery of new lands was regarded as a trade secret, to be jealously guarded by the government of the country whose seamen made it. Spain and Portugal were the first European powers to be engaged in an imperialist struggle for possession of the newly discovered East and West Indies and America. To contain the strife, the two kingdoms concluded in 1494 the Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided the planet between them. Everything to the west of what we now call the fifty-first meridian of longitude west of Greenwich was to be Spanish territory and everything to the east of it Portuguese. Thus Spain was to exploit all of the Pacific and America except Brazil, which fell to Portugal along with Africa and Asia. On the other side of the world the demarcation line was determined by continuing longitude 51°W through the north and south poles where it becomes longitude 129°E. This "Pope's Line", as it came to be called, runs through the Moluccas and now forms the boundary of Western Australia. Since Portugal was a very much weaker power than Spain, it paid her to make much of the treaty and to observe its provisions scrupulously. Any voyages made east of longitude 129°E were flagrant violations of the treaty and so had to be kept secret. There is good evidence that the Portuguese, at the same period and for the same reason, suppressed the news of discoveries they made in the Americas to the west of longitude 51°W. Probably the "Dieppe Maps" were made by spies from bought or pirated Portuguese charts. The originals, kept as secret documents of state in the imperial administrative headquarters, the Casa da India, in Lisbon, may well have been destroyed together with most of the city in the great earthquake of 1755.

The Spaniards, of course, were not idle on their side of the "Pope's Line". Magellan first crossed the whole expanse of the Pacific in 1521-23, perhaps at the very time when de Mendonca may have been making his illicit voyage down our eastern coast. Magellan, with the backing of the stronger power, had no need to keep secret the Spanish claim he made to the Philippine Islands, though they were clearly in the Portuguese sphere of influence. Nominally the Spanish Viceroy of Peru ruled from Lima the whole Pacific Ocean east of the Philippines. He despatched several expeditions to explore it and particularly to look for the great southern continent. In 1537 de Grijalva sailed from Callao, the port of Lima, and followed much of the northern New Guinea coast – without realising, however, that the land he saw was not part of the elusive southern continent. In 1567 de Mendana, with two ships, searched again for the great south land but instead found, and named, the Solomon Islands. Mendana, with four ships and a Portuguese pilot, de Quiros, tried again in 1595 but was even less successful. Ten years later, in the service of Spain, de Quiros sailed with three ships, one of them commanded by Luis Vaez de Torres, said to have been a fellow Portuguese by birth. They discovered and landed on one of the islands later to be named the New Hebrides by James Cook. De Quiros believed he

had found the great south land at last and, with much ceremony, named it *La Austrialia del Espiritu Santo*, Australia of the Holy Ghost, and claimed it for the holy Catholic Church and His Most Christian Majesty, King Philip III of Spain.

While the expedition was exploring the new land, Torres' ship and another were separated from de Quiros. Convinced that the new land was not part of a continent, Torres sailed southwest to continue the search but turned north when not very far from the Great Barrier Reef. In August 1606 he sailed to Manila through the shallow straits that bear his name, passing over what had been continental soil where some of the first Australians had lived thousands of years before. He sighted some islands and the Australian mainland. He seems also, like his Portuguese predecessors in those parts, to have kept his discovery secret. There is no evidence that Dutch or other sailors knew of the existence of Torres Strait until 1762 when a copy of Torres' report to King Philip III was found in the archives at Manila by a British raiding party.³⁵ Six months before Torres passed through the Strait, the first European landing of which fully authenticated records survive was made nearby on the northwestern coast of Cape York Peninsula in March 1606.

The date is significant. Throughout the sixteenth century the Portuguese had dominated the rich trade between Europe and the Far East. From their bases at Goa, Malacca and Bantam, and at Ternate and Tidore in the Moluccas, they dominated the Indian Ocean and the East Indies. Throughout the seventeenth century the same areas were dominated by Dutch merchants organised, from 1602 onwards, in the national, monopolistic Dutch East India Company. Until 1580 the Dutch had been content to gather rich profits by acting as the intermediaries who distributed spices from Portugal through the rest of Europe, but in that year, when Philip II of Spain became King of Portugal too, he closed the port of Lisbon to Dutch ships. For some years the Dutch sought vainly to find a way to the Spice Islands by summer voyages round the north of Asia. Then, from 1595 on, they followed the Portuguese route round the Cape of Good Hope and fought them, not for God or glory, but for trade and profit. By the time of Torres' voyage, they had replaced the Portuguese as the European masters of the Eastern seas.

In 1606 the East India Company despatched from Batavia Captain Willem Jansz in the yacht *Duyfken* (*Little Dove*) "to discover the land Nova Guinea and other unknown east and south lands". Jansz and his men struck the south coast of New Guinea, sailed across the western end of Torres Strait and then followed the western coast of Cape York Peninsula southward to Cape Keerweer (Turnagain). On the return voyage there was a bloody clash with the Aborigines at the mouth of the Batavia River. J. Carstensz, another Dutch skipper, landed at the same spot in 1623 and noted in his log that the local people were much more hostile than those who lived further south and that they also had "knowledge of muskets whose terrible effects they learned in 1606 from the men of the *Duyfken*". Jansz thought that the coast he had followed was part of New Guinea,³⁶ which raises the question of whether it is better to discover a new continent without knowing it, or to discover it and keep it secret, as Cristoval de Mendonca may have done eighty-three years before.

At first the Dutch followed the Portuguese route to the Indies – northwards from the Cape of Good Hope along the African coast and then from the northernmost point of Madagascar almost due east to Sunda Strait. This course necessitated battling against the southeast trade winds or coping with equatorial calms in the long passage across the Indian Ocean. Hendrik Brouwer, later Governor-General of the Indies, tried a new plan in 1611. He sailed south from the Cape into the path of the prevailing westerly winds and then ran east before them until his ship reached the longitude of Java. Then, turning north, he was able to run before the southeast trades to Sunda Strait. Brouwer's two ships made the voyage in just under six months, compared with the average time of about fifteen months by the old route. Naturally more and more Dutch captains took the new route, until in 1616 the Company ordered all to do so. So a

great many ships, running too far eastwards before turning north, sighted the Western Australian coast.

The first to do so was the *Eendracht*, commanded by Dirck Hartog. On 25 October 1616 he landed on the barren island that now bears his name and, before sailing away for Batavia, nailed to a post a pewter dish engraved with a brief record of the event. Subsequently on Dutch maps the extreme northwestern “corner” of the Australian coast was labelled “Eendrachtland”. During the next eleven years, at least as many Dutch ships sighted different parts of the coast. Among the more interesting discoveries was that of North West Cape by the *Zeewolf* (*Seawolf*) and the *Mauritius*, of Houtman’s Abrolhos by the *Dordrecht* and the *Amsterdam*, of Cape Leeuwin (lioness) by a ship of that name, and of the south coast of the country to beyond the head of the Great Australian Bight by Pieter Nuyts in the *Gulden Zeepaert* (*Golden Sea-leopard*).

By 1623 the governors of the East India Company had had enough of accidental discoveries. They despatched two ships, the *Pera* and the *Arnhem*, with orders to explore more fully the southern coast of New Guinea. This Jan Carstenz and his men did but, like Jansz before them, they were attacked so strongly by the Papuans that they crossed Torres Strait and explored more of the coasts of the Gulf of Carpentaria and Arnhem Land, perhaps still under the impression that these areas were part of New Guinea. There were a few other half-hearted official efforts at exploration, but none achieved very much until Tasman’s two voyages of 1642 and 1644.

Tasman’s first voyage was the greatest exploring expedition ever mounted by the Dutch, yet it was more remarkable for the discoveries it did not make than for those it did. Tasman was as good a navigator and certainly as great a bully³⁷ as any other blue-water sailor of his day, but he seems to have entirely lacked the first requisite of a good explorer: curiosity. Perhaps his masters realised this and accordingly gave him unusually specific instructions. Anthony van Diemen, Governor-General of the Dutch Indies, and his Council instructed Tasman to sail from Batavia to Mauritius, there to pick up wood, water and fresh supplies. Thence he should sail south to latitude 52° or 54° and run eastwards before the prevailing westerlies in search of the great south land. If no land were found, Tasman might sail northwards at about the longitude of the eastern tip of New Guinea to solve the mystery of what lay between the coast discovered by Pieter Nuyts and the western coasts of New Guinea and Cape York already known to the Dutch. Specifically, was there a channel from the Fowlers Bay neighbourhood to the Gulf of Carpentaria?

The *Heemskerk* and the *Zeehaen* took on board at Mauritius wood, fresh water and provisions. Whether the latter included the meat of some still surviving dodos we do not know. They reached 49° south, but speedily returned to warmer seas and clearer skies as they sailed eastward between latitudes of 40° and 44°S. On 24 November they sighted the west coast of an unknown country with high mountains inland, two of which are known today as Mount Heemskerk and Mount Zeehan. They also estimated that “the west side of New Guinea must be north of us” and they were not very far wrong. They pursued their voyage to the east, naming the new country Van Diemen’s Land and mapping its southern and eastern coasts. They anchored in the lee of Cape Frederick Henry for the first three days of December while shore parties replenished their supplies of wood and water. They saw the footprints of what can only have been a Tasmanian “tiger” and heard human beings in the forest but did not see any. Both animals and people apparently wanted only to be left in peace. Then they sailed north along about two-thirds of Tasmanian’s east coast and a council of officers decided to leave the new land and bear away eastwards to the longitude of the Solomon Islands or farther. Why did Tasman not at least pursue the mapping of the Tasmanian coast? He knew the position of Nuyts’ Land and of what the Dutch thought was New Guinea, that is, of Cape York Peninsula. Was the new land joined to Nuyts’ Land or to Cape York or to both? Van Diemen and his

Council were as displeased as we may be puzzled. In a report to their masters in Amsterdam they wrote that Tasman:

did not employ ...great ... eagerness to establish the extent of the lands discovered or the nature of the inhabitants, and regarding the principal issues, left everything open for a more conscientious successor.³⁸

Tasman's immense lack of curiosity was demonstrated hardly less impressively in New Zealand, the southwest coast of which he sighted on 13 December and named Staten Land. Cruising northwards he rounded Cape Farewell and anchored in Golden Bay five days later. The local Maoris paddled out in canoes and attacked the Dutchmen so furiously that the latter named the place Murderers' Bay. Then they bore away to the east and spent a few more days wondering whether they were in a large bay of the southern continent they thought they had discovered, or whether there was a strait. Tasman decided on the former and followed the coast of the North Island to Cape Maria van Diemen, its northernmost point. He then left the new land and discovered Tonga and Fiji on his way home to Batavia by way of the north coast of New Guinea. His neglect in completing the mapping of New Zealand meant that he returned thinking the new country to be a promontory of the supposed Great South Land which stretched away eastwards to somewhere south of Cape Horn. Most geographers shared his view until the myth of a southern continent was finally laid to rest by Cook 130 years later.

In January 1644 Tasman set out again in three small ships. He was enjoined to find out whether there was a passage into the Pacific south of New Guinea and whether there was a passage from the unknown southern end of the Gulf of Carpentaria extending to the neighbourhood of Nuyts' Land and his half-explored Van Diemen's Land. Again he failed completely to carry out the first order. Instead he sailed south across the western side of Torres Strait and reported that it was a "shallow bight" in the continuous land which extended from New Guinea to the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Portuguese may have known better for over a century. After this characteristic sin of omission, Tasman did succeed in showing that the Gulf of Carpentaria was just that and not the entrance to a strait dividing New Holland from Van Diemen's Land–New Guinea.

Until sail gave way to steam in the late nineteenth century Dutch ships outward bound to the Indies continued to use Brouwer's route. In about 4600 voyages made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, only five ships were wrecked on the coast of New Holland, as the Dutch began to call the new country. In 1696 Willem Vlamingh, on his way to Batavia, was ordered to search for any survivors of one wreck. He found no trace of them but, unlike Tasman, he bettered his instructions. He made the first accurate and detailed map of the Western Australian coastline from the Swan River to the North West Cape, and he landed on and named Rottneest Island and rowed up the Swan River for about 30 kilometres. Like many later visitors, he was not much impressed by anything he saw except the black swans. On Dirck Hartog Island Vlamingh found the pewter dish left there eighty years before. He had the inscription copied on to another pewter plate, which also recorded his own visit, and took the original home with him to Holland.³⁹

By the end of the seventeenth century Dutch navigators had produced tolerably accurate charts of the entire coastline of New Holland from Cape York west, south and east to Fowlers Bay, of the southeastern coast of Van Diemen's Land and of the western shores of New Zealand. What lay between these chartered shorelines – land or waste of waters or some of both, or even whether there was a strait between New Guinea and New Holland, remained a mystery to most Europeans for another seventy years. The eighteenth century in Europe, particularly the latter half of it, is often called the Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. For the first time in human history, large numbers of middle-class people, not bound by the traditional outlook of the nobility or the clergy, became rich, cultivated and influential. Many leading figures in intellectual life, like the great historian of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon, became agnostics or deists. Sir Isaac Newton and others had shown

that the natural world was governed by rational laws. Enlightened people believed that human society should be similarly arranged. The authority of the church and the lingering belief in the innate superiority of royal and aristocratic persons were at a discount. Reason and love of one's fellow man might do more for humanity than the fasting, prayer and preaching of priests or the decrees of kings. Even some Anglican clergy became *de facto* deists, people who saw the Christian God as a sort of almighty clockmaker who had created the universe but who had no interest in the last sparrow to fall, in human suffering or in performance of miracles. It was not surprising that after the French Revolution of 1789 a voluptuous French actress should have been installed in Notre Dame Cathedral, albeit briefly, as the Goddess of Reason.

Throughout Europe, many enlightened people believed in the cult of the "noble savage". South Sea Islanders, North American Indians – indeed, uncivilised people in general – were seen as being more virtuous because they lived simpler, purer lives more in accordance with "natural" laws than the "effete" and sophisticated citizens of London or Paris or Rome. Some of the first white visitors to Australia, like Watkin Tench, Captain of Marines, and Governor Arthur Phillip himself, initially viewed the Aborigines in this romantic way. Enlightened people believed also in one of the great rallying cries of the French Revolution, which they did so much to bring about: "Careers must be open to talent". Power and place should be conferred on people best able to do the requisite work well, not on those selected by the accident of birth, or the inheritance of wealth, or the weight of ancient traditions. In this respect, daily life in eighteenth century Britain or Holland was much freer than in France or the rest of Europe. In the British Navy, for instance, commissions were not sold as they were in the Army, but were given out by patronage or "influence". Of course, this meant that most of the higher commanders were or aristocratic or "gentlemanly" stock but (and it is a big "but") most officers of and below the rank of captain were not. The son of an illiterate peasant *could* become a naval officer and a great many common people did. Officers without the benefit of aristocratic, or at least "gentle", birth were known affectionately as "tarpaulins". In order to get on in the service they had, of course, to be a great deal better at their job than their gently-born rivals, and they had also to win somehow or other the patronage of at least one great and powerful friend; but even aristocratic youths, with all the influence the heart of an eighteenth-century sailor could desire, had to serve long years at sea before gaining preferment. This system of promotion by merit seems to have been the main reason why, throughout the wars of the eighteenth century and later, the Royal Navy almost always worsted the French whenever battles were joined.

The greatest "tarpaulin" of his time was James Cook. He was also its greatest explorer, a believer in the "noble savage", in science and in the efficacy of human reason. C.M.H. Clark says that he held religion in such low esteem that "he would never tolerate a parson aboard his ship".⁴⁰ Others have observed that it was not customary in the Royal Navy of Cook's day to include a chaplain in the complement of smaller ships such as those Cook sailed in. Perhaps so, but at any rate Cook never did, when in command, have a parson among those at his table and there is no evidence that he had any belief in, or even respect for, divine revelation and its earthly exponents.

The son of a day-labourer, Cook was born on 27 October 1728 at Marton in Yorkshire only about 24 kilometres from the North Sea. He learnt "the three R's" at the village school, his fees being paid by the farmer who employed his father. At the age of 18 he was apprenticed to John Walker, a Quaker, ship-owner and coal merchant of Whitby. Young Cook served his time mostly at sea, carrying coal to other parts of the British coast as well as to Scandinavian and Dutch ports. He must have learnt a good deal about the theoretical side of navigation before he signed on as a seaman with Walker's firm at the end of his apprenticeship. By 1755 he had learnt his trade so well that Walker offered him the captaincy of one of his colliers, the *Friendship*. Instead of jumping at this chance, Cook signed on as an able seaman in the Royal Navy on 17 June. We shall never know why. Everyone knew that the navy was preparing for

war with France and that there would be more chances of promotion, prizemoney and loot for brave sailors. We know too that within a month Cook was promoted to the rank of master's mate. Perhaps he was given to understand there would be immediate promotion for a sailor of his proven steadiness and capacity? It is equally likely that the position fell vacant by chance, and that he was obviously the best possible man to fill it. Two years later he was again promoted – to the rank of master.⁴¹

There is no such rank in the navy today. In the eighteenth century the master of a merchant ship was her captain and usually a man who had worked his way up from the lower deck. In the navy a master might in fact command a small ship but in larger vessels he was, so to speak, the chief petty officer, responsible to the captain for all technical and practical matters pertaining to the working of the ship – for navigation, sails, masts, rigging, taking soundings, bearings and so on. During the Seven Years' War with France, in 1756-63, Cook spent much of his time as master under Captain John Simcoe and much of it in command of his own small craft. In both posts he learnt trigonometry and surveying from an army engineer, Samuel Holland, and he helped to make charts of the St Lawrence River, which did much to make possible Wolfe's victory over Montcalm at Quebec. After the war he was sent to chart the coast of Newfoundland and to observe there an eclipse of the sun. This latter work brought him to the notice of the Royal Society, then a body with very much more influence, though not more prestige, than it has now. When, a few years later, the Society wished to have an observation of the transit of Venus across the face of the sun made from Tahiti, who better could be recommended to command the expedition than James Cook?

The Admiralty concurred and Cook was given commissioned rank as a lieutenant on 25 May 1768. Careful preparations were made for the voyage. In addition to the naval crew, His Majesty's barque *Endeavour* was to carry an excellent astronomer, Mr Green, who was intoxicated perhaps no more often than most Britons of that time. The ship was also to take two of the greatest botanists of the age, Daniel Carl Solander, a pupil of the great Swedish scientist Linnaeus, and the 25-year-old Joseph Banks, already a Fellow of the Royal Society, a young Lincolnshire gentleman who was to be regarded for the rest of his long life as the leading authority on all things Australian. Among Banks' small retinue of servants was Sydney Parkinson, a Quaker and artist whose sketches often tell us more of the *Endeavour's* discoveries than does the log of her master. Cook was given, by the Admiralty, sealed orders to be opened after the astronomical work at Tahiti had been completed. They instructed him to sail south, then west in search of the mythical great southern continent and to chart and take possession of New Zealand.

The *Endeavour* left Plymouth on 25 August 1768 and left Tahiti, her scientific mission accomplished, in the same month of 1769. Sailing south as instructed, Cook satisfied himself that the great southern continent – unless it was situated in the polar regions – was a chimera. He turned west and spent six months exploring New Zealand far more thoroughly than Tasman had dreamed of doing. This done, he was free to sail home. His orders said merely that he was to return “either round the Cape of Good Hope, or Cape Horn, as from Circumstances you may judge the Most Eligible way”.⁴² Cook did neither, or rather, he sailed home round the Cape of Good Hope by way of a route that had never occurred to Tasman or to the Lords of the Admiralty who had issued his orders. This decision constitutes perhaps his greatest claim to fame. He called a council of the officers and, we must conclude, led it to resolve that they should steer “westward till we fall in with the East Coast of New Holland and then to follow the deriction of that Coast to the northward or what other direction it may take until we arrive at its northern extremity”.⁴³

So the *Endeavour* left New Zealand on the last day of March 1770. Cook's second lieutenant, Zachary Hicks, a Londoner, sighted land on the morning of 19 April. Cook named the place Point Hicks, but it has since been renamed Cape Everard. Coasting northwards he

entered a fine sheltered bay on 28 April and anchored the *Endeavour* close to the beach inside its southern headland. The Britons were as puzzled by the behaviour of the Aborigines as previous European observers had been. Some people spearing fish from bark canoes off the headland seemed to ignore the invaders. Another group of Aborigines ran off into the bush as soon as the British party made for the shore, but two warriors stayed to menace it with spears until they were driven off by a few volleys of small shot.

The white men spent a week exploring the surrounding country, most of which, before it was buried under the concrete jungle of Sydney suburbs, was covered by thin sandy soil with sandstone outcrops or swamp. Cook, the farmer's son, puzzled future settlers and historians by writing that some of the land was "as fine meadow as ever was seen".⁴⁴ For Banks and Solander the week was a dream of delight. Never before or since have naturalists found or collected in such a short time such a vast range of plant, animal and bird specimens previously unknown to science. The sailors ate their fill of fresh fish and, consequently, Cook first named the place Stingray Harbour. Later he changed this to Botany Bay in deference to the more refined enjoyment experienced there by the two scientists.

Coasting northwards again, Cook noticed what appeared to be the entrance to a fine harbour which he named Port Jackson. On 22 May they replenished the water casks and shot a fine wild turkey at the place still marked on maps as Bustard Bay, but Cook's even temper was deeply disturbed by what he called in his log "a very extraordinary affair". On the previous night, while the *Endeavour* lay at anchor, Richard Orton, the captain's clerk, had fallen into his bunk dead drunk. While he lay senseless, "some Malicious person or persons in the Ship" cut off all the clothes from his back and a piece of both his ears. Cook was so furious that, at Batavia on the way home months later, he offered a reward of fifteen guineas and fifteen gallons of arrack to anyone who would inform him of the prankster's name. No one would or could, but Cook suspected one of the midshipmen, Mr James Magra or Matra, a native of New York whom Cook considered "one of those gentlemen, frequently found on board Kings Ships, that can very well be spared, or to speake more planer good for nothing".⁴⁵ The incident shows us something of Cook's stem discipline and, equally, something of his care for the well-being of his crew. It also shows his low opinion of Mr Matra, who was destined to become, after Banks, the most influential of the *Endeavour's* complement in lobbying the British government about founding a colony at Botany Bay.

While, as a mark of the captain's displeasure, Matra was still suspended from duties, the barque nosed into the labyrinth of coral islands, shoals, rocks and lee shores which the world now knows as the Great Barrier Reef. It was almost too much for the greatest navigator of the age. At about eleven o'clock, at high tide on the night of Sunday 11 June, the *Endeavour* struck the reef. Thanks to Cook's superb seamanship, and to the splendid morale he had fostered in his crew, the ship got off at high tide the following night. Banks was surprised that the seamen did not refuse duty and plunder the ship as, he believed, was customary in the eighteenth century whenever a craft was in a desperate situation. Instead, he wrote that "the Seamen worked with surprizing chearfulness and alacrity; no grumbling or growling was to be heard throughout the ship, not even an oath (tho the ship in general was as well furnishd with them as most in his majesties service)."⁴⁶

The ship was beached for repairs near the mouth of the Endeavour River where Cooktown now stands. The botanists enjoyed their month in the tropics at least as much as they had their week at Botany Bay. They collected hundreds of new plants, fish, birds, reptiles and animals, including their first kangaroos and turtles – enough and to spare for all hands to eat their fill of fresh food. Small wonder that the crew's morale was so high. Their commander was probably the only one of that time in the Royal Navy who could write unselfconsciously in his log book:

Whatever refreshment we got that would bear a division I caused to be equally divided amongst the whole company generally by weight, the meanest person in the Ship had an equal share with my self or anyone on board, and this method every commander of a Ship on such a Voyage as this ought ever to observe.

No doubt Cook's men concurred with their commander's views. Some at least realised that his care for their diet saved them from scurvy and other diseases that usually decimated eighteenth-century crews. T. Perry, a sailor in HMS *Resolution* on Cook's third voyage, wrote a song in praise of his paternal care for their health:

We were all hearty seamen, no colds did we fear,
And we have from all sickness entirely kept clear.
Thanks be to our Captain, he has proved so good
Amongst all the Islands to give us fresh food.⁴⁷

At Endeavour River occurred an incident with "the Indians", which graphically illustrated the total inability of the two races to understand each other. The local Aborigines were shy and timid, like their brethren at Botany Bay, but after three weeks some of the men approached the ship in a friendly manner. They showed no interest in the trinkets offered them but, on leaving, they started to carry off two of the turtles which were lying on the deck. They were outraged by the Englishmen's greed and ignorance of the laws of hospitality and sharing when the crew stopped them from taking away some of their own communal property – property which, from the Aboriginal viewpoint, the white man had already stolen from the black men without so much as a "by your leave" or a "thank you". To mark their displeasure, the Aborigines set fire to the bush and some ship's stores on the river bank. "I had little idea," wrote Banks, "of the fury with which the grass burnt in this hot climate, nor of the difficulty of extinguishing it when once lighted."⁴⁸

On the evening of 22 August 1770, Cook landed on and named Possession Island off the tip of Cape York. He also had the British colours hoisted and formally laid claim to the whole of eastern Australia from Point Hicks to their then position under "the name of *New South Wales*". In the *Endeavour's* log he wrote that he was confident the whole area "was never seen or visited by any European before us."⁴⁹ As we have seen, this was one of the few instances in which Cook was possibly mistaken, but any evidence there might have been of an earlier visit by Europeans had been destroyed in the terrible Lisbon earthquake just fifteen years before. So the *Endeavour* steered westward for Batavia, the Cape of Good Hope and home. While she was crossing the Gulf of Carpentaria, Cook committed to his journal his ideas on the land and the people they had discovered. Both, he reported, were a great deal more attractive than Dampier had found on the west coast of New Holland.

The eastern coast had many splendid harbours and was reasonably well watered. The native plants and trees seemed of little use to civilised people, though much of the fauna, particularly kangaroos and green turtles, made good eating. However he added, prophetically, that fruits, vegetables and grain crops would flourish if introduced and that there was ample fodder for more domestic animals "than ever could be brought into the country". He then launched into a panegyric on the Aborigines, consciously contrasting his perception of them with Dampier's:

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 wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniencies 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.

...In short they seem'd to set no Value upon anything we gave them, nor would they ever part with any thing of their own for any one article we could offer them; this in my opinion argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life and that they have no superfluities.⁵⁰

This passage has become the classic statement of the nature of the “noble savage” seen through the eyes of the man who must surely be considered the noblest-natured son of the enlightenment in the European Age of Reason. The description is highly romantic, even sentimental. Most readers now, or then, they may take leave to doubt whether, eighteenth-century Aborigines were in general *happier* than Europeans of the same era. Yet the passage shows too that Cook understood the nature of Aboriginal society better than almost any other European observer for well over a century afterwards. He saw that the black people lived entirely by hunting and gathering food direct from nature, that they shared it according to need, and that consequently their lives were “not disturb’d by any Inequality of Condition”. They were free of class conflict because classes standing in a different relationship to the means of production had not developed any more than had chiefs, sorcerers, priests, kings, police or other specialists in the mean art of imposing their will on their fellows. A few more white people with James Cook’s kind of “enlightenment” might have ameliorated the murderous conflict between blacks and whites which was to darken the history of the next two hundred years in New South Wales, New Holland and Van Diemen’s Land.

“Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it”, wrote Shakespeare. Cook died like a hero of ancient Greek tragedy, brought down by *hubris* – that sense of overweening pride in one’s own prowess which is said to anger the gods and presage a fall. On his third great voyage of discovery in 1779, when his name and fame had already become legendary throughout the Pacific, he was felled by the daggers and clubs of some Hawaiian Islanders. A party of natives had carried off one of HMS *Discovery*’s boats and it was felt that nothing less than Cook’s personal *mana* would suffice to get it back. Accordingly he led the landing party and retrieved the boat – as was his custom, without bloodshed. Then as they were returning to their boat, one of the sailors, without orders, fired on an Hawaiian canoe and killed a great chief. The infuriated islanders rushed on the landing party just as they were about to get back into their boats. The Englishmen turned to defend themselves or ran as best they could through the sea for safety, but their commander’s tremendous sense of his own status and of the dignity of a human being, allowed him to do neither. Certain, seemingly, that no Polynesian would dare attack him, Cook unhurriedly turned his back on the islanders in order to gesture the men in the boats close inshore. He fell immediately under a rain of blows.⁵¹