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“...far more happier than we  
Europeans”: Aborigines and farmers

Bill Gammage

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# ‘...far more happier than we Europeans’: Aborigines and farmers

## Bill Gammage

...in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans... They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life... 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 necessarys of Life and that they have no superfluities...

*James Cook, New South Wales, 23 August 1770*

Whereas Cook writes here that Aborigines lived in self-sufficient affluence, in 1803 Thomas Malthus famously argued the opposite. Using accounts from New South Wales, Malthus proposed that all populations are limited by their food supply. Hunter-gatherers depend for food on the whims of nature, and this uncertainty deprives them of control over their lives, limits their number, and blocks their road to what Europeans call civilisation. Hunter-gatherers are victims of nature.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, London [1798 &] 1803.

This powerful idea still shapes popular Western opinion about hunter-gatherer societies. In recent decades the idea has been greatly moderated, and there is growing recognition that hunter-gatherer lifestyles are viable. Still, it remains fair to say most Westerners think hunter-gatherers live less planned and less predictable lives than farmers.

But I argue that when Europeans arrived the Aborigines of Australia were deliberately organising plant and animal resources to make them abundant, convenient and predictable. They did this to such an extent that in terms of production they were ruled less, not more, by the whims of nature than farmers were, because they managed resources over larger areas and so could provide better for adverse seasons. It is unwise to think of ‘normal seasons’ in Australia, but in seasons which suited farming, Aboriginal management made resources as predictable as farming did, and in drought, flood and fire years made them more predictable. In 1788 Aborigines lived comfortably where today white Australians cannot.

Most (though not all) specialists know how carefully Aborigines shaped the land with fire. In the last 40 years ‘mosaic burning’, ‘patch burning’ and ‘firestick farming’ have become familiar notions in Australia. My argument goes further: patch burning is but a finishing touch to grassland, one of the many vegetation types which Aborigines made. Other vegetation types included thick forest, open forest with and without undergrowth, scrub and heath. Aborigines *associated* these: that is, they linked different vegetation types into mosaics to create an orderly landscape and

abundant and predictable resources. They refined these associations with tree corridors or belts, and copses, patches, clearings and plains. They located associations close to or away from suitable landscape features—particularly water, and most particularly swamps, but also hills, cliffs, rocks, coast and so on. They maintained associations sometimes for centuries, by burning and, what was equally important, by not burning. They did all this because Dreamtime spirits and totemic ancestors made the land, then laid down laws and sanctions to ensure that it was maintained forever. The laws were essentially ecological: their effect was that the land not only met the key requirements for resources—that they be accessible and predictable—but also generally ensured that they were abundant and convenient as well.

The Law demanded the continuance of every form of life: plant, animal, insect and what Westerners know as inert forms such as fire, water, wind and earth. Each life form had a totem, and via this each was inextricably one with the people of that totem, who had a particular but not exclusive responsibility to ensure that it flourished. The great changes which Aborigines made to the land had nonetheless to ensure that no habitat was too much reduced, no totem put at risk. For each plant species Aborigines maintained a habitat—grassland for tubers, wetlands for reeds and rushes, and so on. For most animal species they made edges between different plant habitats, since many animals feed in one habitat and shelter in others. Kangaroos, for example, feed on grassland but shelter in open forest, both being habitats where they can move quickly if necessary. So whether on the central

Australian plains or the Tasmanian high country, Aborigines put grassland next to open forest, knowing that kangaroos would live along their edges. That meant burning off all the trees on one patch to make grass, then right next to it using a very different fire regime to clear the undergrowth but leave an open forest. People made many such edges by dotting small plains through forest country, and belts or patches of trees or scrub across plains country. That required careful burning patterns, repeated over many decades.

That is long-term land management, laying a template on the land. Short-term, people refined that template. For example, by firing grass patches in sequence to bring on the fresh green growth which kangaroos love, they could lure kangaroos to each patch in turn, and regulate which edge of the patch the kangaroos would frequent. The forest ring then made the kangaroos easier to hunt. When the animals became spear shy on one plain or group of plains, people would have ready another group, flush with new growth, for them to move to. In short, by firing grass in a planned cycle, Aborigines made kangaroos abundant by creating ideal living conditions for them, and convenient and predictable by shepherding them from paddock to paddock around the country.

Other species required different management. Emus are nervous on small plains which kangaroos tolerate, so emus must have larger plains. Large plains make hunting kangaroos difficult, so Aborigines either studded the plains with copses of trees to attract them, or burnt the grass in ways which did not. Possums don't like plains—they must have trees. Koalas don't mind small



plains but feed only on a few particular eucalypt species, while wallabies don't mind small plains but seek shelter in thick undergrowth which koalas dislike, so their edges cannot be the open forest that kangaroos and koalas prefer. Tubers like *murnong* (yam daisy) were an essential staple needing large areas of open country, but in harvesting those areas people naturally frightened the animals away, so *murnong* fields had to be convenient but not too close to animal habitats. In short, the habitats of thousands of species had to be made, maintained, and associated. Of course a habitat might suit more than one species—kangaroos and possums for example, or wallabies, wombats and echidnas, or *murnong* and emu—but much planning, balancing and negotiating with neighbours and between totems was required.

Sometimes Aborigines worked with the country—sometimes that was all that was possible. Mountains, rocks, rivers and most swamps were there to stay. Yet even in such places Aborigines refined the landscape, deciding whether to emphasise or to mitigate its character. If the crest or the south-facing (away from the sun) slopes of a mountain were steep and rocky, for example, people might either burn it rarely to leave it thick with trees and undergrowth and fallen timber and thus suitable for wombats, small marsupials, small birds and water, or they might burn it or parts of it regularly, to make kangaroo, dingo and parrot country.

Yet far more often than they left country alone, Aborigines changed it, over wide areas. Indeed it was characteristic of them to change it. When Europeans came, Australia was a made landscape, a managed landscape, far more than it was natural. It was a farmed

landscape, because its crops and herds were made abundant, convenient and predictable, and then harvested sustainably. Like European farming, this was done at a local level. Detailed local knowledge was crucial to it. Where I have spoken generally of burning to protect plants or to help animals, an Aboriginal family would know not merely which species, but which plant and which animal, and its historical, totem and Dreaming links. They knew every yard intimately, just as farmers do. But the Law which prescribed and regulated their making was universal—its essentials varied little if at all throughout Australia. Basic principles and purposes were adapted to local circumstance. That is so farming across the world. Australia was one large farm.

There is much written evidence for associations, edges and mosaics, but here we can best see it visually.

**Figure 1. 'Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos', by Joseph Lycett, c1821**

Dense forest rises from low ground to separate grassy hills. A sharp edge divides trees from grass. Fires block kangaroos from the forest and drive them to the spears. Yet the hunters are protecting the forest: they have fired its lee edge so that the wind takes the flames into the grass. When the wind lay the other way they would burn the opposite edge—that must always have been so, otherwise those sharp forest edges would be frayed by fire. A skilful burning regime has kept the forest dense, the grass open, the game accessible.

It is unlikely that fires were lit just to hunt. That would tax a delicate artefact. More probably, when season and wind decreed a time to burn, people hunted as well. If they spread enough edges around their country they could always burn and hunt somewhere, just as if they planned burning cycles they could always shepherd game from one plain to the next.

**Figure 2. 'A panoramic view of King George's Sound...', detail, by Robert Dale, c1832**

Here at Albany, WA, a European farm sits on ploughed grassland, but is at most two years old: this is an Aboriginal landscape, showing associated belts of trees and grass, copses, and water. The fires are Aboriginal, and soon WA would pass laws to send Aborigines to prison for lighting them. Note the neck of trees at centre, similar to that in the Lycett's painting.

**Figure 3. Spinifex patches in the Great Sandy Desert west of Lake Mackay, 24 July 1953**

This country on the WA/NT border was made by people with little contact with Europeans. The shading indicates three or four fire generations. The straight lines are where the fire-lighters have walked, choosing what to burn and what not.



Figure 1. 'Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos', by Joseph Lycett, c1821



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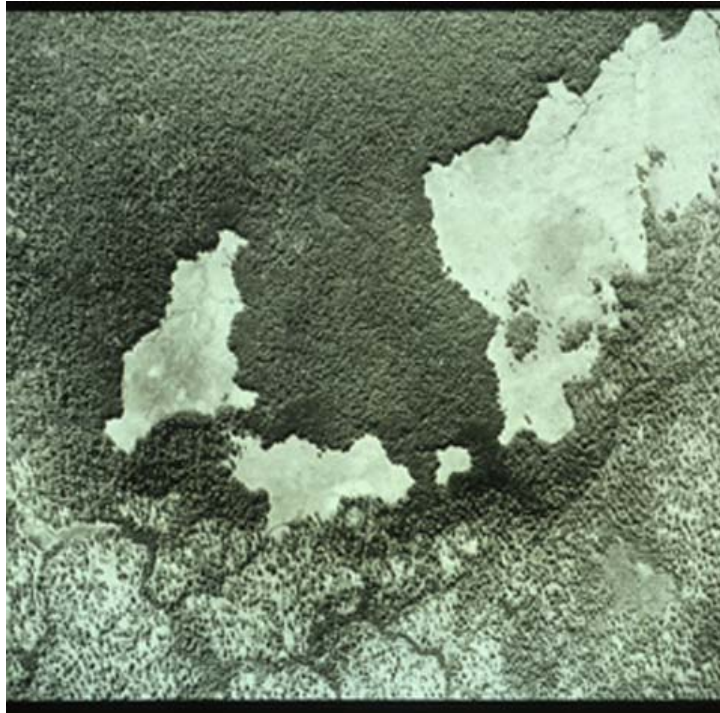


Figure 4. Goderich (top right) and Gatcomb (bottom left) Plains in northwest Tasmania, 12 April 1949

Figure 4. Goderich (top right) and Gatcomb (bottom left) Plains in northwest Tasmania, 12 April 1949

This land was used little by Europeans before 1949. Rainforest should be its climax vegetation; instead the landscape is diverse. The dark areas are rainforest, the plains support a wonderful variety of grasses, herbs, lilies, everlastings, flowering shrubs, heaths and mosses—a beautiful place.<sup>2</sup> On the south, open eucalypt forest fringes the Wandle River, with grass patches both on and off the flats. Gatcomb's south edge is a ridge, thick with snakes, which carries small boggy creeks alive with frogs down to a swamp at the plain's northern tip. People used hot northerlies to drive fire south from the swamp,<sup>3</sup> the fire-front gradually expanding; then over the ridge they burnt open forest, mostly stringybark (*E. delegatensis*). They protected the river, which they called *Lare.re.lar*, meaning platypus. In June 1834 George Robinson found platypus there,<sup>4</sup> so the banks were not eroding, hence not often exposed to the regular cool fires which cleared the ridge scrub. Here Tasmanians conveniently associated the resources of rainforest, open forest, plain, swamp, river and ridge.

These illustrations include the wettest and the driest parts of Australia. Almost certainly, most of the care and industry needed to make such landscapes was done well before Europeans reached Australia. By 1788 most Aboriginal management work was

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<sup>2</sup> For plant lists see L. Gilfedder, *Montane Grasslands of North-Western Tasmania*, Hobart 1995, 25-30, 43.

<sup>3</sup> Information from Bill Mollison, Sister's Creek, 12 February 2002.

<sup>4</sup> NJB Plomley (ed), *Friendly Mission*, Hobart 1966, 884.



maintenance: burning or not burning in complex patterns of time and place, negotiating to balance the sometimes conflicting needs of different totems, now and then making long-term changes to the land such as burning old-growth forest and shifting plains onto more fertile soil, and performing the ceremonies which ensured that all creation flourished, that the farm ran well.

How well the farm ran is suggested by how well fed Aboriginal people were. It is true that many European accounts, notably the journals from Port Jackson (Sydney) in the winter of 1788, report starving Aborigines. The Europeans in Port Jackson assumed that this happened every winter, and was evidence that hunter-gatherers depend for their food on the whims of nature, as Malthus was to claim. But had the Sydney people indeed starved every winter, obviously they would have gone somewhere else. Instead it was the colonists who were starving, so much so that they sent ships to South Africa, China, Batavia and anywhere else they could think of for food, including 700kms to Lord Howe Island to catch turtles. In Port Jackson they hauled their nets for fish every day, feeding over a thousand mouths with the catch. Not surprisingly, within a few months they noticed that fish were becoming scarce. The starving Aborigines they saw were people whose food they had taken.

The Sydney people were reported as shorter and slighter than the arriving Europeans,<sup>5</sup> and that was sometimes repeated elsewhere in Australia, but more often Europeans described

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<sup>5</sup> W Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years* [1789 & 1793], Sydney 1961, 274.

Aborigines as well built, and so, we may infer, well fed. In 1829 Alan Cunningham described three young men near Brisbane as

of the ordinary stature of the Aborigines of Moreton Bay (viz about six feet), appeared very athletic active persons, of unusually muscular limb, and with bodies (much scarified) in exceeding good case.<sup>6</sup>

From the rich plains of western Victoria, Rolf Boldrewood wrote in 1884 that local people were a fine race, physically and otherwise—the men tall and muscular, the women well-shaped and fairly good-looking.<sup>7</sup> These were people in high rainfall country, but similar descriptions come from the most arid parts of Australia. Edward John Eyre, who nearly died crossing the Nullarbor Plain, wrote of ‘The Aborigines of Australia’,

The male is well built and muscular, averaging from five to six feet in height, with proportionate upper and lower extremities... The men have fine broad and deep chests, indicating great bodily strength, and are remarkably erect and upright in their carriage, with much natural grace and dignity of demeanour.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Re 8 July 1829 near Yimbun, *Report* 12 Dec 1829, in JG Steele, *The Explorers of the Moreton Bay District 1770-1830*, Brisbane 1972, 331.

<sup>7</sup> In P Corris, *Aborigines and Europeans in Western Victoria*, Canberra 1968, 2.

<sup>8</sup> EJ Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia...* [1845], Adelaide 1964, vol 2, 206-7.

In November 1845, on Coopers Creek in central Australia where three white explorers were to become famous by dying of starvation 16 years later, Charles Sturt wrote,

The men of this tribe were, without exception, the finest of any I had seen on the Australian Continent... They were a well-made race, with a sufficiency of muscular development... Of sixty-nine who I counted round me at one time, I do not think there was one under my own height, 5 feet 10¾ inches, but there were several upwards of 6 feet... however... I am sorry to say I observed but little improvement in the fairer sex. They were the same half-starved unhappy looking creatures whose condition I have so often pitied elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

In October 1896, in the middle of Australia's largest desert, the Great Sandy Desert, in country far from any white settlement even today, the explorer David Carnegie met two very well built men, one nearly six feet, and both with 'well-fed frames'.<sup>10</sup>

Sturt saw women less well-fed than men. Generally, though not exclusively, men hunted and women gathered in Aboriginal Australia. In the 1930s the anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry studied women's work in the Kimberley region of WA, definitely not country suited to agriculture. She thought they worked less hard than European farmers' wives, but got food more certainly:

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<sup>9</sup> C Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia* [1849], Adelaide 1965, vol 2, 77 (3 Nov 1845).

<sup>10</sup> D Carnegie, *Spinifex and Sand* [1898], Melbourne 1973, 283.

It is not the steady strenuous labour of the German peasant woman bending from dawn to dusk over her fields, hoeing, weeding, sowing, and reaping. The aboriginal woman has greater freedom of movement and more variety... the agriculturalist may be left destitute and almost starving if the [crops] fail or are destroyed by drought, flood, fire, locusts, or grasshoppers, as sometimes happens in China and in Europe. I never saw an aboriginal woman come in empty-handed, though in 1935 there was a drought...

She concluded, 'The women's work... might be more protracted [than the men's] but it was less strenuous, and compares favourably with a European eight-hour day and possibly overtime as well'.<sup>11</sup> Others have since pointed out that Aborigines worked far fewer hours to secure food and shelter than farmers anywhere, even today. And note how frequently early Europeans depicted corroborees and ceremonies. That was because corroborees and ceremonies were frequent, hardly reflecting a people troubled about food. Of course there were hungry times in Aboriginal Australia, otherwise Aborigines would not have needed to manage their resources so carefully and extensively. But that is so of farming too, and as with farming it was not the norm.

The widespread accounts I quote describe people for whom food, medicine and other resources were abundant and predictable. This by itself might answer that question often asked:

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<sup>11</sup> PM Kaberry, *Aboriginal Women: Sacred and Profane*, London 1939, 20, 23.

why didn't Aborigines become farmers? I turn to that question now.

In northern Australia, Aborigines knew about farming. For centuries Arnhem Land people watched Macassans (trepanng fishers from Indonesia) plant and harvest rice and other crops;<sup>12</sup> while Cape York people traded regularly with gardeners on nearby islands. In both areas Aborigines may have tried gardening at one time, but in 1788 none showed any inclination for it. Instead they maintained the sorts of associations typifying the rest of Australia—notably plains beside swamps, ringed by scrub or forest. If anything, hunter-gathering was moving north into the Cape York islands, rather than farming moving south.<sup>13</sup> Clearly people thought their management superior to farming.

In a few parts of Australia, people used staple foods for months each year. Most notably, in south-west Victoria people developed two staples: eels and *murnong*, yam daisy. They built elaborate eel traps. At Lake Condah they built water races with stone walls up to a metre high and wide, and over 50 metres long. Into hard basalt bedrock they dug canals a metre deep and up to 300 metres long.

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<sup>12</sup> CC Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege*, Melbourne 1976.

<sup>13</sup> FJ Byerley (ed), *Narrative of the Overland Expedition of the Messrs Jardine from Rockhampton to Cape York* [1867], Bundaberg 1995, 79-80; J Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*, Sydney 1989, 233-4; JB Jukes, *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of H.M.S 'Fly' and 'Bramble'... 1842-6*, London 1847, 138-9, 145, 307; DR Moore, *Islanders and Aborigines at Cape York*, Canberra 1979, 160, 211, 279-80; D Walker (ed), *Bridge and Barrier*, Canberra 1972, 387-8.

They linked these races and canals into an intricate network, then threaded it with stone ribs to hold wicker or bark eel traps. The races and canals skilfully controlled water flows so that the traps worked whether the water was rising or falling, coming or going. The system probably took decades to build, but thereafter 20 people could operate it without much trouble.

Nearby was a village of stone houses, housing possibly 700 people. They had water, eels, fish, shrimp, water birds and eggs on nearby lakes, *murnong* in summer and *convolvulus* in winter, emu, plains turkey, kangaroo, bracken and many other foods—plenty of food. But they did not stay. After a few months each year they moved on. And when they moved they left piles of eels, sometimes a metre high, rotting in the sun—hardly the behaviour of a starving people, or a people anxious about future food supplies. (By the way those people seemingly came as close as anywhere in Australia to recognising chiefs, suggesting an interesting connection world-wide between villages and chiefs.)

At Mt William and Toolondo in Victoria were even more remarkable systems. That at Mt William had thousands of metres of trenching and banking, covering at least six hectares. At Toolondo channels up to 400 metres long joined two swamps 2.5 kilometres apart and on opposite sides of a watershed. The channels cut through the divide between the coastal and inland water systems, and were engineered to let water flow in either direction. Thus eels could greatly extend their range and increase their number, while the channels which let them do this made it easy to catch them. The channels also drained water in floods and

kept it in droughts.<sup>14</sup> The thinking behind these systems—decades of elaborate and skilful construction to ensure maximum effect and minimum maintenance—is exactly what Aborigines applied to managing their land.

It has been suggested that these specialised food production areas were to allow large ceremonial gatherings.<sup>15</sup> But across Australia such areas were few, whereas large gatherings were universal, and were planned rather than opportunistic, to cater for visitors. Food surplus could be accumulated all over Australia; the method in Victoria was different, not the result. Indeed it may be that the eel systems and the villages reflect a break-down of a management system working well elsewhere. Perhaps in south-west Victoria the lure of food so varied and so tasty tempted people towards sedentism, and then the sheer abundance they created *obliged* them to keep harvesting it, and to waste it, to keep their totems balanced.

Yet the Victorian examples have significant implications. Contradicting Malthus, here were hunter-gatherers who, even in his terms, controlled their food supply. That forces a close look at definitions of farming, to discover in what ways the Victorians were

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<sup>14</sup> GA Robinson, *Journal* 1841, in NSW Governor's Despatches 1842, 927-30, Mitchell Library A1230; I Clark (ed), *The Journals of George Augustus Robinson*, Melbourne 1998, vol 2, 162-3, 196-7, 308; Flood, *op cit*, 215-8; H Lourandos, *Continent of Hunter-Gatherers*, Cambridge 1997; H Lourandos in DJ Mulvaney & JP White (ed), *Australians to 1788*, Sydney 1987, 298-307.

<sup>15</sup> Flood, *op cit*, 222.

not farmers. We face a conundrum: in the essentials of husbandry and harvest the Victorians were farmers as much as Europeans were, yet clearly they managed land differently. Two key differences are detectable: the Victorians did not store, and they were not sedentary—they did not stay put. Let us look at these differences.

The significance of storing is under-rated. Storing releases people from a constant food quest, and lets them stay in areas where otherwise they might starve. Militarily, this is crucial. Armies can remain in the field rather than disperse to find food. Time and again Aborigines holding a military advantage over Europeans were obliged to disperse to get food, thus losing that advantage. Indeed storing explains why it was the British who settled Australia. The First Fleet was an extraordinary technological achievement, the eighteenth century equivalent of putting a man on the moon. Possibly other European powers might have got the ships together, but none had the Royal Navy's supply and ordnance capacity—none could supply the stores.

But some Aborigines did store. In Australia's arid lands, in those very places where Eyre and Sturt remarked on the strong physique of the people, both cropping and storing were common, and involved a staple—grain. People concentrated seed in paddocks, harvested the crop, and winnowed and stored the grain. Thomas Mitchell wrote of native millet in western NSW,

Dry heaps of this grass, that had been pulled expressly for the purpose of gathering the seed, lay along our path for many



miles. I counted nine miles along the [Narran] river, in which we rode through this grass only... it was what supplied the bread of the natives...

People ground the seed, Mitchell wrote, 'into a kind of paste or bread'.<sup>16</sup> Others saw millet, portulaca and other seeds being grown (and protected from fire), harvested, ripened, winnowed and stored.<sup>17</sup> In the Northern Territory in 1870 Christopher Giles

discovered a native granary. This was a rude platform built in a tree, about 7 or 8 feet from the ground, on this were placed in a heap a number of bags made of close netting. Dismounting, I climbed the tree to examine the bags, and was astonished to find that they contained different kinds of grain, stored up for the winter, or rather the dry season.<sup>18</sup>

It was not only grain. In 1976 Dick Kimber, a long-time friend of Walpiri and Pintubi people living in some of Australia's most arid country, concluded,

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<sup>16</sup> TL Mitchell, *Journal of an Expedition into... Tropical Australia*, London 1848, 90 (9 March 1846); see also 98 (20 March 1846).

<sup>17</sup> H Allen, 'Where the Crow Flies Backwards: Man and Land in the Darling Basin', ANU Anthrop PhD, 1972, 77-83, 92-3, 96-7; Sturt, *op cit*, vol 1, 226, 285, 294 (Dec 1844—March 1845); RG Kimber, 'Beginnings of farming? Some man-plant-animal relationships in central Australia', *Mankind* 10, 1976, 142-50.

<sup>18</sup> C Giles, 'The Adelaide and Port Darwin Telegraph Line', *JSA Electrical Soc* vol 2 no 6, Oct 1888, 7.

I believe it is reasonable to say that, at the time of European occupation of Central Australia, the Aborigines had developed a 'farming attitude'. Their use of 'game and vegetable reserves', general concepts of culling and conservation of resources, capture of young animals for 'hunter-display' pets, and semi-domestication of the dingo, all suggest moves towards farming people.<sup>19</sup>

But farming and storing were systematic only in Australia's harsher regions by European standards. In higher rainfall country, examples of storing are found, but nothing so extensive, nothing approaching a staple. In those areas people rarely ate seed—by preference did not eat it. They ate roots and tubers, like *murnong*, which they nourished and harvested but rarely stored. In short, people stored from necessity, not from choice. And nowhere did they become sedentary.

Europeans assume that farmers are villagers. In fact in much of the First and Third Worlds they are not—they live scattered by their fields. Usually it is non-farmers who live in villages, not farmers. The villages in south-west Victoria, on the other hand, were for people only while they farmed. That did not make them sedentary. Not even in one of the richest parts of Australia, by European standards, were people tempted to settle down. Not in the poorest parts either, even though cropping and storing were systematic. Neither food in plenty nor in scarcity led people to stay put. The Law required them to patrol and maintain their

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<sup>19</sup> Kimber, *op cit*, 149-50.

country, ensuring that all totems had a place to flourish. So they quit their villages and eel traps, their crops and their stores, to care for, and to be cared for by, the rest of their land.

So Malthus was wrong to say that it was a secure food supply which put Europeans on the road to what they call civilisation. Aboriginal food supplies were at least as secure, probably more secure. By equating farms, sedentism and civilisation, have we focused on the wrong question? Let us ask not why people became farmers, but why farmers became sedentary.

Almost certainly, not from choice. When Europeans tried to persuade Aborigines to farm, almost invariably they refused, and still refuse. They made clear their liking for their own lifestyles. In 1823 John Ross wrote of people near Lake Echo in Tasmania,

[Their gait] was quite indicative of persons who had little to do, with their pleasure only to seek their freedom. Their air of independence was quite charming, and...I know of no race of people who have greater claims to that property.<sup>20</sup>

Those Tasmanians walked even when they had food; land and totem, more than hunger, made them semi-nomadic. In NSW in 1828 a doctor observed,

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<sup>20</sup> 'Recollections of a Short Excursion to Lake Echo in March 1823', *Hobart Town Almanac & VDL Annual*, 1830, 180, in T Jetson, 'The Roof of Tasmania—the History of the Central Plateau', *Tas Hist MA* 1987, 33.

From our observation, the interior tribes consider the whites, as a strange plodding race, for the greater part slaves, obliged to get their living by constant drudgery every day. Whereas, for themselves, their wants being easily supplied, 'they toil not, neither do they spin'.<sup>21</sup>

In 1841 a Canberra squatter reported,

they in general shew a determined dislike to settled habits of any kind they are so wedded to their own habits—supporting themselves with so much ease by the chase—that it can scarcely be expected they should adopt ours.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps most tellingly, in the 1930s two anthropologists overheard,

An Arnhem Land woman [who] once said in effect, rather patronizingly, as she watched a Fijian missionary working in his mission garden, anxiously concerned because a few plants had died: 'You people go to all that trouble, working and planting seeds, but we don't have to do that. All these things are there for us, the Ancestral Beings left them for us. In the end, you depend on the sun and the rain just as we do, but the

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<sup>21</sup> R Oldfield, *An Account of the Aborigines of NSW*, 1828, in N Gunson (ed), *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E. Threlkeld*, Canberra 1974, vol 2, 354.

<sup>22</sup> TA Murray, *V&P LC NSW* 1842, 19, in S Avery, 'Aboriginal and European encounter in the Canberra region', ANU Arch BA Hons, 1994, 16.

difference is that we just have to go and collect the food when it is ripe. We don't have all this other trouble'.<sup>23</sup>

Westerners usually assume that Europeans and others were made sedentary by becoming farmers. Perhaps it was the other way round: sedentary people had to become farmers. In either case, since the Aboriginal example suggests that they were unlikely to have become sedentary by choice, it follows that they became so from necessity. Farming may have begun not as a step towards something better, but away from something worse.

The obvious 'something worse' is a need to protect food—to protect crops or herds or stores. Not from climate: Europe's harsh winters, like the harsh summers of Africa and Australia, explain why people might store food, but not why they must stay put by the store throughout the year and throughout the years. Not from pests or diseases: concentrating plants and animals makes them more vulnerable to these. It makes sedentary villagers more vulnerable too, although they can build up some immunity—epidemic diseases which Europeans introduced had a catastrophic effect on the Aborigines, whereas no serious epidemic disease was native to Aboriginal Australia. I suggest that people turned to crops, herds and stores to protect them from other people. The reason farmers stepped onto the road to civilisation was military.

Aborigines ensured that usually they had plenty of food by controlling their population and by maximizing their resources.

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<sup>23</sup> RM & CH Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, Canberra 1996, 108.

But their truly great achievement lay in how they protected their resources—not by military force, but by religious sanction. Even under extreme duress Aborigines rarely took food that was not theirs. That may have been so in early Europe and elsewhere too—most societies attempt to sanctify property. If so, it broke down. Farmers were led to protect their food, thus lost the predictability and security that widely dispersed resources gave hunter-gatherers, and thus had to work hard and make hard work a virtue. Work, sedentism and storing generate individual and collective strivings for surplus, for wealth. That is the road Europeans took, and Aborigines avoided. In August 1770 James Cook could not have known whether Aborigines were ‘far more happier’ than Europeans, but he was right to see that they were content in ‘all the necessaries of Life’, which we Europeans, ever restless for more, can never be.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> After I wrote this paper, Peter Metcalf pointed out to me that many of the ideas in it echo M. Sahlins, ‘Notes on the original affluent society’, in RB Lee & I DeVore (ed), *Man the Hunter*, Chicago 1968, 85-9.

## Sources for illustrations

Joseph Lycett, 'Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos', c1821. From his *Drawings of the Natives and Scenery of Van Diemens Land*, London 1830, PIC R5689, NLA. Lycett says this scene is Tasmanian. He never visited Tasmania, and most of his views are of around Newcastle NSW, but several follow Governor Macquarie's 1821 Tasmanian route. Tom Gunn points out that Tasmanians did not use the woomera, shown at left.

Robert Dale, part of 'A panoramic view of King George's Sound...', c1832. NLA.

Spinifex patches in the Great Sandy Desert west of Lake Mackay, 24 July 1953. Courtesy Neil Burrows, Planning and Land Management, Perth.

Goderich and Gatcomb Plains, 12 April 1949. Valentines Run 6/22139, courtesy Bill Tewson, Forestry Tasmania, Hobart. Site on map 3841 Guildford 1:25000.