

Some Account of Kangaroo Hunting on the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales, 1840-1880, and the Evidence of Folksong*

Barry MacDonald

It has been common practice amongst social historians to use the results of folksong research to illuminate certain areas of enquiry otherwise obscured by a lack of documentary evidence. Thus, to cite one well-known example, Russel Ward illustrated his construction of an Australian national 'character' with, *inter alia*, the texts of traditional songs.¹ Similar use of folk material has been popular in Australian historiography throughout the twentieth century, although the nature of its role in the discourse has varied. The discussion presented here owes its initial stimulus to two folksongs – both concerning kangaroo hunting – collected from traditional singers on the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales.² Each text described a different hunting method, and that fact, taken together with information that has come to light since their collection, suggested that further historical enquiry might reveal some pattern of development relating to the hunting of kangaroos in New England. As a corollary, it was hoped that the songs would thereby yield meaning at a deeper level generally than had previously been possible and they certainly add a unique dimension to my tentative historical survey, and form a convenient framework for discussion. As their immediate significance cannot properly be understood outside a social context, they will be presented with details of their collection. From subsequent analysis in the light of further historical, ethnographic and literary evidence, it will be argued that local European kangaroo hunting methods – perhaps adapted originally from Aboriginal models – changed over time, in response to certain historical trends.

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The first of the two songs I have given the working title of 'Dingo Flat'. The air and bulk of the text was provided by Jim Lowe (b.1896) of Backwater, near Guyra. Jim had remembered it from the singing of his second cousin Tom Lowe

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1 Ward, R. *The Australian Legend*, O.U.P. Melbourne, 1977.

2 The names Northern Tablelands and New England are used synonymously throughout this essay.

(b.1863), an Aboriginal stockman and horse-breaker, who had spent all his life on the eastern fall of the Tablelands³:



Once I was invited to chase some kangaroos,
For the twentieth day on Dingo Flat, and mind make no excuse,
When we mustered on the hunting-ground there was horsemen ninety-two,
Likewise there was some ladies there to follow the kangaroo.

The kangaroos were there in scores a-feeding on the plain,
A-feeding on the young grass that grew since the last rain,
There was creamies, reds and dusty browns, and some blue flyers too,
And now and again the dark old chap they call the wallaroo.

Come let your horses go me boys and give that wing a slew,
By gully you've got to ride like fun to wheel the kangaroo...

This was all that Jim could remember of the song, save for the final two lines, with the comment that although Tom Lowe had not composed the song, he had 'put his own name into it':

Oh hello Tom, where have you been, what the deuce is up with you?
I've only been to Dingo Flat chasin' kangaroos.⁴

On hearing the recording of this fragment, Dave de Hugard informed me that he and Wendy Lowenstein had taped some of the same piece from a singer named Basil Cosgrove at Armidale about 1970. I later learned that Jim Lowe and Basil were first cousins, reared in the same mining community at Backwater. Basil's variant was very similar to Jim's, with the addition of the following lines:

Oh when we got them in the yards we had some golden fun,
For taking his combs and telling lies he tried to turn us in,
Or to get up in the morning, says I to take the shoe,
It'll never be said that I'm afraid of an old man kangaroo.⁵

3 Birthdate of Tom Lowe kindly supplied by Gay Hammond of the Guyra Historical Society. Tom, with a number of other Aboriginals, is recorded as working for grazier F.J.White on Aberfoil Station from 1886, assisting with cattle musters in the steep escarpment country there. [Ed. Other details concerning T. Lowe appear, pp. 43ff of B. McDonald's 'Thunderbolt... and the Noble Robber', *AustralianFolklore* no.8 (1993).]

4 McDonald, B., Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra, TRC 2720/39-41. Chris Sullivan has collected a fragment of the same song, though with a different air, from Dick O'Brien of Elsmore, near Inverell. Dick's father learnt the song while driving horse teams throughout the Tablelands region.

5 Lowenstein, W., Collection of Folklore and Social History, National Library of Australia, Canberra, TRC 2915/69.

(Lines two and three of this verse seem to be garbled, and perhaps come from another song.)

I took this extra information back to Jim, but it failed to further prompt his memory. He advised me to contact Tom Lowe's son Bill, who was still living, near Uralla and who said that his father had learned the song while 'quite young', and that he himself had heard it often. He commented that 'in that time', kangaroos would be mustered on a flat, and then driven towards a specially-built timber yard. This had long calico wings attached, so that the kangaroos could be directed through races and into the enclosure. There they would pack in tightly, and the following horsemen would dismount, enter the yard, and beat the animals to death with heavy sticks. The song itself, explained Bill, told of how one of the horsemen (the narrator), waded into the yarded mob and met with a wallaroo who 'had some fight in him'. In an ensuing grapple, the wallaroo stripped the man completely naked, forcing him to quit the field of battle. Bill confirmed that his father sang the text to the same air as did Jim Lowe.⁶

Another singer, Walter Scott of Red Range, had known Tom Lowe well, and remembered these additional lines:

Once we got 'em in the yards and mustered up so thick,
In the middle of that mob I chanced to lose me stick,
I got in holts with a big black buck, says 'I'll succeed with you,
It'll never be said that I'm afraid of an old man wallaroo.'⁷

At the present time, this is as much of the song as has come to light. Its story, however, is clear enough. A kangaroo drive is organized (which includes, presumably, the selection and preparation of a 'hunting ground') to which local community members are invited, their attendance deemed almost mandatory. The narrator of the tale, losing his stick while attempting to dispatch a large wallaroo, engages the animal in unarmed combat. The wallaroo strips him naked, forcing him to depart the scene with great embarrassment.

Although some attempt will be made later to roughly date the song, assuming tentatively that it was created in the region of its circulation, which was certainly the opinion of Jim Lowe, though knowledge of song-diffusion in Australia enjoins caution here. [A good example of this concerns the song 'The Wallaby Track', collected from several New England singers, and also from Ron McKay in North Queensland⁸]. The next step is to examine the internal evidence of the song for possible corroboration. Unfortunately, research has failed to turn up any known location for 'Dingo Flat', which name of course, could well be a fiction. However, the list of macropod species in the second verse does provide some clues, which I will now examine.

6 McDonald, *op. cit.*
7 *Ibid.*, TRC 2720/54.

The 'dark old chap the wallaroo' (*Macropus robustus*) has a wide distribution along the eastern seaboard, from Cooktown to the Victorian border. As the song suggests, it is essentially solitary, and unlikely to be seen in any number.⁹ Edward Morris, giving the animal the alternative name 'mountain kangaroo', quotes C.P.Hodgson's description, in 1846, of various species of Australian fauna including 'Some very fierce and ready to attack man, such as the large mountain 'wollaroo''.¹⁰

The Eastern Grey Kangaroo (*Macropus giganteus*) occurs wherever other species do, and considering its ubiquity, is a favourite for representation by one of the two remaining categories of the song. As colour varies widely amongst individuals, and indeed between local populations, 'dusty brown' would perhaps be appropriate, with 'creamy' possibly describing the female Wallaroo.¹¹ Superimposing the described ranges of these macropods, one on another, the possible locale of the song could certainly include the rough country to the east of Glen Innes — where it was collected, and where Tom Lowe spent most of his life.¹² There is thus a strong presumption, in the absence of any contradiction, that north-east New England is where the song was composed, and where its action took place.

Some externalities can also be brought to bear on the investigation. That a tradition of using this hunting technique obtained amongst white settlers in Tom Lowe's immediate home district, is implied by the following excerpt from P.A.Wright's *Memories of a Bushwacker*, describing pre-1900(?) wild horse culling activities on Wongwibinda station::

Trapping was an exciting experience. First a yard would be built near the track the wild horses frequented, and left open for some time until they became used to its being there. When the time came to make the run, the yard was shut on one side, and from a corner was strung out from tree to tree, about three feet above the ground, a strip of calico about two inches wide. This would extend from the yard for half a mile or more across the route the brumbies usually took when disturbed...Then a man would be stationed near the end of the calico line, and others would spread in a wide arc around the area in which the horses were grazing. This line of men then gradually closed until the brumbies got the scent and the run started. At once the men started in at full gallop and, making as much noise as possible, followed. The wild horses would either be turned by the man at the end of the calico, or come up against it and be diverted into the yard.¹³

By thus identifying the song's locale as New England, I am not suggesting that

8 Edwards, R., *The Big Book of Australian Folk Song*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1976, p. 391.

9 Strahan, R., (ed.) *The Australian Museum Complete Book of Australian Mammals*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1983, p. 250.

10 Morris, E.E., *Dictionary of Australian Words Names and Phrases*, Macmillan, London 1898, p. 497.

11 Jarman, P., personal communication, 1994.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Wright, P. A., *Memories of a Bushwacker*, U.N.E. 1972, p. 19. As the herding of brumbies would obviously post-date the first attempts to hunt the kangaroo by white settlers in the region, it is considered that its existence does not affect the validity of the argument that the general technique may owe its origins to Aboriginal influence.

it describes something unique to that region. A very full description of a similar event is found in Rolf Boldrewood's first kangaroo essay, 'A Kangaroo Drive', published in 'The Cornhill Magazine', vol. xiv, No. 84 in 1866. Set in the state's southern Narrandera district, the story outlines the organization of a drive by a drought-stricken local grazier, whose pastures are suffering severe depredation by kangaroos. Invitations are issued to the district-at-large, and replies come flooding in: 'All the neighbours would come... it was 'the thing' to help a neighbour'. Eventually the party, which includes, besides stockmen and graziers, 'farmers, bankers, drapers, butchers, bakers, black fellows', assembles at the homestead. Strategies are discussed, horsemen equip themselves with stockwhip and stout stick, and all then ride out towards the hunting-ground — a cleared flat in a nearby gum forest. Yards, especially built for the drive, are here described in detail:

'The yard...was a large enclosure of split timber, with saplings and branches placed vertically against the rails, so as to augment the appearance of height and solidity...Longer enclosures, called 'lanes', led in circuitous fashion to this *oubliette*. Behind these again were the 'wings' — long lines of fencing, gradually closing in towards these lanes, and far apart — indeed, out of sight — at their extremities.'¹⁴

The exercise now begins in earnest, and after a thrilling muster and chase, the animals are driven into these yards. Once secured, canvas sheets are drawn across the opening, and the 'bag' — kangaroos and wallabies of all sizes — is peremptorily slaughtered with heavy sticks and clubs. Boldrewood gives the following rationale for this strategy:

'The kangaroo is easily killed by a blow on the head: if, with an 'old man' at bay, you have nerve enough to stand still for his rush (for at such time he charges like a wild bull), and to strike him fair between the ears, he will fall as if shot. So the sticks were the favourite weapons.'¹⁵

The hunt concluded successfully, the party lingers on through the night — 'Tales were told. Songs were sung... for years after among the chronicles of the west, the memory will be fresh of the jests and the adventures, the hospitality and good-fellowship of the great Ballandra Kangaroo drive.'¹⁶

It is worth noting here that throughout the story, Boldrewood (or Thomas Alexander Browne) places great emphasis on the social nature of the hunt. The chief attractions in participating, he says, are the fun of the chase and the hospitality afterwards. In short, 'It was a glorious excuse for leaving home, and for showing off one's horse.'¹⁷ The last lines of the story, quoted above, indicate that the drive was not an oft-repeated occurrence in the district. It is almost suggested that such an experience would make an ideal subject for

14 Boldrewood, R. 'A Kangaroo Drive', *Journal and Proceedings of the Armidale and District Historical Society*, No.18, 1975, p. 34. The essay covered pp. 735-746 in the 1866 journal — but for convenience reference is made to its 1975 reproduction, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-38.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

artistic endeavour, as it certainly did for the short story here, and for the song at Dingo Flat.

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Although Boldrewood (as we will now call him) has one of his characters equate this form of kangaroo drive with the 'finchel' of the Scottish highlands¹⁸, there are good reasons for thinking that it may also have been a close adaptation of Aboriginal methods. (His 1884 essay 'A Kangaroo Shoot', set near Armidale is in fenced country where shooting occurs in confined spaces). In an important article surveying the processes of Aboriginal net-hunting in Australia, L.D. Satterthwaite comments that not only were such hunting techniques well-documented at 'culture contact' by contemporary European observers, but that the type most commonly reported was the drive:

The larger macropods were often captured in planar nets from 1.2 to 4m in width and 8 to over 91m in length...The most frequently reported hunting technique entailed surrounding the kangaroos and driving them into nets erected at a previously selected site...In some instances several nets were joined together to form a three-sided enclosure...into which the animals were guided...Among the places selected for stationing nets were...gullies and narrow valleys; openings in scrub or forest; and near waterholes...Brush fences or wings extending out from each end of the net were sometimes added to assist in directing the game toward the net...While some of the hunters drove the animals, others might be positioned at the net to dispatch them once they became entangled.¹⁹

Although individual hunts were also recorded, and would certainly have had their place in the day-to-day economy, Satterthwaite postulates technical advantages that may have enabled net-hunts to be developed as larger co-operative affairs, sometimes involving several hundred people:

An important feature of net hunting is that prey are immobilized before they are dispatched. Consequently, nets afford greater safety in hunting bigger, more dangerous prey...Furthermore nets obviate the need for projectile weapons: once enmeshed, an animal can be approached closely enough to be killed with hand-held spears and clubs...²⁰

Interestingly, much of his evidence comes from the northern regions of N.S.W. This can be usefully augmented by reports from eastern New England itself — reports such as the following, written by William Gardner at Oban Station, only four miles from Backwater, in c.1854:

When New England was first settled by the Whites, they found the standing nets of the Blacks in many parts of the bush for the purpose of entrapping the wild animals — The tribes of Blacks met by appointment (at) these places at certain times driving from different directions their game before them, and this from a circle of many miles into these nets...²¹

18 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

19 Satterthwaite, L.D., 'Aboriginal Australian Net Hunting', *Mankind*, V.16 no.1, 1986, p. 37.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

21 Gardner, W. 'William Gardner's General Description of New England and of its Early Settlement' in Gilbert & Elphick (eds), *New England Readings*, A.C.A.E. Armidale, 1977, p. 149.

A further gloss is provided by Edward Irby, writing from Bolivia Station, north of Guyra, in 1842:

The country round three sides of the station is now on fire...It is generally supposed that these large fires are caused by the natives dropping their firesticks accidentally...They sometimes burn the old grass off, in order that they may have a chance of killing kangaroos when they go to feed on the young grass that springs up...²²

We have, from the foregoing, a reasonably good account of the working of this indigenous method on the Tablelands. Often co-operative affairs, hunts were apparently planned well in advance, even to the extent that grass was first burnt on forest flats to attract the game. The drive involved 'rushing' the kangaroos into netted enclosures (often with wings attached), and once trapped, beating them to death with sticks. It is argued that the correlation between these and the methods outlined in 'Dingo Flat' and 'A Kangaroo Drive' could hardly be closer.

That white settlers were well aware of Aboriginal methods, is attested by the number of contemporary written descriptions reported by Satterthwaite, who further details the possibility of direct cultural 'exchange':

'In need of rope, the explorer Ludwig Leichardt...took two of the four 'fine kangaroo nets' he found cached under sheets of bark in central Queensland. In their place he left a sword, four fishhooks and a silk handkerchief...'²³

Such cultural communication need not have been so remote of course. Opportunity for Aboriginal influence on white technology and know-how is likely to have been significant. In Tom Lowe's own district, Aboriginal people were consistently employed on grazing runs from at least 1840, soon after the first white settlement there.²⁴ Again, Gardner describes above how sheep-owners often happened across hunting nets on 'their' properties. The Lowe family itself consisted of black and white branches, indicating that at least some sections of the local European community were ready to interrelate significantly with Aboriginal people.²⁵ Parallels may be seen in the white adaptation of Aboriginal building methods. In New England, as elsewhere in Australia, the earliest European dwellings were constructed entirely (even to the chimneys) of sheets of bark. A story of symbolic significance is told in the local Aboriginal community, that King Bobby of the Banbai (whose lands centred around Oban and Backwater), cut the first sheet of bark in the erection of Richardson's Store

22 Norton, B.E. 'Grasslands of the New England Tableland in the Nineteenth Century', *Armisteadale and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, No.18, 1975, p. 7.

23 Satterthwaite, L.D., *op. cit.*, p. 37.

24 Campbell, I.C., 'Social Backgrounds and Relations With the Aborigines in New England' in Gilbert and Elphick, *op. cit.*, p. 112. Crown Lands Commissioner George Macdonald mentions the employment of Aboriginal shepherds in a letter to the Legislative Council, October 1845 (see note no. 34 below).

25 Lowe, M., personal communication, Guyra, 1994. This may well indicate that these family unions were formalised and stable.

(established c.1842) in Armidale, and carried it 'on his back' to the building site.²⁶ E.M.Curr also mentions assistance in cutting bark for huts as being a very important reason for squatters to maintain good relations with Aboriginal groups.²⁷ Such appropriation of resource knowledge must have been common. Both Henry Reynolds²⁸ and Russel Ward²⁹ appreciate the influence of Aboriginal communities on early pastoral organisation. Furthermore, Boldrewood's essay and 'Dingo Flat' each suggests Aboriginal participation in the hunt. It is certainly not unreasonable to infer, from the evidence presented, a possible Aboriginal origin for this white Australian hunting method.

These 'borrowings' were not translated exactly, however. There is no evidence that Europeans used nets themselves, and it is argued that the kangaroo hunt, using horses and timber yards, represents a syncretism of Aboriginal and white styles. Similarly, Europeans did not use the hunt for the same purpose as did Aboriginal people. Undoubtedly, the chief Aboriginal motivation was for resource-utilization — the meat was eaten, fats were rendered, hides, bones and sinews were employed in manufacture. William Gardner, classing the large, seasonal kangaroo drive with other 'feasts', identifies another functional dimension:

At certain seasons of the year the various tribes of the interior meet at appointed places, at these general rendezvous, their disputes were adjusted and settled. In early times the most remarkable of these in the Northern Interior may be mentioned, as Burkanbandean near Tamworth on Peel River in the district of Liverpool plains. Wallingurar near Innar, or Eena on the Macintyre River, and the Bunyeh Bunyeh grounds in the district of Moreton. Formerly at Burkanbandian, an immense number of game was to be found, in the shape of kangaroo, wallaby V.V. At Wallingurar an extensive fishing is found on the Macintyre, and the Bunyeh Bunyeh fruit is found in such quantities that the tribes from a far distance in the interior, visit these grounds during the fruit season.³⁰

On the other hand, the available data suggest that, for most of the nineteenth century, Europeans were largely uninterested in the resource potential of kangaroos. The meat was not eaten in any quantities by them, and C.E.Blomfield, writing of the New England of his youth in the 1870s and 1880s, comments that:

The trade had not at that time realised what good leather their skins made and thousands were just left to rot in the bush.³¹

Again, a parliamentary debate of 1889 refers to the situation pertaining in

26 Kelly, R., personal communication, Armidale, 1994.

27 Reynolds, H., *Aborigines and Settlers*, Cassell, Melbourne, 1972, p. 4.

28 Reynolds, H., *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, ch.6.

29 Ward, R., *op. cit.*, pp. 200-1.

30 Gardner, W., 'Productions and Resources of the Northern and Western Districts of New South Wales (1842-54)', in McBryde, I. (ed) *Records of Times Past: Ethnohistorical essays on the culture and ecology of the New England tribes*, A.I.A.S. Canberra, 1978, p. 243.

31 Blomfield, C.E., *Reminiscences*, U.N.E. Archives, collection A4, Box 4/2, folder 8, p. 5.

N.S.W. a decade before, when 'kangaroo skins were worthless.'³²

If resource-use cannot satisfactorily account for the European practice of periodic mass slaughter of kangaroos, what does? Boldrewood's evidence shows the main motivation to have been the eradication of a pastoral pest. It seems that before the 1870s, macropods did compete with sheep and cattle, though only sporadically, for the squatters' pasture. At first, white settlement on New England may have dispersed kangaroo populations, as indicated by Gardner:

Since the occupation of the Pundarra country by the sheep and cattle stations of the Settlers, the Kangaroo have left the plains, and are not to be seen in droves as formerly they have retired to the unfrequented rock and ridge country, and to the Mountains where great numbers may be seen...³³

George Macdonald, the first Commissioner for Crown Lands in New England, in a report to the N.S.W. Legislative Council dated October 3rd 1845, wrote of the local native inhabitants that

their ordinary means of subsistence must have diminished to a considerable extent — the introduction of 500,000 sheep into the original hunting grounds of the district has nearly driven the kangaroo, on which the natives formerly subsisted, beyond its boundaries.³⁴

This situation is confirmed for other districts by, among others, Peter Wright³⁵, Robertson, Short and Wellard³⁶, Williams³⁷ and Frith and Calaby³⁸. However, in periods of resource-stress such as drought, it is quite likely that kangaroos and wallabies would re-invade 'occupied' grasslands. At such times, European kangaroo drives like those outlined above may well have reduced macropod populations (helped no doubt by the limiting effect on kangaroo numbers of the drought itself). Boldrewood's squatter opines that it is drought causing kangaroos to seek out his pasture, and that they had not, in previous years, presented such a problem.³⁹ His drive moreover, is certainly portrayed as having been successful. But, as I will argue, this form of hunt became redundant on New England towards the end of the century, for a variety of reasons, the chief among them being an 'unmanageable' increase in kangaroo numbers.

32 N.S.W. Legislative Council, *Parliamentary Debates*, 23 May, 1889, p. 1525 ff.

33 Gardner, W., 'William Gardner's General Description of New England and of its Early Settlement', *op. cit.*, p. 149.

34 Macdonald, G.J., 'Report on Aborigines', Minute Book 1844-1859, Armidale Bench of Magistrates, State Archives of N.S.W. microfilm roll no. 2677.

35 Wright, Peter, 'The Kangaroo Problem Over The Last Hundred Years', *Journal of the Armidale and District Historical Society*, No.18. 1975, p. 46.

36 Robertson, G. Short, J. Wellard, G., 'the Environment of the Australian Sheep Rangelands', in Caughley, Shepherd and Short (eds.), *Kangaroos: their ecology and management in the sheep rangelands of Australia*, C.U.P. Cambridge, 1987, p. 23.

37 Williams, O.B., 'The Riverina and its Pastoral Industry, 1860-1869', in Barnard, A. (ed) *The SimpleFleece: Studies in the Australian Wool Industry*, M.U.P. Melbourne, 1962, p. 423.

38 Frith, H.J. and Calaby, J.H., *Kangaroos*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1969, p. 151.

39 Wright, Peter, *loc. cit.*, p. 43.

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C.E.Blomfield says that such numbers rose slowly on the Tablelands from the 1830s to the 1870s, when they soared.⁴⁰ Professor B.E. Norton's early research on our local grasslands supports this view:

There are few references to the prevalence of kangaroos in the early records of the region when stock numbers were low, and one must assume that the squatters did not view them as a serious nuisance to the grazing industry. In the 1880's, however, there is evidence of large-scale slaughter of kangaroos, one property killing 10,000 in 1881, and another destroying 20,000 in four years.⁴¹

Describing these years, Blomfield says that:

one could go into an open space in the scrub... just as the sun was setting and see them going in all directions; it was thought by the graziers they were making a considerable difference to the grass for their stock so they were declared noxious animals and 6d a piece given for their scalps.⁴²

In the face of this perceived plague, New England pastoralists formally petitioned the N.S.W. Legislative Assembly late in 1878, seeking from the House assistance in the control of local marsupial populations. The two petitions are worded similarly and state (in part):

2. That the increase and ravages of marsupials in many parts of the colony are becoming alarming, and a large extent of country, Crown lands and alienated, are virtually valueless to the occupiers, being wholly overrun with these pests.
3. That some stock-owners have attempted to grapple with the evil, but without success. It is an undertaking of such magnitude that it can be dealt with only by special legislation...⁴³

The causes of this population explosion are no doubt complex, and an examination of some of those advanced in recent years may be in order. Norton explored the popular argument that Aboriginal hunting had traditionally kept marsupial populations in check, and that as Aboriginal lifestyles changed, the kangaroo and wallaby populations 'outgrew' their environment:

This reasoning does not seem valid...according to a report by the Commissioner for Crown Lands resident at Armidale in 1842, there were only five or six hundred aborigines on the tableland, or one person to every 22 square miles, hardly a sufficient hunting force to control the kangaroo population.⁴⁴

Although the figures have recently been questioned, there could be some truth in this reasoning. A more compelling objection to the argument is that there is no evidence yet available to link the rise in kangaroo numbers in the mid-1870s with a correspondingly sudden fall in local Aboriginal numbers, or any other

40 Blomfield, C.E., *op. cit.*, p. 5.

41 Norton, B.E., *loc. cit.*, p. 5.

42 Blomfield, C.E., *loc. cit.*, p. 5.

43 N.S.W. Legislative Assembly, *Votes and Proceedings*, Ninth Parliament, V.7, 1878-9, pp. 891 ff.

44 Norton, B.E., *loc. cit.*, p. 5.

similarly drastic disruption to the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle. Moreover, this appeal to a simple demographic model probably does little justice to a proper understanding of Aboriginal society's relations with its environment. It may well be that Aboriginal hunting systems allowed the maintenance of high levels of kangaroo numbers on the Tablelands.

Ethnography indicates that Aboriginal groups, invariably small, shifted camp frequently, so as not to deplete game resources in any one area of their homeland.⁴⁵ Given the wide range of foods available, it seems reasonable to suggest that 'day to day' hunting probably had less effect on the population levels of a few species of macropod than did other ecological constraints. Indeed, the Aboriginal practice, quoted above, of encouraging kangaroo habitat by grass-burning, suggests hunting could even have favoured the dominance of the species concerned. Phyllis Nicholson outlines the thesis that Aboriginal firing practices aided the extinction of megafaunal marsupial populations, which were subsequently replaced by more fire-adapted species.⁴⁶ Catling and Newsome, having extensively tested the latter part of this proposition, predict that:

further understanding will support the hypothesis of fire adaptiveness for the majority of the Australian vertebrate fauna⁴⁷

Two Gumbainngir increase ritual sites, one for the kangaroo, the other for the pademelon, have more recently been documented by archaeologists, a little to the east of our area, at Nymboida. Both sites were the centre of ceremonies 'associated with increasing the number' of these animals.⁴⁸ A.R.Radcliffe-Brown, who visited the area in 1929, describes the operation of such increase rituals. The owner 'tells the animal...to become plentiful, and mentions special places where it is to become abundant.'⁴⁹ (This offers, by the way, clear evidence of the Aboriginal economy's co-operative, non-extractive paradigm, extending even to embrace the agency of the prey animals themselves.) Latz and Griffin document the use of burning and increase ceremonies in Australia as tandem management strategies:

Burning appears to have been almost habitual and the effect so self-evident that the two events, burning followed by food increase, were seen to be almost synonymous providing religious duties were maintained.⁵⁰

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- 45 Belshaw, J., 'Population Distribution and the Pattern of Seasonal Movement in Northern New South Wales', in McBryde, I., (ed) op. cit., p. 74.
- 46 Nicholson, P. H., 'Fire and the Australian Aborigine - An Enigma', in Gill, Groves and Noble (eds.), *Fire and the Australian Biota*, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 1981, p. 55-76.
- 47 Catling, P. C. and Newsome, A.E., 'Responses of the Australian Vertebrate Fauna to Fire: An Evolutionary Approach', *Ibid.*, p. 304.
- 48 Sabine, N., 'The Paddymelon Stone: an Increase Centre of the Gumbaynggir Tribe, Nymboida', in McBryde, I., (ed.) op. cit., p. 221.
- 49 Gummow, M.J., 'Aboriginal Songs From the Bundjalung and Gidabal Areas of South-Eastern Australia', Vol.1, unpublished PhD. thesis, University of Sydney, 1992, p. 125.
- 50 Latz, P. K. and Griffin, G.F., 'Changes in Aboriginal Land Management in Relation to Fire and Food Plants in Central Australia', in Hetzel and Firth (eds.), *The Nutrition of Aborigines in Relation to the Ecosystem of Central Australia*, C.S.I.R.O. Melbourne, 1978, p. 78.

Similarly, Roger Lawrence argues strongly that Aboriginal economy had a marked influence on the physical environment, rather than merely passively reacting to it.⁵¹ Other studies by Kimber⁵², Yen⁵³, and Head⁵⁴ detail general resource management techniques by Aboriginals. Kimber extends this concept to portray Aboriginal kangaroo hunting as the conscious management of marsupial food resources:

There is a distinct concept of maintaining a specific supply, and of culling from it, in a known area...This obviously bears a strong resemblance to conventional pastoral activity, even though man and animal are not directly linked in a controlled unit.⁵⁵

Henry Reynolds draws a similar analogy in examining the Aboriginal utilization of European flocks and herds at times of culture contact. Exploring the widespread and efficient Aboriginal practice of constructing yards to hold stolen stock, he comments that it was: 'obviously adopted from European shepherds though owing something to traditional use of brush fences to control and corral native animals.'⁵⁶ To some extent formalizing these views, economic historian Tony Dingle posits the simple model of a continuum extending between hunter-gatherer and pastoral societies, along which, at different points, can be found various Aboriginal economic practices. Appealing to the example of 'fire-stick farming', he warns against the mistake of assuming that: 'because hunters and gatherers rely on nature's bounty rather than the farmer's field they are always tightly constrained in an environmental straitjacket'.⁵⁷ This evidence then, strongly suggests the possibility that Aboriginal hunting/management practices, in some ways analogous to pastoral methods, maintained high population levels of a prey animal that was, ironically, favourably adapted to them.

Supporting information is provided by Phyllis Nicholson, who details examples of observed changes occurring in ecosystems once these Aboriginal practices had been removed:

Anthropogenic grasslands may have resulted from the Aboriginal fire regime in favourable habitats such as the open river valleys of eastern Victoria...Here the first settlers found valleys and hillsides 'clothed with grass' and with a few large scattered trees. It was kept open by the 'annual bushfires of the Aborigines' but as the settlers' material possessions increased, the dangerous practice of burning the

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- 51 Lawrence, R., *Aboriginal Habitat and Economy*, Occasional Paper 6, Department of Geography/School of General Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1969.
- 52 Kimber, R.G., 'Resource Use and Management in Central Australia', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1984, no.2
- 53 Yen, D.E., 'The Domestication of the Environment', in Harris & Hillman (eds.), *Foraging and Farming: the Evolution of Plant Exploitation*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1989, ch.4.
- 54 Head, L., 'Prehistoric Aboriginal Impacts on Australian Vegetation: An Assessment of the Evidence', *Australian Geographer*, V.20, no.1, 1989.
- 55 Kimber, R.G., 'Beginnings of Farming? Some Man-Plant-Animal Relationships in Central Australia', *Mankind*, Vol. 10 no. 3, 1976, p. 144.
- 56 Reynolds, H., *The Other Side of the Frontier*, p. 162.
- 57 Dingle, A.E., *Aboriginal Economy: Patterns of Experience*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1988, p. 8.

country was discouraged. Soon young saplings appeared and 'after some years of occupation whole tracts of country became covered with forest.'⁵⁸

That Aboriginal firing was used as an instrument to create and maintain grasslands in New England, was certainly the opinion of M.H.Marsh, who wrote the following in 1851:

The great summer heat is sometimes increased by the burning grass, which is generally lighted by the aborigines carrying fire about with them...They have a great effect on the character of the country, as they burn many of the young trees, and thus prevent the forest from being too thick. All the country, except when heavily stocked with sheep, is sure to be burnt at least every two or three years.⁵⁹

If it is accepted that keeping country open encouraged kangaroo species which were favoured by such habitat, then it seems likely that the removal of the Aboriginal component from the ecosystem could just as easily have had a negative as a positive influence on kangaroo population levels. Many studies have been carried out on the differing habitat requirements of kangaroos, and it is evident that the existence of open grassy patches, especially bordering stands of trees, favours many species, including those in our study area.⁶⁰ Whatever the case, the relationship of different components in an ecosystem is rarely simple. Researchers have found, for example, that the removal of a predator from a system sometimes does result in a decrease in the population of the prey.⁶¹ Well-documented too is the minimal effect that the seemingly indiscriminate exploitation by large congregations of Aboriginal groups had on the population of the bogong moth.⁶² Again, studies indicate that availability of food resources, rather than predation, is the significant factor influencing population levels of kangaroos.⁶³ To say, therefore, that Aboriginal hunting kept kangaroo numbers low, and that, once removed, a population explosion occurred, is, at the very least, much too narrow an analysis. Indeed, far from standing in a simple predator relationship with its environment, Kimber regards Aboriginal kangaroo hunting as offering a close analogy to the population-fostering dimension of pastoralism.

A corollary to this argument involves the presumed control, exercised by traditional Aboriginal communities, over their own population numbers. It seems that such control, whether by contraception, abortion, abandonment of the elderly or infanticide (which latter custom George Macdonald mentions as being commonly practised within New England Aboriginal groups), could tentatively be construed as generally systematic, rather than as an immediate,

58 Nicholson, P. H., *op. cit.*, p. 71.

59 Norton, B.E., *loc. cit.*, p. 7.

60 Strahan, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 229 ff.

61 Krebs, C.J., *Ecology: The Experimental Analysis of Distribution and Abundance*, Harper and Row, N.Y. 1985, pp. 157 ff.

62 Flood, J., 'Man and Ecology in the Highlands of Southeastern Australia', in Peterson, N. (ed.) *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia*, A.I.A.S. Canberra, 1976, pp. 30-49.

63 Frith, H.J. and Calaby, J.H., *op. cit.*, pp. 176-9; Caughley, G. Shepherd, N. and Short, J., *op. cit.*, p. 179-187.

ongoing response to environmental fluctuations. Thus, R.V.Jackson explains that:

It is difficult to know whether the [Aboriginal] population fluctuated widely around its average size, growing in favourable periods and declining in bad years, or whether equilibrium was maintained by some form of population control at an average level determined by the land's carrying capacity in lean periods.⁶⁴

Blainey argues persistently that Aboriginal measures of population control were prompted by motivations other than those related to environmental pressure, and that self-imposed 'curbs on Aboriginal population' possessed the permanent character of social institutions.⁶⁵ Although Berndt and Berndt take the opposite view, they do admit, grudgingly, of the existence of such non-environmental motivations.⁶⁶ A variation of this discussion, revolving chiefly around the question of demographic stability of Aboriginal populations, has drawn contributions from Birdsell, Butlin, Blainey, Rowlands, Tindale and others.⁶⁷ Our purpose here however, is simply to establish the possibility that, to some degree independently of environmental constraints, Aboriginal populations were capable of self-limitation. If acceptable, this concept of systematic population control can provide some support for the thesis that Aboriginal society practised a conscious 'total environment' management strategy, adjusting its own, and the populations of at least some prey species, as a buffer against the caprice of environmental fluctuation.

Ironically, it is more likely that it was the competitive nature of European resource use that caused the sudden population increase in kangaroo numbers on New England during the 1870s. Rapid pastoral expansion, and the operation of the Free Selection acts after 1861, resulted in the clearing of ever-greater areas of bushland. The Land Act of 1875 doubled the area of ground permitted to be grazed by free selectors in N.S.W.⁶⁸ This pastoral growth was aided by improvements in roads, technology, investment practices and the development of markets. N.G.Butlin records the steep rise in sheep numbers, particularly in N.S.W., between 1860 and 1893, a product of 'sustained and rapid growth' in the sector.⁶⁹ The evidence suggests that this growth peaked in the period before 1880.⁷⁰ For example, levels of rural capital investment soared from the beginning of the 1870s:

In the first phase, rising from 1871 to an extreme peak in 1877,...the level of pastoral investment increased extremely rapidly in what was, perhaps, the most profitable

64 Jackson, R.V., *The Population History of Australia*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1988, p. 48.

65 Blainey, G., *Triumph of the Nomads*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1975, p. 95.

66 Berndt, R.M. and C.H., *The World of the First Australians*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, p. 154.

67 Dingle, A.E., *op. cit.*, pp. 34 ff.

68 Walker, R.B., 'The Economic Development of New England in the Nineteenth Century', in Gilbert, L.A. and Elphick, E.S. (eds.) *op. cit.*, p. 141.

69 Butlin, N.G., 'Distribution of the Sheep Population: Preliminary Statistical Picture, 1860-1957', in Barnard, A. (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 284.

70 *Ibid.* p. 285.

period of pastoral enterprise ever encountered in Australia.⁷¹

Not only did the level of investment rise, but, as Butlin points out, its character, especially that of British investment, underwent considerable development from the mid-1870s, with extra stimulus provided by wool prices rising sharply from 1871. Much of the investment emphasis of those years was directed towards pasture-creation and fencing, the total length of the latter in N.S.W. increasing from 20,000 miles in 1871, to three-quarters of a million miles in 1879.⁷²

This experience was clearly reflected on the Northern Tablelands. B.E. Norton cites the evidence that major land-clearing programs began on New England grazing properties only from the 1870s.⁷³ Indeed, ringbarking here was accompanied by seasonal burning-off to discourage regrowth. R.B. Walker draws a strong correlation between the enclosure of rural lands and ringbarking in New England, saying that both were extensively practised up to 1900, with 'striking effect on the landscape.'⁷⁴ Sheep numbers on the Tablelands increased fourfold in the forty years from 1860 to 1900, and cattle numbers doubled.⁷⁵ The introduction, then, of so many more sheep and cattle onto New England, the clearing of so many more acres and the commissioning of so much more pasture-land, undoubtedly created immediate competition with kangaroos. Whereas initial white settlement seems to have driven kangaroos into remote corners of the region, with the animals re-appearing on the plains only in times of drought, this further wave of expansion presumably pursued them right to the limits of their flight. In this way, the population increase may indeed have been, as Norton and Blomfield both suggested above, more perceived than real. However, many species of kangaroo and wallaby must have benefitted greatly from the extension of grasslands and, the later years of the 1870s experiencing higher than average rainfall,⁷⁶ their numbers subsequently burgeoned. Although it is conceded that this very process of renewed pastoral expansion may have had an effect on the traditional organisation of local Aboriginal society (including hunting practices), it is hard to imagine that it could have been at all significant compared to the experience of the three previous decades.

4

An interesting and important aspect of the New England squatters' 1878 petitions to the Legislative Assembly, is the perception that the kangaroo problem could not be dealt with at a local level, without government intervention. This is in contrast to the picture of Riverina community co-operation drawn by Boldrewood in 1865. It can be inferred that the position which squatters occupied in rural N.S.W. had evolved somewhat by the end of

71 Butlin, N.G., 'The Growth of Rural Capital, 1860-1890', in Barnard, A. (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 322.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 331.

73 Norton, B.E., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

74 Walker, R.B., *op. cit.*, p. 143.

75 *Ibid.*

76 Blomfield, C.E., *op. cit.*, p. 15.

the 1870s. From which the first days of white settlement in New England, squatters had dominated, both socially and economically. Thus, the doubling in New England's population between 1846 and 1851 is positively attributed to pastoralism.⁷⁷ Blomfield says that by the 1880s, this position of predominance had changed.⁷⁸ The rise of agriculture with the Land Acts of 1861, the discovery of gold on the Tablelands in 1852, the small but real contribution of local secondary industries, the gradual rise in union consciousness, and the utilization of labour saving technology by the pastoralists themselves, all combined to fragment the older community of interest centred on the grazier.⁷⁹ That fewer people came to depend directly for employment on grazing is shown by Walker:

Despite the large increase in livestock, the number of pastoral workers rose by less than a thousand between 1861 and 1901. In 1861 there were 1540, representing 15.9% of the local population, but by 1901 they numbered 2502, or only 5.9% of the local population..⁸⁰

In addition, the squatters, in trying to consolidate their own interests against those of the free settlers, alienated agriculturalists and town-dwellers, who realised the benefits of closer settlement to the municipal cause:⁸¹

The pioneer had become... a monopolist. His claims had to be adjusted to those of the newer classes in the community..⁸²

This is not to imply that the pastoralists themselves were socially unified. After 1875, as we have seen, many free selectors were to become viable pastoralists themselves.⁸³ The squatters' prosperity of the 1870s and 1880s was accompanied by a desire, at least among some, to distance themselves from other classes (including other pastoralists), was symbolized by a conspicuous show of wealth. The building of new, large and sometimes lavish homesteads in New England at this time can be so construed.⁸⁴ That the squatter probably could not even appeal to the common interest of fellow graziers as to the kangaroo problem, is suggested by a debate held in the N.S.W. Legislative Council in May 1889, where frequent reference is made to the pastoralists' differing levels of commitment to its solution.⁸⁵

It is argued from the above that the society that supported the type of kangaroo hunt of 'Dingo Flat', had passed by the time of the squatters' petitions of 1878. In the face of a major threat (real or perceived) from rising

77 Walker, R.B., *Old New England*, S.U.P., Sydney, 1966, p. 43.

78 Blomfield, C.E., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

79 Walker, R.B., *Old New England*, pp. 62-119.

80 Walker, R.B., 'The Economic Development of New England', *op. cit.*, p. 145.

81 Walker, R.B., *Old New England*, pp. 57-8.

82 Roberts, S.H., *The Squatting Age in Australia*, 1835-1847, M.U.P. Melbourne, 1964, p. 358.

83 Walker, *Old New England*, p. 71.

84 McDonald, B., 'The Saumarez Stables', unpublished report to the National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.), 1993.

85 N.S.W. Legislative Council, *op. cit.*, p. 1527.

kangaroo numbers, the pastoralist must have despaired of mustering the community support that would be needed to organize such large and necessarily frequent drives. As an expression of community, as an opportunity for sport, as a means of achieving a small-scale goal — either resource utilization in Aboriginal society, or periodic pest-eradication amongst whites — it was effective. But as a serious response to problems created by a competitive, extractive and ever-growing pastoral economy, it was found to be wanting. It does not follow that the drive was to be completely superseded, at all times, or in all places or circumstances after 1878.) Taking this opinion together with the evidence that Tom Lowe learned 'Dingo Flat' while still a young man, I would make the guess that the song was composed well before 1880, by which time the method it described had largely become redundant.

The foregoing analysis is complicated somewhat by the seemingly enduring practice of another type of social hunt, the 'battue' as described by Rolf Boldrewood in an essay-report he wrote about his New England experience in 1884.⁸⁶ This sort of drive consisted of game being flushed by a line of beaters towards a parallel line of shooters, stationed some distance away. These latter would 'drop' the animals as they drew near. A form of 'estate hunting', it relied for its inspiration on the English aristocratic tradition, and continued on New England well into the twentieth century. F.J.White, owner of Saumarez station mentions, in his diaries, the relatively frequent hosting of such events.⁸⁷ Former Saumarez employees remember these as primarily social affairs, where station workers were co-opted for the often dangerous job of beating towards a line of gun-wielding real-estate agents, bank managers, doctors and dentists.⁸⁸ Boldrewood's description of a predominantly sporting day out certainly accords with their view. In a brief article dealing with Boldrewood's story, Peter A.Wright comments that the outcome of the day's drive would not have made much of an impression on a typical kangaroo population of the time.⁸⁹

The evidence of the 1878 petitions makes it clear that New England graziers were depending on government intervention to solve a problem that they had 'grappled with', to no avail. The parliament's response was to pass the Pastures and Stock Protection Act (44 Vic. No.11) in 1880. By this act, certain animals, viz. kangaroos, wallaroos, wallabies, 'paddamelons', wild dogs and rabbits, were declared 'noxious'.⁹⁰ As rabbits weren't to reach the Tablelands until early in the new century, and wild dogs were otherwise covered by an act of the same year (44 Vic. No.16), the practical operation of the Pastures Protection Act on New England concerned macropods only. *Inter alia*, it

86 Boldrewood, R., 'A Kangaroo Shoot', reproduced in the *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, No.18, 1975, pp. 39-42.

87 White, F.J., Saumarez Station Diaries, collection A149, U.N.E. Archives, vv.61-78.

88 McDonald, B., unpublished field notes, oral history project, National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.), 1993.

89 Wright, Peter, 'The Kangaroo Problem over the last hundred years', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, No.18, 1975, p. 45.

90 Pastures and Stock Protection Act, 44 Victoriae No.11, *Statutes of New South Wales*, Sydney, 1880, p. 145 ff. [Ed. See also in *Australian Folklore* No. 9 (1994), pp. 122, ff.]

provided for the establishment of district boards, comprising local stockowners, to fix the value of, and pay out bounties on scalps presented to them by specialist hunters. The necessary revenue was to be raised by a poll tax on mobs of sheep and cattle.⁹¹ Significantly, Boldrewood's 1884 story illustrates the inappropriate combination of a social drive with a bounty on scalps. Calculating the number of animals shot, and (assuming an equitable distribution) dividing the bounty between the number of participants (Boldrewood too mentions the inevitable dispute over scalps), it appears that each man would have received under 2s. for a day's work, well below regular contemporary adult wage levels in New England. As sport therefore, the drive (in either of its manifestations) could not, it is suggested, be repeated so often as to significantly cull kangaroo populations. As business, the necessarily large number of participants would have militated against the effective operation of the bounty. It is argued that the creation of a class of specialist kangaroo-hunters was the pastoralists' inevitable successful response to the problem of pastoral competition .

5

The second hunting song which I would like to examine deals with individual, profit-driven hunting methods and it easily locates itself, originating on the south-east of the Tableland. Bill Mann of Walcha contributed the air and much of the text, the latter composed by a local identity, Alma Chandler. Named after a battle of the Crimean War, Alma Chandler accompanied his parents as an infant from England to Australia in the early 1860s. Taking over the running of his parents' small farm, he became a respected figure in the Walcha district, and was elected its first shire president. Following is the core of the text, Bill Mann's contribution being supplemented by Tib Chandler of Emu Creek:



Oh me name is Alma Chandler, I'd have you all to know,
To make a little money boys, a-shootin' I did go,
I never shot many possums, of bears I shot a few,
But the main thing that I follered was the jumpin' kangaroo.

It was on the first of April that I rolled up me stock,
Powder shot and wads me boys, and made for Nowendoc,
.....
On the top of the Rhineorse we camped to hunt the kangaroo.

The first to show was Andy, he was a tidy junk,

At daylight in the mornin' he would always leave his bunk,
 He'd have a cup of coffee and a piece of brownie too,
 And at break of day he'd stroll away to hunt the kangaroo.

So early in the morning, when the doo-dahs are asleep,
 If you cast your eyes to Mick LaHay's tent, from it you'd see him creep,
 He'd go and catch old Roany, take his dilly-bag and gun,
 And if he don't get eight or nine he's satisfied with one.

The next to show was Callaghan, though he ain't very slow,
 But where the frost was on the grass he doesn't care to go

.....
 So I'd go and catch the Gypsy Queen before she'd strolled away.

Perhaps you would hear one gun shot, perhaps you would hear two,
 But if you chanced to hear a third, it's an old man kangaroo.⁹²

Mrs. Hilda Cross of Yarrowytch, a grand-daughter of Alma Chandler, knew the song and provided its final verse, composed, as she told me, by the Mick LaHay mentioned in the text:

We'll all go down to Walcha, won't we be in our glee,
 And ride out to Paddy Murphy's, and there we'll have a spree,
 We'll muster all the girls that's there, and try and rise a ball,
 Then go back down to Tia and make the possums fall.⁹³

The song's action indicates that these men are working for the kangaroo bounty. It was probably composed quite soon after the bounty's introduction in 1880, as kangaroo skins do not seem to be the object of the exercise (skins did not become marketable until about 1887).⁹⁴ There is no mention of pack horses for example, and the line concerning Mick Lahay's 'dilly-bag' (defined by a nearly contemporary dictionary as a 'word used by bushmen for a little bag for odds-and-ends, even though made of calico or holland')⁹⁵, suggests that he would be packing scalps, not skins, on his hunting round. The men are serious about their job, rising early and starting work as soon as possible. A sense of distinction from other more 'aristocratic' (for which, perhaps, read 'social') practices is provided by the reference to 'doo-dahs', a term reserved for those with social pretensions⁹⁶ The tenor of the song, though cheerful, is quite different from the exuberant enthusiasm of 'Dingo Flat', underscoring the differing natures of the hunts described. The last verse represents a convention in Australian workers' songs — the sentiment that after hard, heavy, isolated or dirty work.

The contention that solo hunting was indeed effective in reducing kangaroo numbers, is supported by the evidence of the Legislative Council debate, of May

92 McDonald, B., Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra, TRC 2720/46/1-17.

93 *Ibid.*, TRC 2720/6-7.

94 N.S.W. Legislative Council, *op. cit.*, p. 1526.

95 Morris, E.E., *op. cit.*, p. 120.

96 Br. Fred Sheridan, personal communication, Armidale, 1988.

23rd 1889, referred to earlier. Mr. G.H.Cox (a member of a well-established grazing family with significant interests in New England) on that day moved that the Pastures and Stock Protection Act be repealed. The wording of his opening address is reminiscent of the New England petitions of 1878:

It will be in the recollection of many hon. members that in the last decade the country was being overrun by the inordinate increase of marsupials. They increased to such an extent that individual effort was quite unavailing to contend against them, consequently legislation was sought for, and was promptly given by the legislature of the day...The acts...entirely banished the animals, or so modified their inordinate increase, that they have now ceased to be destructive...The act has had some defects. It has encouraged a number of young men to enter upon an almost bushranging life, camping out in the bush and living only by their guns.⁹⁷

His motion was supported by other speakers, notably Mr. F.B. Suttor, who drew attention to the rise in value of kangaroo skins:

A few years ago,... the acts were found to be necessary, in consequence of what might almost be called a plague...At that time kangaroo skins were worthless, but now there is a great demand for them, chiefly for exportation to America; and as the kangaroos are rapidly decreasing in number, the value of the skins is increasing almost month by month...Boys of from 12 to 17 years of age have informed me that they can earn £3 a week by shooting kangaroos alone. That being the case, it is absurd to tax a large number of people for the purpose of paying out 6d. or 3d. for every kangaroo killed....⁹⁸

The political dimension of the motion is obvious. Squatting interests which by 1889 were little affected by kangaroo populations (either because they obtained in districts that were largely now marsupial-free, or perhaps because they had the capital to spend on parallel strategies like fencing with wire-netting), did not want any longer to support other graziers in the fight to control kangaroo numbers. (As the squatters owned the largest flocks, they paid the highest stock assessments under the act.) Consequently, much of the evidence of the debate must be read in the light of the expression of vested interest. For example, the value of kangaroo skins, and the extent to which kangaroo numbers were no longer a problem may well be exaggerated. However, for our present purposes, the debate is instructive in its portrayal of the historical origins and ultimate effect of these early Pastures Protection acts, the description of the creation of a class of solo kangaroo hunters, and the strong implication that there was little community of interest between pastoralists and other sections of the community, or even within the ranks of pastoralists themselves.

97 N.S.W. Legislative Council, *op. cit.*, pp. 1525-6.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 1527.

6

Using the evidence of folksong as a starting point, it has been argued that nineteenth century methods of kangaroo hunting on the New England Tableland form a traceable historical succession. Techniques developed by Aboriginal society were adapted by white settlers, who could use them effectively while the scale of the local pastoral economy was circumscribed, and while ever a perception of community of interest with the grazier pertained. As this perception fragmented with the differentiation of interest groups such as those of labour, agriculturalists or town-dwellers, so the hunting method that relied on community participation was superseded. Instead of looking to their own communities, the graziers of New England responded to the kangaroo problem of 1879 by enlisting government support to create a class of professional hunters, to be motivated by the prospect of good profits from bounties. As a necessary concomitant to this discussion, it was felt that certain aspects of kangaroo hunting practices could not be properly understood without an examination of their place in the Aboriginal economies of New England (and further afield), and their subsequent role in local European society.

A certain irony emerges from all this. It has been held by economic historians and others, that a decisive feature of the clash of European and Aboriginal cultures was the incompatibility of their respective economies. Thus Dingle concludes that 'Pastoralism and hunting and gathering proved to be incompatible forms of land use.'⁹⁹ Though there is undoubted truth in this assertion, it does not take sufficient notice of various features of Aboriginal economic and cultural practices. Of course, the overall orientation of each of the pastoral economies was vastly different. That of Aboriginal Australia was basically subsistence, while the other was tied to the expansion and growth. This, I believe, is where the incompatibility lay. But I would hesitate to consider the question deterministically. Aboriginal society proved that it was quite capable of accommodating creatively the European innovation. To some extent, it may even have appeared to Aboriginal people that Europeans were practising an environmental management that was not at all unfamiliar. Norton summarized the effect European clearing programmes had on the New England landscape:

By the end of the century the tableland had changed from a park-like grassland grazed by marsupials and frequently but irregularly burnt, to a mixture of brush and savannah grazed mainly by ruminants and periodically burnt, often on an annual basis.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, even within the framework of a competitive economy, some graziers, such as the Everetts of Ollera, near Guyra, proved that this accommodation could be reciprocal. But, for many reasons, European colonial

⁹⁹ Dingle, A. E., *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ Norton, B.E., *op. cit.*, p. 10.

society generally could not follow their example:

..Aborigines generally did not object to the presence of Europeans on their land and attempted in various ways to incorporate them into their kinship systems. It was only when Europeans insisted on their exclusive use of the land and failed to fulfil what Aborigines considered to be their reciprocal obligations that there was violent retaliation.¹⁰¹

In a fascinating postscript to his 'Report on Aborigines' (1845), New England Crown Lands Commissioner George Macdonald suggested that, at that stage, the future course of white relations with local Aboriginal society had not yet been determined. After commenting that Europeans had not seemed disposed to 'amalgamate with the aborigines, so as to form families', he predicted the eventual extinction of Aboriginal populations, 'unless some radical change should take place in the principles of our intercourse with them, which it is easier to hope for than to expect.'¹⁰²

There has been much discussion in recent years of Australian graziers turning their attention to the farming of kangaroos. One of its most persistent advocates has been the late Peter Wright, of a pastoral family owning many properties across southern and eastern New England:

...the 'roo would seem to possess unique qualities to suit him for the purpose. He could thus exist in his natural habitat in peaceful co-existence with the domestic animals, of which hitherto he has been a declared enemy.¹⁰³

The suggestion is indeed highly ironic, implying as it does a perverse analogy to black-white relations generally, and one which, for traditional Aboriginal society, has come one hundred and fifty years too late.

7

This social and folklife survey was first suggested by the discovery of two New England hunting songs, each describing a different technique and social attitude. It would be interesting to speculate therefore, whether the songs themselves reflect different cultural influences (i.e. whether 'Dingo Flat' owes anything to formal Aboriginal cultural expression). Examination of song records held by the archives of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies failed to turn up any such connections.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, perusal of the collected songs of the Bundjalang people of New England and contiguous coastal areas, also drew a blank.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, it can be shown that the forms of both songs reveal clear European origins. Their structure is strophic, the texts contain recognisable ballad commonplaces, and the airs to each accord with common English, Scottish or Irish tonal conventions. Indeed, the tune to 'Dingo Flat' has been used for a number of

101 Dingle, A.E., *op. cit.*, p. 57.

102 Macdonald, G.J., *op. cit.*,

103 Wright, Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

104 Koch, G., personal communication, Canberra, 1994.

105 Gummow, M.J., *op. cit.*

other white Australian songs, including 'The Station Cook', 'Lachlan Tigers' and 'The Great Northern Line'.

Furthermore, European-derived kangaroo songs have been collected from elsewhere in Australia. The most notable of these is 'The Old Man Kangaroo' or 'The Tale of a Kangaroo', collected variously by Norm O'Connor in Victoria¹⁰⁶, Russel Ward¹⁰⁷, and John Meredith in western N.S.W.¹⁰⁸ Although not strictly about hunting, this song displays some parallels with 'Dingo Flat'. It describes two men, who after being lost in the bush for some days, are reduced to a state of great hunger. They spy a kangaroo, one of the men tries to kill it with a 'waddy', but the creature grabs the man, threatening to disembowel him. His mate then sneaks up behind the animal and cuts off its tail, whereupon it sinks to the ground, a 'lifeless lump'. The two subsequently enjoy a welcome meal of kangaroo tail soup.¹⁰⁹ Other songs include a rather strange one entitled 'Kangarooing', more about a vicious horse than a macropod,¹¹⁰ and Ron Edwards' *Index* lists the titles 'O'Mulligan's Wallaby Drive', and 'Kangaroo Pups', neither one associated with text or tune.¹¹¹ Finally, Mark Rummery has collected a fragmentary song from the west of the Tablelands, again a comic one, relating the misfortune of one who rides off a cliff into a creek while chasing kangaroos.¹¹² Whether or not these songs can be said to form a consistent genre is outside the scope and intention of the present study. On the contrary, it was felt that by approaching 'Dingo Flat' and 'Alma Chandler' as unique historical texts — each a product of its own time and place — and engaging with them in a hermeneutical relationship, not only would their own meaning be revealed at a deeper level, but their evidence would help illuminate an historical social process otherwise difficult to explain.

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106 Anderson, H., *Time Out Of Mind*, National Press, Melbourne, 1974, p. 149.

107 Ward, R., personal communication, Armidale, 1984.

108 Meredith, J., and Anderson, H., *Folk Songs of Australia*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1979, pp. 40, 1.

109 *Ibid.*

110 Edwards, R., *op. cit.*, p. 198.

111 *Ibid.*, pp. 415-86.

112 Rummery, M., personal communication, 1989.

Appendix

The following is an account of a method of driving kangaroos described for the Darling Downs region of south-east Queensland. It came to light after the preceding article was finished, but as the account illustrates clearly and colourfully many of the points made in that analysis (and more), it was felt to be worth appending and quoting in full. It is excerpted from a pamphlet without date entitled *A Short History of the Downs Blacks*, written by Thomas Hall, and published at Warwick.

'Kangaroo Drive.— The day a kangaroo hunt was to take place was looked forward to as a day of great sport and pleasure, owing to the men and gins being allowed to take part in it. The joy or excitement to the blacks was on a par with that of the picnic races to the white people at the present time in the same district, because each gin, young or old, had the privilege of backing their favourite man to kill the most kangaroos. The evening before the hunt took place two or three cautious men were sent out to discover where the largest number of kangaroos were, and also the best position to set their nets. These were usually placed in a narrow and deep gully where there was a waterhole. Next morning the strongest and ablest men were despatched with the nets, which were about 30 yards long and 4 feet high. These were tied to saplings or young trees in a half circle around the waterhole about 50 yards back, with the inside bark of the Currajong tree. Generally 8 nets were used. On completion of this work one of the men went to the top of the nearest hill and set fire to a dry grass tree. The under part of the grass tree is always dry and the upper part green, consequently, when set on fire volumes of very dark smoke are sent up, which are easily seen by a signal man who is standing on the nearest hill to the camp. This is the signal for all hands to form the circle around the kangaroos, starting at the camp, and extending right and left for miles around until the men guarding each end of the nets are met, thus forming a complete circle. All being now ready the signal man lights another grass tree which was bound to be seen by someone in the circle; signs were then passed along the line from one to the other, as no-one was allowed to speak or make the least noise, but close in gradually around the kangaroos. Up to this stage one would not have known there was a person in the place. Afterwards, however, the yells and screams of the men and women made a perfect babel of noise.

As soon as the kangaroos see the first man they make off in the opposite direction, only to meet another man. They then begin to bound about in all directions, meeting men everywhere, thus becoming more frightened and stupified. The drivers were then silently but swiftly closing in on the kangaroos, and when in sight of the nets the principal driver gave a terrific wild yell, which was followed by the three sides of drivers, but the men near the ends remained as quiet as mice. The kangaroos, hearing no noise near the net side, immediately stampeded towards the nets. Now is the time the real fun begins. Then men make a desperate charge, a la Anzac, upon the kangaroos with heavy nulla-nullas. The kangaroos try the nets, and finding themselves surrounded, the 'old men' kangaroos turn on the blackfellows and show fight. Then the real slaughter takes place. The gins, young and old, who have been closely following their champions now come running in, laughing, screaming, and clapping their hands, completely intoxicated with excitement, but keeping back a fair distance so as to be out of all danger. What with the men clubbing the kangaroos, the yells and screams of the men and gins, added to the hissing grunts of the kangaroos, it is a fair pandemonium. Those of the kangaroos not disabled, finding it impossible to escape, I may add, jumped into the waterhole on top of each other, whereupon the men jumped in after them, some using waddies, others tomahawks, until the last kangaroo had been killed. This is one of the most amusing scenes in the blackfellow's programme of life. The kangaroos are sometimes fierce 'old men' measuring from 5 to 6 feet in height, and very powerful. On many occasions the hunters got badly torn about with the kangaroos' hind claws. The slaughter being over they pulled down their nets, rolled them up, and each one taking as much kangaroo as could be carried, started off to camp in the best of spirits. That night a great feast would take place, and all the daring deeds rehearsed and talked over until near midnight. The following day there was nothing but eat, drink, and sleep.'

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