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Aboriginal and white pastoralist history — the positive stories

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Abstract
This paper examines the complex and often overlooked positive relationships between Aboriginal communities and white pastoralists in Australia. Narratives surrounding colonialism tend to focus on dispossession and conflict, yet there is a body of evidence that indicates some relationships were characterised by mutual respect, cooperation, and friendship. Using historical accounts, oral histories, and firsthand testimonies, this paper explores the diverse experiences of Aboriginal and white settler interactions, revealing a more nuanced history than is often presented.

The research highlights that while the overarching history of colonisation led to massive suffering for Aboriginal communities, the early pastoral era was marked by a variety of experiences, from oppression to collaboration. Through an examination of primary sources, this study contributes to a broader understanding of Aboriginal-settler relations, moving beyond simple binaries of conflict or harmony.

The importance of not simply accepting polarised positions about Australia's history is highlighted, as the reality of the situation was usually more complex. A deeper understanding comes from listening to alternative viewpoints about our shared history and discussing how we move forward together.

Introduction

The dominant narratives about Australian Aboriginal history since 1788 tend to emphasise dispossession, violence, and ongoing struggles for rights and recognition. While these stories are true and ubiquitous they can overshadow accounts of cooperation, friendships and nuanced relationships between Aboriginal people and white pastoralists. This paper seeks to highlight these positive perspectives, demonstrating that historical interactions were not uniformly antagonistic or destructive.

Historically, Aboriginal people's own oral histories reveal this dichotomy. Not all Aboriginal people working in the pastoral industry viewed white pastoralists as the enemy. Certain station managers and landowners are remembered with respect for their fairness, predictable treatment, or willingness to intervene on behalf of Aboriginal workers (Ross 1990; Ross and Bray 1989). Even today, many Aboriginal people want to talk about and acknowledge the pain of the past, and they also want to find a way forward.

This paper argues that Aboriginal-settler interactions in Australia cannot be reduced to a single narrative; relationships were not only shaped by the frontier wars, the disposition of land and discrimination. Dreadful events did happen, and the detrimental legacy lingers. Nonetheless, race relations need to be understood through a spectrum of experiences that reflect the diversity of individual relationships, shaped by time,

geography, and personal attitudes. In the early days of settlement, and on stations today, enduring friendships and mutual respect does occur with some Aboriginal people and white pastoralists.

Methods

This study draws from four primary sources to examine historical relationships between Aboriginal people and white settlers. First, it draws on the writings of Alice Duncan-Kemp, whose detailed recollections, papers and books provide insight into her experiences growing up in the Channel Country alongside Aboriginal people and continuing to live most of her life in south-west Queensland rangelands (e.g. Duncan-Kemp 1961). The second data source is oral histories recorded by social scientist Helen Ross and a Warmun community member, Gija woman and language teacher Eileen Bray. These document Aboriginal perspectives on their interactions with white settlers in Kija country in the East Kimberley (Ross 1990; Ross and Bray 1989). Thirdly, this paper includes information from two interviews done by the author: Interview 1 with an Aboriginal woman and Interview 2 with a white descendant of a pastoralist. These offer personal accounts and reflections of family experiences in the rangelands and rural regions of eastern Australia. All these accounts support the premise that Aboriginal people and white pastoralists have had positive relationships with each other.

The qualitative data from these sources allows for an exploration of relationships across different regions and time periods. This paper does not claim to present a comprehensive review, but it highlights key themes that emerge from firsthand testimonies and recorded histories, which indicate that race relations are complex and nuanced.

Quotations used in this paper reflect the attitudes and language of settlers from the late 1800s and early 1900s, a period of pastoral expansion in Australia. This language, while confronting by today's standards, is retained here to provide an authentic representation of historical contexts.

Results

Despite the dominant narrative about dispossession of land and the enduring legacy of colonialism, positive relations did occur between Aboriginal people and early white settlers and pastoralists. These are largely unrecognised, especially in common parlance where the dialogue is often divisive.

Respect for Aboriginal culture

Some settlers respected Aboriginal people and their customs, even integrating these into their lives at times. In her book, *Our Channel Country*, Alice Duncan-Kemp explains that her parents taught her and her sisters to "*respect the Aborigines and insisted that we observe their laws and their rights to the vast area – their hunting-grounds and their only home – on which our stock depastured*" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p232). She went on to describe that as children they '*were severely punished*' if they transgressed cultural boundaries (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p232). She had a deep understanding of Aboriginal people and their culture, as she spent considerable time wandering the country with Aboriginal people as a child, as she explains:

"We were placed under the care of Mary Ann, and Mother made her personally responsible for our welfare and safety. Mary Ann appreciated and vindicated the trust and confidence placed in her" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p209).

George Debney of neighbouring Monkira Station was another settler who "treated and recognised the aboriginals as human, every black near and far loved Debney … 'Muluh-bu' they called him, 'the Very Wise One'" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p137). Alice Duncan-Kemp recalled that he spoke 30 Aboriginal dialects, and "he could tell from a broken spearhead or the print of a bare foot what man has passed that way and to what tribe he belonged" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p136).

Similarly, the Tamblyn family in central-west Queensland respected Aboriginal traditions by allowing corroborees to occur undisturbed. Elizabeth Tamblyn, William Lake Tamblyn's mother, ensured that white settlers stayed indoors during these ceremonies, recognising their cultural significance (Interview 2 2024).

Close friendships were not always desired, as explained by an Aboriginal woman (Interview 1 2024) about her father and grandfather who were Gunditjmara (south-western Victoria), living on their country:

"(The settlers) didn't talk to them much. But they were left alone … they had a good business in the timber industry; they made ends meet" (Interview 1 2024).

This aligns with what Duncan-Kemp said: "The aborigines did not intrude upon the European—the blacks never intrude. They only asked to be left alone (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p232).

Some Aboriginal knowledge and Law are considered private, sometimes it is 'women's business' or 'men's business'; sometimes it is only for those who had reached a certain level of knowledge, of lore (Hicks 2020). As such, white people are not privy to many customs and knowledge.

Respect for Aboriginal customs, however, was not uniform. In the early days of establishing pastoral stations, many settlers disregarded traditional laws, often leading to conflict. "*Clashes with the blacks were a very real feature in the early pioneer days, but I have not mentioned anything of them because in my day such a thing was only a very remote possibility"* (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p232). However, those who respected Aboriginal culture and practices found ways to coexist more peacefully. Alice Duncan-Kemp's writings provide valuable insights into the cooperative relationships between settlers and Aboriginal people in early 20th-century Australia. She explains that keeping harmony meant adhering to customs, and that she:

> "owed so much to our parents training and the [Aboriginal women's] finesse, and that to sit (at night by a fire) with the blacks a friendly distance away squatting over theirs, work being over, while the exchange of small talk, taking in the daily doings black and white, is the only sure way of keeping harmony and friendship" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p116).

Such an understanding of Aboriginal culture and Debney's ability to read country would have enhanced local Aboriginal people's respect for him (Duncan-Kemp 1961). These accounts suggest that settlers and pastoralists who respected Aboriginal practices were able to coexist and foster cross-cultural exchanges, at least to some degree, but the depth of friendship is unknown.

Aboriginal Knowledge

Duncan-Kemp reflects on her appreciation for Aboriginal knowledge, noting that "I am grateful to the aborigines for what I learned from them of the good earth and its harvest, of human values and of dignity and decency —and reality" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p236). She goes on to say explain that:

> "a very important side to Mary Ann's activities … was the office of gdanaja or herbalist … Mary Ann possessed a great knowledge of the many divisions of the flower calendar and its intricate workings … some of this knowledge she passed on to her beloved 'mississees'" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p210-211).

Early settlers in Australia's rangelands probably relied on Aboriginal knowledge to navigate and survive the harsh landscape more than is reported. Alice Duncan-Kemp acknowledged this in her writings, stating, "*The natives have been a wonderful asset to the settlers, without them, progress would have been impossible*" (Duncan-Kemp 1961 p233).

This perspective is reinforced by the descendant of Walter Lake Tamblyn, who was known to go walk-about with the Aboriginal people; sharing of food and reciprocity between 'black' and 'white' were a way of surviving in harsh environments and conditions, according to this interviewee. Such accounts challenge the simplistic notion that Aboriginal people were merely passive victims of colonial expansion. Instead, they actively shaped settler experiences and, in some cases, ensured their survival.

Aboriginal people's understanding of their land made them experts at navigation, finding food and water, forecasting seasonal conditions compared to white settlers who have arrived in Australia much more recently. While settlers often imposed their own European livestock practices, some came to appreciate the traditional knowledge of Aboriginal communities, particularly in relation to land use and resource management.

'Good Kartiya'

Oral histories collected by Ross and Bray reveal that Aboriginal people remembered certain white pastoralists as 'good kartiya' (good white people), individuals known for treating Aboriginal workers fairly and predictably, and in some cases, intervening on their behalf. Ross notes that "*the non-Aborigines who treated Aboriginal people well, and especially those who were willing to intervene on their behalf, are remembered with special affection*" (Ross and Bray 1989 p63). Among the earliest remembered were Sam and Arthur Muggleton, whom Aboriginal people recalled as encouraging settlement at Frog Hollow in north-western Australia as a refuge and providing meat, after 1905 (Jack Britten, 'Frog Hollow' in Ross and Bray 1989 p28-29).

Over time, the standards for what constituted 'good kartiya' and 'bad kartiya' evolved. As more pastoralists took active steps to intervene on behalf of Aboriginal workers, positive relationships like those at Frog Hollow became more common. Meanwhile, 'bad kartiya' remained, but their level of harshness gradually declined as expectations shifted (Ross and Bray 1989 p37). These comments indicate that perceptions change over time, adding to the complexity of race relations.

Nuanced Government Relations

The relationships between Aboriginal people and Government officials in the rangelands, had similarities to those between white settlers and Aboriginal people – they were far from uniform. Police behaviour varied more than is often acknowledged. The role of outback 'Native Police' force is documented in a harrowing account by David Marr (2023), who acknowledged the violent history of some of his forebears, with names, dates and crimes committed documented in early newspapers. Other accounts discuss the role of the Native Police in Queensland (e.g. Richards 2008; Roberts 2005; Walker *et al.* 2023), and elsewhere in Australia (e.g. Foster & Nettelbeck 2012; National Museum of Australia 2025). While many officers were complicit in violence, there were instances where police intervened to protect Aboriginal people. Ross and Bray (1989) outline several examples of positive relationships from the oral histories they collected, for example: Constable Flinders, who worked at Turkey Creek from 1914 to 1918 and intervened to prevent violence (Ross 1989 p37). Likewise, in the 1930s and 1940s, some pastoralists took active steps to defend Aboriginal employees. Jimmy Klein, manager of Texas Downs, stood up for Aboriginal workers and, in one account, saved a man from being shot by a white man after a fight (Bob Nyalcas, "Jimmy Klein" and "Violet Valley walkout" in Ross and Bray 1989 p63-64).

These examples illustrate that, while the broader colonial system was built on dispossession and control, and many massacres are documented, there were individual settlers and authorities who treated Aboriginal people humanely and even with kindness. The shifting expectations of fairness and respect over time also reflect the changing dynamics of Aboriginal-settler relations, as Aboriginal people increasingly asserted their rights and demanded better treatment.

Conclusions

Historical relationships between Aboriginal people and white pastoralists were complex and diverse. While the broader colonial project involved dispossession and violence, some individual relationships – especially after the initial dispossession phase - were marked by cooperation, mutual respect, and cultural exchange. Both parties appear to have been active in building the relationships, and the Aboriginal people had some agency in creating these relationships.

Recognising these nuanced histories does not negate the injustices faced by Aboriginal communities, but it does add depth to our understanding of Australia's colonial past. Having the difficult conversations about race

relations, and about our history, helps us all understand the world from someone's perspective. Respecting our cultural differences is critical for society to move forward, and to bring harmony and build resilience in communities in the rangelands and beyond.

The challenge today is to integrate these perspectives into contemporary discussions on land rights and reconciliation, moving beyond simplistic narratives to acknowledge the full spectrum of historical experiences. Further research into personal diaries, oral histories, and archival materials will be essential in painting a more complete picture of Aboriginal-settler interactions.

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