

# Early colonial attitudes

Newspapers and journals shed light on 19th century attitudes which regarded Indigenous people as inferior.

**Early Australian colonists were heavily influenced by 19th century attitudes that regarded Indigenous people as inferior. Newspapers and journals of the time contain ample evidence of this.**

Newspaper articles provide telling evidence of the colonists' attitudes toward Indigenous Australians. According to Harris, "Opinions such as the following were commonplace and newspaper editors, it would seem, happily published them:

'Brutish, faithless, vicious, the animal being given fullest loose only approached by his next of kin the monkey... the Australian black may have a soul but, if he has, then the horse and the dog, infinitely superior in every way to the black human, cannot be denied possession of that vital spark of heavenly flame.' <sup>[2]</sup>

Harris notes an increase in this sort of derogatory writing in 1838, surrounding the trial of seven colonists for the cold-blooded murder of 28 Indigenous men, women and children at Myall Creek. On the 5th of October, for instance, the following article by "Anti-Hypocrite" was published in the Sydney Herald:

«The Indigenous people are the most degenerate and brutal race of beings in existence and stand as it were in scorn to the shame of creation. A scold and a lewd, ugly human being» They are insensible to every bond which binds man to his friend > husband to wife «rather to its child or creature to its God» They stand unqualified in the affairs of the most ancient and barbarous histories for the anti-Christianity of the world» <sup>[3]</sup>

The Myall Creek trials also reveal the partiality of the jury. Following the first two weeks of trials, one of the jurors remarked:

'I lōōk ōñ t̄hè b̄lāck̄s aś a sèt ōf mōñk̄èys«añd t̄hè èaṛl̄ièṛ t̄hèy aṛè èyṭèṛm̄iñat̄èd f̄rōm t̄hè façè ōf t̄hè èaṛt̄h t̄hè b̄ètṭèṛ»I wōúld ñèwèṛ cōñsèñt t̄ō hañg a w̄hìtè mañ f̄ōṛ a b̄lāck̄ ōñè»I k̄ñèw wèll ṛhè cōlōñiśt̄s/ wèṛè ḡuìlt̄y ōf t̄hè m̄úṛdèṛ«bút I f̄ōṛ ōñè wōúld ñèwèṛ sèè a w̄hìtè mañ súffèṛ f̄ōṛ šhōḍt̄iñg a b̄lāck̄»N<sup>12</sup>.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Darwin's theory of evolution gave scientific support to this common belief in the inferiority of the black races, and their inevitable displacement by the white race. Harris writes, "convinced of the physical, cultural and intellectual inferiority of the Aborigines, the scientific community came to the almost unanimous conclusion that evolutionary theory, based on the survival of the fittest, demanded that the Aboriginal race was doomed to extinction. Educated thought generally tended to follow this conclusion:

'Wìthōút a hìstōṛy«t̄hèy hawè ñō qas̄t«wìthōút a ṛèl̄ìḡiōñ t̄hèy hawè ñō hōqè«wìthōút t̄hè h̄ab̄ìt̄s ōf f̄ōṛèt̄hōúgh̄t̄ añd qṛōw̄dèñcè t̄hèy cáñ hawè ñō fúṭúṛè»Thèiṛ dōōm̄ iś sèal̄èd»»N<sup>10</sup>.

Harris highlights that "objectionable as these views are...they are not just intellectual errors. They came to be part of a much more sinister rationalisation of reality. If Aborigines were not quite human, then killing one was a different act from killing a person." (pg. 23-24)

The editor of the Colonist recognised this tragic logic, writing in 1839:

; Sōṛd̄id̄ sèl̄f̄ m̄t̄èṛès̄t̄ iś aṭ t̄hè ṛōōt̄ ōf t̄hìs añt̄i«Abōṛìḡiñès fèèl̄iñg»Bècaúsè t̄hè qṛìm̄ìṭ̄iwè lōṛds ōf t̄hè sōil̄ iñt̄èṛfèṛès«iñ sōmè ōf t̄hè f̄rōñt̄ièṛ št̄at̄iōñs«wìth t̄hè èas̄y añd lúçṛat̄iwè ḡṛažìñg ōf cátt̄lè añd šhèèq«t̄hèy aṛè fèl̄t̄ b̄y t̄hè sèñs̄ìṭ̄iwè qōčkèṭ̄s ōf t̄hè ḡṛažìèṛs t̄ō b̄è a ñúisañcè«añd t̄hè b̄ès̄t̄ ql̄èa t̄hèsè "ḡèñt̄l̄èmèñ,, cáñ sèt̄ úq f̄ōṛ t̄hèiṛ ṛìgh̄t̄s t̄ō ab̄at̄è t̄hè ñúisañcè b̄y t̄hè s̄úm̄maṛy qṛōcèss̄ ōf št̄abb̄iñg«b̄úṛñiñg« añd "qōiśōñiñg,,iś«t̄hat̄ t̄hè ōffèndèṛs aṛè b̄èl̄ōw t̄hè l̄èwèl̄ ōf t̄hè t̄hè w̄hìtè mañ,,s̄ šqècíès: N<sup>11</sup>.

Stanner described this awful reasoning as the 'the persuasive doctrine of Aboriginal worthlessness', and according to Harris, it pervaded colonial Australian society,

influencing generations of non-Indigenous Australians . "Many people", writes Harris, "their consciences eased, accepted the demise of Aboriginal society as inevitable, even if it were hastened by white aggression." [7]



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## **References**

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