
No hoofed animal trod Australian soil until the coming of white settlement in 1788, but despite their lack of an indigenous grazing tradition the dispossessed Australian Aborigines soon found themselves working in the pastoral industry that formed a staple of settler capitalism. The creation of the colony (now state) of Queensland was quickly followed by the pastoral occupation of Australia’s northeast in the 1860s. For ecological reasons pastoral leaseholders soon came to specialize in beef cattle managed through open-range grazing. Controversy developed as to the wisdom of permitting the surviving Aboriginal population to remain on the lands taken from them, but the more canny or enlightened pastoralists soon found them a cheap, adaptable, and versatile labor force. Aborigines, despite previous inexperience with horses, adjusted quickly to stock work. By 1886 they formed probably over half the entire workforce of the Queensland cattle industry and provided a model for the overlanders who occupied the Northern Territory and the Kimberley district of Western Australia at that time.

In the latter regions this way of life persisted until the 1960s. Aboriginal men provided stockmen, drovers, and general laborers for the cattle industry; Aboriginal women made good the domestic and sexual demands created by the shortage of white women. Although exploitative, these arrangements were not without their value as Aboriginal survival techniques. As one commentator wrote in 1936 the “backyards of cattle stations dovetailed into the front gardens of primitive hunting areas” where the Aborigines could keep up their customary routines and ceremonies and preserve their social and spiritual attachment to the land. Queensland, as Dawn May shows, was different.

Tropical agriculture in coastal north Queensland demanded the indenture of thousands of Melanesians, largely from Vanuatu and the Solomons, as well as labor from China and several parts of Southeast Asia. Consequently at the end of the nineteenth century
Queensland became the crucible of the White Australia policy, its labor unions among the most militant advocates of racial policies that would preserve jobs by blocking the use of underpaid non-Europeans. When Australia federated in 1901 tight immigration restrictions excluded outsiders, but Aboriginal policy remained the responsibility of the individual states. In the cattle industry, stricken by an unusually long and severe drought, graziers could not manage without cheap Aboriginal labor. So it was that from 1897 the Queensland Government led the rest of Australia in devising systematic policies of control and intervention.

While Aborigines still in theory had the right of hunting over pastoral leases, cattlemen wary of stock-spearing often prevented them. After a period of providing free beef rations, the government moved gradually towards a system of reserves, sometimes run by Christian missions, to which Aborigines could be sent voluntarily or otherwise. These acted as a labor pool for the cattle properties, although employers often complained that mission teaching bred "cheeky natives." Pastoralists were encouraged to enter into formal agreements with their Aboriginal employees, including a small wage in cash or kind. Traveling government protectors were empowered to oversee working conditions on pastoral properties. This was not enough for the trade unions, who wanted as far as possible to exclude Aborigines from the workforce. With the coming of the Labor government that ruled Queensland for all but three years between 1915 and 1957 the issue was resolved. Regulations in 1919 provided a wage rate for Aborigines fixed at two-thirds of the award for whites. This was far in excess of Aboriginal wages elsewhere in Australia and was deliberately intended to make Aboriginal labor unattractively costly. But efficient alternatives were unavailable. Cattlemen continued to employ Aborigines in large numbers, although the unions tried to confine their use to unskilled labor. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s beef prices remained consistently low, and many pastoralists downsized their workforce by removing old people, children, and other unproductive Aborigines to the reserves so that the Aboriginal communities were further disrupted.

Under the pressure of World War II, Aborigines in northern Australia were given opportunities in many skilled trades previously denied them. This experience generated a slowly growing demand for better conditions in the pastoral industry while mainstream Australian opinion was growing more racially tolerant. By the mid-1960s the principle of equal pay was conceded, but by this time the beef cattle industry was moving from the old open-range methods to more capital-intensive practices, and the traditional skills of the stockman were giving way to expertise in modern technology.

Aboriginal workers in the cattle industry were ill qualified for these changes, since more than half had received no formal education at all, and few if any of the remainder had progressed beyond primary level. Social problems proliferated. In Queensland the position was exacerbated by a singularly reactionary state government that fought federally funded schemes to establish Aboriginal groups on their own pastoral properties. Even after the Australian High Court's landmark Mabo decision in 1992, acknowledging for the first time the concept of native title in Australia, the prospects for an equitable outcome to the land question remained problematical.

May's study is of more than local importance, since it contributes to recent debate about frontier capitalism and dependency theory. She argues that the Queensland cattle industry provides an example of the survival of a precapitalist mode of production while it could serve as a reservoir of cheap labor. It remains a question whether Queensland Aborigines, at last accorded a modicum of land rights, can adapt their ecologically sensitive traditions of land management to the imperatives of the international economy of the twenty-first century.

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