

# Colonialism and its Aftermath

*A history of Aboriginal  
South Australia*

*Edited by*

**PEGGY BROCK AND TOM GARA**

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# Foreword

My personal affiliations with South Australia are a result of my transportation ‘south’ in 1957. This forced re-relocation (firstly from family, then from a mission to South Australia) was an outcome of the removal of me and my siblings from our family in Alice Springs. Our removal was authorised under the *South Australian State Children’s Act 1895*.<sup>1</sup> This is a clear demonstration of the ways in which Aboriginal lives have been controlled by determinations made by non-Aboriginal people since the time of colonisation and into the twentieth century, and of the reach of South Australia’s administration of Aboriginal people into the Northern Territory. Consequently, I know myself both as an Eastern Arrernte woman (east of Alice Springs), *and* as a South Australian.

My life story and those of a number of other Aboriginal people recounted in this book illustrate our personal experiences within the context of the policies and practices outlined in the various chapters. Today, when writing a history of South Australia from the time of its inception as a ‘free’ colonial outpost through to the mid- to late twentieth century, it is inherent that the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people – whether drawn from texts of the past or the result of gathering of ‘life-stories’ – are given equal measure to the non-Aboriginal written sources used to reconstruct and interpret events. In recognising this imperative, and working from the position of inclusivity in the stories of history, this book utilises both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal methods of understanding and representing the colonial history of South Australia.

As outlined in the first section, ‘The South Australian Context’, in pre-colonial times each Aboriginal community had its own means of

understanding and communicating the past to future generations. The recorded histories of Aboriginal people in the second section, 'Adelaide', show the high-level capacities and resilience of Aboriginal people in the face of extreme attacks on our ways of life which resulted in the decimation of Aboriginal connections to land, language and knowledges (our ways of defining, describing and articulating the way our/the world works), both across the state and in particular across the area of the Adelaide plains.

Other chapters also demonstrate that the colonisers wrote detailed accounts of their interactions with Aboriginal people, and placed great value on Aboriginal people they considered leaders. These records are a rich information source which provide the opportunity for a two-directional reading of the documents – one direction is being able to understand the colonial approach to Aboriginal people; the other allows the reader to gain an insight into the ways in which Aboriginal people negotiated their lives and that of their families and communities who were under colonial control.

The Aboriginal experiences and viewpoints are varied and demonstrate the ways in which the colonial endeavour impacts on the present lives of the Aboriginal people whose stories are recorded here. While colonialism has disrupted many communities and displaced individuals across all the regions discussed in the book, the contemporary biographies and autobiographies of Aboriginal elders such as Uncle Kevin 'Dookie' O'Loughlin and Dr Aunty Alice (Alitja) Rigney show that we have maintained our sense of identity as Aboriginal Australians whose connections to 'South Australia' are as strong as those whose associations began at the time of colonisation.

The regional histories included in the book emphasise different aspects of colonialism and its aftermath, from physical violence and murder, to segregating Aboriginal people on reserves, to often forced assimilation, missionary interventions in religious and cultural life and, most recently, the native title process. They also illustrate that there is no defined 'era' of history that can be spoken or written about without inclusion of the Aboriginal narrative. Working from this premise, the editors, Peggy Brock and Tom Gara, have strategically deployed a range of Aboriginal voices into

the spaces between the chapters, telling a history from a broad range of perspectives. The result is a comprehensive, inclusive and broad-ranging history of the state of South Australia.

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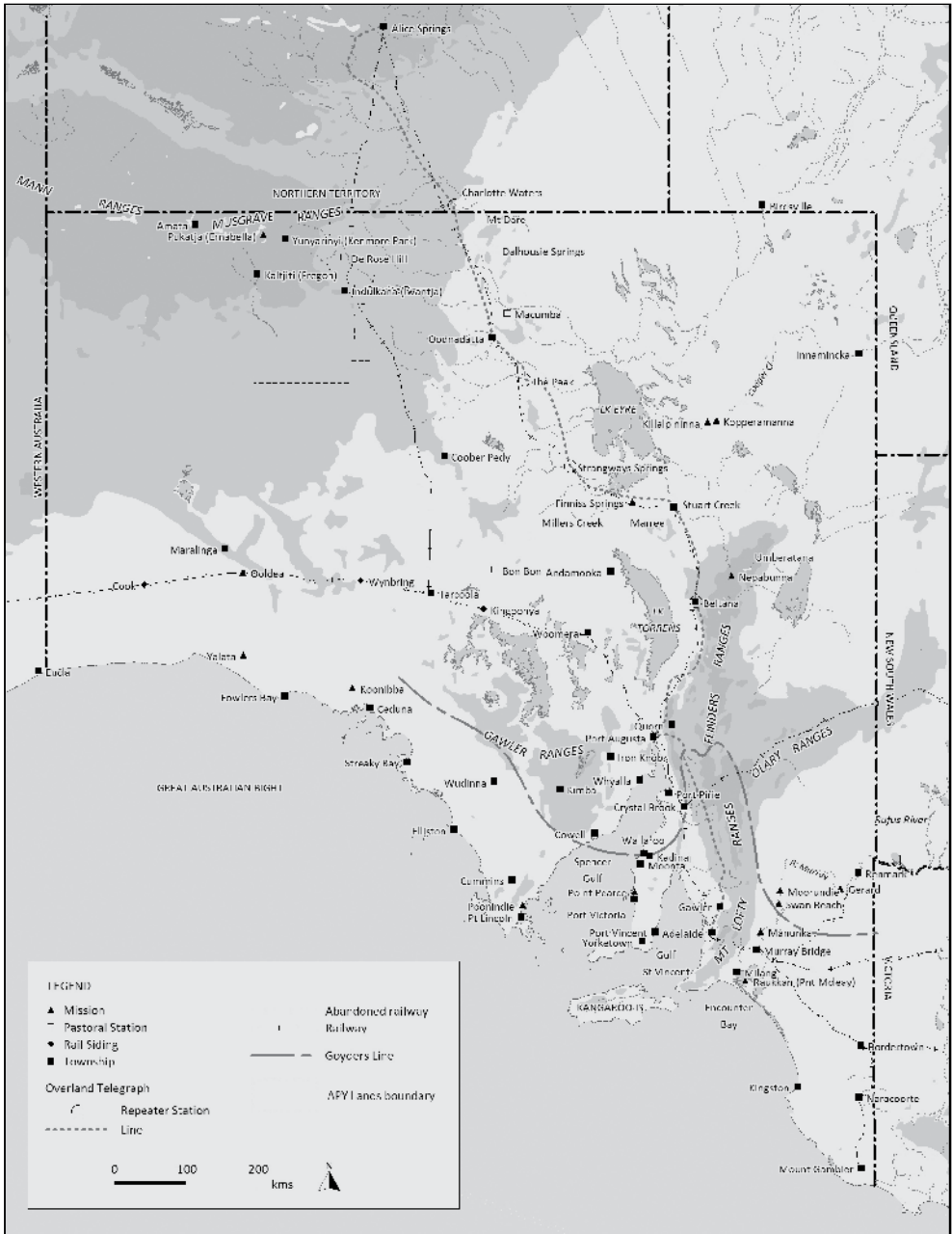
# Introduction

**PEGGY BROCK**

The focus of this book is the colonial history of South Australia which has framed the interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and their institutions since 1836. It illustrates through a series of regional histories how colonists and the reach of the colonial state gradually spread through South Australia and details the ongoing impact of colonialism on Aboriginal individuals and communities.

The state of South Australia was a British imperial construct, its borders determined in London without any reference to environmental factors, or the Aboriginal presence. The state was defined by three straight lines on a map and a varied and extensive coastline. As the discussion in Chapter 1 makes clear these lines dissected river drainage systems and the resulting ecological zones, as well as Aboriginal cultural and political groupings. The distribution of Aboriginal language, cultural and political groups do not coincide with state borders, nor do Aboriginal movement patterns, whether for trade, religious, cultural or social purposes. The colonial theorists in Britain envisaged a process in South Australia that would recognise the Aboriginal people in the state and their pre-existing rights (see Chapter 2). But colonisation on the ground was no more sensitive to pre-existing Aboriginal life than elsewhere in Australia.

This discrepancy between intention and actuality was largely due to settlers' determination to acquire land for their own use, but also to their ignorance of Aboriginal rules of conduct and formalities, and lack of interest in trying to understand the societies they were supplanting. As a result first encounters between colonisers and Aboriginal people were fraught with misunderstandings and conflict. The members of early exploring parties were conscious that they were very vulnerable to attack and on the whole tried not to antagonise the Aboriginal people they



**South Australia**

encountered. Charles Sturt's journey down the Murray River in 1829–1830 illustrates this approach. Without any common language except an easily misinterpreted sign language, Sturt and his party offered gifts of metal hoops and other items to the people they met. He noted that as their boat travelled downstream they were 'introduced from tribe to tribe', that is emissaries from one group would warn people down river of the approach of these strangers. Some people were well disposed to them, others hostile, even trying to bait them with offers of women, which Sturt and his men resisted.<sup>1</sup> However, as many of the following chapters illustrate, when colonists ventured out to establish themselves on Aboriginal land many did not take the same care to understand and respond to Aboriginal greeting protocols or acknowledge their proprietary rights, leading to conflict and violence.

There are broad themes throughout the book, such as disruption to Aboriginal lives and culture, and displacement and dispossession of land. Nevertheless, Aboriginal people's experiences of colonialism in South Australia varied depending on when they were colonised, and how. Factors that influenced the interactions between settlers and Indigenous peoples include the terrain and ecology, the density of both Aboriginal and settler populations, the availability of water, the period of colonisation, the type of colonial economic activity and the placement of Christian missions and government-run stations.

Unregulated interactions between coastal peoples and Europeans who were catching seals and whales off the coast began well before formal colonisation in the early nineteenth century, while some groups in the far west and north-west of the state did not have any sustained contact with outsiders until the mid-twentieth century. The Adnyamathanha in the north Flinders Ranges were able to use the hilly, rugged terrain to protect themselves to some extent in the nineteenth century while the people living on open plains were more vulnerable to horsemen with guns. The impact of urban development and intensive agriculture was more immediate and devastating to local populations than pastoralism in the outback, although all forms of activity disrupted and eventually obliterated pre-existing Aboriginal economies.

Aboriginal hunters and gatherers lived on a varied diet depending on their location and the seasons. Even those living in arid and semi-arid

country had a variety of foodstuffs to live on as they moved across country, while those in well-watered areas travelled shorter distances and lived more densely on the land. As their economies were disrupted Aboriginal people were forced to live on a limited diet of processed flour and sugar supplemented by tea, which resulted in poor nutrition with a long-term impact on Aboriginal health. Aboriginal workers employed in the pastoral and agricultural industries, as most were until the mid-twentieth century, were generally 'paid' in food rations, tobacco and perhaps clothing and blankets, sometimes supplemented by wages. Those not employed received government rations distributed by the local police officer or some other government functionary, by pastoralists or their employees, or at missions or government-run stations. The ration distribution system, which operated for over a century from the 1850s to the early 1960s, was a semi-official means of controlling the movement of Aboriginal people through the placement of ration depots.

Dispossession and displacement from their lands and the resultant undermining of economic, social and cultural life were not the only determinants of Aboriginal lives under the colonial state. Government policies and practices, as set out in chapters 2 and 3, and settler attitudes also impinged on them. The consequences of these varying policies is reflected in the regional histories, and also most tellingly in the life stories that follow them. In these accounts the impact of colonialism is reflected in the experiences of individuals and families who built their lives in new and often confronting circumstances. Some of these stories are memoirs of Aboriginal people today talking about their own experiences and those of their parents and ancestors, others are based on historical records dating back to the early days of the colony. These life histories reflect the varied experiences of Aboriginal people over the past 180 years.

The first section of the book provides context for the regional histories of South Australia. The opening chapter is an introduction to the range of Aboriginal societies that existed in South Australia at the time of colonisation. Our knowledge of these societies of 180 years ago depends on interpretations by scholars of both oral accounts passed down in Aboriginal communities and written descriptions by early explorers, colonists, policemen, ethnographers and missionaries. The chapter discusses some of the factors that determine the way we

conceptualise pre-colonial Aboriginal societies, influenced by scientific and administrative ideas. It considers how we estimate population numbers at the time of colonisation, and their distribution through ecological zones; how we describe and name Aboriginal socio-political structures; and the coincidence of language groups with ecological zones in the region. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the nineteenth- and twentieth-century policies and practices of the colonial and settler state and the impacts these laws and attitudes had on Aboriginal people in broad terms. The three following sections are organised by regions: Adelaide, southern South Australia and the outback.

The three chapters in the Adelaide section consider: the immediate effect of colonisation on the people of the Adelaide Plains and their neighbours, the Ramindjeri around Encounter Bay, in the first twenty years following formal colonisation; the history of the movement of other groups into the Adelaide region and their living conditions over the next century; and an analysis of activist groups of mainly urban-based non-Aboriginal people concerned over the impact of loss of land and autonomy on Aboriginal communities, as well as the beginning of organised political activism among Aboriginal people in Adelaide.

The next section consists of four chapters that discuss the southern part of the state. The first, Chapter 7, examines critical moments in Ngarrindjeri responses to colonisation along the lower River Murray, Lakes Alexandrina and Albert, the Coorong and Encounter Bay. Chapter 8 focuses on interactions between the Narrunga and settlers on nineteenth-century Yorke Peninsula, and the establishment of a mission at Point Pearce. Further east were the Buganditj in the lower south-east who, unlike the Ngarrindjeri and Narrunga, were not able to form a community around a longterm mission (Chapter 9). We then move to the west coast and Eyre Peninsula in Chapter 10, where colonisation resulted in major population movements in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century as missions, pastoralism and agriculture were established.

The last section discusses the history of the outback from the northern Flinders Ranges, to the north-east, far north, north-west and far west of the state. Pastoralism and later mining came to the Flinders Ranges in the 1850s (Chapter 11), while many people in the regions further north and west experienced major disruptions only in the twentieth century. Some of



these areas are desert or semi arid, while others support pastoralism and mining. Aboriginal people generally found they could maintain continuities with the past in pastoral areas, more easily than peoples in the southern parts of the state. However, some societies in the north such as the Dieri were devastated by high deathrates and displacement from their essential water sources, and loss of control of their lands.

The three chapters on the north-east and far north illustrate different aspects of this outback colonial experience. Chapter 12 considers how the local Aboriginal people were viewed by ethnographers and missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century. The following chapter emphasises the impact of the land-use changes and introduced infrastructure and technologies on people in the north-east, while Chapter 14 analyses interactions and the cultural adjustments people had to make to such changes further to the west and north-west.

Aboriginal people in the north-west and far west encountered colonial disruptions later than in other regions. By the mid-twentieth century mission and government policies were changing, as indicated in Chapter 3; transport and other communication networks were greatly improved while there were new hazards such as atomic tests at Maralinga. Chapter 15 discusses the Yangunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara, who refer to themselves as Aṅangu, in the north-west. Although not the first non-Aboriginal people to move into the region, Presbyterian missionaries established a station in 1937 at Ernabella (Pukatja), which gradually became the hub of the community and has had a profound and ongoing influence on relations between Aṅangu and outsiders. While there was an eastern movement of Pitjantjatjara people before and after the establishment of the mission, there were much more profound population movements in the arid far west due both to the uncertain rainfall as well as colonial developments on its fringes and later rocket and atomic bomb tests in the heart of the region. Chapter 16 considers these population movements, what caused them and the repercussions for these people. It discusses the role of missions and most importantly the long-term impact of nuclear testing on the health and wellbeing of the people, often referred to as the Spinifex people.

The epilogue briefly considers how the history of colonial relations continues to influence Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations in South Australia and beyond its borders.

This history of South Australia is based on the research of historians, anthropologists and linguists, and the lived experience of some Aboriginal elders. Despite its wide range, there are regional histories that are not covered in this volume, most notably the upper Murray River, and the mid-north and southern Flinders Ranges, as well as the twentieth-century history of Point Pearce on Yorke Peninsula, and the south-east of the state. In putting this volume together the editors also realised that there are many other gaps in our knowledge, including a history of Aboriginal education, language reclamation, housing and other social histories, an overview of the arts movements in Aboriginal communities, the Stolen Generations, and histories of urban-based people. Generally the emphasis in research has been on the nineteenth rather than the late twentieth century; this is partly due to the sensitivities of writing about people who are still living as well as the availability of sources. This book, therefore, reflects the research that has been carried out in South Australia since the 1980s and also shows where research still needs to be undertaken. Some gaps are also the result of the native title claim process, which has made it more difficult for scholars to undertake research outside that process and makes research undertaken for claimants unavailable to the wider public.

Since the 1830s, when Aboriginal words were first given written form, there has been a bewildering plethora of spellings of Aboriginal words and names, and these spellings (orthography) continue to be reviewed into the present (see also Chapter 1). This myriad of spellings makes it difficult for readers unfamiliar (even some who are familiar) with Aboriginal names, to identify individuals as well as groups through a book such as this. We have therefore decided to follow the spelling of Aboriginal groups as they have been submitted for native title claims so there is consistency from chapter to chapter. However, where there are direct quotations from sources the spelling of the source has been retained.

This is the first Aboriginal history of South Australia to be published since the advent of native title in 1993.<sup>2</sup> The complex process of native title claims has led to much new research and reevaluation of colonial relations, their impact on Aboriginal individuals and communities, and how Aboriginal people define themselves and relate to their pre-colonial ancestors. Several of the contributors have been involved in researching native title claims, which has influenced the way they conceptualise

and present their research. Some of the chapters are based on post-graduate theses that have never been published; other authors revisit earlier research and reassess it in the light of the availability of new data, particularly through the digitising of newspapers and other records. This book brings the history of Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations in South Australia into the twenty-first century, educating new generations into the complex and often fraught history of this state.