CHAPTER 5

HOW MANY PEOPLE?

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THE FIRST FULL, official census of the Aboriginal population of Australia was taken only in 1971. Before that date, counts in some areas and estimates for the whole continent were made by many people.

In 1770 Joseph Banks thought that the country was 'thinly inhabited' with the inland perhaps 'totally uninhabited'. Eighteen years later, Governor Phillip wrote that about fifteen hundred people inhabited the coastal bays near Sydney, a figure that is probably a reasonable estimate (see chapter 17).

As European explorers and settlers spread out, many made population estimates. These are all subject to severe limitations. The first few sightings of Aborigines in any area were often hurried and from a distance. Women and children normally kept out of sight, only the men were seen, and numbers of them may have remained hidden. More importantly, most observations were made only after European occupation became consolidated around Sydney. Even early inland explorers such as Sturt and Mitchell, whose journals contain counts of the people they met, made their journeys over forty years after the first settlement. By that time, exotic diseases had killed many southeastern Aborigines, and others had been dispossessed from their ancestral lands and moved to join distant kin. Thus even the best estimates will not closely reflect the situation in 1788. Such observations did, however, become accepted and generalised so that, by the later nineteenth century, the Aboriginal population in 1788 was estimated as only 150 000.

This low estimate reflected current beliefs about the nature of Aboriginal society. It was assumed that the 'Aboriginal race' would soon become extinct because of the biological superiority of Europeans. Aborigines, it was said, were physically incapable of resisting disease or the effects of alcohol, or of adopting the ways of Western civilisation. Such beliefs were thought to be supported by scientific studies. In addition, traditional Aboriginal societies were believed to be completely nomadic and entirely parasitic on what the harsh Australian environment might provide. Given such misunderstandings, it is understandable that the original inhabitants were thought to be so few.

Acceptance of this low figure and belief in the Aborigines' inferiority helped to diminish the moral responsibility of the colonists. The smaller the original number of inhabitants, the less drastic the fatal impact seemed. Disinheriting a few despised people did not seem much of a crime. However, recent historical research now confirms that thousands of men, women and children were killed by settlers.

In 1912 the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer noted that informed estimates allowed for 20 000 Aborigines in the Northern Territory. Describing this as 'a mere guess', he suggested on the basis of his extensive travels there that a census would show 'more nearly 50 000' people. Spencer was too optimistic, but the real number is unknown, as there was no comprehensive census. The federal government decided to draw further on anthropological expertise and asked A.R. Radcliffe-Brown to reassess available evidence about the 1788 population. His estimate, in the *Official year book* for 1930, doubled the estimates then current.

Radcliffe-Brown divided the continent into resource and climatic zones and reread many historical sources such as explorers' and settlers' estimates. He assumed that well-watered areas had supported more people than desert regions, but he also assumed that tropical areas were richer and supported more hunter–gatherers than temperate areas. The second assumption, of course, largely reflected the 1930 situation. He worked always with *minimum* population estimates and thus reached a figure of over 250 000. To allow for probable errors, he adjusted it upward to a figure 'probably over 300 000', though he did not readjust his state-by-state figures.

Radcliffe-Brown's round figure has been accepted for half a century. Other studies tended to confirm it, although they were not based on quantitative data. For example, in the late 1930s a major survey of tribal distributions concluded that there had been about six hundred tribes in 1788. The researchers argued for an average tribal membership of 500 (despite some variations), giving a total population of 300 000. Linguists also considered this number to conform with their findings. Because over two hundred Aboriginal languages were spoken, and it seemed reasonable that speakers of any language would have numbered from a few hundred to a few thousand, a population of 300 000 seemed plausible.

Fifty years after Radcliffe-Brown's estimate was made, estimates of the population in 1788 are being revised upwards. An early move in this direction was made in 1970, when a re-evaluation prompted by newly available historical, archaeological and environmental resources raised the Tasmanian estimate of 2500 to 3000–5000 people. Some now consider even this too low.

A more dramatic reassessment has been made of the western Victorian evidence. Correlations between archaeological remains, population counts in the 1830s and historical records of locations where Aborigines were encountered suggest a more intensive land use and more complex technology than were hitherto recognised (see chapter 15). The evidence indicates that stone hut clusters were occupied semipermanently. Western district population densities are claimed to equal those on northern tropical coasts, traditionally assumed to constitute the most densely occupied zone. Calculations double Radcliffe-Brown's estimates.

Striking confirmation of the likelihood that significantly larger populations inhabited temperate regions occurs along the central Murray River. A large sample of human bones from the period just before contact has recently been examined and shows that the population was less healthy than might have been expected, given the region's rich resources. Evidently the population was stressed and suffered from illnesses associated with overcrowding. Although such conditions were not observed by early Europeans this evidence suggests that Radcliffe-Brown's estimates were too low.

Archaeological data conform to such re-evaluations. For example, the significant

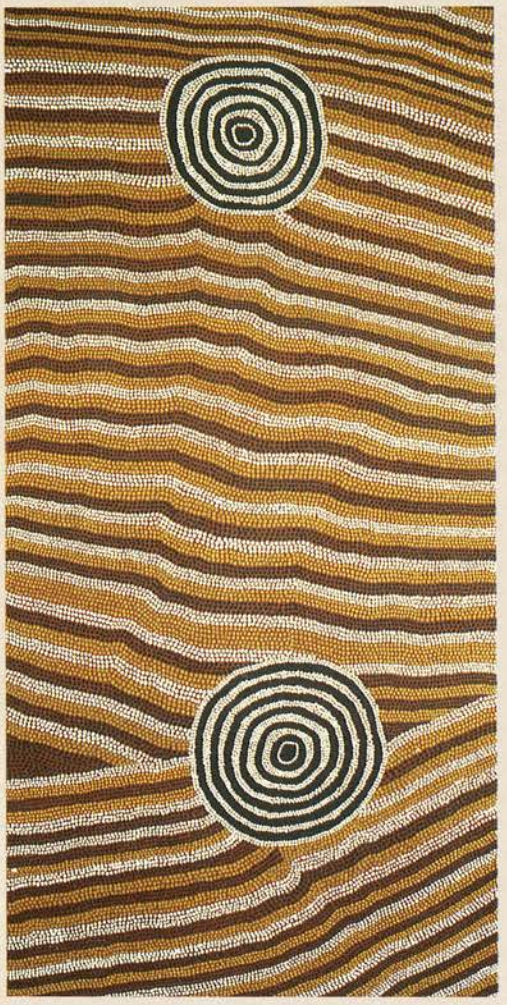
role of plant foods in Aboriginal societies is now recognised. In fact, plants contributed staple resources in every region, with the potential to support large populations. In the southeast the formerly widespread yam daisy (*Microseris scapigera*) or *murnong* provided such a staple. Impressive technological features of a permanent nature, such as systems of fish or eel traps and enormous nets for fowling along inland rivers, were associated with this exploitation of plants. Archaeologists believe that some sites resembled permanent villages; in many areas life had become semisedentary by 1788. A rapid increase in the number of campsites and the intensity of their use during recent centuries has been detected.

But the most striking recent challenge to past estimates comes from an attempt by an economic historian, Noel Butlin, to estimate the impact of diseases brought into Australia by Europeans from 1788 onward. He has suggested that the number of Aborigines who died following 1788 was vastly greater than has been allowed, and that this decrease occurred more rapidly than previously thought. He sees smallpox as the major killer. This disease required a relatively dense population to facilitate its endemic spread across the country. According to this proposal, when Europeans arrived on any scene 'beyond the frontier', disease had already decimated the population. Consequently, even careful observers of first contacts saw only the survivors. Other fatal diseases, such as measles, chest ailments and venereal diseases, to all of which Aborigines of southern Australia possessed no immunity, should not be underestimated as additional rapid killers. It is relevant that Radcliffe-Brown took insufficient notice of disease as a factor, although he was aware of it. Similarly, while authors of recent research on western district records consulted journals of 1840–41 to advantage, even these early sources chronicle events some decades after the probable first spread of European diseases.

It is difficult to estimate the effects of diseases, and Butlin's projections of earlier populations are based on computer simulations using various probable (though unverifiable) assumptions. Such assumptions raise the population of New South Wales and Victoria to 250 000—more than four times the 1930 estimate. If Radcliffe-Brown's figures for each state were similarly adjusted, the Australian population in 1788 would become about 900 000. This may be scaled down if we assume that the impact of smallpox was less in the north than in the southeast. Such a figure is plausible, though further research is needed to confirm it. Almost all the research to date relates to the temperate southeast or southwest. Already claims can be sustained for a doubling of population estimates for Tasmania, parts of Victoria, New South Wales and the Perth region for the centuries before 1788. Population numbers in semiarid regions were almost certainly underestimated by pastoral pioneers and attendant police wishing to minimise the effects of their impact. This view is supported by recent research on the capacity of the country to sustain populations manipulating its resources in ways we know Aborigines did.

The area still requiring reinvestigation is the tropics. At present, it is less certain than in southern Australia that these regions, which have maintained relatively high populations throughout the last 200 years, supported more people in the past. Because of the previous bias towards assuming higher densities in the tropics, it seems unjustified to increase estimates by the same factor as those in the temperate south. Possibly, also, population decline in the tropics following introduced diseases was less drastic. Long-term contacts between Indonesian fishing crews and people living along the northern coastline from Kimberley to Carpentaria may have produced greater immunity from some diseases, but may also have acted to keep populations lower than they might otherwise have been.

It is thus premature to give a definite figure for the Aboriginal population in 1788. But we consider that an estimate of about 750 000 people is a reasonable one.



Section of a painting by Charlie Tjapangati of the Pintupi. The painting tells of Tingari events at Nakinga, south of Lake Mackay, Western Australia. The roundel represents a waterhole: it is located among sandhills. The Tingari are a group of Dreaming characters who instituted rituals and created and shaped certain sites. Their travels are narrated in song cycles, details of which are sacred and told only to appropriate persons.

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II

CONTINUITY AND DIVERSITY:

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