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‘The Miserablest People in the World’: Race, Humanism and the Australian Aborigine

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Abstract

This paper considers how an idea of the Australian Aborigine impacted upon the development of racial thinking throughout the nineteenth century. We distinguish three phases of this development. Against the background of what was considered to be a distinctly human capacity to rise above nature, our central argument however is that the extreme and irremediable savagery attributed to the Aborigine led to the mid-nineteenth shift to a polygenist, or an innatist, idea of race. The first part of our discussion, covering the early 1800s, elicits a specifically humanist puzzlement at the unimproved condition of the Aborigines. But, as we will show in the central part of our discussion, it was not only the Aborigines’ inclination but their capacity for ‘improvement’ that came to be doubted. Challenging the very basis upon which ‘the human’ had been defined, and the unity of humankind assumed, the Aborigine could not be accommodated within a prevailing conception of racial difference as a mere variety of the human. The elaboration of polygenism may therefore be understood as arising out of this humanist incomprehension: as an attempt to account for the ontologically inexplicable difference of the Australian Aborigine. In the final part of our discussion, we trace the legacy of the Aborigine’s place within polygenism through the evolutionary thought of the late nineteenth century. Despite an explicit return to monogenism, here the Aborigine is invoked to support the claim that race constitutes a more or less permanent difference and, for certain races, a more or less permanent deficiency. And as, in these terms, the anomalous Aborigine became an anachronism, so Australia’s indigenous peoples came to embody the most devastating conclusion of evolutionary thought: that in the human struggle for existence certain races were destined not even to survive.

I

The impact of racial thought on the Aboriginal peoples of Australia has been well documented in the fields of critical race studies, post-colonialism and Australian history (see for example: Reynolds 1989; Attwood 1992, Ch.4; Ryan 1996). The impact of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples on racial thinking has, however, received rather less attention. In this paper, we consider how the Australian Aborigine, or rather a certain idea of the Australian Aborigine¹, informed the development of racial

¹ The ‘Australian Aborigines’ are referred to here only insofar as they are represented from a certain perspective. We do not attribute any objectivity to such representations, but neither do we suppose – after a certain form of discourse analysis that follows Michel Foucault (1972) and Edward Said (1979) – that the colonial ‘encounter’ can be reduced to the act of their ‘construction’ (see Bhabha 1994; Perrin 1999).

thinking throughout the nineteenth century. Our discussion here will distinguish three phases of this development, traversing the early, middle and late 1800s. Centrally, however, we argue that in the ‘encounter’ with the Australian Aborigine the idea of race underwent its most radical and profound elaboration: in the mid-nineteenth century shift to a polygenist, or more generally an innatist, idea of race.

Underpinned by an assumption of the unity of humankind, earlier conceptions of race had maintained its kinship with terms like ‘tribe’ or ‘nation’, such that race was considered to be a sub-division, or a mere variety, of the human. By 1850, however, the ‘human’ no longer provided the common referent according to which race could be held to describe one or another kind of human being. Race came to be regarded as a biological difference that was essential and immutable. The different races came to be understood as fixed ‘types’, if not – according to the polygenist thesis – as the product of entirely separate creations. Shattering the very idea of human unity, race, to paraphrase Robert Knox (1850: 6), became everything. And, in a development that was anticipated by increasing doubts about the Christian idea of a single human origin during the first half of the nineteenth century, and which was to leave its legacy well-beyond the explicit ‘reversion’ to monogenism announced by evolutionary theory in the second half of the nineteenth century, race came to describe not only the permanent character of a people, but also their irrevocable destiny.

Our claim that such a significant shift in racial thinking may be attributed to the encounter with a people whom William Dampier had earlier described as ‘the miserablest ... in the world’ devolves precisely upon the extent, and the perceived extremity, of this ‘miserableness’ (Dampier 1927 [1697]: 312). Dampier’s description was based on the ‘fact’ that, unlike ‘the great variety of savages’ he had encountered, the Australian Aborigines had ‘no Houses and skin Garments, Sheep, Poultry and Fruits of the Earth’ (Dampier 1927 [1697]: 312). What Dampier, and later many others, saw as the Aborigines’ utter lack of improvement and, most significantly, their failure to have cultivated the land, ensured their singular place in nineteenth century racial discourse. For, previously, racial differences among the world’s people had been understood within an ontology that, supporting the very assumption of human unity, defined and distinguished ‘the human’ exactly in its separation from, and capacity to rise above, nature.

This humanist ontology stretched back to the ancient anthropology of the human as a unique city-building, city-dwelling animal, as well as to the biblical injunction to subdue nature. But it was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it received its most sustained elaboration. According to the idea of a progressive human separation from, and control over, nature – conceived as either exterior or interior to the human – the social contract and stadial theorists posited a universal human progression from savagery to civilisation. Nature was to be *cultivated*. And, as the etymology of this word implies, it was in the labour of cultivation that the cultural rather than natural character of the human was articulated. For the social contract theorists, the cultivation of human reason over natural instinct or desire (see for example Rousseau 1968 [1763]: 65) and, correlatively, the cultivation of land in the transition to a civil society, itself characterised by property, law and the institutions of government (see for example Locke 1960 [1689]: 290-291), defined a distinctively human development. For the stadial theorists too, the ‘cultivation’ of nature – both in the form of agriculture and the domestication of animals – was crucial to human

progression: in de Pauw's words, 'property and all the arts are ... born in the womb of agriculture' (cited in Meek 1976: 146)².

In what follows, we shall pursue the claim that, against this background, the figure of the non-cultivating Aborigine was a troubling and, for this reason, crucial figure in nineteenth century reflections upon human difference. Just as the uniqueness of Australian flora and fauna had perplexed European naturalists and their classificatory schema, so the non-cultivating Aborigine bewildered the early colonists. This figure also confounded those nineteenth century ethnologists who were attempting to categorise and explain the diversity of humankind. The Aborigines were considered to be unlike any other savages. Whilst the discovery of the American Indians, for example, had aroused some anxiety in accounting for their relative impoverishment (Pagden 1995), it was according to an eighteenth century framework that maintained the *universal* possibility of human development that their condition had been understood and explained. Like 'those early barbarians who occupied the continent of Greece and its islands' (Lafitau, cited in Meek 1976: 62), the American Indians were situated within a universal narrative of 'the human' which held that all civilised peoples had been savages and all savage peoples were destined to become civilised. Whilst a 'state of nature' was imagined on the basis of encounters with the American Indian, it was always as a stage – even if the first stage – of a human progression away from nature. Such a state was not, therefore, conceived as static or permanent. And in America the signs of its surpassing were repeatedly invoked: by Turgot, for example, who saw evidence of the Americans' transition to a pastoral stage; by Robertson who noted that, whilst it was 'very slight', agriculture among the American Indians was nevertheless discernible; and, among others, by Adam Smith who – despite what he regarded as its rudimentary character – observed that the American Indians did 'have some notion of agriculture' (cited in Meek 1976: 118).

As the Americans' condition could be understood as a stage of *human* development, so it could be, and was, explained in monogenist terms. Whether it was in the claim that the American Indians had only recently arrived on the continent, or that their environment or climate had inhibited their development (Meek 1976: 124), the dominant view was that: 'In every part of the earth, the progress of man hath been nearly the same; and we can trace him in his career from the rude simplicity of savage life, until he attains the industry, the arts, and the elegance of polished society' (Robertson, cited in Meek 1976: 141). If, therefore, the Americans' development was limited, then this was for reasons that would have inhibited any people who found themselves in the same situation.

Although there is no doubt that the Enlightenment idea of savagery supported the conception of a hierarchy of races (Gould 1997: 63), it was in a fundamental acceptance of the perfectibility of all human beings that an essential humanity was assumed and maintained (White 1978: 156). Racial difference, and the very notion of savagery, were subordinated to this unity. And – except for an isolated few³ – race did

² Many world historians have seen agriculture as the developmental threshold that provided the basis for the emergence of the great regional traditions of human civilisation (see for example Clark 1969; Maisels 1990; MacNeish 1992; Smith 1995; and Atkins, Roberts and Simmons 1998).

³ Most notably, it was Voltaire, Edward Long and Lord Kames who conceived race in stronger terms. And whilst they have often been invoked to claim a continuity in racial thinking, at least since the

not provide any explanation for what were understood to be different levels of human development. This idea of race, however, was to come under increasing pressure in the early decades of the nineteenth century. By 1850, race became ‘everything’ precisely in the sense that it – and not what Knox referred to as ‘fanciful causes, such as education, religion, climate etc.’ (1850: 8) – was considered to account for the differences between peoples.

Our claim that this shift to an innatist and, correlatively, a determinist idea of race can be traced to the encounter with Australia’s Aborigines supplements George Stocking’s (1968: 39) observation that the problem of accounting for human difference became more acute with the increase in ‘data’ about other peoples that followed the ‘great expansion of cultural contact’ in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly after Cook’s voyages to Oceania (Douglas 2003: 3, 12,27). Stocking’s rather general claim here is that the sheer range of human diversity provided one context – and one among others⁴ – in which the assumption of human unity came to be questioned. But, against the background of the humanist ontology that we have indicated, and in view of widespread perceptions of the *extremity* of the Aborigines’ so-called savagery, our account of the ‘place’ of the Australian Aborigine in nineteenth century racial thought will explain exactly *how* the ‘data’ generated by increased ‘cultural contact’ problematised, and eventually shattered, the assumption of human unity.

Precisely, then, our central argument is that the non-cultivating Aborigine precipitated a crisis in eighteenth century ideas of what it meant to be human. The Aborigines’ utter lack of development posed a fundamental challenge to the assumption of human unity. And, insofar as the Aborigine could not be assimilated to the conception of race as a subdivision, or mere variety, of the human, the elaboration of polygenism in the mid-nineteenth century can be understood as a reaction to this crisis: as an attempt to account for the ontologically inexplicable difference of the Australian Aborigine.

As indicated, our presentation of this argument traverses three historical periods, covering the early, middle and late nineteenth century. The first part of our discussion draws upon perceptions of the more general ‘peculiarity’ with which Europeans apprehended Australia, but these are considered within the context of a specifically humanist puzzlement at the condition of the Aborigines. Based on observations of the uniqueness of Australian flora and fauna, initial suspicions that the entire continent must have been the product of a separate creation were seemingly confirmed by the unimproved condition of the Australian Aborigines, and the ensuing problem of their ethnological categorisation. As will become clear, however, and as we will argue in the second part of our discussion, it was in the context of successively failed attempts to ‘civilise’ them that this initial perplexity turned into an outright crisis; introducing

Enlightenment (see for example Goldberg 1993; Eze 1997; and Mosse 1999), there is a broad consensus among race historians and historiographers that the shift to an innatist idea of race occurred around the middle of the nineteenth century (see for example Gossett 1965; Montagu 1965; Hannaford 1996; Banton 1998; and Drescher 2001, among others).

⁴ Stocking’s other contexts – the *contextual* relevance of which we acknowledge – include both the development of biology in the early 1800s, defensiveness in the United States about the abolition of slavery, as well as the effect that the discovery of geological time had upon the biblical account of human origins (see also Stepan 1982).

speculation not only about the Aborigines' inclination, but about their very capacity, for improvement.

This apparent incapacity was elaborated through the 'sciences' of craniology and phrenology. The intractable Aborigine supplied seemingly irrefutable evidence for an essential, permanent and innate racial difference, and so came to provide the strongest support for those who maintained the intrinsic inferiority of the 'dark-skinned' races. We will show, then, how humanist incomprehension in the face of the Australian Aborigine gave rise to the polygenist idea of race as an innate and permanent difference which – in mid-nineteenth century arguments for slavery, for example – was extended to the 'negro', as well as more generally⁵.

In the final part of our discussion, the legacy of this idea of race – and of the crucial place of the Aborigine in its elaboration – will be considered in the context of evolutionary theory's explicit 'reversion' to an assumption of the unity of humankind. This legacy is, of course, all too familiar in Australia. But, maintaining our concern with the impact of the Aborigine upon racial thought, we will argue that this figure of extreme savagery occupied a central position in evolutionary theory's barely reworked assertion of the polygenist contention that race constituted a more or less permanent difference and, for certain races, a more or less permanent deficiency. The miserable condition of Australia's Aborigines led the evolutionists to consider them as representative of the earliest stage of human evolution (see for example Griffiths 1996; Hiatt 1996; and McGregor 1997; as well as, more generally, Brantlinger 2003). But whilst, in this respect, the Aborigines were again invoked to support the elaboration of a racially differentiated scale of human development, from an insistently humanist perspective their apparently enduring inability to improve acquired a renewed significance that bears its own emphasis here in our assessment of the decisive impact of 'the Australian' on nineteenth century thought. Supplementing the evolutionary thesis that racial characteristics were effectively permanent, the figure of the Aborigine framed an effectively innatist understanding of this racial hierarchy. Only now, in evolutionary terms, the anomalous Aborigine became an anachronism. Based upon 'evidence' that they were already dying out, Australia's indigenous peoples came to embody the most devastating conclusion of evolutionary thought: that in the human struggle for existence certain races were destined not even to survive.

II

That Australia presented a general challenge to European categories-its flora and fauna raising questions about the possibility, as Darwin was to put it later, that 'surely two distinct Creators must have been at work' (cited in De Beer 1965: 107) – has been well-documented (see Marshall and Williams 1982; Smith 1985; Moyal 1986; Martin 1993; and Ritvo 1997). In 1783, the collector Sir James Smith, for example, complained that 'When a botanist first enters ... New Holland, he finds himself as it were in a new world. He can scarcely meet with any cellain fixed points from which to draw his analogies' (quoted in Smith 1985: 168). Similarly, François Peron remarked in 1809 that 'New Holland defies our conclusions from comparisons, mocks

⁵ The argument presented in this paper draws upon, and summarises, that in K. Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (2006).

our studies, and shakes to their foundations the most firmly established and most universally admitted of our scientific opinions' (quoted in Smith 1985: 306). And, a year later, the traveller Joseph Arnold claimed that 'the natural history of New South Wales is as strange to me as if I had become an inhabitant of the moon' (cited in Neville 1997: 17).

As Bernard Smith notes, whilst 'the strangeness of the plants placed difficulties in the way of classifiers [t]he situation was if anything more difficult when it came to the classification of animals' (1985: 166). So bizarre was the likes of the kangaroo – which, in the words of zoologist George Shaw, even needed 'a distinct genus' (cited in Smith 1985: 167) – that, Smith concludes, in Australia 'traditional European ideas concerning the nature of the universe were exposed to novel and difficult questions' (1985: 167).

In the context of this more general problematisation that Australia posed for existing classificatory schema, and ultimately for the idea of a single creation, the apparently incomparable Aborigine posed a similar challenge to prevailing conceptions of the human. Following Dampier, Lord Monboddo had called attention to the Aborigines' extreme miserableness in the 1770s. Noting that their 'huts are not near so well built as those of beavers', he described Aboriginal 'society' as that of 'Man in his original condition' (cited in Smith 1985: 170). And, in Australia, it was the failure of the Aborigines to have surpassed a state of nature – a state that apparently no longer needed to be imagined – which preoccupied both Cook and Banks, as well as many of the early settlers.

Their canoes, Cook claimed, were the 'worst he had ever seen' (cited in Hawkesworth 1773: 210). Similarly, Banks described their 'houses' as 'framed with less art or rather less industry than any habitations of human beings probably that the world can shew' (Banks cited in Beaglehole 1962: 128), adding that even the 'wretched hovels at Terra Del Fuego' were superior (cited in Hawkesworth 1773: 230-1). To these observations can be added many others: including those of George Barrington, who observed that 'These people certainly have fewer ideas of building a place to shelter than any savages ever discovered' (1802: 20); of David Collins, who described their habitations to be 'as rude as imagination can conceive' (1804: 306); and of Surgeon-General John White who argued, more generally, that 'in improvements of every kind, the Indians of this country are many centuries behind' (1962 [1790]: 204-5).

Above all, though, it was the absence of cultivation among the Australian Aborigines that the Europeans remarked upon repeatedly. In Louis Freycinet's words: 'as for cultivation properly so-called, nature is the sole contributor' (2001: 173). Or in Watkin Tench's account: 'to cultivation of the ground they are utter strangers' (cited in Williams and Frost 1988: 190). Or again, as William Bradley put it: 'we never met with the smallest appearance of any kind of cultivated ground' (cited in Williams and Frost 1988: 191). And so on. For the colonists, therefore, and as Cook-as well as Barrington (1802: 29), Collins (1804: 299) and Paterson (1811: 493) among many others – stated explicitly, the country was 'in the Pure State of Nature', 'the Industry of Man' having had 'nothing to do with any part of it' (cited in Williams and Frost 1988: 166).

Such accounts are of interest here, less in their documentation of supposed Aboriginal savagery, than in their somewhat obsessional emphasis upon its extremity. The colonists' pre-occupation with the absence of cultivation in Australia cannot be understood solely in an anticipation of the 'lawfulness' of their appropriation of land that, as uncultivated, could be considered as *terra nullius*⁶. Rather, it is against the humanist background already indicated, and according to which 'the human' was defined by its very capacity to rise above and to improve upon nature, that the manifest remarkability of the Aborigines' failure to cultivate the land acquires its full significance.

Banks himself attested to the dominance of such an idea of 'the human' in drawing his erroneous conclusion that the interior of Australia was uninhabited. He too had remarked upon the fact that Australia was 'intirely void of the helps deriv'd from cultivation' (cited in Beaglehole 1962: 113), observing that 'even the North Americans who were so well vers'd in hunting sow'd their Maize' (cited in Beaglehole 1962: 122). 'We saw indeed only the sea coast', Banks stated, but recalling that he had never heard of 'any inland nation who did not cultivate the ground' -and noting also that 'should a people live inland who supported themselves by cultivation those inhabitants of the sea coast must certainly have learn'd to imitate them in some degree at least, otherwise their reason must be suppos'd to hold a rank little superior to that of monkees' (cited in Beaglehole 1962: 122) – he concluded that 'where the sea does not contribute to feed the inhabitants, the country is not inhabited' (Banks cited in Hawkesworth 1773: 227-228). For Banks, then, and in accordance with Enlightenment views, the unimproved condition of the coastal Aborigines could be accounted for only with reference to their situation. The assumption that cultivation was an essential human attribute was incontestable for him, and an inland people who did not cultivate was simply impossible to conceive.

Although Banks could not but speculate 'whether this want of what most nations look upon as absolutely necessary proceeds from idleness or want of invention' (cited in Beaglehole 1962: 124), contextual explanations could still just about appease the anxiety provoked by the Aborigines' condition. But, as Banks' reasoning indicates, such explanations were dependent upon the assumption that the transition to cultivation *could* be made, and that – if they were to be classed as human – the Aborigines possessed at least the capacity to surpass their 'natural' condition. Whilst it was this assumption that the Australian Aborigine was increasingly to challenge, for most colonists the mere fact that they saw no evidence of any Aboriginal transcendence of nature was at least peculiar. It was, moreover, their accounts, as well as those of Cook and Banks, that began to circulate beyond Australia, and to impact upon the burgeoning discourse of ethnology in its attempts to explain how nations with different customs, physical features, and beliefs could have diverged through migration from a single origin (see Bravo 1996).

Central among those ethnologists who were concerned to account for the origins and diversity of humankind was James Prichard, whose insistently monogenist claims

⁶ This claim – which can be traced back through the ontology we have indicated, to Locke's argument that rights in property only arise with cultivation (1960: 336) – was addressed in *Mabo and ars v Queensland [No.2]*, 1992. And in this context, it is noteworthy that the successful claimants in that case were renowned gardeners.

were later to become the target of those who argued for an innate conception of racial difference. Prichard attributed a pivotal role in his views on human diversity and origins to ‘the nations inhabiting the South Seas, and the Austral countries’ (1973 [1813]: 221), but he came to be as confounded by Australia’s indigenous peoples as European naturalists had been by its flora and fauna.

Describing Terra Australis as that ‘great department of the world so much insulated or cut off from communication with the great continents’ (1826: 56-7), Prichard repeatedly invoked observations that ‘The natives of Australia differ... from any other race of men in features, complexion, habits, and language’ (citing Wilkes, in 1841: 263); or again, that ‘All New Holland ... appears to be inhabited by a race, essentially different from all those hitherto known ‘ (citing Peron, in 1826: 407). As Stocking has pointed out, ‘real indications of disarray’ become evident in Prichard’s monogenism by the time of the third edition of his *Researches*, in 1836-47 (Stocking 1973: Ixxxii)⁷. Arguably, it was a certain perplexity about the Australians that was its cause. Here, for example, Prichard struggles to situate the Australians, classifying them among the ‘Alfourous’ nations, as well as according them an entirely separate chapter (1841: 258-279). And in his *The Natural History of Man*, published in 1843, Prichard admitted what was already discernible in the third edition of his *Researches*: that any correct classification of the Australians ‘cannot yet be determined’ (1843: 354).

Prichard’s difficulty in classifying the Australians was, moreover, directly related to accounts of their extremely savage condition. Citing Dampier (Prichard 1826: 397; Prichard 1841: 262), ‘The Australians’, he noted, are ‘perhaps, the most miserable of the human family, being destitute of the arts which could enable them to live with any degree of comfort in the region which they inhabit’ (1843: 545). Calling them ‘one of the most degraded and savage races of the world’ (1841: 266), he at least contemplated the idea that they might be innately deficient as he himself linked their ‘degradation’ to, in his words, ‘a form of the head ... which is most aptly distinguished by the term prognathous’ (1843: 107).

Despite such references, Prichard maintained that ‘all human races are of one and the same species’ (1843: 546). But in an indication of just how intolerable the extent of the Aborigines’ ‘miserableness’ was for him, and perhaps also providing an explanation as to why a correct classification of the Aborigines could not yet be determined, he speculated: ‘there is reason to believe that we have as yet seen only the most destitute of the whole nation; and that there are tribes farther to the northward, perhaps in inland countries of the great Austral land, who are by no means so miserable or so savage as the people near the southern shores’ (1843: 545). Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, however, others who shared neither Prichard’s optimism nor his religious views were less equivocal in suggesting that the Australian Aborigine simply could not be classified according to existing ideas of human and racial difference.

The possibility that the Aborigines’ unimproved condition was not due to any mere disinclination had been raised as early as the mid-1790s: ‘The Native Inhabitants are

⁷ James Hunt, Knox’s protégé, and co-founder of the polygenist Anthropological Society of London, also pointed out that: ‘There are many indications in Dr Prichard’s writings that even he was becoming alive to the difficulty of his own theory’ (1866: 326).

the most irrational and ill formed Human beings on the Face of the Earth destitute in every thought for future Comfort and deriving as yet no benefit from Civilization. They have no Idea of profiting by the Example of our Settlers to sow Corn for a Sure Provision' (Daniel Paine, cited in Williams and Frost 1988: 197). But it was, we will indicate now, as continued efforts to 'civilise' the Aborigines and to encourage them to cultivate met with repeated failure, that their very capacity for improvement came to be doubted. The colonists' initial puzzlement at the peculiarity of Aboriginal non-cultivation thus turned into outright consternation as Enlightenment humanism and the conception of human unity that it supported were put fundamentally into question.

III

Whilst, in 1848, the Scottish Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Hamilton Smith claimed that it was 'the Papuan of Australia ... in many respects, the most sunken of all human beings' who raised, in his words, 'the problem of the identity of species' (1848: 207), polygenists such as Knox and Hunt in England, and Nott and Gliddon, among others, in North America, went further⁸. They drew upon the work of craniologists and phrenologists such as Samuel Morton and George Combe in order to locate an explanation for the miserable condition of certain peoples in the size and the shape of their skull, as it was taken to reflect the capacity of the mind in its power of reasoning or 'ideality'. The thesis of an innate racial difference was elaborated and supported against the 'fashionable tone of thinking ... that national character depends on external circumstances ... and the different circumstances in which men are placed; and that the *native* stock of animal, moral, and intellectual powers on which these operate, is the same in New Holland, in England, in Hindustan, and in France' (Combe 1853: 327). As we have indicated, for Knox, as for many others, race became everything exactly because it came to be thought as independent of external conditions. And, pitched explicitly against what he referred to as 'the laborious writings of Dr Prichard' (1850: 23), Knox announced: 'call them Species, if you will: call them permanent Varieties; it matters not. The fact, the simple fact, remains just as it was: men are of different races' (1850: 2).

Crucial in the elaboration of this idea of race was the figure of the Australian Aborigine. Beyond contentions that the 'condensed picture' of separate speciation offered by the 'insular continent' of New Holland provided exemplary support for the argument that there had been distinct 'centres of creation' (Agassiz 1854: lxxiii), it was in an extension of the observation, taken here from John Nott, that 'the natives of Australia differ from any other race of man in features, complexion, habits and language' (Nott and Gliddon 1854: 433), that Hamilton-Smith's 'problem of the identity of species' received an unambiguous polygenist response⁹. Knox himself –

⁸ Here, we are compelled to leave aside the wider European discourse of race, which includes figures such as Carl Vogt (whose *Lectures on Man: His Place in Creation, and in the History of the Earth* (1864), was edited by James Hunt), who stated:

We find that there is an almost regular series in the cranial capacity of such nations and races as, since historical times, have taken little or no part in civilisation. Australians, Hottentots, and Polynesians, nations in the lowest state of barbarism, commence the series; and no-one can deny that the place they occupy in relation to cranial capacity and cerebral weights corresponds with the degree of their intellectual capacity and civilization (1864: 91-2).

⁹ Knox too remarked upon the extent of human diversity in the following terms:

That the southern hemisphere of this globe should differ in many respects from the northern in its fauna and flora, will cause no surprise to men in quest of truth; but that it differs so widely as it

despite focusing mainly on Africa, which he claimed to know best – could not avoid invoking a source who stated ‘that the native Australian race differed in an extraordinary manner from the European’ (1850: 2). The crania of the ‘the Tasmanians and Australian races’, Knox observed, ‘show many peculiarities of structure’ (1850: 227). He later went on to refer to Richard Owen’s report on a collection of skulls shipped from Australia to the British Museum, stating that: ‘It is only with regard to the Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines that [Owen] could feel any confidence in detecting the distinctive characters of race’ (Knox 1863: 269).

It was, however, not simply the ‘peculiarity’ of Australia’s inhabitants that prompted the polygenist thesis. Rather, such a thesis was formulated precisely in view of the apparent miserableness of the Aborigines’ living conditions and, we will argue now, specifically in response to the otherwise inexplicable fact that they did not – and apparently could or would not – transcend nature by cultivating either their environment or themselves. For it was exactly the Aborigines’ inability to improve that came to be explained in innatist terms, and with reference to craniology and phrenology, following repeated attempts by the colonial powers in Australia to civilise them: explicitly, to convert them to Christianity and to persuade them to cultivate the land.

In the context of Enlightenment assumptions about the inevitable progress of all peoples, including savages, Governor Macquarie had been optimistic about the possibility of the Aborigines’ improvement: ‘these people appear to possess some Qualities, which, if properly Cultivated and Encouraged, Might render them not only less wretched and destitute by Reason of their Wild wandering and Unsettled Habits, but progressively Useful to the Country’ (cited in Reynolds 1989: 104). And efforts to civilise the Aborigines were made throughout the 1820s and 1830s, with a broad-based endeavour that linked their civilisation to Christianisation, settlement and cultivation (Gascoigne 2002).

Typically, the idea of ‘inducing them to give up their wandering’ (Colonial Department 1834: 161, 158) and grouping them on missions was, according to the *Report of the Inquiry into the Forcible Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission [HREOC] 1997), ‘based on the notion that Indigenous people would willingly establish self-sufficient agricultural communities on reserved areas modelled on an English village’ (no page number). In a letter in July 1840 from three members of a mission in New South Wales to the Colonial Land and Emigration Office in London, it was, for example, suggested that reserves of land would supply the ‘best means’ for enabling Aborigines ‘to pass from the hunting to the agricultural and pastoral life ... wherever they have been induced by any means to abandon their wandering habits’ (Colonial Office 1844: 61). It was argued that such ‘reserves ... would enable them to live not as hunters, in which case no good would be done, but as cultivators of the soil’ (Colonial Office 1844: 62).

really does, is not generally known, and still less believed. When I describe the Bosjeman and Hottentot, the Australian and Tasmanian, then will be the proper time to unfold this great fact: that the races of everything living ... differ from the northern (1850: 125-6).

Macquarie himself established a so-called 'Native Institution' in Parramatta, New South Wales, in 1814, for the 'civilization of the native black children', although it operated for just four years. Some time later, and after the second such Institution had been closed, it was observed that this attempt to 'settle them on a portion of land' had failed entirely (Archdeacon Broughton, cited in Colonial Department 1836: 14). Despite a number of accounts indicating 'the decided improvement' of Aborigines in regions and districts where they had been induced to remain for a fixed amount of time, there were many more reports of 'little change' among the Aborigines (Colonial Office 1844: 176, 182, 199). Whilst the superintendent of a mission in Victoria, for example, insisted, against mounting evidence of the failure of missions in the Australian colonies, that 'the means which have been so successful among the Indians in America, the Hottentots in Africa, and the Cannibal Islands of the South Seas, will, by the blessing of God, if faithfully used, produce the same effects among this people also' (Colonial Office 1844: 243-4), attempts to convert and more generally to civilise the Aborigines were proving as futile as Macquarie's 'Native Institution'. One commissioner for crown lands in New South Wales, summarised this view in 1843: 'From their present mode of living, and the great dislike the blacks have to civilized life, I do not consider that there is any great hope that their future prospects will improve' (Colonial Office 1844: 334).

In 1844, Captain George Grey conceded to the British government that the Aborigines had 'resisted all efforts which have been made for their civilization' (Colonial Office 1844: 100). And whilst Grey, along with others, proposed that yet further efforts should be made, the very possibility of their civilisation was now in serious doubt. The residual optimism of Grey and others was not, for example, shared by Lord Stanley, Secretary of the Colonial Office in London, who stated that: 'it seems impossible any longer to deny that the efforts which have hitherto been made for the civilization of the aborigines have been unavailing; that no real progress has yet been effected, and that there is no reasonable ground to expect from them greater success in the future ...' (20 December 1842, cited in Colonial Office 1844: 221). Stanley, however, could still not bring himself to reach the polygenist conclusions that others soon would. But, just a year later, in a report from a select committee appointed to assess 'the condition of the Aborigines in New South Wales' (Colonial Office 1845), it was exactly these conclusions that were anticipated, as the colonists' initial bewilderment at the peculiarly non-cultivating Aborigine was recalled.

As the committee's chair invoked a certain 'wanting in their minds' in order to explain the evident failure of policies directed towards Aboriginal civilisation (Colonial Office 1845: 20), so the committee's enquiries may be read as struggling to pose the question – if not to propose the thesis – that the Aborigines were uniquely incapable of improvement in general, and of cultivation in particular. Reverend Polding, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, was asked: 'Are you not aware that all the tribes of Indians, in America, have been accustomed in their native state to cultivate the ground?' On the point of a failure to 'hold' the Aborigines to the soil, even on reserves, another member of the committee asked: 'Can you account for the difference of success that has attended the missionaries' efforts with regard to New South Wales, as compared with all the neighbouring islands-does it not appear an anomaly of an inscrutable character?' (1845: 8-9). Clearly, it was a unique incapacity for improvement that was suspected; as the Aborigines had become not just a

peculiarity for the European settlers and scientists but an ‘anomaly’ for the colonial authorities.

Confounding all attempts to civilise them, and so putting into question the doctrine of a universal human improvability, the Aborigines’ difference could no longer be explained in environmental/Enlightenment terms – particularly as many observers were to argue, in view of the agricultural improvements that the Europeans had apparently managed to achieve in Australia¹⁰. Recourse to the thesis, intimated by the select committee’s enquiries, of an innate deficiency among the Aborigines came to provide the only possible explanation for their continued failure to improve either themselves or the land. And it was observations such as Combe’s, that ‘in Van Diemen’s Land and New South Wales a few natives have existed in the most wretched poverty, ignorance, and degradation, in a country which enriches Europeans as fast as they subject it to cultivation’ (1853: 332), that became the very basis upon which the argument for an innate deficiency among Australia’s Aborigines was expounded.

An anonymous essay published in 1843 in *The New South Wales Magazine* declared what was to become the dominant explanation: that ‘all attempts to civilize the savage are futile’ because of a ‘deficiency in [their] reflective faculties’ (1843: 58-9). Confirmation that a biological difference, unique to the ‘Australian race’, provided the explanation for their continuing savagery was also to be found in the case of the ‘half-caste’. In a statement that anticipated later colonial policy in Australia, the question was raised:

How is it that the half-caste remains with the white, while the pure black under similar circumstances returns to savage life? I am at a loss for any other explanation than this: that the faculties of the half-caste are of a different order from those of the pure black ... and consequently, that nature is too powerful in the other case to be subdued by any change of circumstance (1843: 59).

By 1866, a reviewer in the British-based *Popular Magazine of Anthropology* of Gideon S. Lang’s *The Aborigines of Australia* was able to interpret that book as vindication of what was by then accepted to be ‘the world-wide fact that the savage hunter is irreclaimable by the civilized man’ (Anonymous 1866: 50). The Australian savage, the reviewer went on to argue, was not an ‘uncultured type of civilized man’, one ‘who may be schooled in civilisation’, but instead was a lost cause. And, in the claim of an essential Aboriginal deficiency that was, as we will show now, generalised, it was precisely a certain humanism that could no longer be taken for granted: ‘In the animal sphere we readily admit that there are both birds and beasts that practically defy domestication ... But we are backward in applying this principle to man’ (1866: 59).

It was the ‘sciences’ of craniology and phrenology that set about explaining the supposed deficiency of Australia’s Aborigines, locating its source in, as Combe put it, ‘the structure of the head’ (1853: 335). Observing that ‘[t]he New Holland skull’ was the most deficient in a variety of respects, including ‘Number, Constructiveness,

¹⁰ Although, as Warwick Anderson (2002) has pointed out, the colonisation of south eastern Australia was no confident act of mastery, but a difficult and anxious exercise of reconciling the mismatch British colonists perceived between themselves and a land in which they felt acutely alienated.

Reflection, and Ideality' (1853: 240), Combe 'supported' his analysis with the 'evidence' that had impelled it. He referred to the accounts of Australian explorers and settlers, making particular note of their observations about the Aborigines' 'lack of housing' and their 'lack of acquaintance with any species of grain', as well as referring to Governor Phillips' failure to 'effect the civilization of that miserable people' (1853: 240). Nott too linked evidence that '[t]he races of New Holland and the island of Timor ... represent the lowest grade in the human family' to what he called their 'remarkable ... anatomical characteristics' (1854: 434). He continued, drawing now on Morton: 'While, in countenance, they present an extreme of the prognathous type hardly above that of the orang-outan, they possess at the same time the smallest brains of the whole of mankind' (1854: 434).

It was in offering 'the lowest and most degraded picture of wretched humanity, scarcely rising in their grovelling and debased dispositions above the level of the very brutes', that Australia's Aborigines were considered to offer a unique opportunity for craniological and phrenological study (Aeneas 1844: 156). As measurements of the shape of Aboriginal skulls and the size of their brains were correlated to observations about their savage condition, so Australia's Aborigines came to provide apparently definitive evidence for the thesis of an essential difference between all races, as well as for the claim of an innate, and so permanent, deficiency in some. As Knox, for example, invoked 'specific characters in the quality of the brain' in order to formulate his own theory of 'a physical and, consequently, a psychological inferiority in the dark races generally' (1850: 224-5), it was according to a rationale and a set of criteria derived from the extreme case of the Australian Aborigine that polygenism was generalised to all races but most significantly, of course, to what Knox called 'the dark races'.

In the production of a scale of mental (in)capacity that constituted a hierarchy of the world's races, the Australian Aborigines assumed a referential place; as the 'Negro' and other 'types of mankind' were considered and assessed in relation to them. For Morton, as Nott cited him, the 'Australians' (as members of the 'Negro' group) came bottom of a 'Table, Showing the Size of the Brain in cubic inches, as obtained from the measurement of 623 Crania of various Races and Families of Men', with a mean cranial capacity of 75 cubic inches (Nott and Gliddon 1854: 450). This compared to that of the 'Negro Races', with a mean of 83, the 'American Tribes', with a mean of 84, and the 'English' with a mean of 96 cubic inches (1854: 450). And for Combe, albeit less formally, the lowly position of the 'New Hollander' supported his further consideration of, for example, the 'New Zealanders', who were placed above the New Hollanders on account of the fact that they cleared trees and hewed wood, and cultivated potatoes and corn (1853: 344), and the 'Negroes', who were placed above the 'New Zealanders' owing to 'a concentration of mind which is favourable to settled and sedentary employments' (1853: 352). And so on.

It is not merely the fact that the Australian Aborigines were accorded the lowest position in such racial hierarchies that is significant here. Rather, as we have argued, it is in framing and supporting what, in contrast to Enlightenment social contract and stadial theory, was a hierarchy of innate and so permanent racial incapacity, that the Australian Aborigine may be seen as a key figure in the nineteenth century shift to polygenism. Shattering the monogenism that Prichard sought to preserve, this figure was integral to the subsequent elaboration and generalisation of an innatist idea of

race through Combe's, Morton's and others' versions of craniology and phrenology. To be clear, therefore, it was the *unaccountability* – in humanist terms – of the extremely miserable condition of the Aborigines that gave rise to the supposition of an innate difference among peoples. As the human achievement (or lack of achievement) in transcending nature became correlated to differences in the size and shape of the skull, so a peoples' capacity (or incapacity) for civilisation could be measured and compared.

It was, therefore, as these craniological and phrenological calculations came to provide the basis upon which polygenism was generalised that the miserable condition of the Aborigine appeared not only as the paradigmatic support for a determinist idea of race, but as constitutive of the very terms in which it was thought and extended to all peoples. And, most pervasively, to the 'negro' – as in the pro-slavery reader *Negro-Mania* (1851), for example, it was argued that:

... never at any given time from the most infinitely remote antiquity until now, has there ever appeared a race of Negroes, that is, men with woolly heads, flat noses, thick and protruding lips, who has ever emerged from a state of savagism or barbarism, to even a demi-civilization – look to the West Indies, to Brazil, to Australia. (Campbell 1851: 6-7)

Exactly because of what came to be seen as an innate and permanent racial deficiency among the Australians, and now among all 'savages', 'the dark races' were no longer expected to change or improve. Supporting his calculation that the 'Australians' have the 'smallest brains', Morton contended: 'It is not probable that these people ['The Australian Family'], as a body, are capable of any other than a very slight degree of civilisation' (1839: 94). And, he continued: 'Forty years have elapsed since the country was colonised ... and I have not yet heard of a single native having been reclaimed from barbarism' (1839: 94). Regarding the possibility of their civilisation, and in a strident rebuttal of Enlightenment developmentalism, Knox declared, 'I should say not' (1850: 244); that they may be converted by education into white men is, he later added, 'an entire delusion' (1863: 268).

The polygenist thesis of permanent racial difference – in Hunt's words, the idea that 'from the very earliest dawn of history, races have existed as they are now' (1866: 326) – had thus come to anticipate the argument for racial destiny. In a letter to Hunt in 1865, James Bonwick in Australia stated categorically in relation to the Aborigines: 'I see no hope of their so-called civilization and Christianity. We do not improve them. There are those here who are obliged to acknowledge the force of your arguments' (1866).

IV

As the legacy of polygenism for Aboriginal peoples in Australia itself attests (see for example, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission J 997; McGregor J 997), '[t]he notion of the permanence of racial elements' persisted through the explicitly monogenist framework of evolutionism in the late-nineteenth century, to eugenics, and beyond (Stepan 1982: 96). And, in drawing out this legacy, and the crucial place of the Aborigine in its elaboration, it is the limits of evolutionary theory's explicit reversion to monogenism that we now take up. The unimproved – and unimproving – Aborigine, we will now argue, constituted a referential figure in

the most extreme determinism that came to characterise thinking about racialised difference towards the end of the nineteenth century.

As Butcher writes in refuting the distinction between Darwinism and Social Darwinism, Australian anthropological materials shaped the Darwinian view of the human and human evolution: ‘the roots of some of Darwin’s ideas on human evolution are to be found in his use, over a period of some thirty years, of material sent to him from Australia’ (1994: 389). Here, however, and without wishing to add to what Bowler has referred to as ‘the Darwin industry’ (1992a: 297), it is Alfred Russell Wallace who will be given more attention in view of his strong and earlier interest in race, as well as his pervasive influence on subsequent accounts of human evolution.

Darwin had paid scant attention to ‘the human’ in his *Origin of Species* (1859), but he developed the theme in his book *Descent of Man* published in 1871. Implying, if not arguing, that the process of human physical evolution, from *homo erectus* through Neanderthal man and onwards to (what are now called) anatomically modern *homo sapiens*, was embedded in the trajectory of a general progress of life towards higher levels of organisation and consciousness (see Ingold 1995), Darwin understood the hallmarks of the contemporary human to be an upright posture and an enlarged brain; the latter of which had evolved, it was asserted, to exploit the tool-making capacities of hands that were now freed from the task of locomotion. Darwin, then, took it as given that the steady expansion of the brain continued the progressive thread that ran through the whole evolution of life.

For Wallace, as well as for the cultural evolutionists and evolutionary anthropologists who followed him, it was ‘mental’ growth – correlated with, and calibrated upon, such an expansion of the brain – and not physical development, that constituted the essential story of human evolution. Human physical development was thus seen as having been ‘completed’ some time ago (Stepan 1982: 85). And it was in the thesis that physical – including racial – development preceded a distinctively human form of mental evolution and of socio-economic development, that ‘racial types could be thought of as extremely old and fixed’ (Stepan 1982: 85).

In its explicit monogenism, evolutionary theory imported an Enlightenment style of explanation to account for human physical difference. For Wallace, in his influential paper ‘The Origin of the Human Races and the Antiquity of Man Deduced from the Theory of Natural Selection’ (1864), ‘all the differences that now appear’ among peoples were considered to have been the product of varying ‘climate, food and habits’ (1864: clix). But, compromising Wallace’s putative return to a notion of human unity, and to the idea of race as a human subdivision, ‘raciation’ – as he termed it – had indeed been determined long ago.

At some point, he suggested that, when humans ‘had the form but hardly the nature of man’ (Wallace 1864: c1xvi), natural selection would cease to operate on the body, as

... there came into existence a being in whom that subtle force we term mind became of greater importance than his mere bodily structure ... [T]his wonderful faculty taught him to govern and direct nature to his own benefit... From the moment when the first skin was used as a covering, when the first rude spear was formed to assist in the chase, the first seed sown or shoot planted, a grand

revolution was effected in nature, a revolution which in all the previous ages of the earth's history had had no parallel, for a being had arisen who was no longer necessarily subject to change with the changing universe--a being who was in some degree superior to nature, inasmuch as he knew how to control and regulate her action, and could keep himself in harmony with her, not by change in body, but by advance of mind. Here, then, we see the true grandeur and dignity of man (1864: c1xviii).

In re-articulating the humanist ontology that we are concerned here to problematise, Wallace correlated a distinctively human, mental, form of evolution with an increasing separation from and mastery over nature. And, as the more or less classical idea of savagery that here provides a counterpoint to what Wallace was to term 'the higher ... races' indicates, what he referred to as the 'lower and more degraded races' were exactly those who could be characterised as at this 'zero point' of human evolution (1864: c1xv).

For Wallace, and for those who drew upon his account of human evolution, it was 'the Australians' who constituted this zero point insofar as they were considered to be 'the lowest [race] of our modern epoch' (1864: c1xvii). As we will see now, it was as this evolutionary understanding of race was figured and confirmed with reference to Australia and its intractable peoples, that the determinist legacy of polygenism came to inform Wallace's and others' conception of a distinctively human evolution. For Wallace's argument did not imply, as the social contract and stadial theorists had, that all peoples had the capacity to develop. Rather, according to the relative permanence of racial difference the development of certain races was considered to have been 'arrested' at that point where the mental capacity of others had started to evolve. It was, then, as Australia and its indigenous people came to be regarded as representative of the earliest stage of evolution that the Aborigines occupied a crucial place in Wallace's argument and in its further elaboration: as paradigmatic figures of this attenuated evolutionary process.

Recalling the earliest suspicion that the Australian continent may have been an entirely separate creation, the thesis of Australia's isolation informed the claim not only for its general peculiarity but now also for its antiquity (McCabe 1910). Just as Australia's eucalypts and wattles were regarded as primitive types of vegetation, and its monotremes and marsupials were considered the oldest and lowest class of mammals (see Ritvo 1997), so, apparently, 'if it be true that the continent of Australia is the oldest portion of the earth's surface, it can well be understood how it is that its aboriginal inhabitants are the most uncivilised races of mankind' (Wake 1867: cv).

Again, our concern in this respect is not simply with the well-documented fact that the Aborigines were seen as archaic or, more specifically, that they were invoked as a precursor to the distinctively human development that, for evolutionary theory, had simply passed them by (see, for example, McGregor 1997). Rather, it is the persistent humanist concern with the figure of the unimproved, and unimprovable, Aborigine that we wish to document. For it was with reference to the Aborigine's extreme miserableness that the very thesis was formulated that, at a certain historical moment, 'the human' had evolved out of nature and on to civilisation. This thesis was formulated according to the idea that variations in this human evolutionary process

could be identified with, and calibrated upon, a *racial* difference. It was, then, according to this effectively permanent difference (or deficiency) that certain races came to be regarded as belonging to the past, rather than to the future, of the evolutionary process. In anticipation of this conclusion, it was exactly in the evolutionists' insistent obsession with the human capacity (or incapacity) to rise above nature that the Aborigine – or more particularly now, the Tasmanian – became the pivotal figure in the evolutionists' own formulation of a hierarchy of races.

Consistent with Wallace's emphasis upon human mental evolution, and its essential correlation with the improvement of nature, it was a comparative analysis of the implements of this improvement that pre-occupied so-called cultural evolutionists such as E. B. Tylor and Lt.-Gen. Pitt-Rivers. And it was again the Australian Aborigine who supported and framed the comparative schemas they elaborated. On his own collection of implements, Pitt-Rivers, for example, stated in 1870 that: 'In every instance in which I have attempted to arrange my collection in sequence, so as to trace the higher forms from natural forms, the weapons of the Australians have found their place lowest in the scale, because they assimilate most closely to the natural forms' (cited in Mulvaney 1981: 54). Tylor's more sustained focus was the onset of the human's socio-cultural development, which presented for him the task of reconstructing the past out of its traces or 'survivals' in the present. Again after Wallace, Tylor referred to this socio-cultural development as 'Man's power over Nature' (1865: 190) and, turning his attention to the various 'stages' through which humans had culturally evolved, he attended particularly to the 'quality of stone implements' (1865: 201).

The unimproved Aborigine provided the basis for Tylor's argument. The inhabitants of Australia, he argued, lived in 'original Stone Age conditions' (1865: 204) and were 'the most peculiar of the lower varieties of Man' (1865: 371). Or again: 'If there have remained anywhere up to modern times men whose condition has changed little since the early Stone Age, the Tasmanians seem to have been such a people. They stand before us as a branch of the Negroid race illustrating the condition of man near his lowest known level of culture' (1899: v). Tylor deduced that 'the Tasmanians were at a somewhat less advanced stage in the art of stone implement making than the Palaeolithic men of Europe' (1899: v). In other aspects too, he argued, the Tasmanians 'give an idea of conditions of the earliest prehistoric tribes' (1899: vi). For Tylor, the archaic Tasmanian was construed as approximating human origins more faithfully than other people on earth. And, noting that '[t]he life of these savages proves to be ... undeveloped ... so much so that the distinction of being the lowest of the normal tribes may be claimed for them' (1894: 152), it was with the Australian – or the Tasmanian – as his referent that Tylor articulated the general thesis of a progressive *human* evolution: 'few would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in order of culture: Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, the Italian' (Tylor 1958 [1871]: 27).

Although similar hierarchies were articulated by other evolutionists, including John Lubbock and Lewis Henry Morgan, these again have to be distinguished from those proposed by the stadial theorists in the eighteenth century. For although Tylor, for example, was – as his comparative method demanded – an avowed monogenist, he nevertheless wrote:

There seems to be in mankind inbred temperament and inbred capacity of mind. History points to the great lesson that some races have marched on in civilization while others have stood still 'or fallen back, and we should partly look for an explanation of this in differences of intellectual and moral powers (cited in Bowler 1992b: 727).

In this respect, and clearly with the Tasmanians and the Australians in mind, Tylor employed an idea of race that at least compromised his monogenism. But other evolutionists, who had also invoked race in a way that equated differences in physicality or livelihood with a distinct or deficient 'inbred' mental power or capacity (see for example Morgan 1877: 17-18), were even less inhibited in taking up the legacy of polygenism. For Wallace, mental capacity developed after 'raciation' – as itself an aspect of human physical evolution – had already occurred. But, as we have intimated, it was in this ongoing human development, which took place in the progressive exercise of the human intellect, that Wallace nevertheless posited further 'evolution': in 'brain size and complexity' and, he added, along with 'corresponding changes of form to the cranium' (1864: c1xvii).

For Wallace, and for Morgan among others, the human's cultural evolution was also a cranial evolution. Just as the affinities between evolutionary theory and polygenism were already evident in the idea of a racially determined capacity for mental development, so craniology could now be pressed into evolutionary service.

In parallel with Tylor's culturally materialist attempts to map the Aborigine onto the evolutionary past, Thomas Huxley had already claimed that the skulls of Australians – whom he referred to as 'the lowest and most degraded in rank of any which can claim humanity' – 'are wonderfully near the degraded type of the Neanderthal skull' (1862: 166). In this respect, however, it was not only that the size of the skull was measured and understood as an index of mental superiority/inferiority. Precisely, what was being calculated was no abstract intellectual faculty; but rather the capacity, in humanist terms, to exercise a civilising agency over nature. And it was as craniology returned to evaluate this capacity, and so again to facilitate its comparison with observations of relative 'development', that the impact of the Australian Aborigine on evolutionary theory proved as formative as it had been for polygenism.

Bolstered by the legacy of the polygenist equation between the unimproved condition of the Aborigines and the size and shape of their skulls, the procurement of Aboriginal remains continued apace in the late nineteenth century (Tumbull 1997)¹¹. W. Duckworth, a physical anthropologist from Cambridge, for example, concluded that on numerous measures of cranial capacity the Tasmanian skull was the smallest, followed by the Australian, the North American Indian, the Negro, the New Zealander, and the Ancient Peruvian (Duckworth 1894; see also 1895, 1898, 1902). In 1873, S. Bradley offered his 'Note on the Peculiarities of the Australian Cranium' to the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, and an audience that included its president, John Lubbock. And in 1885, O. Thomas presented his study of a collection of male and female skulls of the 'low Australoid natives of the Torres

¹¹ Here, again, we will have to leave aside the wider European discourse, which at this time included such figures as Ernst Haeckel who, on the strength of cranial evidence, noted that: 'the lowest stage of all the straight-haired men, and on the whole perhaps of all the still living human species, is occupied by the Australian or Austral-negro (*Homo Australis*)' (1883: 314).

Straits Islands’, concluding that one of them ‘may be taken as a type of the lowest and most simian human cranium likely to occur at present’ (1885: 336). In the same year, finally, Darwin himself was to invoke craniology and its derivation of a racial hierarchy of mental (in)capacity: ‘Dr. J. Barnard Davis has proved, by many careful measurements, that the mean internal capacity of the skull in Europeans is 92.3 cubic inches: in Americans 87.5; in Asiatics 87.1; and in Australians only 81.9 cubic inches’ (cited in Gould 1997: 77).

As such ‘measurements’ were consistently correlated to the Aborigines’ lack of improvement, again it was their incapacity – albeit now traced to their insufficient mental evolution – that was elicited. In the craniological elaboration of the Australians’ apparently arrested development, for example – taken here from *The Australian Anthropological Journal* – it was stated that:

Some of the differences which exist between the lower races and the higher races of men are produced by the arrest of the growth of the cortical substance upon the anterior lobes of the brain by the closure at an earlier age in the lower races of the sutures of the fore-part of the cranium, which is not so in the higher races¹² (Anonymous 1897:110-111).

Here, the predictable, and now barely reworked polygenist, conclusion followed: owing to this cranial deficiency, and in the absence of its correction, ‘no permanent or general change or improvement can be brought about in these lower races’ (Anonymous 1897: 111).

Despite the evolutionists’ belief in the unity of humankind, there was, therefore, no return to an Enlightenment idea of the improvability of all peoples. And, for Wallace as well as for many others, it was the Aborigines’ apparent lack of ‘mental power’, and so their inability to evolve intellectually, morally and socio-economically, which informed the notorious evolutionary thesis of the ‘inevitable extinction’ of the savage races (1864: c1xv). ‘If my conclusions are just’, Wallace stated:

... it must inevitably follow that the higher – the more intellectual and moral – must displace the lower and more degraded races; and the power of ‘natural selection’ still acting on his mental organisation, must ever lead to the more perfect adaptation of man’s higher faculties to the conditions of surrounding nature, and to the exigencies of the social state (1864: c1xix).

Here, Wallace drew upon general observations concerning the supposedly more advanced, and so relatively superior, character of European life forms--remarking, for example, that ‘the weeds of Europe overrun North America and Australia, extinguishing native productions by the inherent vigour of their organisation, and by their greater capacity for existence and multiplication’ (1864: c1xv). Others too invoked the Australian Aborigine and the Tasmanian in order not just to support, but to formulate, the argument that those who had not managed to turn nature to their own ends were destined to give way to those who had.

¹² The same author went on to correlate the ‘arrested growth’ of the Aboriginal cranium with a lack of improvement that, of course, this cranial analysis purported to explain: ‘The blacks have been for thousands of years roaming over the plains and forest lands of Australia, and have died without leaving any buildings, gardens, farms or erections of a permanent character’ (Anonymous 1903: 34).

James Bonwick, who had declared the innate fact of Aboriginal unimprovability some twenty or so years earlier drew exactly this conclusion. Observing that ‘the race, as a race, is not rising ... [that] Australian aborigines ... are descending to the grave’, it was in a testament to the persistence of race – its importance accentuated rather than diminished by its awkward, but still relentless, passage through evolutionary theory – that Bonwick was able both to legitimate and to generalise what now appeared to be the only ‘future’ imaginable for Australia’s persistently anomalous inhabitants: ‘Old races everywhere give place to the new’ (1887: 207, 210).

In this article we have sought to develop the argument that the ‘peculiar’, ‘anomalous’ and finally the ‘anachronistic’ figure of the Aborigine occupied a singularly influential place in nineteenth century racial discourse. Supposedly the ‘miserablest’ of all savages, the Aborigine challenged the humanism that had formerly sustained the Enlightenment assumption that humankind was a single species. When, during the early nineteenth century, colonial accounts of Australia’s indigenous peoples impacted upon the efforts of ethnologists and others who were concerned to explain the origins and diversity of humankind, this assumption floundered. By the mid-nineteenth century, the apparently unimproved, and now evidently unimproving, Aborigine had impelled the opposing thesis: that race did not merely name a variety of the human, but rather an essential and immutable difference according to which the different races constituted permanent ‘types’, or even distinct species. It was, finally, the legacy of this polygenist argument that compromised evolutionary theory’s explicit reversion to an assumption of human unity. The Aborigine was invoked as paradigmatic of the very fixity that in the late-nineteenth century was attributed to racial difference. And, endowed with an inherent inability to evolve that was then generalised to what were regarded as the ‘lower races’, the Australian Aborigine came to embody the thesis that, in the interests of a distinctively human evolution, some peoples were destined only for extinction.

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