Mark Francis

Social Darwinism and the Construction of Institutionalised Racism in Australia

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The period 1880-1920 was one in which the Aborigines were incapable of successful resistance to white political institutions. The ‘invasion’ of Australia had been opposed by the indigenous people, but they were, for the most part, defeated remnants by 1880. Open opposition ceased to be a possibility; the Aborigines were incapable of military or political resistance, and there were few signs of the kind of covert resistance one can find among other indigenous people in phenomena such as ghost dancing or the heavy investment in the reinforcement of cultural identity as a substitute for political action. In the period in question, Aborigines, or at least those in the settled parts of the continent, lived according to the rules imposed upon them by the small group of officials, clergymen and ethnographers who interested themselves in their welfare. The word which most frequently springs out of the reports of Aboriginal protectors and other officials from this period is ‘control’ over people whom they ‘defined’ as Aborigines.

There are a number of possible topics of investigation which arise from this situation. One could, for example, look at how Aboriginal identities were affected by control. Or, one could examine how closely the pretence by officials to have control was mirrored by actual life on government stations. However, since I am looking at the theories behind the construction of institutions it is appropriate here to concentrate on the question of white bureaucratic attitudes. This is an attempt to discover why whites constructed these institutions, and how they justified this activity. In doing this I do not feel obliged to explain why Australian officials and politicians did not refer to possible legal resolutions of conflicts, as their contemporaries did in similar societies such as Canada and New Zealand — except to point out that there were few Australians in this period who offered a justification that the continent was theirs as terra nullius or by right of conquest. In the period in question, there was sometimes a vague sentiment that the seizure was unjust, but this was not articulated in juridical terms. That is, the sentiment did not spur colonial Australians into making legal justifications. This, in turn, suggests that analysis of legal language among Australians will not produce viable descriptions of racial language of the kind which, for example, Anthony Padgen has brought to bear on early Spanish treatment of Amerindians.

This article will also not explore other interesting lines of investigation such as why Aborigines were denied citizenship for a lengthy period of time. To do this would require a considerable investment in contemporary white notions of communal membership during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a separate area of enquiry. It is probably enough to say that when Aboriginal suffrage was omitted from the Australian constitution, this denial of citizenship was not defended or discussed. Probably the framers of that document believed that the hypothesis that an Aborigine should be a citizen was implausible though the formal debates were silent on this issue. So one is again thrown back on the proposition that official
behaviour towards Aborigines was not controlled by any thought that the indigenous subject of regulations possessed political rights, or, perhaps, even legal rights.

What does seem to be important in constraining or focusing official governance of Aborigines is science. That is, while the initial impulse for official action might have been philanthropic or evangelical, it was given some shape by being put into a scientific or quasi-scientific language. This idea has often been disinterred by Australian scholars, but, unfortunately, it has been narrowed down to a single strand of nineteenth-century evolutionary language, social Darwinism, whereas a more complete account would show competing evolutionary languages, and even non-evolutionary scientific perspectives. An undue concentration on one gripping doctrine is unfortunate not simply because it avoids the complexities of the history of science, but, because, as I will attempt to demonstrate, it was one of the least attractive scientific perspectives for the Australian official.

For those who are unaware that ‘social Darwinism’ is frequently invoked by Australian historians and anthropologists, I should remark that it is well entrenched in the writings of prominent scholars such as Henry Reynolds and D.J. Mulvaney. Following in their footsteps, other scholars have re-iterated this idea. For example, Richard Broome comments that ‘social Darwinism’ came to be widely accepted in Australia by the 1880s. After all, he continued, ‘“the survival of the fittest” seemed to explain what many white Australians already believed; that some races were better than others, and the weaker ones faded away’. Another scholar, Andrew Markus, almost escaped from this interpretation when he distinguished between ‘Spencerianism’, which he claimed was the type of race theory which predominated in Australia, and social Darwinism. He correctly distinguished between the work of Charles Darwin, as primarily concerned with biological change, and writers such as Herbert Spencer, who focused more on social evolution. However, after having made this important emendation, Markus lapsed into a Reynolds-like account. Forgetting Spencer, he claimed that, during the 1880s, the diffusion of social Darwinism in Australia provided colonists with a world view which gave race the primacy of place. There are scholars who do not use ‘social Darwinism’. For example, Bain Attwood and Nicolas Peterson, who attempt to correct this theory in a delicate way by suggesting that perhaps social Darwinism was applied in an indirect rather than a direct fashion, or by suggesting that there were non-evolutionary ethnographers who were of importance. Even more subtle is the refusal of the Australian anthropologist, Nicholas Thomas, to engage in any discussion of the scientific term ‘evolution’ which he employs in his work. ‘I take the view that meanings subsist in the use of concepts in texts, rather than in authorised pronouncements which may bear little relation to the order of a discourse’. Regina Ganter and Ros Kidd in their article on Queensland protectors are more open in their argument and suggest that general welfare policies and control mechanisms were as important as racialism, but they confine themselves chiefly to analysing the practice of the administration and do not address themselves to styles of racial theory. In a sense, Attwood and the others are engaged in a kind of muted revisionism. However, these cautious procedures are of little use now that Mulvaney, in a recent issue of Aboriginal History has authoritatively pronounced social Darwinism to be a paradigm. In response to this, stronger measures are now called for; there is a whiff of ‘normal science’ in the air.

It is a necessary strategy, when challenging this paradigm, to critique the most
popular exponent of it, Henry Reynolds. It is difficult to criticise Reynolds’ views because, while they appear to be recent, they are fragments of an intellectual debate which belongs more to A.O. Lovejoy and to a style of intellectual history which was common during the 1940s. Reynolds, like Lovejoy, relies on a cataclysmic shift in the European mind. First, it is imagined there was a time which the great chain of being linked all creatures together, and provided a static overarching framework. Second, it is believed that this was suddenly replaced by an evolutionary science which described how animal species, including discrete human races, competed in a struggle which doomed some to extinction.  

Reynolds’ claims about racial ideology in Australia have a general and a specific form. The first of these is an expression of regret that racism flourished in late nineteenth-century Australia, and that the same prejudices were re-cycled well into the twentieth century. In a second, and more specific, claim, he suggests that Australians were in the grip of a single quasi-scientific racial ideology which can be accurately described by the phrase ‘social Darwinism’. This doctrine, he believes, informed popular prejudice and structured the policy of colonial and, later, state governments in their dealings with Aborigines. Reynolds adds that there had been an early form of racism, but this had been supplanted by the new ideology. Early scientific racism weakened the belief in racial equality in colonial Australia, social Darwinism undermined it altogether.

This article shares Reynolds’ belief, and his regret, that nineteenth-century white Australians were usually racist in their attitudes toward, and treatment of, Aborigines, and agrees that these features persisted into later periods. However, Reynolds’ more specific claim that racism was guided by a scientific ideology is not supported here. On the contrary, it is held that Reynolds’ approach is seriously flawed.

Reynolds begins his examination of the specific scientific ideology which he believes structured Australian racial thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a definition: ‘Social Darwinism incorporated the concept of race itself, the idea of a racial hierarchy and the commonly accepted grading of the world’s people’. This is a three-part definition, which, in association, with the name ‘Darwin’, proposes that there was a coherent doctrine which stressed that there were separate human races, ordered them in from the bottom to an evolutionary top, and that this was commonly believed. As a definition of social Darwinism this is idiosyncratic in two respects. First, it does not contain the idea that Darwin’s views were, at least, concerned with natural rather than artificial selection. To put this in another way, Darwin’s theory of natural selection meant that he focused upon environmental pressures which allowed some individuals to have more descendants than others. To omit this feature of Darwin’s particular contribution to evolutionary theory means that there is no reason to invoke the name of Charles Darwin at all. It also obscures the actual debate which nineteenth-century scientists and ethnographers had when they did not invoke race theory, a hierarchy of races or natural selection. To put this in another way, Darwin’s theory of natural selection meant that he focused upon environmental pressures which allowed some individuals to have more descendants than others. To omit this feature of Darwin’s particular contribution to evolutionary theory means that there is no reason to invoke the name of Charles Darwin at all. It also obscures the actual debate which nineteenth-century scientists and ethnographers had when they did not invoke race theory, a hierarchy of races or natural selection. Second, there is nothing about ‘Darwinism’ which compelled nineteenth-century scientists to believe that human beings were divided into races which were like separate animal species, which would then compete with one another. When Reynolds claims that Charles Darwin’s associates, T.H. Huxley and Alfred Russel Wallace, were social Darwinists, he is simply wrong. He does not notice that Huxley rejected the work of physical anthropologists who claimed, on the basis of measurements of skulls, that there were separate human species. Nor does
Reynolds mention that Wallace believed that all human beings had evolved beyond the point where change was a matter of natural selection. Wallace believed that people could control their environment, and that, therefore, they could control change.

Since Reynolds uses a flawed and extremely loose definition of social Darwinism he is able to ‘prove’ it by reference to quite diverse and, occasionally, antagonistic scientists and writers. His list of ‘Darwinist’ scholars does not distinguish between the popular evolutionary writer, Henry Drummond, the British author of the *Ascent of Man* (1894), and Ernst Haeckel, the German philosopher and scientist, who wrote the *History of Creation* (1892). They were, however, quite dissimilar. The former was more of a populariser of the altruistic Herbert Spencer, than of Darwin, and the latter was indeed a harsh social Darwinist whose writings eventually helped forge a virulent German race doctrine. Herbert Spencer is also cited to support Reynolds’ ‘social Darwinism’ on the grounds that Spencer believed that evolutionary progress destroyed the ‘impulsiveness’ of early man. This is flawed because Spencer’s evocation of the psychology of ‘primitive’ man owed more to J. J. Rousseau than to Darwin, but, more significantly, it indicates that Reynolds has ignored one of the great divides of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory. That is, he fails to notice that Spencer believed that human beings were evolving beyond military competitiveness. Rather than Spencerianism supporting the violent repression of Aborigines by Australian settlers it held out the serene vision that European militarism was itself primitive and would disappear. Any nineteenth-century reader of Spencer would have been able to distinguish between this eirenic ideal and one which advocated violent struggle against other ethnic groups.

This leads to the crux of what is wrong with Reynolds’ approach to ‘social Darwinism’. It is not that he had missed some of the complexities which would be of interest only to professional historians of science; rather he has ignored some of the most important features of evolutionary thought. That is, some attention must be paid to the difference between theories of biological evolution and theories of cultural change. Darwin, is associated with the former, so, when his name is invoked in a definition, one would expect that it refers racist theories about subjects such as breeding, degeneration and miscegenation. The latter is different. Cultural evolution theories were often not concerned with the biological survival of individuals, but with the disappear ance of the mores, religion and technology of a people. This distinction is historically important. For example, it was a theory of cultural evolution which promoted the idea that Aborigines should be transformed into Christian workers which meant that the individuals would survive while their culture was eradicated. The biological individuals, or their descendants, would be part of a more developed culture. Some nineteenth-century scientists and social scientists, including followers of Herbert Spencer, believed that indigenous culture would wither away, but this did not imply that they saw this as part of a competition between individual numbers of different races.

It is crucial, when discussing social Darwinism, to keep in view some basic distinctions concerning nineteenth-century scientific attitudes; otherwise, there is a loss of historical discernment, and all nineteenth-century comment upon Aborigines begins to appear to be the same. This, indeed, is the consequence of Reynolds’ neologistic definition of social Darwinism. He is left with no way of distinguishing between James Bonwick’s literary lament for the Tasmanian Aborigines and Karl Lumholtz’s vicious and pseudo-scientific advice on why to distrust Queensland
Aborigines. The fact that the first was an innocuous figure who thought more often about Shakespeare and Walter Scott than about ethnicity and the latter was a gun-toting traveller in the bush is not mentioned. Similarly, Karl Pearson and James Collier are both cited as racists, even though the first was one of the handful of serious ‘scientific’ English race theorists while James Collier’s claim to fame was as the author of a popular history of Australia pastoralism.

When he deals with the specifically Australian past, Reynolds does not distinguish between officials who were scientists, such as Baldwin Spencer, who might have been expected to apply Darwinism in their dealings with Aborigines, and non-scientists, such as Ramsay Smith or Archibald Meston, who called for the protection of the indigenous people. These varied officials, together with murderous activities of the Queensland settlers during the last third of the nineteenth century, were all equally parts of ‘the new harsh Darwinian world’. The emergence of this world was concomitant with the destruction of the great chain of being, and is seen as one of the great ideological shifts; it is said to have wrecked the feeble attempts colonists were making to ameliorate ethnic relations. ‘Under the influence of social Darwinism hope of Aboriginal advancement died’. Much of my criticism of Reynolds relates to his 1987 book, Frontier, but he continues to propagate his belief that popular racism on the frontier derived from the ‘racial ideology’ which settlers brought with them. Reynolds’ broad brush strokes have created an imaginary synthesis in which late nineteenth-century Australians were inevitably pushed into creating a scientific ideology of race, an ideology so powerful that it erased the differences between scientific observation, philanthropic action, and overt racist hostility. Of course, the reality is: that the historical tableau of nineteenth-century colonies needs some fine brush work, that there was no great gulf between a Christian providential world and a racist scientific one, that social Darwinism did not kill the hope of Aboriginal advancement, and that white Australians, like many colonial peoples, created their own popular varieties of racialism. In addition, while their popularly elected governments often attempted to protect Aborigines, they also institutionalised ‘civilising’ and control mechanisms which were as cruel as the racial evils they were meant to eradicate.

Before any accurate historical work can be done on how varieties of science and pseudo-science impacted on the treatment of Aborigines, it is necessary to clear away the naive, but widely accepted, myth that ‘social Darwinism’ was a commonly accepted and functional racial ideology in colonial societies in Australia. I turn, therefore, to D.J. Mulvaney’s claims because he, more than anyone else, has constructed an argument and offered proof. That is, part of his biography of Baldwin Spencer is a case study of a scientist who knew exactly what Darwinism was, and who took this knowledge with him when he turned into an anthropologist, and then applied this ideology when he acquired autocratic powers to restructure ethnic relations in the Northern Territory shortly after the commonwealth government acquired responsibility for it in 1911. There was little question that Professor Spencer, as a scientist, knew what Darwinism was. When a student at Oxford he had been a protege of H.T. Mozely, who, in turn, was a great favourite of Charles Darwin whom he referred to as his ‘master’. Baldwin Spencer offered lectures on Darwinism around Melbourne. He corresponded with Alfred Russel Wallace, who had adhered to Darwinism when most Englishmen had edged away from that doctrine. Baldwin Spencer had even gone to Germany to meet Haeckel — the man who had
Social Darwinism

done most to move European social theory towards the doctrine. This is the case one could have constructed from the biography on Spencer, but the case which Mulvaney actually constructs is weaker. He observes that Spencer, when editing the work of Howitt and Fison — two ethnologists from the colony of Victoria — drew upon a social evolutionary perspective which condemned the Aboriginal race to ‘predestined extinction’. Mulvaney continued by saying that the ‘biological truth’ implicit in their pessimistic views was unquestioned by Baldwin Spencer, and that his welfare policies assumed racial extinction, or at least, a racial admixture which gradually filtered out ‘black’ blood.23

The chief problem implicit in Mulvaney’s argument is that the ‘predestined extinction’ is part of a nineteenth-century providential explanation of the fate of part of the human race, not of the natural selection theory propagated by Charles Darwin, Wallace and their scientific contemporaries. At this point, it would be useful to rehearse again a definition of ‘social Darwinism’ so that its prosaic naturalising features can be seen clearly. Social Darwinism was a doctrine of natural selection as distinct from artificial selection of the kind one found among plant and animal breeders. The ‘natural’ mechanism was competition or the struggle of some animals against others. The losers of the competition would have few descendants. Darwinism was a scientific process which affected outcomes without either human or divine intervention. In contrast to this, the work of Australian ethnographers, such as Howitt and Fison, should be seen in the context of late nineteenth-century colonial culture. In other words, their view of Aborigines was as moralistic as it was scientific.24

The other problem with the Mulvaney account is how to transfer the narrative account of anthropological knowledge to an administrative arena in which it effected the treatment of Aborigines. At first sight, Mulvaney’s task seems to be a simple one. After all, Professor Spencer was empowered to do what he liked in the town of Darwin, untrammelled by legal restraint or popular resistance from among the European population, the Aborigines, or the Asians. He set up a system for controlling Aborigines by transferring their camp to a place outside town, by imposing a curfew, by establishing prohibited areas, by instituting a system of identification discs to be worn by Aborigines entering town, by using a system of licensing employers which forbade employment by Asians (the majority of urban employers), and finally by establishing a system of control over marriage and sexual contact. He also suggested the establishment of reserves and industrial training.25 Professor Spencer’s own published account of his activities was replete with vulgar boasting which reveal unrestrained racialist attitudes towards the Chinese, and gloating over the embarrassment or shame of individuals who were caught in the cogs of his new administrative machinery.26 The question becomes, should this repellant activity be described as social Darwinism?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to look at previous administrative efforts by the South Australian authorities in the Northern Territory. As Mulvaney notes, Professor Spencer was fortunate to inherit from the South Australian administration two inspectors, Beckett and Kelly, who ‘anticipated’ his regulations of 1911.27 However, if we unpack this ‘anticipation’ it would be found that repeatedly since the mid-1880s South Australian officials had suggested that the Adelaide government draft special legislation to help them control the Aborigines.28 In these requests and the accompanying reports one can find evidence that the administration
Mark Francis

was already attempting to control employment, restrict sexual contact, move Aborigines to camps outside town, invent identification systems and reserves, and report on the need for further efforts to support missions and education. Some of these officials were more humane than Spencer — for example Beckett negotiated with Aborigines before attempting to move them — and some even more macabre — for instance, H. Basedow who wanted Aborigines all marked with identification scars in an inconspicuous place. All of these suggestions, except Basedow’s, were the familiar currency of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century protection systems throughout Australia. There was little novelty about Spencer’s plans; they were commonplace pieces of machinery, typical of those used to control Aborigines. They were often designed to inhibit any social change which originated outside official circles. When Spencer was later forced to reflect on his administration while under oath, he agreed that his ordinances for controlling ‘natives’ were based upon the South Australian Act of 1910, and upon the Western Australian Act. He also admitted that he approved of the practical measures which were in use in Darwin before his arrival in 1911. These included the locking up of ‘native witnesses’ and the use of one ‘native boy’ to punish another for breaking a curfew. Neither action was cruel because ‘you cannot judge the black man by the white man.’

To re-iterate this point: Baldwin Spencer’s views were run-of-the-mill; they were the shared administrative commonplaces of this period.

If one has recourse to Baldwin Spencer’s anthropological views rather than to his administrative ones he sometimes appears to be a more benign figure, but even in this more ‘scientific’ domain here there is no reason to believe that he structured his views with reference to the ideas of Charles Darwin. For example, when he thought about Aboriginal organisation he was relatively free from theories which echoed biological evolution and offered the suggestion that such organisation was the result of deliberate intention on the part of the Aborigine and doubted if the phrase ‘primitive’ tribe meant anything. If Baldwin Spencer could describe Aboriginal society by reference to intentional (i.e. artificial) action rather than as a natural response, and if he could abandon the idea of the ‘primitive’ tribe, then there seems no reason to cite him as a social Darwinist, even though both personally and professionally his treatment of Aborigines was harsh, dictatorial and even cruel.

At this point, it is useful to emphasise why a strong revisionist account is necessary here. Mulvaney, Reynolds and some other Australian historians have mistakenly adopted a phrase which, more than any other, had led to confusion in understanding how institutionalised racism was constructed. The administrators who controlled racist policies in Australia were hostile to the inclusion of social Darwinism in their plans for the treatment of Aborigines, not supportive of it. Even when they suspected that social Darwinism accurately described ungoverned race relations, they were anxious to ameliorate or reduce its operation. To put the matter in the words of J.L. Parsons, the government resident in the Northern Territory in 1889, send us some special legislation or there will be ‘survival of the fittest’. Parsons knew about social Darwinism and it was something he was determined to avoid.

The primary purpose of administration was to avoid ‘natural’ outcomes (that is outcomes which would cause the Aborigines to be exterminated in competition with the settlers) in favour of artificial ones. One way of looking at attempts to control sexual relations between Aborigines and members of other ethnic groups was an attempt to reverse ‘natural selection’ by having recourse to artificial selection.
Ultimately, in the hands of Dr Cecil Cook, the chief protector of the Northern Territory during the 1930s, one saw the emergence of a breeding policy in which the half-caste population was to be ‘bred-up’ white over a few generations. This policy was so firmly fixed that it led to a major bureaucratic row with J. W. Bleakley, the chief protector of Queensland, whose 1929 report on the Northern Territory was based on the premise that half-castes were to be bred out to black. Cook won, and the future was seen as a white one. A memo in the prime minister’s files for 1933 noted that while the Aboriginal Ordinances (1918-1930) allowed the protector to authorise an Aborigine to marry someone of a different race, in practice permission was never given. On the subject of half-castes, the policy of the government was to encourage the marriage of half-caste with white or half-caste. ‘The object being to breed out the colour as far as possible’.

This was artificial selection and control, not natural selection; the commonwealth government was unwilling to let nature take its course. If one is attempting to give an accurate description of the government’s policy it would be best to avoid the term ‘social Darwinism’. Scientifically, the term usually conveyed images of competition, struggle, natural selection and survival of the fittest. If the term is used without these connotations, then it becomes empty of content — a mere synonym for ‘racism’ of ‘racialism’.

The point of this article is not to re-examine government policy towards Aborigines in the Northern Territory, the outlines of which are well known; it is to demonstrate that Professor Spencer, together with his predecessors and successors, administered policies, which, while embedded in beliefs which stressed that while Australians and Aborigines were separated by a vast moral and intellectual gulf, did not owe their initial impetus, nor their detailed working out, to social Darwinism. Instead, the policies owed much to the ideas of Australian ethnographers. Many of these figures have been ignored by recent scholars who are more committed to providing a ‘sanitised’ professional ancestry for late twentieth-century anthropology, regardless of the confusion this procedure causes in the history of race relations.

In pursuit of this history I do not much care which nineteenth-century anthropologist — a Howitt for example — was imagined to have first caught a glimpse of Aboriginal society which was more independent of European preconceptions than his predecessors. That is, from the point of view of Australian attitudes to ethnicity it does not matter who was the first to be similar to modern anthropologists. I am just as interested in figures such as John Fraser, Alan Carrol and Archibald Meston who were successful in expounding their views to contemporary officials and to the few politicians who took a marginal interest in the subject. It was this sort of now forgotten and shadowy ethnographic expert whose advice guided the Aboriginal protection boards which, from late Victorian times, controlled Aborigines. These figures were often consciously reactive against ‘social Darwinism’, and offered alternate evolutionary accounts which were seen as scientific by their contemporaries.

Before developing this point, it is pertinent to say something about nineteenth-century evolutionary theory in general. To have standing in the late nineteenth century, one could not simply say — as a ordinary person might — that the native people are withering away. Such a statement, though sometimes resisted, was a commonplace among historians and other non-scientific observers. For example, as early as the 1820s and as late as the 1880s conventional British historians without any pretence to science made this sort of statement about indigenous peoples. To
be scientific, even in a minimal way, was to abandon the phrase ‘withering away’ and to adopt some version of what a turn-of-the-century American anthropologist, W.H. Holmes, called ‘lenticular’ evolution. This was that the evolution of an indigenous people began as a thin line, developed a complex culture, and then lost it. The ‘lens’ or flattened oval was the visual image or a culture which failed to perpetuate itself.

Something like this cultural evolutionary theory was behind efforts to protect Aborigines in Victoria from 1860 and in New South Wales from 1882. The Aborigines were seen as part of a dying culture and one’s duty was to protect them from the whites, to make their last days as comfortable as possible. However, the image of the dying Aborigine did not generate any particular protection policies. Since Aborigines were doomed there was no way of deciding between competing policies, other than the macabre rationale that one policy might hasten extinction faster than another policy. However, the choice of policy began to seem more pressing when Aborigines either seemed to be perpetuating themselves or to be taking rather a long time to disappear. Something more than the ‘dying’ Aboriginal theory was needed.

To examine this problem of what else might be useful to explain or direct protection policies is to enter the world of people with government connections — its apologists or advisers — from 1890 to 1910. This is a world of official year books, of ethnographic accounts submitted to police forces, and of monographs written explaining New South Wales to the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1892. These accounts were neither constrained by the demands of academic journals nor of popular newspapers. They were the epiphenomena of a political world in which the subject of Aborigines was of genuine, but marginal, interest. They were unrequested defences of Aboriginal people, or thinly voiced calls for action. They were not defences of government action in the sense modern press releases are, but they are the only clues which can explain the daily processing and ‘protecting’ of Aboriginal people.

What is striking about these accounts is that, often they were either non-evolutionary, or they were evolutionary in a deliberately anti-social Darwinist fashion. It is also notable that the relative depth of ethnographic expertise does not explain whether a given writer’s policy will be skewed in a particular way — for example, whether it will be assimilationist or segregationist. This can be seen in the work of Walter E. Roth, who was respected in ethnographical circles. He was hostile to the idea that the Aborigines living near South Rockhampton should have further contact with whites. This was not because they were innocent victims, but because they were far too ‘knowing’ to be allowed in the township. The Aborigines knew the value of money which they could easily obtain by the sale of ferns collected in the mountains, or by bartering their weapons which they specially made for the local market, or by temporarily selling their women. Rather than Roth seeing this as assimilation, he classed these activities, and the growing Aboriginal disinclination towards physical exertion, as the activities of vagrants. His advice was a recipe for sequestrating Aborigines to stop this evolution. The Aboriginal adaptation to their changed environment was a phenomenon of which Roth disapproved. Unlike those of a modern scientist, Roth’s evolutionary views combined adaptive change with moral progress.

It was more common for advisers to disapprove of existing contact between Aborigines and whites as cruel and violent. Their request was for less brutal contact.
Social Darwinism

The Rev. J.B. Gribble, a missionary who was a familiar campaigner for better treatment of Aborigines in New South Wales and other colonies, and whose efforts had often received government support, believed that early settlers, for their own cruel purposes, reported to the world that Australian blacks were closely allied to brute creation, and that they were too low in the human scale to be improved. But, Gribble continued, this view resulted from imperfect knowledge or from the accidental observation of the most degraded specimens of the race. This degradation was not natural, but was produced from contact with the vices of the white man. [To see these opinions in Gribble’s *Black, But Comely* might give rise to the opinion that he was merely a missionary, but he was an important voice in the foundation of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, and was still campaigning and writing when the *Science of Man* began to be published in the 1890s.]

Edward Dowling, a New South Wales public servant and the secretary of the colony’s branch of the Australian Natives Association, was the intellectual support in Sydney for the Aboriginal Protection Board during the 1890s. As he explained to the visitors to the Chicago World Columbian Exposition of 1892, some atonement was needed for the treatment of the native races of America and Australia. They all may become extinct before the end of the next century unless more care is taken of them for the future. Dowling’s message was that care taken now would avoid the extinction of Aborigines. The same message (that assimilation would not happen without more care) was propagated by W. Ramsay Smith, the Head of the Department of Public Health of South Australia, writing in the *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia* (1910). He warned that, ‘Such contact as has occurred and now obtained does not tend to absorb or graft on the black fellow to our race; it withers or rots him.’

If Dowling was the Sydney intellectual on Aboriginal affairs during the 1890s, then John Fraser was the ethnographic heavyweight. His book, *The Aborigines of New South Wales* appeared in 1892, but was still being used as the standard account of the subject by W. W. Thorpe, the ethnologist of the Australian Museum in Sydney in 1914. Fraser’s volume reveals all the features which were common to period accounts of pre-history, fore-lore and early cultural anthropology. However, it also possesses a framework of argument designed to combat white prejudice in Australia. If Fraser gave an account of marriage customs which mentioned a practice of spearing a bride in the leg to stop her wandering, then he accompanied this with a homily to the white reader:

‘Oh, how cruel! they say. Yes, it is cruel if we are to judge those blacks by our own standard of humanity. But in considering the question of Australian marriage, we must always bear in mind that there the woman is the absolute property of her husband, just as much as any goods or chattels, and he may do with her whatever he likes, even to the extent of putting her to death, without any challenge from group or tribal law. And whenever we express our virtuous indignation at the cruelty of Australian blacks we should at the same time bear in mind that, not so very long ago, our own English laws allowed a husband to chastise his wife and to tyrannize over her in many ways, and American law was once very tender in dealing with the rights of a master over his slave as his own private property.’

There is no gloating over European evolutionary progress here; Fraser was
picking examples which were almost within living memory. The message was that ‘we’ were cruel too. Much of Fraser’s defence of Aborigines was aimed at the combination of quasi-scientific and popular prejudice which depicted Aborigines as both brutal and immoral. The two qualities were connected and had to be dealt with together. Thus, he combats Sir John Lubbock’s comments in the *Times* which claimed that since Aborigines have no number for ‘five therefore they have low mental powers’. Fraser thought that this was as false as saying that they followed their sexual lusts in a free and beastly manner. To combat this prejudice, Fraser’s technique was to constantly refer to European, Asian, African and Pacific customs which were similar to the Australian ones. This exercise blurred evolutionary distinctions, and made the Aborigines seem as part of common humanity.

In addition, Fraser listed Aboriginal virtues — for example those of loyalty, faithfulness and courage — even, in one case, heroism in the rescue of a white man without any hope of reward. Cannibalism, the most common moral flaw attributed to Aborigines, was explained as a virtue in the Aboriginal world. For example, ‘the hand of a white man was a valued morsel, because he who ate of it became partaker of the manual dexterity of the victim’. This was why an Aboriginal woman, whose case was familiar to Fraser, carried in her bag the hand of a white stockman her group had killed.

Fraser had a vision of the lenticular development of Aboriginal culture, but it was unaccompanied by any thought of the moral superiority of European culture which might justify colonial society. He felt that the indigenous peoples were disappearing simply because they felt that they have no home or country. The white man has taken it all from them. They will now die ‘despite the fostering care of our colonial rulers’. This was regardless of the fact that the Aborigines possessed ‘virtues which some might profitably imitate’. Exhibited within his ethnographic moralism are features which seem, superficially, to support the theory that social Darwinism was predominant in Australia. Most pertinently here would be Fraser’s belief that the probable extinction of Aborigines was inevitable, and was the result of European settlement. However, Fraser did not view this development as progress, but as the subjugation of a viable and interesting culture. His argument is not social Darwinist in tone because its primary purpose was to avoid Charles Darwin’s perspective of the natural change in human development because it was part of a materialist slant on man’s place in the universe. The disappearance of which Fraser speaks is providential; it involves a moral lapse on part of the white man. He ends his book with the observation that the children of Ham are being disposed of by their relations.

Fraser’s book maps a clear route through the minefield of Victorian evolutionary thought as this applied to the future of Aborigines. It was a pessimistic account in which ‘inevitability’ was a consequence of European moral failing. The other common account is embodied in Archibald Meston’s 1895 book, *Queensland Aboriginals*, which, despite its title, covers the five mainland colonies. Meston simply denied that the Aborigines were a ‘doomed race’, and claimed that this prognosis is blamed upon divine providence when the guilt lies in ourselves. The crucial aspect of Meston’s argument draws attention to the fact that he was combating his opponents’ theology, not their science. Their science seemed acceptable to him; their vision of providential doom was not. The fact that the cleavage in Australian ethnographic argument takes place at this point makes the social Darwinist interpretation difficult to sustain as an explanation of official European attitudes.
towards Aborigines. Meston’s concern is that the continental Australian colonies were repeating the mistake made in Van Diemen’s Land and in the United States of America. In both places the argument that the indigenous people were wasting away was but a shameful subterfuge which strong races have used to conceal their crimes against the weak. Meston called on Queensland to care for, and preserve, its native race for the colony’s honour and for ‘our common humanity’.

In the preservation of indigenous people, ethnographic knowledge would be used to avoid the mistakes made by unqualified missionaries who overlooked the fact that the Aborigine was a ‘primitive man’, separated by thousands of years from his teacher who stood on an apex of civilisation. According to Meston, past mistakes have been caused by the failure to extract the Aborigine from his social context, not because his individual abilities were weak. In matters of intelligence and perceptive faculties he was equal or superior to members of civilised races. The attempt to civilise in the course of one generation had been hopeless; what was needed was complete isolation from whites on reserves for two or three generations.

Here we have a clear scientifically-informed policy — one of reserves and education towards assimilation — which was based on opposition to a policy of neglect which was seen by Meston as non-scientific and providential. As a progenitor of policy, Meston had all the intellectual muscle one needed to direct an Aboriginal protection institution. The objective would be that of controlling Aborigines for their own good. The alternative of doing nothing and leaving Aborigines to their fate was either a subterfuge or morally weak. Those who advocated that Aborigines control their own destiny at the risk of being exploited by competitive whites were immoral. To be moral meant that adoption of a policy of ‘courageous’ intervention, a policy which might have been detested by the majority of white Australians and Aborigines, but which late Victorian and Edwardian reformers saw as a vocation. Even when, at a later period, the future of the Aborigines seemed to be a problem in eugenics rather than a moral one, the Aborigines were not to be allowed to improve or decay naturally. For example, when Sir George Buchanan submitted his report on the future of the Northern Territory in 1925, he took particular exception to the territory’s administrator advocating that the Aborigines be left alone to lead their own free and natural lives. Buchanan had spotted the problem that free and natural lives might lead to assimilation. Instead of this, he wished for strict segregation. This however, was only an ideal to Buchanan since, if it were applied strictly as a policy, it would disrupt white lives by removing labour. In a spirit of compromise, Buchanan settled for controlling the half-castes.

Before leaving the topic of Australia’s neglected ethnographers, it is important to note that the neglect is deliberate, and is part of the professional mythology of an important late twentieth-century group of experts on Aboriginal affairs. In accounting for their ‘unique’ professional standing, it has seemed important to anthropologists to denigrate and simplify the values and views of their predecessors — the ethnographers — especially as these too had claimed status because of their special insight into Aboriginal identity. It is interesting to speculate as to why the ethnographers have largely been ignored. As has been hinted, this may be because their professional successors find them embarrassing. Modern anthropologists have made a pre-eminent claim to be the only non-Aborigines who know about Aborigines, therefore the history of their discipline is assumed to be of cardinal importance in the understanding of associated matters such as ethnic relations. This is the peculiar
phenomena of an academic sectarian and monopolistic ownership of the intellectual past, which has to be constantly cleansed in order to remove tainted material associated with ethnographers and other non-professionals. Even though modern anthropologists only began to make inroads as government advisers and popular advocates of Aboriginal rights in the 1930s and 1940s, they now wish to eliminate from the past the kind of figure, whom they call ‘ethnographers’, and who played a role in constructing government policy and informing public opinion of the need for care of Aborigines in the period from 1880 until 1915.

My quarrel with anthropologists here is not over whether they have a good grasp of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory. After all, why should they possess sophistication in a sub-field of the history of science which attracts little attention even from other historians. My complaint is that, in massaging their professional history, anthropologists have excluded numerous historical figures whose ideas and efforts went into the construction of those government institutions which controlled Aborigines and ethnic relations in Australia. To blanket these developments as ‘social Darwinist’, and then to ignore the ethnographers as insufficiently scientific because they were not ‘social Darwinist’, is confusing and avoids the real history of ethnic relations as this crystallized around institutions and official attitudes.

In conclusion, it should be noted that strictly scientific rationales such as social Darwinism did not often appear to trouble Australian officials between 1860 and 1890. In this period, protectors and Aboriginal protection boards operated ad hoc assimilation and segregation policies — sometimes conflicting ones — without much more than a nod to Christian and philanthropic mores. When scientific rationales emerged circa 1890, these, whether ethnographic or anthropological, followed the patterns already laid down by state-subsidised missionaries and non-ideological officials of the earlier period. The language of scientific racialism — and social Darwinism was not the most common of these — were reservoirs from which officials and politicians could snatch phrases to apply to, and extend upon, already functioning bureaucratic practices. These practices were ones of strong administrative control of Aborigines, a control limited only by lack of funds or suitable station managers.

As has already been stressed the control of indigenous people in such a way to avoid natural selection or adaptation is not social Darwinism. The chief mystery is why, with so little evidence, a particular scientific phrase has ever become so entrenched in Australian historical writing. It may be that to call racialism ‘social Darwinism’ is an attempt to remove it from Australia, and to assign it to necessity or to Charles Darwin, a distant European scientific personality. There is a hint of this kind of apologetic excuse in Henry Reynolds’ use of race theory:

The growth of scientific racism was a European rather than a purely Australian phenomenon. A small colonial society had little chance of resisting the most powerful intellectual currents of the age.97

Perhaps it has been a solace to imagine an inevitable glacial process which white Australians could not have avoided. This might be preferable to seeing racialism practised by protectors and other officials as a home-grown, well-meaning tragic absurdity. Of course, not all colonial Australians were swept along; nor did all of them believe that their treatment of Aborigines was just. On the contrary, some
even identified European settlement as an ‘invasion’. However, such doubts did not cause colonial Australians to become as sensitive as their modern descendants are. Among the small groups of colonial officials, politicians, and ethnographers who cared about the treatment of Aborigines the thought of injustice simply threw into a quandary from which the only atonement seemed to be to control, rather than to compensate, the indigenous people.

* The research on which this article was based was done while the author was a Visiting Fellow with the Federalism Research Centre, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. He is grateful for help from a large number of scholars in the RSSS, and from the staff of the Australian Archives and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies.

Endnotes

1 On these phenomena among Native Americans see Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native, American Indian Political Resurgence*, New York, 1988, pp. 62 and 66.
2 As in North America the ‘definition’ of indigenous people was primarily a legal distinction which nominated some individuals as subject to special legislation and excluded others. The authoritarian aspect of white treatment of Aborigines — especially on missions — has been documented by Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages*, Sydney, 1990, pp. 74-81. Markus seems to view this as chiefly associated with the 1930s. In a latter book he suggests that earlier Australian race relations were controlled by a hegemonic racial ideology, social Darwinism, which was not broken until the 1990s. (Andrew Markus, *Race Relations, 1788-1993*, St. Leonards, 1994, pp. 76 & 111). The implication of this is that Markus seems to believe that social Darwinism provided the basis for racism until the 1930s when there emerged competing racist theories. This article, contrary to this, argues that late nineteenth-century racism in Australia borrowed from diverse scientific and non-scientific sources, many of which stayed current into the early twentieth-century. Further, it is argued that it is confusing to label these varied racial doctrines ‘social Darwinist’. This article does support Markus is stressing that authoritarian language, or the desire for control, was the most distinctive feature of much comment about Aborigines. However, Markus is too timid in confining this to the 1930s. It was also the dominant pattern of race language from the period 1880 to 1920.
3 Since Alan Frost wrote ‘New South Wales as *Terra Nullius*: the British Denial of Aboriginal Land Rights’, *Historical Studies*, vol. 19, nos. 74-77, April 1980 — Oct. 1981, it has been commonly believed that uneasy consciences in the past defended their unjust possession of Aboriginal lands by use of legal doctrines such as *terra nullius*. However, Alan Frost focuses his discussion almost entirely on eighteenth-century literature. The sole exception to this is a citation to an 1822 legal opinion. Henry Reynolds in *The Law of the Land*, Australia, 1987, has produced a much more fully argued account of *terra nullius*, but this too avoids dealing with the problem of why Europeans did not invoke legal justifications for their occupation of Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
6 Andrew Markus, *op.cit.* 1994, p. 14. It is unclear whether Herbert Spencer had the kind of impact among Australian ethnographers as he had among American ones. It is my impression that neither Spencer nor Darwin had much immediate and direct influence in Australia.
Mark Francis

edition, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1996, p. 3. While textual sophistication might be praiseworthy in literary studies, it is more suspect when ‘evolution’ or ‘scientific racism’ is the subject. Then the refusal to make authoritative pronouncements on a sensitive subject may be an act of re-inscription not restraint. That is, it may be an attempt to step outside the order of a discourse when the moral act would be to attempt to specify and define it.


Henry Reynolds, ‘The Unrecorded Battlefields of Queensland’, *Race Relations in North Queensland*, edited by Henry Reynolds, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, 1993, p. 67. Two of Reynolds’ contributors, Clive Moore and Anne Allingham, suggest that the ‘racial ideology’ which North Queensland settlers brought with them was a result of the fact they often came from squatting families further south, and thus processed two generations of conventional frontier wisdom. If this is ‘racial ideology’ then it is obviously not the scientifically driven racism or the ‘social Darwinism’ to which Reynolds and others have often referred (See Clive Moore, ‘Restraining their Savage Propensities’ and Anne Allingham, ‘Burdekin Frontier’, *Race Relations in North Queensland*, op. cit. pp. 111 and 117).


Much of the controversy which A. W. Howitt generated among his contemporaries concerned spiritual rather than materialistic issues. They were particularly provoked by his attempts to demonstrate that Aboriginal groups possessed a sense of natural religion with his ‘All Father’ theory.


‘Mulvaney & Calaby, *op. cit.*, p. 278. J. T. Beckett’s report, written before Baldwin Spencer assumed control over Aboriginal affairs, has him issuing special licences to employers of Aborigines, growing vegetables for feeding the ‘natives’, planning reserves, keeping unemployed Aborigines out of Darwin, moving the Aboriginal camp to a new spot outside town, and helping them re-erect their huts. (Australian Archives, A1, 1912/10964). These were all activities which Spencer claimed to have originated.

J. T. Beckett claimed that his own extensive experience with the ‘natives’ began as early as 1886 in Western Australia. He had also been through New South Wales and Queensland. ‘In fact, I have been handling natives very largely the last thirty years.’ *Commonwealth of Australia, Royal Commission on the Northern Territory, Minutes of Evidence*, Melbourne, 1920, p. 177. What he remembered as praiseworthy and unique about Spencer’s administration was that he had repressed the half-caste harems which some officials possessed, and that he had developed a good vegetable garden for the education and profit of the Aborigines. Neither of these accomplishments were treated as the product of science.

Australian Archives, A1, 1911/8705.


Social Darwinism

9. In Queensland too government action was sometimes seen as the antithesis of a natural communal response. For example Clive Moore quotes from the Mackay Mercury in 1866 the warning that unless the settlers got better protection from the Aborigines they would begin their own war of extermination. ['Restraining their Savage Propensities' in Reynolds, op. cit., 1993, p. 95.]


34 Australian Archives, A 3001, Part 1, 23/5/1933.


42 John Fraser, The Aborigines of New South Wales, Sydney, Charles Potter, 1892, p. 29, see also p. 90.

43 Ibid., p. 25.

44 Ibid., p. 27.

45 An earlier version of Fraser’s work was accompanied by a printed discussion in which he claimed his explicit purpose was to combat erroneous theories, held by some ethnologist, that Aborigines belonged to a different race. Fraser was determined to show that mankind was homogenous. (John Fraser, The Aborigines of Australia, Their Ethnic Position and Relations, The Victorian Philosophical Institute, (1888) p. 33) Fraser’s views parallel those of J. W. Powell, the American ethnologist, who specifically discounted biological analogies as false guides to the human world. Like Fraser, Powell thought that anthropology demonstrated the unity of mankind. (See Hinsley, op. cit., pp. 99 and 125.)

46 Fraser, op. cit., 1892, p. 44.

47 Ibid., p. 56.

48 Ibid., p. 62.

49 Ibid., p. 90.

50 Archibald Meston, Queensland Aboriginals, Proposed System for their Improvement and Preservation, Brisbane, 1895, p. 3.

51 Ibid., pp. 22-3.

52 Ibid., p. 23. The reality of Meston’s protection differed from his energetic desire. Perhaps because of his hostility to the missions he sometimes advised against active intervention in the lives of Aborigines. (See Noel Loos ‘A Chapter of Contact’ Race Relations in North Queensland, op. cit., p. 24).

53 Ibid., p. 24.

54 Ibid., pp. 24-5. Meston’s view of complete isolation did not exclude missionaries teaching Christian Values on the reserves.


56 Ibid.