

Chapter One

The Aborigines in European Mythology 1606 — c. 1825

“Once Man entirely free, alone and wild,
Was bless’d as free — for he was Nature’s child.
He, all superior but his God disdain’d,
Walk’d none restraining, and by none restrain’d,
Confessed no law but what his reason taught,
Did all he wish’d, and wish’d but what he ought.”

Wordsworth

Long before anything was known of Aboriginal mythology the inhabitants of the Great South Land were themselves a part of European ‘myths’.¹ From ancient Greek conjectures about the nature of the inhabitants of the antipodes, through initial Christian responses to the Australian heathens, to the doctrine of the Noble Savage, we learn more of the cosmologies and world views of the respective authors than of the inhabitants of the Austral land. An exceedingly fine line distinguished fictitious utopian novels and reports of actual ‘savages’ in such idyllic conditions; or rumours of monstrous races of men and observations of the monstrosities of savage life.

The central preoccupation of the authors discussed in this chapter was the idea of ‘nature’. Nature has always been an important theme in the history of ideas (Collingwood, 1945), but in the eighteenth century it was an obsession, and it is hardly less than

an obsession for some contemporary authors.² If the word 'myth' is used loosely, then I think we can say that tales of half-human and half-animal monsters, and of humans that are at the level of brutes; or tales of men dwelling in natural utopias, and of noble savages; are all of a 'mythological' nature. Furthermore, it will become evident in the course of this chapter that they are also nature mythologies.

In more concrete terms, this chapter has two main themes. Firstly, I will examine the idea that the Aborigines were representatives of natural man. The decline of this notion came in the nineteenth century when closer association with the Aborigines revealed that they were, in fact, in possession of a complex culture. One integral aspect of their culture was their religious belief, which brings me to the other main theme of this chapter. 'Religion' is an elusive term. In order to discuss theories of Aboriginal religion it will be necessary to specify what was understood by 'religion' in any particular period (cf. W.C. Smith, 1962). In this chapter I will trace the developments in connotations attached to 'religion' up until the time of the Deists. Further developments will be considered in later chapters.

By analysing the pre-nineteenth century history of the ideas of 'natural (Aboriginal) man' and 'religion' I hope to lay a secure foundation for the discussion of theoretical approaches to Australian Aboriginal religion.

1. Prelude to Encountering Aborigines

Broadly speaking, the Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian traditions have been the two principle forces which have shaped the Western world. It is thus not inappropriate to begin my investigation with these traditions. While they knew nothing of the Aborigines, they formulated ideas which were instrumental in conditioning the initial evaluation of the Australian natives.

Expectations of a Great South Land were held in classical antiquity (G.A. Wood, 1916). The Pythagoreans, and perhaps even Pythagoras himself, had deduced the sphericity of the earth, and it was commonly assumed that both hemispheres were inhabited. In the *Phaedo* Plato suggests that there are people dwelling in hollow pockets around the globe, like ants and frogs around a pond (1954 ed., p. 172). Plato's thinking did much to popularize the notion that the earth was a sphere, while Aristotle made the view orthodox. The ideas of the Pythagoreans were developed by Crates of Mallos (second century B.C.) who argued that two oceans divided the world into four major land masses. When combined with the opinion that equatorial regions were uninhabitably hot, these oceans

permanently separated the Antipodeans from people dwelling in the northern hemisphere. Cratesian geography passed down (principally through the writings of Martianus Capella and Macrobius) into the Middle Ages, where it caused irritating difficulties for Christian philosophers, as we will presently see.

Meanwhile, we must turn to another legacy of the Graeco-Roman world. The Romans provided us with the word *religio* which initially referred either to a power or powers which men were obliged to obey as a condition of citizenship, or to man's acknowledgement of such powers. However, Greek influences modified the Roman conception of *religio*. In Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* for the first time we come across the notion that *religio* is an objective 'something' (W.C. Smith, 1962, p. 24f.). Here we see the germ of the idea that religion might be the subject of speculation and analysis. Here were the beginnings of the study of religion.

However, it was with the emergence of the Christian *ecclesia* that there arose the notion of religious exclusiveness, of 'our' form of worship against that of others. It should be immediately added that this was not synonymous with the idea of 'our religion', nor with the idea of 'true religion' (*ibid.*, pp. 30-32 ff.). Both of these ideas were much more recent conceptions.

The early church was more concerned with heaven and hell than with hemispheres (Wright, 1925, pp. 53-57ff.). Like those of their Ancient Near Eastern neighbours, Judaic cosmologies seem to imply that the earth is flat and covered by a dome-shaped sky. 'God sits throned on the vaulted roof of the earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers' read the words of *Isaiah* (40:42). Yet classical geography was not totally forgotten, and eventually it was again assumed that the earth was a sphere. It would, however, have been heretical for Christians to suggest that the antipodes were inhabited. The Cratesian division of the globe had made it impossible for Adam's descendents to pass into the Southern hemisphere. Thus, St. Augustine deemed it a 'fable' that there were 'men on the opposite side of the earth, where the sun rises when it sets to us, men who walk with their feet opposite ours' (1950 ed. p. 532).

It was only after explorers had proved it possible to pass through the equatorial regions that it was once again believed that the antipodes were inhabited. Sailors who ventured into southern waters had centuries of speculation to stoke the fires of their imaginations with notions about the people of *Terra Incognita*. Isidore referred to those people who believed that

... in addition to the three parts of the world, there is a fourth part beyond the ocean in the midst of the south and unknown to us on account of the heat of the sun. Within its confines the antipodeans are fabulously said to dwell (quoted in J.K. Wright, 1925, p. 157).

One such view, advocated by followers of the Roman Axiochus, placed the Isles of the Blest (which Aristotelian elemental theory had dismissed from the belly of the earth) in the antipodes. There dwelt the dead and the infernal gods, while the northern hemisphere contained the living and the higher gods.

Another view, dating back to Theopompus in the fourth century B.C., conceived of a southern utopia where the people 'exceeded the stature of us twice' (quoted in G.A. Wood, 1916, p. 455). Later on in this chapter we will see that there was a revival of Australian utopias in the eighteenth century. As for the notion that the antipodeans were extraordinarily tall, this was still conceivable in the seventeenth century when Tasman concluded 'that the natives here must be of very tall stature' because he had observed that notches made by them to climb trees were five feet apart (Tasman, 1898, p. 26).

The view that the antipodes were inhabited by monsters was probably the most common of all speculations about this land. As India became more accessible many of the 'Marvels of the East' (cf. Wittkower, 1942) were transplanted into the Southern land. (It should be noted that Ceylon was sometimes considered to be the Northern tip of the Southern continent.) For example, Pliny had described

... a tribe of men called the Monooli, who have only one leg, and who move in jumps with surprising speed; the same are called Umbrella-foot tribe, because in the hotter weather they lie on their backs on the ground and protect themselves with the shadow of their feet (1942 ed., vol. 2, p. 521).

Yet on the *Osma Beatus* map of the thirteenth century these same creatures are depicted as dwelling in the Antipodes (reproduced in Wright, 1925, p. 123).

We have no evidence that the Portuguese navigators who mapped part of the Australian coast in the sixteenth century made contact with the Aborigines (cf. McIntyre, 1977). Later cartographers, however, fabricated details of the appearance of the inhabitants of Australia. When these maps came to the attention of the Australian public in 1886 one journalist described the depicted inhabitants as

... a symbolic prophecy of Darwin's theory. There are three types of men; the first has the face of a dog, the second the face of a monkey, but in the third the face is a true human one (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15-4-1886).

It was the view that the Southern continent was inhabited by a monstrous race of men that coincided with the initial Dutch reaction to the Aborigines. Thus Van Carstel reported that

They [the Aborigines] had two holes in the midst of the nose, with fangs of hogs or sword fishes through them, protruding at least three fingers' breadth on either side, so that in appearance they were more like monsters than human beings (in Heeres ed., 1899, p. 29).

2. Initial Attitudes towards Australian Heathenism

D.J. Mulvaney has noted that the early Dutch attitude towards the Aborigines was essentially that of Hobbes towards natural man (1958, p. 134). In his *Leviathan* Hobbes had argued that 'nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind' (1651, p. 63). To the staunch royalist Hobbes there was nothing admirable about such equality, since equality in obtaining ends resulted in conflict where there was common interest in these ends. Consequently, the life of natural man has

... no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short (ibid, p. 65).

From man's fear of his own vulnerability sprang the 'Religion of the Gentiles'. He sought causes of his fate, and being ignorant of true causes, he invented the Gods. These Gods, Hobbes argued, were conceived in the image of the human soul which was, in turn, a notion arrived at by dreaming or seeing one's own reflection. It was thus in the

... Opinion of Ghosts, Ignorance of second causes, Devotion towards what men fear, or Taking of Things Causall for Prognotisques, consisteth the Naturall seed of Religion (ibid, p. 56).

In chapter three we will see that early evolutionary anthropologists applied an almost identical theory to the study of Aboriginal religion.

While Hobbes' empirical evidence for his claims about 'natural man' are taken exclusively from the American Indians, he would have found support for his views in Dutch reports of the Aborigines. Thus Willem Jansz, writing the first description of the Aborigines, said that the area adjoining the Torres Strait was 'inhabited by savage, cruel, black barbarians' (in Heeres ed., 1899, p. 6) to which Purchas added that they were man eaters and heathens (ibid., p. 4). It was, of course, an *a priori* assumption that they were heathens. The instructions to Dutch captains usually stated that

Close attention should be paid to the disposition of the people, their character, conditions and humours; to the religion they profess and to their manner of government (ibid., p. 66).

Such information proved to be unobtainable, however.

The uniformly negative attitude of the Dutch towards the Aborigines can be attributed to at least two main factors. Firstly, the Dutch religious climate posed problems for any positive appraisal of heathens. Mulvaney has mentioned that Calvin's views on man's nature were instrumental here (1958, p. 134), since Calvin saw man as a very miserable creature indeed. Furthermore, the Calvinist doctrine of election posed problems for nonbelievers.

The covenant of life is not preached to all [he said] and among those to whom it is preached, does not always meet with the same reception. This diversity displays the unchanging depth of divine judgment (Calvin, 1536, vol. 2, p. 202).

By any of the three tests of election — profession of true faith, upright life, and attendance upon the sacraments — the Aborigines were a damned people.

It was perhaps partially because of these views that Calvin displayed little interest in missionary endeavours, which brings us to the second factor influencing the negative attitudes of the Dutch towards the Aborigines. The Dutch sea-borne empire was primarily concerned with economic prosperity. Despite what Calvin might have wished, the state dominated the church in the Netherlands, and the church had little power in the politico-economic arena (cf. Boxer, 1965, p. 134f.). Lay readers on board ships were treated with condescension and contempt. The result was that when the discovery of a country such as Australia was made, which lacked an obvious abundance of natural resources, there was little interest in lingering in order to save native souls.

The Spanish evaluation of the Aborigines was almost diametrically opposed to that of the Dutch. Hanke has said that 'no European nation ... with the possible exception of Portugal, took their Christian duty towards native peoples so seriously as did Spain' (1949, p. 175). For Fernandez de Quiros the search for the Southern continent was a religious quest. As fate would have it, he never reached Australia and, in fact, landed in the New Hebrides. Nevertheless, he must be considered here simply because it was commonly asserted (even in the early years of this century) that he had, in fact, arrived in Australia. Quiros' religious zeal and visionary enthusiasm — exemplified in his dedication of the South Land to the Holy Spirit (Australia de Espiritu Santo, 'South Land of the Holy Spirit') — relates him to the tradition of Spanish mystics, the most famous of whom had but recently died (St. Teresa 1515-1582, St. John of the Cross 1542-1591, Fay Luis Ponce de Leon 1527-1591). Quiros felt that it was Spain's religious responsibility to these natives 'not to leave them desert, but to make this the means of making the

Lord God known in all of them, believed in, worshipped and served' (Markham ed., 1904, vol. 2, p. 486).

The Spanish had had the benefit of learning from their debates about the nature of the American Indians. While some saw them as lazy, melancholy, shiftless and idolatrous, others, notably Las Casas, took the opposite view. Las Casas argued that

God created these simple people without evil and without guile. They are most obedient and faithful to their natural lords and to the Christians whom they serve ... They neither possess nor desire to possess worldly wealth. Surely these people would be the most blessed in the world if only they worshipped the true God (quoted in Hanke, 1949, p. 11).

Quiros held almost identical sentiments about the natives of Australia del Espiritu Santo. He saw them as

... a decent people, clean, cheerful, and reasonable, and as grateful as we have found them. On all these grounds there is reason to hope that, with the aid of divine providence, and by gentle means, it will be very easy to pacify, to indoctrinate, and to content them (Markham ed., 1904, vol. 2, p. 479).

In sum, he saw them as being nothing more than 'simple heathens'. He has little to say of their specific form of heathenism save that he mentions they serve the Devil rather than God (*ibid.*, p. 486). It seems their religion had taken a wrong turn, but in Quiros' eyes their faith was hardly worse than that of the Protestants. Thus, after arguing that it was Spain's duty to convert these heathens from the Devil to God, he adds:

[T]his has to be the door by which so many people ... have to enter for good, and to avoid the cares that would arise if enemies of the Roman should come to sow false doctrine and convert all the blessings I have set forth into great evils (*loc.cit.*).

Neither the Dutch nor the Spanish, however, were to colonize Australia. Initial British attitudes towards the Aborigines compared with those of the Dutch. Like the Spanish, the British response to the Aborigines was conditioned by their experiences in America. Unfortunately, they did not share Las Casas' opinions. There were several reasons for this. English Protestantism lacked the secular influence of Catholicism. Las Casas had the support of the Church behind him in his debates, whereas the Protestant cleric had no such patronage. Furthermore, Protestant pre-requisites to conversion were more stringent, and the diminished number of converts that resulted added weight to the notion that the Indians were incapable of accepting Christianity. Finally, the English were confronted by relatively aggressive natives, whereas the Spanish had encountered the settled agricultural Indians who were

comparatively peace-loving. The Indian massacre of 1622 had halted all attempts to convert and educate the Indians in Virginia (cf. Gossett, 1963, chap. 2).

It is significant that William Dampier, who was the first Englishman to observe the Aborigines, and who provides us with the first extensive description of the physical appearance of the Aborigines and their culture, had helped to fight the Spanish in America, and had actually retired in Virginia five years before he arrived in Australia. His best-selling book, *A New Voyage Round the World* (1697), popularized the caricature of the Aborigines as a degraded race who were not fully human. Of their religious beliefs he merely stated, 'I did not perceive that they did worship anything' (1697, p. 314). This assumed lack of religiosity added weight to the argument that the Aborigines were the most miserable people on earth, 'And setting aside their Humane shape, they differ but little from Brutes' (ibid., p. 312).

It is obvious that such a statement was verging upon, if not encompassing, the extreme racist attitudes which were growing in prominence in this period. The Polygenist theory, first proposed by Theophrastus Paracelsus in 1520, went so far as to assert that not all men were descendants of Adam. This theory was revived in 1655 by Isaac de la Peyrère's two works *Praeadamitae* and *Systema Theologicum ex Prae-Adamitarum Hypothesi*. Among La Peyrère's evidence that the Gentiles were from a different stock than Jews, were the reports of peoples 'from those unknown Countries, to which the *Hollanders* have sailed of late, the men of which, as is probable, did not descend from Adam' (in Slotkin ed., 1965, p. 81).

In 1695 an anonymous English writer published another polygenetic theory. He said:

The *West-Indies*, and the vast Regions lately discovered towards the South [he refers elsewhere to Quiros, Van Diemen and Tasman], abound with such Variety of Inhabitants ... not known, or ever seen in *Asia*, *Africa*, or *Europe*, that the origin of them doth not appear so clear as some late Writers pretend; ... their Differences from all the rest of the Globe, in Manners, Languages, Habits, Religions, Diet, Arts, and Customs ... render their Derivation very obscure, and their Origin uncertain, especially in the common Way, and according to the vulgar Opinions of planting all the Earth from one little spot (in ibid., p. 82f.)

I shall return to the subject of the polygenetic theory in the next chapter. Here I wish only to emphasize the importance of La Peyrère's works as attacks on orthodox Christianity. There can be no doubt that his ideas were considered as serious threats. His books were publicly burned in Paris, and he was forced to renounce both his Pre-Adamite theory and his Calvinism. The significance of his thinking lies in its illustration of the new critical approaches to the

understanding of religion that were emerging in this period. La Peyrère argued against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, questioned biblical authority, and denied the occurrence of a world-wide flood. In these respects he was a 'precursor of the Eighteenth Century critical Deists' (cf. McKee, 1944). But more than this, he also offered a theory of the evolution of Gentile religions and magic which reads like a strange combination of de Brosses and Frazer. The Gentiles believed that gods and spirits could inhabit any form, and thus 'They thought that the animals and vegetables, from trees, to metals and stones, were moved and led by those Spirits' (in Slotkin ed., 1965, p. 108). Conversely, it was held that magicians could manipulate material objects to compel the spirits and gods.

From those enchantments all witchcraft and Philtres took their beginnings, by which men were either bewitched to love or hatred, or made well or ill. To this adde the impressions of good and bad vertues, in those Images, which they call *Talismanical*. ... For they thought that Nature express'd hidden effects in like shapes, as it were by sympathie, and that the gods express'd the truth of Ideas by manifest Images (loc. cit.).

Thus, in La Peyrère's writings we can see the roots of some of the themes that were to preoccupy eighteenth-century thought. These will be discussed more fully in the remainder of this chapter.

3. Deism and Southern Utopias

Far too little was then known about the Aborigines for them to be included in eighteenth-century debates about non-Christian religions (cf. Pailin, 1971). However, this very aura of mystery made Australia an ideal location for utopian novels. Recent explorations in Australian waters were well enough known to give these novels an air of credibility. At the same time, since nothing was known of the vast majority of the continent, there was no way to disprove even the most incredible allegations. It is therefore not surprising to find that Australia was unrivalled in popularity as a location for imaginary societies.

The most famous, although for our purposes the least relevant, of these novels was Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. According to Case, Swift's library included many maps and books of travel. Amongst these was Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World* with which Swift was well acquainted (Case, 1945, p. 52). Swift makes only one brief reference to the 'Aborigines': 'I [Gulliver] saw twenty or thirty men ... stark naked, men, women, and children, round a fire, as I could discover from the smoke' (1726, part 4, chap. 1). This is not very enlightening. The Houyhnhnms, who were

located not far from the southern tip of Tasmania (Case, 1945, p. 61), are more interesting. These creatures

... thought Nature and Reason were sufficient guides for a reasonable animal, as we pretend to be, in showing us what we ought to do, and what to avoid (1726, part 4, chap. 5).

These two concepts, 'Nature' and 'reason', were the central themes of eighteenth-century thought. They were basic to Deistic arguments, and it is consequently significant that the French utopian novels, of which more shortly, portrayed the Australians as Deists. In contrast to Swift's obviously fictional book, these French authors made every attempt to convince their readers that their works were authentic. Indeed, because of the heretical nature of these books, and the political censors of the French monarchy, it could have endangered the safety of the author if he were suspected of dressing politico-religious criticism in the clothes of a novel. Since many readers were convinced of the authenticity of these novels, they made a significant contribution to the growing expectations surrounding the inhabitants of Australia. Furthermore, even if (as is probable) these books were little read after this period, the influences of Deist thought remained — as indeed they remain today. Thus for example, it was relevant that one of Andrew Lang's critics was to argue that Lang had portrayed the Aborigines as 'unconscious English Deists in paint and scars and feathers' (Hartland, 1898, p. 293). An understanding of the Deist movement is essential background for the ground covered later in this book. In the remainder of this section I will examine the main tenets of Deism, and then look at some French portrayals of Australian Deists.

The most distinctive feature of eighteenth-century thought was its new conception of nature (cf. Willey, 1940, chap. 1). The religious controversies of the preceding century had divided Christian opinion. It seemed that revelation had proved to be insufficient in solving disputes, and even if the Bible were infallible, there still had to be some criteria of biblical interpretation. The solution advocated by Deists was to seek God in contemporary nature rather than in past revelation. Externally this nature was the nature of order and design that had been unveiled by Copernicus, Galileo and Newton. Internally it was man's reason. Thus Matthew Tindal wrote in *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (sometimes dubbed 'The Deist Bible'):

The happiness of all beings whatever consists in the perfection of their nature; and the nature of a rational being is most perfect when it is perfectly rational, that is, when it governs all its actions by the rules of right reason (in Waring ed., 1967, p. 117).

Lord Herbert of Cherbury is often regarded as having been the father of Deism, and we may use his arguments as a convenient starting point. Lord Herbert's religious views were rooted in an epistemological postulate which he referred to as 'common notions' — that is, self-evident, *a priori* assumptions. There were five common notions in the domain of religion. Firstly,

Every religion in the past has acknowledged, every religion in the future will acknowledge, some sovereign deity among the gods (in Gay ed., 1968, p. 32).

He adds that there has been 'no race, however savage' without some expression of this divine religion (ibid., p. 34). The other four common notions are: that this deity ought to be worshipped; that worship is not merely ritual, but the practice of virtue and piety; that such beliefs give rise to a sense of sin that can be expiated; and that there is a retributive after-life.

There were several dramatic repercussions from this attitude towards religion, which were felt well into the twentieth century. Firstly, it is obvious that this approach led to the 'demythologizing' of religion. Thus there was John Toland's book with the telling title *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696). Toland tried to prove that the gospels are completely in harmony with reason. The influence of such concepts can be seen clearly in the writings of Max Müller. Trompf has said of Müller that

... [h]e understood religion as a rational attempt to apprehend the Infinite, and a *sane* approach to morality, and because most myths, no matter how integral they were to a religion, did not conform to this prescription, he was forced to isolate the mythological frame of mind and speak of it in terms of 'disease' and 'parasitic growth' (1978, p. 78).

Such an attitude greatly retarded a satisfactory appraisal of Aboriginal mythology as a religious phenomenon. Tylor separated 'mythology' from his chapters on 'animism'. In reference to the Aborigines, Lubbock said:

... a myth is one thing, and religion is another. Mythology is not religion. The myths are often contradictory, childish, repulsive, and blasphemous (1911, p. 154).

We shall see later that Lang used this myth/religion distinction to magnify the stature of Australian High-Gods. If the reader wonders why the first half of this book has little to say on Aboriginal mythology, I blame the Deists.

A second repercussion from Deist thinking was the notion that 'religion' was a system of beliefs which could be critically analysed in terms of their truth content. W.C. Smith has said that in the Enlightenment:

In pamphlet after pamphlet, treatise after treatise, decade after decade the notion was driven home that a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or are not true, something whose *locus* is in the realm of the intelligible, is up for inspection before the speculative mind (1962, p. 40).

Prior to this it would have been meaningless to talk of a 'false' religion.

It was also in this period that we see the emergence of the idea of the religion of a particular people (for example, Australian Aboriginal religion). Thus, from around the time of Lord Herbert, 'religion' came to signify a system of beliefs that could be studied, depersonalized and abstracted, rather than an inner quality of 'religiousness'. Such a notion forms the basis of all definitions which begin: 'A religion is a belief in ...'. Here I can do no more than note that such connotations of 'religion' are not necessarily essential, and at least one modern author has been bold enough to argue that these ideas of 'religion', and even the word 'religion' itself, have outlived their usefulness.³ If he is right, then we will have to re-learn that, in an entirely new sense, the Aborigines are indeed a people without 'a religion'.

A third repercussion from Deist thinking was the reformulation of the traditional Christian doctrine of primitive monotheism. Voltaire, for once agreeing with the Church, said of the monotheist, 'His religion ... is the most ancient and the most widespread; for the simple worship of God preceded all the systems of the world' (1766, p. 479). John Hawkesworth applied Deist arguments to the natives of the South Seas:

Nothing is more obvious [he said] to a rational being, however ignorant and stupid, than that the universe and its parts, as far as they fall under his notice, were produced by some agent inconceivably more powerful than himself (1773, vol. 2, p. 238).

Thus, man's reason and the logic of the universe invariably leads to the common notion of God's existence.

While it was some time before there were any empirically based claims for an Aboriginal Supreme Deity, in the realm of pure fiction French Deists were making precisely these claims for the imaginary inhabitants of Australia. These Australians were described as possessing a religion 'depending more on philosophy and human reasoning than on revelation and faith' (Veiras, 1675, p. 283). Space prevents me from examining any more than two of these novels: Gabriel Foigny's *A New Discovery of Terra Australia ...* and Denis Veiras' *The History of the Sevarambians* (see Atkinson 1920 and 1922, Berneri 1950, Friederich 1967 and Mackaness 1937).

Foigny was initially a Catholic priest, but he was defrocked for his scandalous behaviour. In 1666 he went to Geneva and

became a Calvinist. Here he wrote his novel. The book, and in particular the chapter on Australian religion, was considered blasphemous by the Venerable Company.

Reports about Australia were firing the popular imagination at this time. Foigny had read and been inspired by Quiros' relation to the King of Spain, published in French in 1617 (Berneri, 1950, p. 190). Foigny also seems to have been influenced by La Peyrère's polygenist theory, since his Australians were not descendants of Adam, and had thus escaped the fall (Willey, 1940, p. 13). Incidentally, both Foigny and Veiras had accepted La Peyrère's opinion that the Mosaic chronology was too short (McKee, 1944, p. 472f).

Foigny claimed to have received his information from an explorer named Sadeur who had returned from Australia. The Australians, said Foigny, were eight feet tall, vermilion in colour, and hermaphroditic. The last factor, say the Australians, separates them from beasts. Since they were complete and self-sufficient beings they were troubled neither by love, passion, succession, marriage, divorce, nor any of the other burdens of mono-sexual creatures (1676, p. 70).

Ominously enough, Foigny says that 'there is no subject more curious and secret among the Australians, than their religion' (ibid., p. 79). Nevertheless, Sadeur finds an informant to expound their convictions. They refer to a venerated, omnipotent and inconceivable being as the Hab. In every way the Hab is an impersonal principle rather than a loving God. Indeed, the notion of personal providence is quite alien to the Australians.

If his [the Hab's] conduct was particular, [said the informant] I should be at a loss to persuade myself that it was his, since an Universal Being ought to act after an universal manner' (ibid., p. 81).

Since the Hab is an infinite impersonal power, theology becomes futile, since finite man could never comprehend the infinite. Thus the rationale for their silence on religious matters.

Denis Veiras made even more effort than Foigny to make his novel sound authentic. The plot of the book resembles the voyages of Franz Pelsart, who had been wrecked off the coast of Western Australia in 1619. Some of Pelsart's men reached the mainland, where they saw 'black men, stark naked, without the least covering' (in Heeras ed., 1899, p. 57). Apart from this brief description, Pelsart's men had nothing to tell of the Aborigines. In contrast, Siden, who was Veiras' equivalent to Pelsart, returned with a wealth of details about the Australians.

The southern utopia had been founded by Sévaris who was a devotee of the sun. A Christian named Giovanni later persuaded

him to acknowledge a supreme invisible God. However, Sévaris never completely abandoned his old beliefs, and the sun remained as a mediator of the Supreme Deity. The invisible God became *otiose*, as we can clearly see in the following description of their temples.

These two ideas of Deity, have caused the Sevarambians to place in their temples a black veil beyond the altar, to represent the invisible and eternal God, whom they know not, and can only perceive a faint image of, through the thick darkness that envelopes the understanding. But the Sun, who is, they say, a visible and glorious God, and the mean or canal, by which we receive life ... they believe him to be their God in a particular manner ... and that therefore they are obliged, by love and gratitude, to address him their vows, pay their homage, and direct their religious worship, immediately to him, as the minister of that Great Being (1675, p. 285).

This 'solarization' of the infinite would have been a familiar theme to Max Müller. Furthermore, the notion of the degeneration of the belief in a relatively abstract conception of a Deity was applied to the Aborigines by Lang. Again, Eliade has recently referred to 'the transformation of a Sky Being into a *Deus Otiosus*' amongst the Aborigines (1973, p. 33). To my mind there is no mystery involved in explaining why these Deist novelists depicted an Australian religion which partially corresponds with beliefs supposedly discovered amongst the actual natives of Australia. It is my impression that the theorists who passionately defend the 'High-Gods' or 'Supreme Deities' of the Aborigines are doing so in the wake of Deist thought. This is not to deny the existence of the 'sky heroes' of south-east Australia. What I am saying is that the place these beings have found in anthropological literature is disproportionate to their place in Aboriginal religion. The fact that a good proportion of this book is concerned with the question of the existence of an Aboriginal Supreme Being bears witness to the fact that early theorists investigated Aboriginal religion with the preconceived idea, if not that religion was a belief in a Supreme Being, then at least that a belief in a Supreme Being is the highest form of religion.

The legacy of Deism will become apparent in the course of the following chapters. Meanwhile, it is time to turn to another consequence of the new eighteenth-century attitude towards nature — the idealization of natural man.

4. The Rise and Fall of the Noble Savage

From the Deist notion of the religion of natural law it was only a small step to the idealization of natural man who was fully enveloped by these laws. In many respects the noble savage was utopian man, discovered rather than invented.

Eighteenth-century thinkers argued that truth was simple, reasonable, and discernible. Yet ironically, the period was rife with disputes. It seems there were two ways to avoid this dilemma. The first solution, examined later in this chapter, postulated that man's reason needed to be refined and perfected. This was the idea of progress, which found its ultimate formulation in evolutionary social theory. However, a second solution was equally feasible. It could be maintained that simple self-evident truths are most readily perceived by the mind of man uncluttered by modern sophistication. The fresh eyes of natural man were in tune with natural law.

While primitivistic arguments were by no means a new occurrence (cf. Ferguson, 1975, chap. 2), they were particularly popular in the eighteenth century. The rapid growth of science and the increasing occupational specialization in this period, made the simple life of 'natural man' appear an attractive alternative to modern society. To put this point in terms of more recent 'mythological' thought:

... if it is true that nature has rejected man and that society persists in oppressing him, man can at least reverse the poles of the dilemma to his credit and *seek the society of nature to meditate there on the nature of society*. Here it seems to me, is the indissoluble message of *Le Contrat Social* (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 40).

Michel de Montaigne might be taken as a convenient starting point for a survey of primitive thinking. Montaigne had argued that the American Indians

... are still very close to their original simplicity. They are still governed by natural laws and very little corrupted by our own (1580, p. 109).

Montaigne took his evidence from Las Casas, and thus he would have found his arguments confirmed by Quiros' reports, which were, as we have seen, identical in sentiment with Las Casas' views.

In the eighteenth century the doctrine of the Noble Savage was exceedingly popular. Amongst philosophers, it was held, with reservations, by Locke and Montesquieu. Both of these authors were careful to avoid over-idealizing natural man, and this caution was shared by Rousseau. However, Rousseau's importance to the development of primitivistic thinking lies not in what he said, but in what people believed him to be saying (cf. Lovejoy, 1948). In reality, Rousseau had maintained that natural man was physically fit and good-humoured but mentally inferior. Conversely, modern man was intelligent, but physically feeble and unhappy. Rousseau's ideal man was a compromise, who corresponded roughly to present-day hunters and gatherers — since it must be remembered that his totally natural man was a hypothetical construction having no foundation in (at least contemporary) reality. Most of Rousseau's

followers, if they had read him at all, misunderstood him to say that present-day 'savages' were in a pure state of nature, and that those Noble Savages were in every way superior to civilized man.

Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) and his *Social Contract* (1762) were published only a few years before Cook landed in Australia in 1770. Cook shared the current disillusionment with orthodox Christianity, and he would not allow parsons on board his ships. Yet he was also a highly self-disciplined individual, and his strict moral code made him somewhat hesitant to condone the promiscuous Tahitian life-style. The 'hard primitivism' of Australia was more to his liking. Having observed the Aborigines, he rose to defend them against Dampier's claim that 'The Inhabitants of this Country are the miserablest People in the World' (Dampier, 1697, p. 312), by retorting:

[I]t is said of our first Parents that after they had eat of the forbidden fruit they saw themselves naked, and were ashamed; these people are Naked and not ashamed ... These people may truly be said to be in the pure state of nature, and may appear to some to be the most wretched upon Earth: but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans (in Beaglehole ed., 1955, vol. 1, p. 508).

Joseph Banks shared Cook's assessment, although he preferred the 'soft primitivism' of Tahiti. Banks attributed the happiness of the Aborigines to their ability to be content with little, an ability which he contrasted with European greed (idem, 1962, vol. 2, p. 130). The views of Cook and Banks were popularized in Hawkesworth's *Voyages ... where the Aborigines were portrayed in an even more idyllic and uncritical light.*

Nothing was yet known of Aboriginal religion at this stage. However, Bernard Smith has suggested that William Blake's engraving 'A family of New South Wales' is the pictorial equivalent of his poem 'Little Back Boy' (1960, p 128f). The poem begins:

My Mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O, my soul is white!
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black, as if bereaved of light.

The poem advocates the possibility of knowing God without a knowledge of Christianity. It should be added that Blake did not accept the Deist argument, according to which such knowledge was obtained through reasoning. 'There is no natural Religion', said Blake in his attack on Deism, and if 'all religions are one' it was due to the fact that

As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various), So all religions and as all similars have one source, the true man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius. (From the second of the above mentioned illustrated poems printed in 1788).

It is impossible to say whether Blake intended to convey these sentiments in his engraving of an Aboriginal family. If he did, it was a unique contribution from this period. The Noble Savage doctrine was not destined to survive into the period when other inquirers were debating the nature of Aboriginal religion.

To some extent, the depths to which savage reason was believed to have descended was determined by the heights to which the primitivists had elevated them. Deists had primarily seen religion as a rational *belief* in a Supreme Being, and many of them had argued that this belief was common to all men, including 'savages'. The empirical evidence available contradicted this assertion. Thus, Hume was quick to point out that 'The savage tribes of AMERICA, AFRICA, and ASIA are all idolators. Not a single exception to this rule' (1757, p. 31). Naturally, it was assumed that the Australian Aborigines would conform to this pattern, although no empirical evidence was available to confirm the suspicion. Charles de Brosses — who borrowed many of Hume's ideas, but replaced Hume's 'polytheism' with 'fetishism' — made this point quite clear. While too little was known of the Aborigines for them to be utilized in *Du Culte Des Dieux Fétiches* (1760), in his *Histoire des Navigation aux Terres Australes* (1756) de Brosses had assumed the Aborigines to be 'fetishists', and he suggested that missions to *Terra Australia* should proceed gently,

by procuring for them a more comfortable life, by showing them the ridiculous falseness of their stupid idolatry, by leading them ... to practise simple moral virtues, before beginning to speak to them of any more elevated dogmas (quoted in Friederich, 1967, p. 49).

The reference to morality is significant. It will be remembered that Lord Herbert had suggested that morality was an integral part of religion, and this had remained a common opinion in the following centuries. Now, while nothing was known of the religious beliefs of the Aborigines, it was at least clear that their morality was not that which the Deists had predicted.

If it was accepted that religion was the *rational* belief in a moral Supreme Being, it followed that savage polytheism or fetishism evidenced their faulty reason:

[A]ccording to the natural progress of human thought, [said Hume] the ignorant multitude must first entertain some grovelling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature ... The mind rises gradually from inferior to superior: By abstracting what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection (1757, p. 34).

This idea of progress of religion was shared by Rousseau:

Savage *Manitous*, Negro *Fétiches*, all the work of nature and man, where the first deities of mortals, polytheism was their first religion and idolatry their first cult. They could not recognize a single God until they generalized their ideas more and more (quoted in Pettazzoni, 1950, p. 2).

Thus, works like those of de Brosses and Hume attacked the vision of primitivists of a rational and contemplative savage. Van Gennep wrote, in reference to de Brosses, that if

... primitive religion was fetishism, conglomerations of absurdities, it follows that primitive social organization and the entire primitive mentality could also have been nothing but a similar conglomeration of absurdities. In this sense, de Brosses' little book occupies a special place among the indirect refutations of Rousseauianism (1914, no page ref.).

There were, however, more direct attacks on Rousseauianism. In France in 1799 Louis-Francois Jauffret and nine colleagues formed the short-lived (it was dissolved in 1804) *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme*, which professedly 'devoted itself to the science of man, in his physical, moral, and intellectual existence' (quoted in Moore, 1969, p. 17). They seized upon the opportunity to provide instructions on anthropological investigation for the members of Baudin's expedition to the unexplored Southern parts of Australia (see also Marchant, 1969). The society produced two memoirs: one by Georges Cuvier on physical anthropology, and the other by Joseph-Marie Degérando, published as *Considerations on the Various Methods to Follow in the Observation of Savage Peoples* (1800, ET 1969). These memoirs have been called 'the first serious statement of the aims and methods of anthropology' (Moore, 1969, p. 19. See also Stocking, 1968, chap. 2).

Degérando warned against superficiality and disorderliness in observation. He realized that attempts must be made to learn indigenous languages, and that careful and detailed information must be recorded of the environmental, political, military, legal, economic, moral and religious life of the people studied. With regard to religion he suggested investigations into native ideas of God, immortality and the nature of human existence, as well as observation of ceremonial life, temples, priesthoods and methods of disposal of the dead (1800, pp. 98-100 ff.).

In charge of the anthropological investigations on Baudin's expedition was one Francois Péron. When compared with Degérando's instructions, Péron's accounts are a great disappointment. Degérando had suggested the following inquiries:

What impression is made on the Savage by the spectre of the ordinary phenomena of nature? Does he go back from the knowledge of effects to the supposition of certain causes and how does he imagine the cause? Does he allow a first cause? Does he attribute to it intelligence, power,

wisdom, and goodness? Does he believe it to be immaterial? Does he suppose it to have a fixed abode? Does he furnish it with physical agents? Does he consider it as a providence, that is, as a being that watches over him, and over nature? Does he believe it eternal? Does he suppose it capable of understanding him, penetrating his thoughts, being swayed by his prayer? Does he allow several of these causes? Does he endow them with equal power? Does he suppose them to be at one with each other? By what attributes does he distinguish them? Does he put between the first cause and himself invisible secondary agents? What idea does he form of them? Does he attribute a principle of action and of feeling to the stars, to plants, to the elements, and so on? What is his idea of animals? (ibid., p. 84f.).

Péron's superficial reply regarding the Tasmanian Aborigines was:

People have believed themselves to have noticed [the savages] looking frequently at the sun, and have readily persuaded themselves that this must be their divinity. But I have seen nothing of the kind, and believe them as lacking in ideas of this kind as they are in industry for their own survival (quoted in Moore, 1969, p. 35).

Apart from an ill-informed reference to sacred sites (ibid., p. 29f.), Péron provided no information regarding Aboriginal religious life.

Péron's failure to find an Aboriginal religiosity added weight to the anti-primitivistic sentiment of the period. He made a direct attack on Rousseauianism by subjecting some of its main tenets to experimental examination. With the aid of a machine called a dynameter, Péron measured the strength of Tasmanian and Australian Aborigines, Frenchmen and Englishmen, and found they measured approximately 50, 51, 69 and 71 kilograms respectively. For this he claimed the honour of being

... the first man who has laid open, by experiments in distant parts, this wide field of observation, and exposed direct experiments and numerous facts to that dangerous opinion so generally promulgated and believed, that the physical degeneration of man is in proportion to his state of civilization (1809, p. 314).

He generalized from this to a condemnation of the whole notion of the Noble Savage. He laments that the fatal eloquence of primitivists had

... led astray the public opinion, and for the first time, sensible men were seen to tremble at the progress of civilization, and to sigh for that miserable condition illustrated in our days by the seductive title of a state of nature (ibid., p. 311f.).

The simple happiness that Cook had admired had lost its appeal. Baron Field turned Cook's very words on their head, saying that

... the Aborigines are the only savages in the world who cannot feel or 'know that they are naked' and we are taught in the scriptures that the eyes of man cannot be opened to what we call a civilized ... life, knowing good and evil, till he acquires a sense of ... shame or 'fear' (1825, p. 225f.).

However, when Field wrote these words in 1825, a new attitude towards the Aborigines was emerging. Missionaries, Aborigine protectors, explorers and others were finally acquiring information on the culture of the natives of Australia. The central concern was gradually shifting from futile conjectures about 'natural man' to what was to become the study of 'primitive culture'. This transition will be examined in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, to conclude this chapter, I will quote a passage by Watkin Tench. In miniature, Tench represents some of the developments discussed in this chapter. Initially sharing the optimism about the Aborigines shown by Governor Phillip (under whom he served), he later came to retract these views. The following lines reveal the position of those who were disillusioned with the nature of the Aborigines, but who were ignorant of their culture:

A thousand times ... have I wished, that those European philosophers, whose closest speculations exalt a state of nature above a state of civilization, could survey the phantom, which their heated imaginations have raised: possibly they might then learn, that a state of nature is, of all others, least adapted to promote the happiness of a being, capable of sublime research, and unending ratiocination: that a savage roaming for prey amidst the native deserts, is a creature deformed by all those passions, which afflict and degrade our nature; unsoftened by the influence of religion, philosophy and legal restriction (1793, p. 200).