

A JOURNEY TRAVELLED

Aboriginal-European relations at
Albany and the surrounding region
from first contact to 1926

Murray Arnold



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The purpose of the Fund was to make the results of research on the South West region of Western Australia widely available so as to assist the people of the South West region and those in government and private organisations concerned with South West projects to appreciate the needs and possibilities of the region in the widest possible historical perspective.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book necessarily includes some statistical information, principally about numbers of Aboriginal and European people who inhabited various towns and rural areas in the wider Albany region at differing times during the period of one hundred years it covers. Readers may periodically find it useful to refer to Appendix 3, where much of the information is presented in tabular form.

The book contains images of Aboriginal people now deceased.

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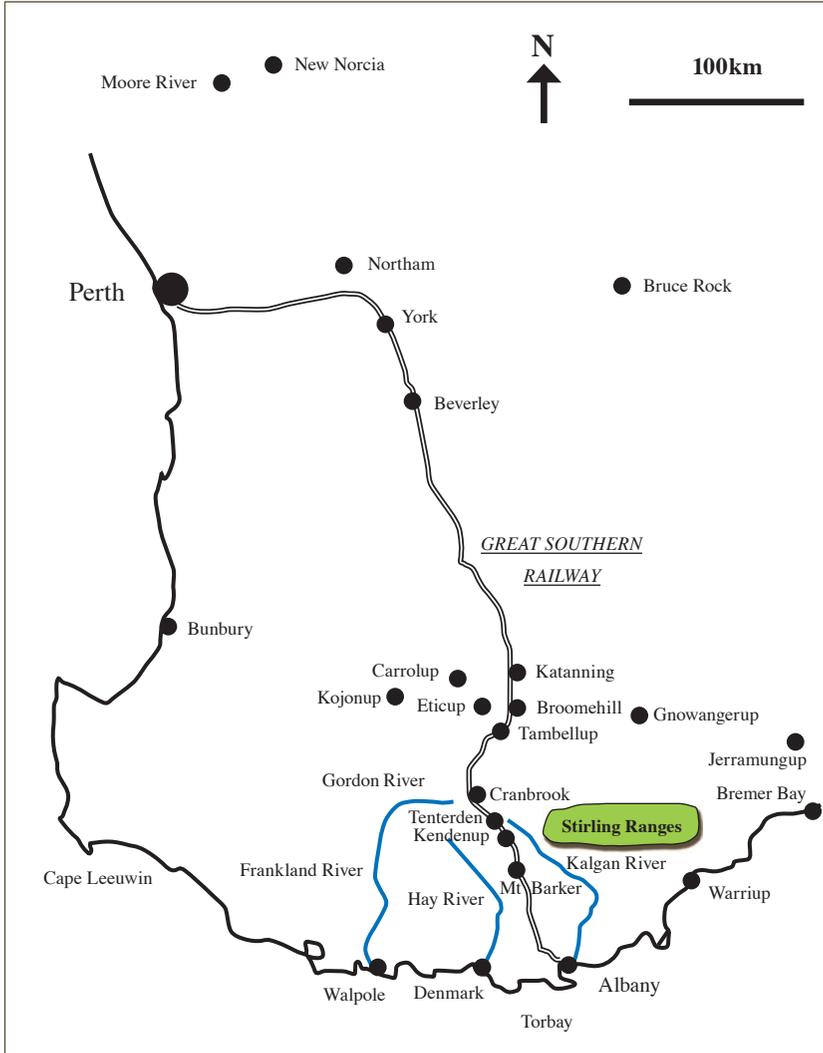
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Introduction

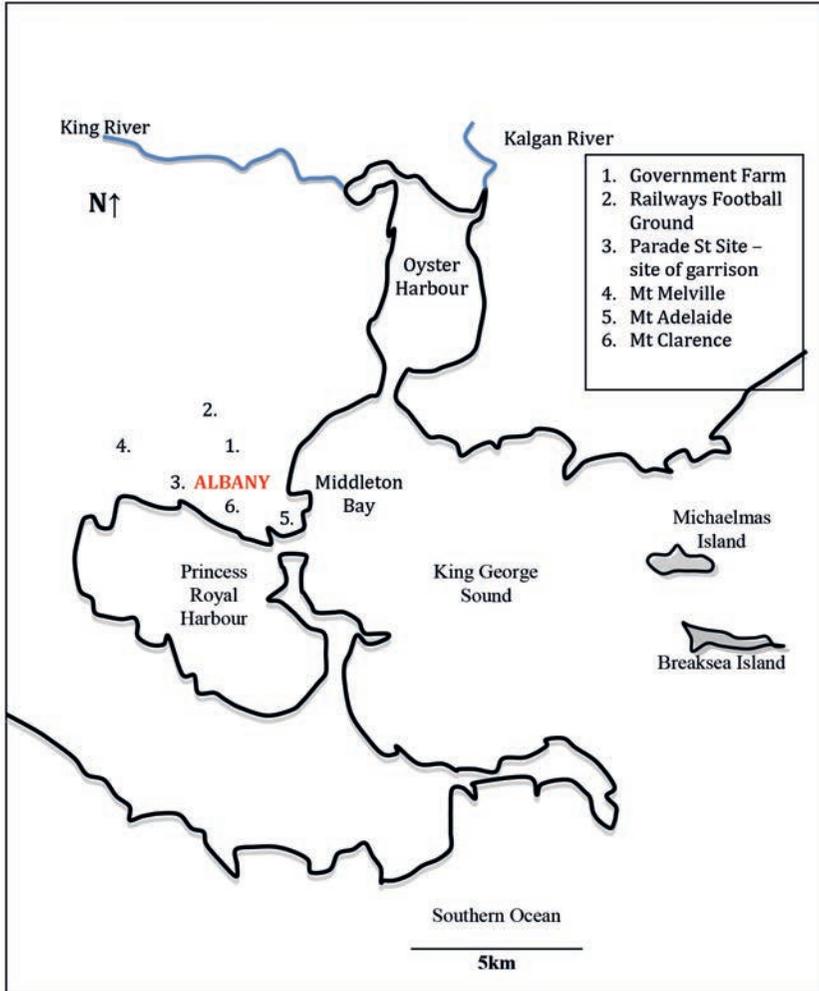
A glance at the Australian history section of any major bookshop shows that the story of human habitation of the Australian continent is rich and varied, yet one will find almost nothing on the shelves dealing with either of the two topics that arguably far outweigh all others in importance – the arrival of the first humans to our shores about 50,000 years ago, and the story of how the Aboriginal people and European settlers interacted with each other during the extended period following the invasion that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although details of the first event remain sketchy and open to conjecture, there has always been a wealth of documentary and oral information available about the second. What has been lacking until quite recently is the sense among historians and the general Australian public that the history of Aboriginal–European relations, not only for the first few years of contact but for a period of many decades, is absolutely central to our nation’s story.

A JOURNEY TRAVELLED



South-west Western Australia

INTRODUCTION



King George Sound; the Town of Albany and its environs

Following the introduction of the pivotally important White Australia Policy soon after Federation in 1901, there was an almost universal tendency for Australians to treat the history of Aboriginal dispossession with an embarrassed silence. It was widely felt that Australians needed to feel pride in their newly formed nation and its place in the British Empire – a pride that historians generally believe was not to take root fully until the events at Gallipoli in 1915 – and any criticism of those who had settled the land was therefore not welcomed. Popular national narratives portrayed early settlers as worthy pioneers who had braved drought, bushfire, flood and isolation, and had from time to time been forced to put up with briefly mentioned and largely unspecified difficulties caused by a small Aboriginal population that somehow faded away as the frontier expanded under the ‘civilising’ influence of the British. During the early to mid twentieth century Australian historians concentrated almost exclusively on economic and political history, and virtually ignored any serious study of Aboriginal–European relations on the Australian frontier.

This extraordinary situation persisted with very few exceptions until the intense cultural and political foment that occurred throughout the Western world in the decade of the 1960s inevitably impacted upon the history departments of Australian universities. Asian and African decolonisation movements, the struggle for African-American Civil Rights in the USA, the Vietnam War and the rise of the New Left were all influential in a trend towards radicalisation in Australian academic circles. The 1965 Yirrkala bark petition, the 1967 Referendum, the Gurinji people’s strike for equal wages and land rights, and the rise of new, radical, articulate and effective spokespersons from among the Aboriginal community focused this trend upon Aboriginal issues. Historians began to show how Aboriginal people, the prior owners of the continent, had been brutally dispossessed of their heritage by the process of colonisation, indeed that colonisation

explicitly *demand*ed dispossession. For the first time, Australians were confronted by the reality of their past as the old reluctance to write about the history of Aboriginal–European relations came to an abrupt end.

Although pressures outside and within Australia had been building towards a fundamental shift in the way that historians treated Aboriginal–European relations, observers are overwhelmingly of the opinion that the 1968 ABC Boyer Lectures delivered by the noted anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner were instrumental in making the critical breakthrough. There were five lectures in the series, but it was the second, ‘The Great Australian Silence’, that had the greatest impact. Stanner challenged historians to begin to take Aboriginal history seriously. Charles Rowley and Henry Reynolds were two of the first to rise to this challenge with the publication of a number of very influential books in the 1970s demonstrating for the first time the level and nature of the violence that had accompanied European settlement throughout the Australian continent.

In time, a reaction set in against published histories that some historians regarded as focusing unduly on European atrocities and Aboriginal maltreatment. In 1987 Perth-based historian Bob Reece wrote:

In their enthusiasm to document the bloodiness of the process of colonisation, Reynolds and others have not been so interested in documenting and highlighting that other major characteristic of Aboriginal–European interaction: accommodation.¹

Reece also contended that while the new historians had correctly noted the inaccuracy of the old idea that Aborigines simply ‘faded away’ as Europeans settled on their traditional lands, they were wrong in asserting that Aboriginal resistance to invasion had been the standard response throughout the continent. He and

others showed how some Aboriginal people had chosen not to oppose white settlement, and had instead made attempts to adapt their traditional way of life to accommodate the new realities.

Although the new wave of historians principally centred their attention on the national scene, some began to take up the challenge of writing histories that focused upon Aboriginal–European interaction at the level of individual colonies or states. However, vital as these histories are – not least because it is at the national and state levels that Aboriginal policies are formulated and implemented – they can lack the immediacy, intimacy and gritty relevance of works that focus in on the story at the *local* level. My own experience has convinced me that there are many Australians interested in the history of Aboriginal–European interaction in their town and district who find it frustrating that the only information they are able to access relates to a national or very broad regional level. In most cases, they have no alternative to decades-old shire-based histories written by people with no specific interest in Aboriginal history, almost all of whom treat the story of Aboriginal–European relations briefly as a side issue to the main story of settler pioneers and their achievements.

This study adopts a fresh and fundamentally different approach by focusing on Aboriginal–European relations in one major town and its hinterland over a period of one hundred years. Instead of this relationship being treated as one small part of the greater story of the town and region’s progress from small beginnings to the present, it forms the central core around which events and changes take place.

Albany is the port and principal centre of Western Australia’s Great Southern region, and is today a thriving and beautiful city with 33,000 inhabitants. Situated on the shore of Princess Royal Harbour, a large body of sheltered water connected by a narrow channel to the wide expanse of King George Sound, Albany has one of the few safe anchorages along the continent’s rugged south

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coast. European settlement of Albany began two-and-a-half years prior to the arrival of the *Parmelia* at the Swan River, the event that is officially regarded as marking the beginning of British settlement of Western Australia. For much of the nineteenth century it was only Albany's extensive natural harbour and her situation on the route between Britain and eastern Australia that allowed the settlement to remain viable. The economic development and population growth that occurred in other areas of south-western Australia largely bypassed Albany and the surrounding region because the natural extreme infertility of most of the area's soils prevented the establishment of profitable farms in all but a few favoured pockets. The slow rate of development for the first hundred years of settlement allowed Aboriginal people to retain elements of their traditional way of life for an extended period in a way that was not possible in many of the other settled areas of the colony and state.

After commencing research, it soon became apparent that there was a need to cover a considerably wider area than the townsite and immediate surrounds of Albany. The region's Menang people had always moved throughout an extensive area, and this did not cease with the arrival of European invaders. As pastoralists and others began taking up holdings away from the initial settlement at Albany, the story of contact and interaction spread ever wider from the town. The geographical boundaries set for this history – from Denmark to Frankland River, Kojonup, Katanning, Jerramungup to Bremer Bay – are necessarily somewhat arbitrary, but reflect research-based evidence showing that most Aboriginal people and settlers living within them had significant ties to Albany. This area is somewhat larger than that usually regarded as comprising the traditional land of the Menang group from the King George Sound region. However, the extension of the boundaries to include what is more or less the Great Southern region is justified by evidence indicating that from about the mid nineteenth century their

members moved relatively freely throughout the extended area. This is a local history, but one that recognises that the concept of 'local' can sometimes best be defined by people's movements, rather than by strict geographical constraints.

Historians such as Neville Green and Tiffany Shellam have written extensively about the first five years of the settlement when Albany was a military garrison, before land became available for purchase by free settlers. This very early period of Albany's history is fascinating because of the unusual opportunity it provides to study relations between Europeans and Aborigines during their first few years together in a context of co-operation rather than exploitation – a very different context to that which typified the nineteenth-century Australian frontier. However, almost nothing has been written about how the relationship between the two groups at Albany developed once unrestricted settlement began and the inevitable European usurpation of Aboriginal land took hold.

Albany is not the only place in Western Australia where historians have tended to concentrate upon the early contact period when writing about Aboriginal–European interaction. Extraordinarily, no comprehensive study has been published of Aboriginal–European relations anywhere in the state's south-west between 1840 and 1900. This study breaks this pattern by looking at the relationship prior to the establishment of Western Australia's first British settlement in late 1826, and then tracing the story through to Albany's Centenary celebrations in late 1927. The book has been written from a social history perspective, and shows how decisions made by Europeans at all levels affected the lives of Aboriginal people living in the region.

Not all of the Aboriginal people who lived in the region permanently or temporarily prior to 1927 had ancestral links to Albany; indeed some had no such ties to *any* part of the area covered by this book. However, as this is a study of Aboriginal–European

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relations in general, rather than a history purely concerned with those Aboriginal people originally from Albany and its hinterland, all Aborigines who lived part or all of their lives in the region are of interest to the story.

The shape of the book has been determined partly by the availability of documents. There is a wealth of relevant official letters, police records, court transcripts, and Protectors' reports held at the State Records Office at Perth, and the Battye Library holds many other semi-official and unofficial documents such as newspapers, church records, and diaries. The Local History Section of the Albany Public Library holds published local histories, newspapers, and unpublished letters and diaries from the region. The works of other historians have also proved an invaluable resource. In making use of both official and unofficial documents, I have been acutely aware that they were all written by men and (much less frequently) women for their own reasons. I have therefore read them critically in an attempt to see what may have been actually happening without being specifically spelt out. Wherever the sources allow, I have discussed how Aboriginal people reacted to European presence and European decisions, and acted in ways that reflected their own perceived best interests.

Local history was once disdained by academic historians, but is now widely appreciated for its ability to bring together at an intimate level many different aspects of the life of a community, such as land use, social structure and religion. This increasing interest in local history is a reaction against globalisation, and reflects a growing desire to make a claim for the role of place and space in understanding ourselves. Gender, race, ethnicity, class and other distinctions are important, but none of these confer the ability to locate oneself in the space in which we spend our lives. This does not mean that we should abandon national and international perspectives for a purely local outlook, but that historians should keep in mind the importance of all three

perspectives. To focus on the shared Australian experience to the detriment of diversified Australian experiences is to do injustice to history. Albany represents a classic opportunity to demonstrate the power of local history to illustrate this diversity.

Albany and its hinterland, perhaps uniquely in the Australian experience, deserves the label of the 'friendly frontier' because of the amicable relationship that developed following the arrival of the first Europeans to settle there. However, we will see how the initial era of friendship gradually but surely gave way to a relationship that differed very little from other regions of south-west Western Australia. The Albany region had its own unique set of geographical, political and human circumstances, all of which helped determine how its Aboriginal and European people related to each other during the first hundred years after the British established their settlement. Aboriginal people were not simply manipulated by Europeans – they made choices that varied between resistance and accommodation, and I have sought to give these choices due attention and respect.

Once the British Government decided to establish a settlement on the west coast of the Australian continent, the die was cast. No one has yet been able to devise any realistic combination of enlightened official policy and benevolent intent on the part of those Europeans who entered the Aboriginal world, either through choice or compulsion, that could have led to a long-term situation devoid of injustice. As we today look back on earlier philosophies, perspectives and decisions, we are able to see that many things ought to have been approached in a different manner. However, this should not preclude us from acknowledging that the men and women from both the Aboriginal and European communities at Albany negotiated the complex circumstances and relationships of colonial invasion in a way that has few, if any, parallels in Australian history.

Chapter Two

First Contact

European–Aboriginal interaction at
King George Sound prior to British settlement



A bust of Captain Nicholas Thomas Baudin overlooking King George Sound
by Peter Gelencser, 2005

In 2001, the French and Australian governments erected a large bronze bust of French naval captain Nicolas Baudin on the boardwalk connecting Middleton Beach to the Albany City waterfront precinct. From this vantage point on the eastern slope of Mount Adelaide stretches a breathtaking 180-degree vista of King George Sound that has remained virtually unaltered since the Menang, completely unaware that on the other side of the globe existed a very different group of people from themselves, caught sight of the first Europeans to enter their world.

Walkers commonly pause to read the inscription on the accompanying plaque, frequently giving up after finding the raised lettering frustratingly difficult to read. They move on, aware that the Frenchman with his enigmatic expression must hold some significance for the history of Albany, but remaining unsure of who he was, or what he did. The few who persevere with the task of reading the complete text and relate it to the accompanying map of the voyage may wonder why the map shows Baudin's vessel apparently vanishing at a point approximating the ocean boundary of Victoria and South Australia, when the text clearly states that the expedition included an extended stay at Sydney.

The enigmatic Baudin bust and plaque serve admirably as metaphors for our incomplete knowledge of the extended period from the first contacts between the Menang and a number of visiting European seafarers, and the commencement of British settlement at the Sound in late 1826. We know that explorers, whalers and sealers, as well as those sailing between the colony of New South Wales and the port of Cape Town, called at King George Sound during this period to refill their ships' water containers, take on board firewood for their stoves and repair storm damage to their vessels. From some of the few remaining ships' logbooks from this period we know that contact was made with the local Aboriginal inhabitants. We even have some detailed accounts of the interaction that occurred between

these visitors and some members of the Menang who chose to assist or trade with them. What must, however, always remain imperfectly understood is the effect that these early contacts had upon subsequent relationships between Albany's Aboriginal people and those who arrived on their shores, firstly as generally friendly visitors, but then as invaders and supplanters of Aboriginal traditional rights as owners of the land.

It is most unlikely that any Europeans were aware of the existence of the sheltered waters of King George Sound prior to the year 1600. However, in 1610, a voyage took place that had profound implications for the region's future. The young Dutch captain Hendrick Brouwer proved the validity of his theory that his fellow Dutch East Indies mariners could save time and company money by utilising the strong westerly winds that consistently blow at southern latitudes, rather than continuing to sail the traditional route up the east coast of Africa before heading east to the islands of the East Indies (Indonesia). He showed that as much as six months could be cut from a voyage that commonly took a year to complete. In 1617, the company formally instructed its captains to sail directly eastwards from the Cape of Good Hope for a distance of 1,000 Dutch miles (about 4,000 statute miles), before turning northwards to the East Indies. The policy was sound in theory, but in practice the inaccuracy of longitude measurements and the impossibility of making completely accurate dead-reckoning calculations meant that some ships inevitably sailed too far east and made contact, either visually, or at times violently, with the west coast of the Australian continent – the then uncharted *Terra Australis*.

In 1616 Dirk Hartog became the first Dutch master to make this mistake and live to return with a record of the nature of the coast. His unfavourable reports on the barren nature of the country tallied with those of later Dutch observers and resulted in a lack of commercial interest in the area. For the next 170 years the region

received no dedicated voyages of discovery, although the fact that updated Dutch maps showed a harbour named Monkbeelven in the approximate position of King George Sound indicates that Dutch mariners continued to sail occasionally along its shores and probably were well aware of the existence of the harbour.¹ If any of these ships sailed into the uncharted waters of the Sound, no record has yet been found, and if any contact took place between these mariners and the Menang, it has to date been lost to history.²

France and Britain had long been maritime rivals, and as their power increased relative to the Dutch during the eighteenth century they sought to increase their knowledge of the southern continent from both a scientific and a strategic viewpoint.³ François de St Alouärn reached Cape Leeuwin in 1792 but was unable to land. He then sailed north to Dirk Hartog Island, taking possession for France of ‘the land to the north-west’ of his anchorage, an action that was not taken seriously in Paris.⁴ Bruny d’Entrecasteaux led a voyage in 1792 of two more French vessels, *Recherche* and *Esperance*, to explore the largely uncharted south coast east of Cape Leeuwin, but the ships were unable to enter King George Sound. Britain and France were each acutely aware of the strategic ambitions of the other, and a voyage of discovery in the southern seas by one nation resulted in the almost simultaneous despatch of an expedition by the other; as a counter to the French expedition, the British sent George Vancouver to explore and chart the southern coast of New Holland.

On 28 September 1791, Vancouver sailed into King George Sound in the *Discovery*, accompanied by the *Chatham*. This visit of a little over two weeks’ duration was a turning point in the lives of the Menang, even though no contact took place with the British. For the first time, the commodious and sheltered harbour was explored by Europeans, assessed for its value to maritime travel, and located accurately on maps that would be keenly studied by those who would seek to pursue their varied purposes in its

shelter. Whatever the future held for the area's Aboriginal people, Vancouver's entry into their world ensured that it would be shared with others.

Vancouver was immediately aware of the strategic and economic importance to the British Government of such a vast natural harbour, not least because it would afford shelter and fresh water to ships sailing to and from the new penal settlement at Sydney. Vessels on this route usually sailed well to the south of the area on their way to rounding the southern tip of Van Diemen's Land, but the knowledge of a safe place to replenish water stocks or to seek a sheltered anchorage to effect repairs could be of great value to mariners. At this time, the dramatic events of the 1789 French Revolution caused concern in Britain about French political instability and the potential threat this presented to British interests at home and abroad. Fearing that this fundamental shift in French affairs could lead to an expansionary phase which might see the region come under French domination, Vancouver claimed all of the land from 'Cape' Chatham (later found to be an island south-east of Cape Leeuwin) to as far east as he may later sail. Perhaps because the authorities in London had no plans to form a settlement in the area, there is no evidence that Vancouver's pre-emptive annexation was ever officially recognised by the British Colonial Office.⁵

Vancouver was of course aware of the presence of Aborigines in the area around the newly discovered Sound. He made some efforts, including leaving some gift items 'as tokens of our friendly disposition, and to induce any of the natives, who might, unperceived by us, have been in the neighbourhood, to favour us with a visit'.⁶ He came across:

the most miserable human habitation my eyes ever beheld...
The reflections which normally arose on seeing so miserable a contrivance for shelter against the inclemency of seasons, were

humiliating in the highest degree; as they suggested in the strongest manner, the lowly condition of some of our fellow creatures...⁷

Surprisingly, given the experience of subsequent European visitors, his crew made no contact with those who dwelt in the ‘deserted village’ of about two dozen huts. Atypically for British ships of the period fitted out for voyages of exploration, *Discovery* carried only one person (Menzies, a surgeon–naturalist) who would today be regarded as a scientist. Vancouver had no one aboard with the specific responsibility to make contact with Aboriginal people. It would appear that London believed the Aboriginal inhabitants of New Holland were unlikely to be of scientific interest, perhaps because the British assumed there would be little difference between them and the Aborigines of the region of the Port Jackson settlement with whom they were by then familiar.

Once King George Sound had been charted and noted as a safe harbour, French and American whaling ships began to call in for shelter and to take on fresh water from the several springs at Frenchman Bay and along the shores of Princess Royal Harbour. It is highly likely that some contacts were made by the crews of these vessels with the Menang, although it appears that any records of such encounters have not survived. There is, however, one piece of indirect evidence that points to the probability that whalers treated Aboriginal people at least reasonably well. Dr T. B. Wilson, surgeon appointed to the British settlement at Albany in late 1829, wrote:

It is quite notorious on many parts of the coast, that if a small vessel makes her appearance, the natives get out of the way as fast as possible, while, if the ship be large, they come down to the beach without mistrust or fear.⁸

Whaling ships were much larger than the small boats used by sealers, and according to Wilson's observation, which he presumably checked with other British members of the settlement who had been there longer than he, those sailing in them were not feared by the Aboriginal coastal people. The men who entered the harbour in smaller vessels were another story altogether.

Vancouver's account of his voyage made the southern coast of New Holland a magnet for those who read his observations of numerous whales and seals in the area. Already, gangs of sealers were operating in the waters around Van Diemen's Land and as far west as Kangaroo Island; Vancouver's sightings of seals, together with his charts of the western coastline, gave the incentive for the more venturesome of these men to try their luck in the new and unexploited seas far to the west. While not under the type of stern discipline enforced by the Royal Navy, whaling crews were nevertheless under a form of control by their masters. Sealers were under no such restraints. Commonly a gang would be hired at Hobart and brought to the area between King George Sound and the Recherche Archipelago where they were left for months at a time to hunt and skin seals. Until the ships returned, the men lived on islands or at temporary camps on the coast where they were loathed and feared by Aborigines unable to prevent their women being taken as concubines and virtual slaves.

Albany author Sarah Drummond's research for her PhD thesis about the history of the sealers and Aboriginal women who lived on the south coast islands between Albany and Esperance around the beginning of the nineteenth century has shown that while some of the women were abducted from Bass Strait islands, others were sold to sealers by Tasmanian Aboriginal groups that had forcefully taken the women from neighbouring groups. Her examination of Tasmanian Protector G. A. Robinson's biographies of sealers shows that as few as two from a total of thirty had ever

been convicts, effectively challenging the common assertion that the sealers were almost all men of that class.⁹

Wilson's comment about Aborigines fleeing sealers' boats accords with the fact that during 1825 and early 1826 there was a campaign by churches and the press in Sydney and Hobart to have the 'nests of sealers wallowing in beastly sensuality' removed from the Australian south coast, including the western areas around King George Sound. This strong and widespread feeling of revulsion towards the sealing gangs because of their reported cruelties to Aboriginal people caused pressure to be exerted on the authorities to send an armed naval vessel to wipe out these 'criminal outposts'. It was suggested that military settlements be established at Western Port and King George Sound to put a permanent end to the sealers' 'debasement' activities.¹⁰

The trade in sealskins was substantial and lucrative. Between 1800 and 1806, more than 100,000 sold at Sydney for prices as high as two guineas each, although it is not known how many of these came from vicinity of King George Sound.¹¹ Fortunately, Vancouver's estimate of the number of seals in the area was highly exaggerated – had it proven accurate, the numbers of sealers would have been much larger and the scale of cruelty and exploitation of the Aboriginal people would have been even greater.

Although Aboriginal people were cruelly victimised by sealing gangs during the pre-settlement era, there is one clear indication that they were not always prepared to accept ill treatment passively.¹² Shortly after the establishment of the settlement, Aborigines attacked a group of British officers and convicts who believed that they had been mistaken as sealers, and a convict was speared, almost fatally. This incident is revisited in Chapter Three. Shellam, who examines the event in detail, indicates that revenge was not the sole motive for the incident – 'It is hard to know what the spearing signified for the King Ya-nups' – but does not conclusively show that the British were wrong in assuming

that the Menang were retaliating for injuries received at the sealers' hands.¹³

The first settlers believed that Aboriginal children from the King George Sound region who were not of full descent were the result of liaisons between sealers and Aboriginal women. William Nairn Clark wrote in 1842 that the first sealers to visit the area were from Van Diemen's Land, and had called in at Port Phillip Bay where they kidnapped several Aboriginal women and took them to the islands to the east of King George Sound. It was the children that these women bore to the sealers who could be seen at the settlement.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, given the lack of formal recording procedures and the sensitivities then involved, it is not possible to verify these assumptions. However, there is little doubt that the sealers bear the responsibility for being the first to introduce three scourges of European civilisation that were to prove so devastating to the Menang – alcohol, tobacco and venereal disease.

In 1801, Commander Matthew Flinders became the next recorded visitor. His ship, the *Investigator*, was equipped in England for a voyage intended to make landfall at Cape Leeuwin from whence he was to sail to a point near Ceduna reached by the Dutch navigator Thyssen in 1626. Flinders was ordered to continue to chart the coast as far as the already mapped Bass Strait. On the evening of 8 December his vessel sailed into what was then named King George Third's Sound, before entering the inner harbour and establishing a shore camp near the site of what was to become the city of Albany. Unlike Vancouver, Flinders' party made contact with a group of the Menang soon after arrival. As we have seen, this was possibly not the first meeting between European and Aboriginal people at Albany – it is likely that sealers or whalers had previously called at the Sound – but it is the first encounter of which a written record has survived.

When reading accounts of meetings between two very different groups of people, it is critical to attempt to understand

the writers' attitudes and cultural assumptions about those from the other group. Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of important schools of thought existed in Britain and France about inhabitants of newly 'discovered' lands. Since it was French and British sailors who visited King George Sound prior to European settlement, it is the attitudes of the people of these two nations that are relevant to this story. It would clearly be simplistic to assume that every visitor to the Sound held firmly and exclusively to any one theory. It would be even more unrealistic to make the assumption that as the educated elites in Britain and France moved from older schools of philosophy to ones more in tune with emerging scientific and cultural ideas, those from the less educated sections of those societies always moved with them. Those who journeyed to visit the Sound inevitably held preconceptions about the Aboriginal people they fully expected to encounter on arrival. Although we can never know what these preconceptions were in detail, an examination of some commonly accepted viewpoints of the time provides a framework for looking at the records through the eyes of contemporary writers.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the dominant Western philosophy concerning the structure of the universe was still the medieval *scala naturae* or 'The Great Chain of Being', although the idea was coming under increasing challenge in Great Britain where it had never been as strongly held as in Continental Europe.¹⁵ This theory provided an explanation of how every substance or creature in the universe had a place on a 'chain of being', with God at the top of the chain and beneath him angels, stars, kings, nobles, various lesser grades of men, the lion as king of the beasts, then lesser animals and so on. An essential understanding of the concept was that all places on the chain were fixed – it was not a ladder that could be climbed by personal effort or merit. It gave a philosophical and logical basis to the doctrine of the divine right

of kings, and to those who supported and enforced a socially immobile stratified society.¹⁶ Laird wrote:

Next to the word 'Nature', 'The Great Chain of Being' was the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century, playing a part somewhat analogous to that of the blessed word 'evolution' in the late nineteenth.¹⁷

The relevance of this worldview to events at King George Sound lies in the position it assigned to various levels of humanity, and the relationship that it held to exist between humans and the so-called higher forms of the animal kingdom. The division between the two was believed to be very indistinct.¹⁸ Some people were ordained by God's plan to be superior to others, while close observation of newly discovered peoples might well show that it was they who occupied the mysterious position on the chain between men and the higher placed animal species. Obviously, those who held to the theory, and had grown up in the rigidly enforced hierarchic social structure engendered by its application, had the preconditioning to regard indigenous peoples throughout the world as their racial and social inferiors.

By the time the first British and French ships called at King George Sound, the influence of this philosophy was still significant, although in decline in both Britain and France. A frightened British middle class saw the writings of Voltaire, Erasmus Darwin, and especially Thomas Paine, as a major cause of the revolutionary turmoil that swept over France in the 1790s.¹⁹ This fear gave impetus to Evangelicalism, with its fundamental antagonism towards the static continuity advocated and enforced by those holding to the Chain of Being as their guiding philosophy.²⁰ Evangelicalism was a powerful and politically influential movement within the Church of England at this time that aimed at rejuvenating the Church and promoting social and humanitarian projects, such as the William

Wilberforce-led campaign to abolish the Atlantic slave trade. In France, the old idea of the Chain of Being was swept away by the Revolution as a relic of absolute monarchism and the perceived tyranny of the Ancien Régime.

Another influential contemporary theory held that people are essentially virtuous unless corrupted by civilisation. This concept, generally referred to as the idea of the ‘Noble Savage’, is at least as old as ancient Greece and Rome, and is found in writings of classical scholars from both of these societies. Barbaric acts committed by ‘civilised’ Europeans, such as the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572 in France, and the treatment of indigenous peoples by the Spanish Conquistadors, led to a revival of the theme. The Spanish Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas witnessed and wrote about incredible acts of cruelty in sixteenth-century Spanish America and attacked those who held to the widely accepted view that ‘Indians’ were essentially inferior beings to the Spanish. His criticisms of the colonial system powerfully influenced many throughout Europe to embrace the concept of the Noble Savage in reaction to such cruelty.²¹

It is possible to see the concept in the writings of Captain James Cook following his 1770 voyage in the *Endeavour*:

From what I have said of the Natives of New-Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people on Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans; being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity, which is not disturb’d by the inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all the things necessary for life, they covet not Magnificent Houses, Household stuff etc, they live in a warm and fine Climate and enjoy a very fine and wholesome Air, so that they have very little need of

Clothing and this they seem to be fully sensible of, for many to whom we gave Cloth etc to left it carelessly upon the Sea beach and in the woods as a thing they had no manner of use for. In short they seem'd to set no Value.²²

The Noble Savage point of view was essentially theoretical, and was commonly held by intellectuals rather than by the less educated members of society. As increasing contact led to an increase in observed (as distinct from purely theoretical) knowledge about the indigenous inhabitants of Australia and North America, the unreality that had always characterised much of the ideal of the Noble Savage became apparent and its influence waned. However, it proved to be an idea that refused to die completely, and as late as 1893 when Cook's journal was finally published the editor felt it necessary to point out in a footnote that the explorer's views about the Australian Aborigines were in error. Indeed some modern commentators see evidence that it is still alive in some quarters. Australian academic and writer Larissa Behrendt has attacked what she refers to as 'the romanticism of the "noble savage" pervasive in texts and cinema' still being used for political ends today.²³

The French reacted against the old ideas because they saw them as inconsistent with their new, modern, scientific republic. The British reaction against Primitivism, a term that embraces the concept of the Noble Savage, came from two different quarters. Clearly, when one considers the extent to which the British Empire was then expanding by taking land from 'primitive' peoples, it was not a useful model around which the Colonial Office in London might form policy. Secondly, and crucially, Evangelical Anglican Christianity and the rise of the influence of Enlightenment thinkers in the late eighteenth century combined in a powerful new philosophical movement that swept away the older paradigms of thought among the elite stratum that largely controlled decisions in what was still an oligarchic society.

This new philosophical viewpoint held that all humans were descended from common ancestors. Any variety in peoples was due to a form of evolutionary development, the ultimate goal of which was a society not unlike that advocated by Enlightenment theorists.²⁴ Man had passed from hunter to shepherd to farmer to merchant, with a corresponding shift in social organisation from tribe to modern state. The fundamental difference between this point of view and those held by previous generations of the elite of British and European society was that the human race was now seen to be one, with the evident variations caused by culture, rather than by biology or an unchangeable decision of God.²⁵ Alexander Maconochie, who later held the position of commandant at Norfolk Island, demonstrated the sincerity with which educated men of the period held to the idea by giving lectures speculating that the ancestors of British and Europeans were black, before ‘the effect of civilisation’ turned them white.²⁶

This philosophy allowed for the possibility of ‘improvement’ for all peoples, even if the desired improvement was seen as being necessarily along the lines of moving towards the model of British society at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since racial differences were believed to be only skin deep, indigenous peoples deserved full respect as fellow humans. However, the influence of Evangelical Anglicanism upon the British elite ensured that this respect did not extend to Aboriginal religion or culture. Aboriginal society, with its emphasis on community rather than the individual and on its own non-Christian spirituality, was something to be superseded, rather than valued and encouraged.

The contrast between this new and relatively enlightened view, and those positing ‘savage’ people as occupying an indeterminate position between mankind and the animal kingdom, is crucial to any understanding of the philosophies underlying the first contacts at King George Sound, and the subsequent history of Aboriginal and European interaction in the area. Many settlers

in early nineteenth-century Australia still held the older view. Stanner observed:

In the early years of settlement [in eastern Australia] insensibility towards the Aborigines' human status hardened into contempt, derision and indifference. The romantic idealism, unable to stand the shock of experience, drifted through dismay into pessimism about the natives' capacity for civilisation.²⁷

This view was being expressed as late as 1965, when the Western Australian author Alexandra Hasluck wrote that the land around Mandurah when she was a child 'had hardly been seen by human eyes, save those of black men, if they could be called human'.²⁸

The attitudes and assumptions of the Menang towards the first Europeans with whom they came into contact are obviously of equal importance in understanding the significance of the interaction that took place prior to permanent British settlement at the Sound. Unfortunately we don't have access to any documents from this period written by an Aboriginal person, and only very little was written by Europeans at Albany that touched on the subject.

The most comprehensive source of information about how Australian Aboriginal groups in general rationalised the existence of Europeans is the influential Australian historian Henry Reynolds' book *The Other Side of the Frontier*, written in 1981. Reynolds noted that their arrival caused Aboriginal groups to indulge in prolonged and intense debate about the true nature and intent of these newcomers. Numerous contemporary European observers, as well as castaways who had spent considerable time living with Aborigines, believed that the pale-skinned visitors were initially seen as Aboriginal individuals returning from the dead. This idea was held in widely geographically separated areas of the Australian continent. Reynolds stated that the various

words used by Aboriginal groups to describe Europeans could be translated as 'ghost', 'spirit', 'eternal departed' and 'the dead', and that throughout much of Australia the Aboriginal people who first came into contact with settlers withheld the use of their word for 'person' as a descriptor of the newcomers.²⁹

To a society with no knowledge of people from across the ocean, this was a logical assumption to make. The cosmos was a very limited place and most, if not all, of the human race were kin, or potentially so. The known number of people was small, but the number of inhabitants of the spirit world was vast. The spirit world was just as tangible as the world inhabited by the living, and it is little wonder that Aboriginal groups across the continent separately reached the conclusion that the visitors were a form of returning spirits. In a world where the existence of other countries was neither known nor suspected, there was no other logical alternative.

We have information from several sources about the way the Aboriginal people of the south-west of Western Australia fitted the pale-skinned men into their cosmology. Francis Armstrong, who arrived at Perth in 1829 and maintained a deep and lifelong interest in Aboriginal people, is probably the best and most accurate source of information about the subject, despite criticism of him by several of his contemporaries. He wrote that Perth Noongars rationalised the existence and presence of Europeans as Djanga, a Noongar word meaning the ghosts of their dead ancestors who had returned from the spirit island of Kurannup.³⁰ Similar beliefs also existed among coastal groups in many other parts of the continent.³¹ Aboriginal people at Perth frequently identified individual Europeans as one of their deceased relatives, and it is interesting to note that this initial belief was still adhered to at least as late as 1838, when Captain George Grey described how an elderly Noongar woman near Perth assured him that he was the ghost of her dead son.³² Grey believed that the concept of anyone

voluntarily leaving their homeland was so alien to Noongar people that they thought Europeans must be Noongar spirits returning to their old campsites.³³

None of the observers at Albany recorded detailed information on the subject. This is surprising given the frequency of reports from Perth; Armstrong wrote that the belief was so common there that several hundred people were regarded as Aborigines returned from the dead.³⁴ Nind, Barker and Collie all took a keen interest in Aboriginal beliefs and it is inconceivable that they would not have raised the subject in their enquiries and discussions. However, they wrote almost nothing about the issue. The most comprehensive record that we have concerning the topic is one account in Barker's journal. The settlement's commandant broached the subject on a day when there was 'much hail and rain', presumably a good opportunity to sit together in the house and have an extended conversation with Mokare, who was his close companion and frequent informant on Aboriginal matters. Barker wrote: 'Conversation with Mokarè about 1st arrival of White People here. He said black fellows knew nothing about them or their reasons for coming...'³⁵ It is probable that Mokare was not born when the first encounters at King George Sound occurred, but it is reasonable to assume that he would have been aware of any knowledge possessed by his immediate ancestors about European visitors to Australia before the first arrivals at their area.

Nind regarded the custom of interring personal implements in a deceased Aboriginal person's grave as evidence for a belief in the afterlife, and noted their belief that their fathers went to the westward after death.³⁶ There is, however, one piece of later information which indicates that the beliefs held by the Menang were similar to those of other Noongar groups. In 1908, Nebinyan, an elderly Aboriginal man who had worked in the whaling industry at Albany from 1862 to 1877, told how his ancestors at Albany had seen and touched the Djanga.³⁷

There is a further piece of indirect evidence that supports the idea that the Aboriginal people at Albany held some version of the reincarnation belief. Reynolds noted that in some areas of Australia where European settlement occurred later than at places some distance away, the 'secular' view of Europeans was taken from the outset. This was because Aboriginal people from the earlier settled areas had abandoned the reincarnation idea and informed their neighbours of the actual nature of white men.³⁸ By the time Perth was settled by Europeans, a considerable number of ships had called in at King George Sound over a long period, and some information about the Europeans aboard them must have reached the Swan River Aborigines. The well-attested fact that the Aborigines at Perth held strongly to the reincarnation belief would appear to be evidence that the Menang had not come to any differing conclusion by the late 1820s.

Matthew Flinders' arrival at King George Sound on 8 December 1801 meant that the officers and crew of the *Investigator* were much more likely to meet the Menang than was Vancouver, who visited at a time when many of the Aboriginal people would still have been inland before returning for the summer. Six days later, the first recorded contact between Aborigines and European people at Albany took place. Flinders' journal described how during the ensuing four-week period 'frequent and amicable communication with the natives of this country' occurred.³⁹

It is interesting to note that no meeting took place until the sixth day after the British arrived, even though parties had gone ashore on each of the intervening days – and that it was the British who initiated the contact. Flinders' journal entry for 14 December records that various parties were assigned tasks, including the naturalists, who: 'ranged the country in all directions, being landed at such places as they desired; while my [Flinders] own time was divided betwixt the observatory and the survey of the Sound'.⁴⁰ One of these parties, headed by the chief naturalist

Robert Brown, decided to investigate some smoke that was visible at the entrance to Princess Royal Harbour. There they met with 'several of the natives who were shy but not afraid'. Having given the Menang men a handkerchief and a bird that they had shot, the men found that:

like the generality of people hitherto seen in this country, these men did not seem to be desirous of communication with strangers; and they made very early signs to our gentlemen to return from whence they came.⁴¹

The next morning, a cautious group of Aboriginal men approached the British tents with what the new arrivals felt was a very mixed message. One walked up to the British with a raised spear and, with the others in the group, made what were taken to be threatening words and gestures. The British found it perplexing that the purpose of the 'vociferous parleying' that followed seemed to fluctuate between the issuing of threats if they remained on Aboriginal land, and the granting of permission to stay. Eventually an exchange of goods took place and the two groups parted, 'apparently on very good terms'.⁴² During the remainder of the stay, other peaceful contact occurred and Flinders referred in his journal to the Aboriginal people of the area as: 'Our friends the natives...'⁴³ For reasons not made clear in his journal, Flinders decided to exercise his marines in the presence of the Aboriginal people who had frequently visited the British camp. The brightly coloured uniforms, together with the music of the fifes and drums, made a deep impression on the audience, and it is most interesting to note that the marines' drill movements were carefully memorised and subsequently incorporated into a corroboree performed at Katanning in 1908.⁴⁴

Flinders' visit influenced the future direction of Aboriginal-European relations at Albany in several ways. Firstly, comments

in his journal clearly indicated his belief that the Aborigines of King George Sound were fundamentally the same as those at Port Jackson. This meant that the British could plan any future settlement at this strategically interesting natural harbour with the knowledge that the local Aboriginal people could be managed as 'easily' as had been the case at Sydney over the past thirteen years. From an Aboriginal perspective, the significance of Flinders' visit for the future was that they had met Europeans and had found them to be friendly and non-threatening. Following Flinders' visit, those who sailed into King George Sound would find people who had incorporated the presence of Europeans into their own view of the world, and were generally prepared to meet them on a basis of mutual, if guarded, friendship.

In 1803, two French ships called at the Sound as part of a scientific expedition given the task of thoroughly investigating the north, west and south coasts of the still partly unknown Australian continent. Nicolas Baudin, already an experienced leader of scientific missions, was in command. The scientists on board *Géographe* and *Casuarina* had been given most comprehensive instructions about how to carry out a study of the physical and moral conditions of the Aboriginal people who were reported to be living in the western part of Australia. Historian Leslie Marchant has proposed that it was these instructions that marked the turning point in the study of humans, and led to the beginning of scientific anthropology.⁴⁵

The expedition spent eleven days at King George Sound and, as Flinders had experienced two years earlier, the Aboriginal inhabitants were found to be peaceable and friendly. The pattern of Aboriginal men approaching the visitors, while ensuring that their women and children remained out of sight, was again noted. Baudin was impressed with the construction of fish traps, but noted little else about the Aborigines. The French officers and crew were under strict naval discipline and motivated by high scientific ideals, and their visit would have reinforced the idea

among the Aboriginal inhabitants that Europeans were both friendly and short-term visitors.

In 1818, Phillip Parker King sailed into King George Sound in the *Mermaid*, anchoring at the entrance to Oyster Harbour where Flinders had anchored seventeen years earlier. Despite seeing their fires each night, King and his men made no contact with the Menang during their eleven-day stay. This is curious since Allan Cunningham, the expedition botanist, explored extensively around the area looking for new specimens for his collection, and John Septimus Roe walked a very considerable distance alone around the perimeter of Oyster Harbour. Given the friendly relations that had developed during Flinders' visit in 1801, it is surprising that the Aboriginal people chose not to make contact with King and his crew.

It is possible that the visit of the *Emu*, a British transport vessel that called in to take on firewood in 1816, may have been significant in this regard. While the ship was anchored, the 'gentlemen' on board (including W. C. Wentworth) made frequent visits ashore where they were received in a 'most friendly manner' by the local Aboriginal people who came unarmed. On several days Aborigines happily came aboard, but on the last day of the visit the boat's crew were attacked without any warning by a group of men who threw a volley of spears. Although Mrs Napper's bonnet was grazed, no one was injured. The crew immediately discharged their muskets in the general direction and fled to the ship without knowing whether they had hit any of their attackers.⁴⁶ When King called at the Sound again in late 1821, he recorded that the local Aborigines were well acquainted with the use of muskets. King would have been aware of the *Emu* incident, but the actions of the members of his expedition in walking around the area, in Roe's case by himself, would indicate that they did not expect the affair to be repeated.

There are two grounds to dismiss the possibility that King was either not interested in making contact during his first visit, or that

he actively avoided it. Firstly, his instructions from the Colonial Office in London specifically stated that he was to observe in detail the appearance, language, occupation and preparedness to trade of all of the Aboriginal people along the Australian coast. Secondly, King's behaviour on his next voyage clearly indicated that he was diligent in fulfilling his task of meeting Aboriginal people. He welcomed the contact that occurred at King George Sound during his second visit three years later, even after his journal indicated his crewmen had recently been attacked at several locations on the northern Australian coastline. If King had been reluctant to meet Aboriginal people on his first visit, he would have had every reason to be even more reluctant on his second. It would therefore appear likely that it was the Menang who chose not to make contact during his first visit.

King circumnavigated the Australian continent on three occasions, calling at King George Sound on each voyage. It was during his second visit of two weeks between December 1821 and January 1822 that he and his crew enjoyed extensive contact with considerable numbers of the local Aboriginal people. In direct contrast with their policy of keeping away from all contact with the British that had characterised their approach to King's first visit three years earlier, the Menang showed a desire for close and continuing contact.

The *Bathurst* arrived late on the afternoon of 23 December and anchored in the Sound. Early next morning, members of the crew heard 'Indians' calling from the rocky northern side of the entrance to Princess Royal Harbour and returned their calls. As the ship's whaleboat entered the harbour, the Aboriginal men walked along the shore inviting the British to land, wading out to greet them. King was not prepared to risk the 'quarrel' that a refusal to share whatever was in the boat might cause and pulled off into deeper water, much to the 'disappointment and mortification at our want of confidence' that this action caused.⁴⁷ The British

crew, not unnaturally cautious following their recent clashes with Aboriginal groups in northern Australia, carefully ascertained that the men on the shore were unarmed. However, they decided to return to the ship and move to the entrance to Oyster Harbour where they 'could anchor near enough to the shore to carry on our different operations without being impeded by the natives, even though they should be amicably disposed'.⁴⁸

At their new anchorage in deep water close to shore, King felt secure enough to welcome on board small parties of Aboriginal men. Soon, he was referring to them in his journal as 'our friends', noting that they were 'totally free from timidity or distrust'. Menang men assisted the British in the work of gathering stores of firewood and fresh water, and permitted them to carry out botanical research over an extensive area bordering the harbour. The crew became particularly attached to a young man to whom they gave the name 'Jack'. They allowed him to visit and leave the ship whenever he wished, and he became so attached to the British that he accepted their offer to sail with them on the remainder of their journey, only to decline after experiencing seasickness during a period of rising swell that preceded the *Bathurst's* departure. The Menang eagerly traded weapons for ship's biscuit, and the British took a considerable quantity of Aboriginal artefacts on board.⁴⁹

King generally treated the Menang with a degree of respect, and it appears from his journal that he welcomed their friendship. There was, however, a jarring note: on the day after the *Bathurst* arrived, King had Jack dressed in sailors' clothing and plied him with alcohol in the form of watered-down rum, the 'grog' traditionally rationed to sailors aboard vessels of the Royal Navy.⁵⁰

Ten months later, King returned to King George Sound for a brief visit during which he noted the presence of the American sealing schooner the *San Antonio*. King's journal mentioned meeting with 'our old friend Coolbun', but apart from noting

Jack's absence he wrote almost nothing about any interaction the crew may have had with the local Aboriginal population.

In 1825, the French Government gave Jules Dumont d'Urville command of a voyage of scientific discovery to the Pacific region. Western Australia was not part of his official itinerary, but the requirement to repair storm damage to his ship, the *Astrolabe*, made necessary a stay of eighteen days at King George Sound in October 1826.⁵¹ As King had done earlier, Dumont d'Urville took Aboriginal men aboard his vessel, dressing one in European clothing before putting him ashore. Like King, the French Captain gave alcohol to at least one Aboriginal man, the first to go aboard the ship. Dumont d'Urville stated that the man had suffered greatly from the 'evil effects', and it is interesting to read that when eight local men later made their acquaintance with Dumont d'Urville and some members of his crew, the Aborigines refused to take any of the brandy that was offered to them.⁵²

It is difficult at this remove to state confidently why both King and Dumont d'Urville resorted to plying Aboriginal men with alcohol aboard their vessels. One possible explanation is that it had become common for Europeans to react against what they saw as the unrealistic concept of the Noble Savage by casting indigenous people in a comic role. So common was the practice that it had its own conventions. Artists depicted Aboriginal men and women as grotesque caricatures of Europeans, complete with inappropriate forms of European clothing, a clay pipe, and 'comical' nicknames.⁵³ The widespread view that in many ways the antipodes represented the inversion of things in the northern hemisphere reinforced the idea, allowing even those with some residual sympathy with the Noble Savage theory to rationalise that it was an inappropriate concept to apply to indigenous people from the southern hemisphere.⁵⁴ A painting by the *Astrolabe*'s official artist, Louis Auguste de Sainson, shows clear signs that it was not only the British who were influenced by this attitude towards

Aboriginal people. Three Europeans are portrayed as meticulously dressed, while an Aboriginal man is depicted as wearing shabby and ill-fitting European clothing. His Aboriginal companions are depicted as barely human. The artist was obviously intent on producing this painting in the comic savage genre – his other paintings of the King George Sound area show Aboriginal people with realistic physiques and possessing an obvious dignity.

Apart from this incident, the journals of Dumont d'Urville, de Sainson and the two naturalists Joseph Gaimard and Jean Constant Quoy present a picture of respect for the people with whom they came into contact at King George Sound. Given the different experience of British visitors prior to settlement, it is interesting to note that the Menang almost immediately brought their children to meet the French visitors. However, like the British, they were not permitted to see or meet with the women.⁵⁵ Only three days after their arrival, the relationship between the visitors and the residents was such that three French men spent most of the night at the camp where the Aboriginal people were living at the time. The picture of the evening presented in de Sainson's journal is that of two very differing groups of people, each intent upon learning as much as possible about the other, and each feeling safe in the other's company.⁵⁶ Apart from confirming that men who arrived in large ships were likely to be friendly, interesting and useful trading partners, a lasting consequence of the enforced stay of the *Astrolabe* was the opportunity it provided for de Sainson to paint a number of carefully detailed scenes which have survived to the present.⁵⁷

Albany's early history was very different from that of almost every other area of the Australian continent – by the time the first contingent of British men and women arrived on the scene with intentions of staying on a long-term basis, the Aboriginal residents of the region had known of the existence of Europeans for well over thirty years, and had had time to consider how they fitted

into the Aboriginal spiritual world. The experience of European contact had been generally positive, and where problems had arisen, the Menang were well able to differentiate between the exploitative sealers and the much more amicable and interested men who visited for short periods in the big white-sailed ships. Aboriginal people welcomed these ships and the people who lived in them, because they brought different opportunities for trade than did visitors from other Aboriginal groups who travelled across country.⁵⁸ Initially there appeared no reason to suspect that the *Amity*, which arrived only a few weeks after the departure of the *Astrolabe*, represented any change in the already well-established pattern. Had the Menang been aware that this ship was actually the forerunner of countless others that would bring men, women and children who would ultimately dispossess them of their sacred land, the events recounted in the next chapter may well have played out in a very different fashion.