

Land of Vision and Mirage

Western Australia since 1826

GEOFFREY BOLTON



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Geoffrey Bolton

Introduction

Summer holidaymakers on the beach at Rottnest's Thomson Bay sometimes observe on the eastern horizon the shimmering outlines of high-rise buildings above the mainland. As the outlines change shape and dissolve, they are seen to be mirages, reflecting and exaggerating the profile of Perth's central business district.

These mirages illustrate a major theme in Western Australian history. Beginning with the first Governor, Captain James Stirling, bold entrepreneurs have pushed projects for investment and development on the basis of inadequate research and over-hopeful assessment. Caution has been scorned as inexperienced settlers were urged into the role of pioneers. When disappointment and human hardship followed, the leaders would proclaim undaunted faith in the validity of the enterprise, blaming setbacks on hostile critics, unforeseen bad luck, and insufficient effort on the part of the workers. The myth of dynamic entrepreneurship, both state and private, has survived nevertheless. Doubters are seldom encouraged to question the capacity of an underpopulated Western Australia to sustain the infrastructure or to provide the specialised human talent required for well-planned developmental programs.

The great visions never resulted in total failures but left a residue of modest growth. Perhaps that growth would not have occurred without the first prodigal input of capital and labour summoned up by the leaders, but it was more often the result of canny improvisation and unspectacular hard work by their followers. Western Australia was, after all, one of the many frontiers of Western capitalism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, vying with a host of competitors for investment

and migrants. Geographically isolated, its economic development could not await the calculations of rational planners. Instead stimulus came from the visionary with limitless faith in the West's resources and too little appreciation for the need for assessment and conservation of those resources.

Isolation has fed a number of Western Australian attitudes and stereotypes. With a coastline too long for realistic defence and a small and unevenly distributed population, Western Australians understandably fear invaders who might move in on them as they moved in on their Aboriginal predecessors. The Americans, Irish Fenians, rabbits, Germans, Japanese, bikie gangs, unauthorised 'boat people', cane toads—how could they be resisted if they came with sufficient force of numbers? More than most Australians, the inhabitants of the West rely on the protection of great and powerful allies, but such dependence breeds its own ambivalence. Nineteenth-century Western Australians valued membership of the British Empire but resented the heavy hand of the British Government. Western Australians voted to join the federated Commonwealth in 1901 but spent the next century girding at the encroachments of federal authority. Sometimes, as with the secession referendum of 1933 or during the perceived threat of Japanese invasion at the height of World War II, they voiced an active mistrust of the Eastern States.

The political and cultural dominance of the Sydney–Canberra–Melbourne axis—the 'Hume Highway hegemony' of Geoffrey Blainey's phrase—has often been tempered in Western Australia by a notable capacity for innovation fostered rather than discouraged by the state's remoteness. Where Brisbane and Adelaide have frequently been drawn into the commercial and cultural orbit of the Hume Highway hegemony, Western Australians, challenged by greater distance from the dominant south-east, have found scope for independent initiative. Sometimes this spirit of initiative has led to commercial excesses, sometimes to a naive provincial boastfulness in matters of culture, but in a society of limited resources, the tally of achievement since colonisation has often been creditable.

Sporadic debate arises, as similar debates arise in Queensland and Tasmania, as to whether Western Australians are developing a provincial character and ethos distinct from that of other Australians. Most

measures of such distinctions are superficial, but as Terry Eagleton has observed: 'It would be surprising if people who have shared roughly the same culture and material circumstances over long periods of time did not manifest some psychological traits in common'.¹ Linguists have detected a glossary of 750 distinctively Western Australian words, some borrowed from Aboriginal sources, others English. Words that 'arrived' in Western Australia with early settlement found the jump across the Nullarbor too exhausting to undertake. Examples include the use of 'brook' for a small stream, and the identification of fertile land as being 'in good heart'.²

Factors such as class, ethnicity, gender and religion possess the same potential for divisiveness in Western Australia as in any other regions of Western civilisation, but at least until the second half of the twentieth century there persisted among many Western Australians a belief that in their isolated community, disagreements should never be pushed too far, but all should stick together. No doubt this belief was convenient to those who wielded political and economic power in Western Australia, and no doubt troublemakers and dissenters often found it hard to gain a serious hearing, but this clannish sense of fundamentally shared identity of interest seems to have formed an effective social cement. From the 1960s, as the economy grew and diversified and the effects of postwar migration began to make their mark, Western Australian society became more complex and in some respects more adversarial. New strains emerged in the federal compact as Western Australia, like Queensland, took a greater share in earning Australia's export income and in competing for trade and investment in East and South Asia. If there was no longer a unifying consensus about what it meant to be Western Australian, there was still an inherited sense of local identity that strongly influenced responses to social and economic change, and even to the challenge of globalisation.

Once in every generation a single author has attempted to summarise and interpret the history of Western Australia since British occupation and settlement in 1829. In 1897 a visiting American, Warren Bert Kimberly, an early example of the freelance professional in search of a commission, produced an account of nineteenth-century Western Australia that, despite his comparatively short sojourn in the colony, contained many acute insights on which later historians have built.³ One who built on Kimberly was Dr James Sykes Battye, who published a

carefully uncontroversial account in 1924, which also stopped short at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ Strongest on the history of exploration and constitutional change, Battye's history was the standard reference until the arrival of the energising influence of the young Frank Crowley at The University of Western Australia during the 1950s. Crowley summed up the results of a decade's archival research and graduate supervision in *Australia's Western Third*, published in 1960.⁵ Believing that the 'prize of history is the understanding of modern times', Crowley devoted more than half his book to the twentieth century, with a much greater emphasis on social and economic history than his predecessors. To this day his comprehensive account retains its value.

Since its publication, however, Western Australian historical writing has advanced enormously. Vigorous research at the state's five universities has been buttressed by the increasing professionalisation of freelance historians and bodies such as the Royal Western Australian Historical Society. All this activity has been unable to do justice to the wealth of archives and primary sources preserved and classified at the J. S. Battye Library of West Australian History and the State Records Office of Western Australia. In 1981 Tom Stannage edited a multi-author anthology that incorporated many of the findings of recent research, but much more has been produced since then.⁶ It would be vainglorious for any individual historian to think that he or she could produce a short history that adequately summarised all the new approaches and insights that have been bubbled up among lively-minded historians of Western Australia during the last twenty-five years. All the same, it is time that a short history was produced for the convenience of non-historians and historians alike. This book will have served its purpose if it does no more than stimulate the appearance of other and better short histories.

I

A shabby-genteel society, 1826–1850

On Christmas Day in the morning in 1826, the brig *Amity* anchored in the magnificent harbour of King George Sound on the south coast of Western Australia. Four weeks later a party of soldiers and convicts under Major Edmund Lockyer hoisted the Union Jack at what would become the town of Albany.¹ Thus British sovereignty was claimed over the one-third of Australia that had been known to Europeans longer than any other part of the continent, and was least wanted. Western Australia's coast was probably sighted by the Portuguese in the 1520s and accurately charted by the Dutch between 1616 and 1697. They reported the coast as dangerous, the landscape as barren and the Aborigines as uninterested in trade. Later in the seventeenth century the English traveller William Dampier confirmed these impressions. Consequently, Australia's western third was undisturbed during the eighteenth century, except probably for a few European castaways and the seasonal visits of fishers from Macassar in the Sulawesi region of Indonesia, who came to the north coast in search of *bêche-de-mer*. In the late eighteenth century, as European interest intensified in the Indian and Pacific oceans, St Allouarn left a claim of French sovereignty at Dirk Hartog Island in 1772 and George Vancouver raised the Union Jack at King George Sound in 1791, but their home governments showed no interest in taking possession.

Nobody sensed Western Australia's potential economic strengths. These included a south-western enclave stretching about 800 kilometres east and north of Cape Leeuwin, with an assured winter rainfall of the Mediterranean pattern; a northern region of almost equally regular summer rainfall, which a later generation would name the Kimberley

district; and, concealed within the arid interior, an unimaginable store of minerals. Even after Britain sent Governor Arthur Phillip and the convict fleet to New South Wales in 1788, the 2.5 million square kilometres of Australia west of the meridian 129° east remained in the keeping of the Aboriginal hunter-gatherers who had peopled the continent for at least 40,000 years.

As elsewhere in Australia, Aboriginal occupation was unconsciously preparing the ground for European settlement. The yam patches and clumps of edible plants gathered by Aboriginal women often foreshadowed the sites of homestead blocks for farms and grazing properties. In the Yamatji country north of modern Geraldton, it seems that native plants were systematically cropped. The carefully fostered skills and techniques accumulated over a thousand generations of hunting would make Aboriginal guides and stockmen a valuable resource for European pastoralists. The tracks they travelled would lead surveyors along the easiest lines of cross-country access. Thus a major highway leading east from Perth across the Darling Scarp was originally known as 'King Dick's road' after the 'whitefeller' name of the Nyungar guide Beban who pointed it out. In late spring and summer, when Aboriginal people burnt off the season's grass and undergrowth in order to aid their hunting, they were promoting the growth of fresh grass and giving the country that open park-like appearance that appealed to newcomers from Britain in search of good pasture. As Sylvia Hallam writes, it was the *work* of generations of Aboriginal people that created an environment that European settlers found attractive.²

British interest in Western Australia stirred only in the 1820s, more than thirty years after the occupation of New South Wales. Ex-convict sealers and American whalers working their way west from the established harpooning grounds in Bass Strait and the Southern Ocean sailed the waters near the present sites of Esperance and Albany by the mid-1820s. Some who came ashore behaved brutally towards the Nyungar. Of greater concern to the authorities in Sydney were reports of French maritime activity in the area. At war for more than twenty years until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Britain and France were still on uneasy terms a decade later. Despite its unpromising reputation, Australia's empty western sector could seem, perhaps groundlessly, a temptation

for France's colonial ambitions.³ In October 1826 the French naval officer Dumont d'Urville landed at King George Sound to examine its botany. But the West was not to become Australia's Quebec. Having discarded the idea of stationing a garrison at Shark Bay on the western extremity of the continent, Governor Ralph Darling of New South Wales decided to assert British sovereignty by staking out a claim on the south coast, where an eye might be kept on the sealers and whalers. Lockyer's garrison set the British imprint on Western Australia.

Fear of the French was not the only spur to official action in those last months of 1826. The New South Wales authorities were lobbied by Captain James Stirling, a mixture of energetic servant of Empire and Scotsman on the make, with relatives in the powerful British East India Company, which still claimed commercial pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean region. Stirling envisaged a new colony in Western Australia with potential for Indian Ocean trade. He would name it 'Hesperia', the land looking west, with overtones of classical myths suggesting fruitfulness. Governor Darling authorised him to explore Western Australia's largest river south of the tropics, the Swan. Accompanied by the botanist Charles Frazer, Stirling visited the Swan for twelve days in early March 1827. At that time of the year, they can hardly have realised the unique character of the flora of Western Australia's South West. At least two-thirds and possibly more than 80 per cent of the species are not known elsewhere. Misled by the tallness of the jarrah forest and by an exceptionally mild summer, they formed very exaggerated ideas of the fertility of the coastal plain without exploring the inferior sandy country on either side of the river. Stirling was no judge of soil quality. It was therefore misleading when he returned to New South Wales and then to Britain with joyful reports of an environment like the most fertile parts of Italy. He was on sounder ground when he suggested that British officers in India and their families might holiday in Western Australia to recuperate their health, but nothing came of the idea.⁴

His propaganda fell on ready ears. Since the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, many army and navy officers had retired on half-pay without career prospects. Farm prices were low, and many small landowners faced an uncertain future. Reports from New South Wales suggested that even ex-convicts were succeeding as farmers and graziers. To members

of the more respectable classes, the possibilities were tempting. As James Henty of Sussex told his brothers:

What can we do in England with £10,000 amongst all of us unless indeed we chose to descend many steps in the scale of Society, and which our feelings would ill stand, having at the same time the opportunity of doing as well and perhaps considerably better...under British Dominion and a fine climate.

*For the first year or two we shall have to endure privations and hardships which we have not been accustomed to in England. What of that?*⁵

Even the Hentys' farm labourers shared their optimism. One of them, Charles Gee, voiced their hopes in rough-hewn verse:

*Now when we come to New Holland I hope that soon will be
All will send home to England, and happy there wee be
With plenty of provishons, boys, and plenty for to do,
So hear is health to Henty and all his joyful crew.
So hear is off to New Holland if God will spare our lives,
All with little children, hower sweethearts and hower wives.*⁶

Unlike the colonies of eastern Australia, the Swan River would be free of the convict taint. Investors and settlers responded eagerly to the news that 40 acres (16.2 hectares) would be granted for every £3 invested in cash or goods. Although the British Government was unwilling to spend money on the new colony, it made no objections to attempts by private enterprise, and its publicity further exaggerated Stirling's already over-optimistic propaganda. Many scrambled for early access to the Swan River Colony. One ambitious syndicate was promoted by a cousin of the British Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel. Thomas Peel sought support from a group of investors already speculating in New South Wales, and when they reneged he found generous but unpublicised backing from an ex-convict merchant, Solomon Levey.⁷ At the end of 1828 Stirling was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Western Australia, and the first settlers left England in February 1829. Western Australia was the first agricultural colony attempted in the British Empire for nearly a century,

and the first in Australia to be envisaged from the outset as a society of families. As one of the colony's first medical men put it:

If we can imagine the population of one of the parishes of England mixed with a sprinkling of half-pay officers and some gentlemen from the East and West Indies, and a few cockneys, put down on the shores of a wilderness, we shall have some idea of the Founders of this interesting society.

He compared Western Australia's First Fleet to Noah's Ark.⁸

Few of the settlers can have guessed how great a gamble they were taking. They arrived in June 1829 to the dismal onset of a rainy winter. No advance party had been sent to make essential preparations. No land had been allocated nor buildings erected, nor had any steps been taken to come to terms with the Nyungar. The settlers were dumped with their possessions on Garden Island and later on the beaches north of the Swan. Stirling's energetic Surveyor-General, John Septimus Roe, at once went to work laying out the town sites of Fremantle, Perth and Guildford, and marking out land along the Swan. He and his staff worked under constant pressure from impatient settlers. Roe's straight lines drawn across the lands of the Mooro and the Beeloo survive today in some of the longer streets of Perth's eastern suburbs. Most blocks combined a small stretch of river frontage and a long tract of the less fertile hinterland. To the lifelong resentment of some settlers, the best land on the upper Swan was allocated to Stirling, Roe and a few favoured friends and officials.⁹ The location of their holdings may have helped to determine the site of the colony's capital, Perth, but so did access to fresh water and river transport, fine views of the Darling Scarp and—comfort for an isolated people—the shelter offered by Mount Eliza from hostile naval bombardment. Perth was founded on the north shore of the Swan on 12 August 1829 with the apt symbolism of the felling of a tree. The biggest investor, Thomas Peel, arrived too late to claim his original grant, and had to accept a large estate south of Fremantle. It was poor land and Peel was a useless manager. His settlers suffered severe privations; some died. Peel lingered for more than thirty years, a model of broken-down gentility.¹⁰ Destitution and misery were common. "That man who

declared this country good deserves hanging nine times over', declared Eliza Shaw, though her husband was one of that class of whom Henry Trigg wrote in February 1830:

*We have a great number of half-pay officers and their familys. They are but ill suited to rough it, and when they arrive expect to have eggs, ham, mutton chops and rump steaks in every corner.*¹¹

Instead, for the first year of settlement they lived mainly on the salt pork, ship's biscuits and other hard fare brought out from England. Some contracted scurvy. Most of the first comers camped under canvas for months, disturbed by rats, fleas, flies and mosquitoes.

Many of the early investors brought with them servants indentured for a contract of either five or seven years. Within two years most of those indentures were broken or annulled by the Governor. Cash was in short supply in the colony, and so many landowners could not afford to pay their labour force. 'Masters here are only in name', exclaimed George Fletcher Moore, 'they are the slaves of their indentured servants'. As one employer put it, 'Almost every settler is obliged to dismiss his indentured servants for idleness, disobedience to orders, or drunkenness, and so soon as they obtain their liberty they embark for either Hobart or Sydney'.¹² Master and servant legislation enabled magistrates to punish defaulting workers with fines or imprisonment, and these laws remained in force until 1892, but they did little to improve the productivity of the work force, or their living standards. Incompetent workers were hardly worth keeping, and skilled workers (there were only ninety-two out of a total work force of 788 as late as 1837) found they could do better for themselves on the open market. Some of the unskilled were reduced to petty crime. In a generally law-abiding community, it was notable that the majority of crimes were larcenies of food or items of clothing committed by members of the labouring class.¹³

Those settlers who fared best tended to be practical yeoman farmers who had given their enterprise forethought. The Hardey and Clarkson families, Yorkshire Methodists who arrived in February 1830 in their own ship, the *Tranby*, brought with them a prefabricated house that they could erect in Fremantle before taking up their land grants. Establishing

himself at a peninsula on the Swan River about four kilometres east of the township of Perth, Joseph Hardey at once busied himself with growing produce for the local market, built the colony's second windmill, invested his profits in property, and was soon a respected confidant of Governor Stirling.¹⁴ Other families, such as the Hentys, soon despaired of success and went off to Van Diemen's Land, whence they would find a fresh opportunity as pioneers of what is now Victoria. Departures from the colony offset natural increase. Between 1830 and 1833 the non-Aboriginal population stagnated at around 1,800, and although a small intake of migrants in 1834 pushed the number up over 2,000, it stayed close to that figure for the rest of the decade.

The first hope of improvement came in the spring of 1830 when Ensign Robert Dale crossed the Darling Scarp and found better country along the Avon River (the upper part of the Swan). In January 1831 Captain Thomas Bannister blazed an overland route between the Swan River and Albany. But in 1831 the Colonial Office imposed a minimum price of five shillings an acre (0.4 hectare) on land sales in all colonies. Investors lost interest in Western Australia. Whereas half a million hectares was alienated between 1829 and 1831, barely 100,000 was sold between 1832 and 1837. Inexcusably, after forty years of contact between Aboriginal people and settlers in eastern Australia, Stirling made no recognition of Indigenous land rights.

The garrison at King George Sound, who encroached comparatively little on the land, lived amicably with the Nyungar, who continued to exercise authority in the region at least until 1842. At the Swan River a cycle of killings and reprisals began within two years, largely because of Aboriginal attacks on introduced livestock grazing on their traditional lands. The Advocate-General, George Fletcher Moore, admitted wryly that 'perhaps these uninformed creatures think they have as good a right to our swine as we have to their kangaroos', but this did not stop him and his fellow colonists from taking strong measures in defence of their property.¹⁵ During Stirling's absence from the colony between 1832 and 1834, relations deteriorated. The killing of unoffending Aborigines provoked the killing of unoffending settlers. In 1833 a senior Nyungar, Midgegooroo, was executed by firing squad before an approving crowd. Two teenage brothers hoping for a reward treacherously killed his son

Yagan later in 1833. If Stirling had fallen into Nyungar hands, he would probably not have fared as badly. As the novelist Anthony Trollope reflected forty years later: 'These black savages were savage warriors and not murderers; and we too, after a fashion, were warriors, very high-handed and with great odds in our favour, and not calm administrators of impartial laws'.¹⁶

The Binjarup Nyungar of the Murray River district, about 80 kilometres south of Perth, continued to offer defiance. Early in 1834 they raided Perth's first flourmill on the south side of the river, their leader Calyute threatening to kill the caretaker, George Shenton. Soldiers trapped Calyute and his companions. He was given sixty lashes with a knotted cord, with lesser punishments for several of his companions. On his release from gaol, Calyute took the lead in hostilities against Thomas Peel, who was encroaching on his people's lands. Two of the soldiers guarding Peel's property were ambushed and one was killed. This episode of frontier warfare ended in October 1834 with the battle of Pinjarra, when Stirling led a military detachment in a dawn raid that resulted in the deaths of more than twenty Nyungar. Calyute and the remainder of his people offered no further resistance, but Lieutenant Bunbury, visiting the region in 1836, wrote: 'The young men, who are very friendly themselves, tell us that we shall never be quite safe or on good terms with their tribe while the old people are still alive'.¹⁷

Sporadic episodes of violence were balanced by long periods of coexistence and even cooperation. If one settler at a Guildford meeting in 1837 could propose a war of extermination against the Aboriginal people, his views were not shared by the responsible authorities. Stirling was unhappy about the continued use of the military as a peacekeeping force and wanted to establish a civilian constabulary, but his executive council balked at the expense. He used the colony's first Foundation Day ceremony, on 1 June 1835, as an occasion for reconciliation, with a Nyungar corroboree as its centrepiece. The government promised 'to visit every act of injustice or violence on the Natives with utmost severity'. The *Perth Gazette* lamented, 'Too much blood has already been spilt in the warfare between the whites and the blacks, and we are afraid the destruction of the Aborigines has been in the ratio of 10 to 1'. By 1840 the Swan Valley was 'pacified', and Aboriginal people were employed in

jobs such as shepherding. Until the convict period, some regularly served as mailmen. Aboriginal leaders accepted designation as 'constables', and a Wesleyan mission school was endeavouring to give the children a Christian education. The frontier of violence had shifted to the Avon Valley. Not without opposition, Stirling's successor, Governor John Hutt, extended to Aboriginal people the right of testifying in civil and criminal courts, but their protection under British law was still uncertain.¹⁸

Mistrust remained under the surface. For hundreds of years Europeans had thrilled to legends of children spirited away by alien forces, but they seemed a little nearer reality in this raw and ambiguous environment. In the first summer of European settlement, it was widely believed that a small child who was lost in the bush, John 'Bonny' Dutton, must have been stolen away by Aborigines. The government had to issue a notice cautioning settlers against vigilante action, and before long a party of Nyungar restored the boy unharmed to his parents. They had merely wished to show their bush colleagues what a white child looked like. For several decades afterwards, in contrast to modern usage, the term 'stolen children' reflected a fear among settler mothers that the 'black men' would take away their little ones. Eliza Shaw and George Fletcher Moore both wrote of it as a matter of course. Ted Lewington, who lived well into the twentieth century, believed that around 1850 an Aborigine had snatched a baby from his mother's arms and run away, only to drop the child when shots were fired after him. Two decades or so later, the girls of the prosperous Shenton family of Crawley House (now the site of The University of Western Australia) still listened to stories of white children abducted by the 'dark people'.¹⁹

Conflict with Aboriginal people justified the presence in the colony of a detachment of British troops, supplied by a commissariat whose demands for accommodation, transport and food provided a vital stimulus to the local economy. As Pamela Statham-Drew has pointed out, expenditure on the military guard far exceeded actual export earnings for most of the colony's first twenty-one years.²⁰ Despite its early reluctance, the British Government was after all funding Stirling's dream. Other sources of capital were few. A handful of Fremantle merchants such as Lionel Samson and George Leake, as agents for local landowners and shopkeepers, advanced them credit. Outside investors were not tempted

while the thriving whaling and wool industries of eastern Australia offered strong competition.

James Cameron has argued that despite their inexperience of conditions elsewhere in Australia, the first generation of settlers showed good judgment in selecting country, and adapted well to their new environment.

*Western Australia was so remote in fact that little information on viable forms of production or suitable methods of land management filtered in from other colonies and...such information as did come was of little relevance or use.*²¹

Although John Septimus Roe led exploring parties to the south in the spring of 1835 and eastward a year later, they found no reliable pastoral country. In 1839 George Grey and his companions, having survived shipwreck near the present site of Kalbarri, walked 600 kilometres to Perth. In the early stages of their journey, they noted Yamatji wells, tracks and grounds showing evidence of systematic yam cultivation. Grey thought this country gave high promise for future European settlement. Further south the party suffered privations in poorly watered coastal country, and this discouraged northward expansion for several years.²²

Within the settled districts, landowners and their shepherds learned their husbandry through trial and error. Western Australia's first substantial pressure group was its Agricultural Society, founded in 1831 as a medium for exchanging information about the new environment. By the end of 1833 a bountiful harvest from 240 hectares under crop put an end to food rationing, and the following year the first agricultural show was held at Guildford. Enough grain was grown for self-sufficiency by 1835, but sluggish local demand discouraged expansion. Shortages continued. In June 1837 Moore wrote: 'We are most anxiously looking for a vessel from England. There is neither salt, nor foreign flour, nor candles nor soap in the colony'—though he added that there was enough local produce to avert any sense of crisis. In the same year, the Government Resident at Albany reported, 'there is not a pound of meat as well as flour to be purchased in the settlement'.²³

Wool-growing progressed more slowly. Although 8,000 sheep were introduced in 1829–30, losses through toxic native plants meant that there

was only the same number in 1836. Flocks built up to nearly 45,000 in 1841, when wool exports were valued at £3,000. But such progress was puny when it was estimated that in one year American whalers netted £30,000 from their catch in Western Australian waters. Local entrepreneurs began shore-based whaling at Albany in 1836 and Fremantle in 1837, but failed to match their competitors. However, until the 1860s the American whalers proved welcome trading partners for the South West settlers, whose foodstuffs they purchased in return for commodities such as clothes, tools and books.²⁴ The most encouraging sign of economic progress was the establishment of the Bank of Western Australia in 1837, largely backed by Fremantle merchants. When this was taken over by the Bank of Australasia in 1841, local investors drove it out of business by forming the Western Australian Bank, which was to survive until 1926. This spirit of self-confidence was fed by a modest growth in commerce. In 1840, for the first time, a ship sailed for London with a cargo made up entirely of colonial produce.

Stirling left the colony in January 1839, never to return. In the experienced eyes of a Colonial Office under-secretary, 'Sir James administered the Government of Western Australia with very remarkable ability and temper and with more success than the inherent improvidence of that scheme of Colonisation would have justified any one in expecting'.²⁵ In the struggle for survival, Stirling's original vision of a gentry colony stood no chance. Some aspiring families followed the Hentys to the fairer prospects of eastern Australia; others drifted into alcoholic obscurity. More worked their land with family labour and held on for better times, but their children were already being shaped by the environment into something tougher and, in many cases, more barbarised. The five Bussell brothers, pioneers of the Vasse district, personified the variety of responses with which the would-be gentry of the first generation met the pressures of the environment. The oldest brother, John, always retained the humane and scholarly values of his background in an English vicarage, even when in later life financial reverses compelled him to turn schoolmaster. The youngest, Alfred, only 13 years old when he arrived in Western Australia, adapted resourcefully to the bush, married a robust young woman without social pretensions, and survived as a thoroughly acclimatised pioneer grazier in the Margaret River district. But some of

the intermediate brothers went badly to pieces in the alien environment. Charles Bussell fathered a child on a servant girl and treated her shabbily. The pervading fear of Aboriginal hostility pushed Lenox Bussell into shooting dead an 8-year-old Nyungar girl who had been taken under the family roof. He went unpunished, but when he died at the age of 30 he was deemed of unsound mind.²⁶ By contrast, the Bussells' neighbour, Georgiana Molloy, attuned quickly to the bush of the South West. A pious young wife of a retired military officer, busy with motherhood (she eventually died in childbirth), she found time to study and classify the botany of a region offering more new and unknown species than any comparable quarter of the globe, and to communicate those findings to appreciative scholars in Britain. She was exceptional.²⁷

English traditions of deference wilted in the colonial environment. A newly arrived clergyman might assert that 'Society will never work unless there is a situation for each class according to God's ordinance', but within a few years he was compelled to recognise that the son of two of his servants, well dressed and with a horse of his own, looked 'more a gentleman than many who are truly such'.²⁸ In Western Australia the clergy were not numerous enough to dominate colonial society, nor were they supported by the infrastructure of tradition and property built up over centuries by the Church of England in the Mother Country. The first Anglican colonial chaplain, John Burdett Wittenoom, was more effective as schoolmaster than as spiritual leader. The second Anglican priest, the Italian-born Dr Giustiniani, left after antagonising the colonists by upholding Aboriginal rights too strongly. Two more Anglican clergy arrived in 1841, and the original Perth church, a modest building walled with mud-brick and rushes that doubled as the courtroom, was replaced by a more substantial edifice in 1845. At Picton the most effective of the early clergy, John Ramsden Wollaston, had to build his own church assisted by his sons. Anglicans had the advantage of their status as the official church, but other branches of Christianity also found a place in Western Australia. The Wesleyans had a church in Perth by 1842; the Congregationalists in 1846. A Catholic bishop, John Brady, arrived in December 1843, followed by several parties of religious.²⁹

The transmission of metropolitan culture to the colony largely rested with this handful of clergy and a few educated officials such as George

Fletcher Moore. Somewhat desperately the colonists tried to preserve the decorums and the social rituals of English provincial society. On the monarch's birthday, Government House dispensed modest hospitality and the soldiers paraded. There were dances such as the one when Moore lifted the spirits of his hearers with a song, 'Western Australia for Me', set to the tune of an Irish ballad. By July 1839 a group of citizens put on the colony's first theatrical performance, a musical farce, *Love à la Militaire*, before an appreciative audience. Wittenoom, a keen amateur cellist, arranged musical evenings.³⁰ Despite these displays of harmony and consensus, the tensions of a pioneer community kept breaking through. Although only one fatal duel is recorded from the first decade of settlement, there were endless quarrels and lawsuits: over trespass by a neighbour's pig, over a boat borrowed and not returned, over angry words exchanged late at night in taverns. It was all petty, but such incidents enlivened the monotony and provided matter for two Perth newspapers by 1840.

If Perth seemed a remote outpost of European civilisation, the country districts endured a more than Siberian isolation. A member of the Logue family, taken in 1837 as a boy of 11 from Perth to the Avon Valley, never saw the ocean for the next thirteen years. Then on an overlanding trip he climbed a high hill in order to catch a distant glimpse. Eliza Brown, wife of one of the most considerable landowners in the York district, lived in a thatched shed warmed in winter by a pan of coals. The hundred kilometres separating her from Perth seemed limitless to a woman nursing a small child. She was, she wrote to her relatives in England, 'without the common necessities of life'.³¹ The isolation of the whole colony was underlined in 1841 when Edward John Eyre, with another Englishman and three Aborigines, set out to overland from South Australia to Albany. His arrival after gruelling adventures, worn out and emaciated, was the result of great good luck and the bush skills of his one surviving companion, the Aborigine Wylie. Eyre became a hero, but his fate confirmed Western Australia's reputation as the most isolated settlement in the world's most isolated continent.³²

Nevertheless, by the time of Eyre's expedition Western Australia seemed modestly on the move. The colonists were taking the first steps towards understanding their environment. After many sheep were

lost through an unidentified poison plant, the experienced botanist-farmer James Drummond identified the culprit as the York pea, a *gastrolobium*. The Perth Agricultural Society was joined in 1840 by the York Agricultural Society and in 1842 by a Vineyard Society, each trying to promote good practice among the colony's farmers.³³ The pastoral frontier in the South West was gradually expanding, despite the unease of Governor John Hutt (1839–46), who believed that his instructions required him to check the spread of squatting because of the potential cost to the government of providing infrastructure. Although overshadowed by American competitors, offshore whalers operated from Fremantle and from several bases on the south coast. Open-boat whaling lasted at Cheyne Beach, east of Albany, until 1879, providing employment for Nyungar men as well as Europeans.³⁴

Western Australia's modest improvements were overshadowed in the eyes of British investors by the new colonies at Port Phillip, South Australia and New Zealand. Those enterprises reflected the influence of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, whose theories were as yet untainted by practical experience. He inspired the investors who in 1839 planned the formation of the Western Australian Company to develop the land around Leschenault Inlet, 150 kilometres south of Fremantle. Plans were devised for a settlement called Australind, its name reflecting the persisting hope of trade with India and Southeast Asia. Then the promoters lost confidence and dithered over alternative sites before deciding on Australind after all. Investors withdrew their capital, and, although nearly 450 migrants arrived under its auspices in 1841–43, the venture came to be regarded as another Western Australian failure. However, Australind's impact on the colony's human capital was momentous. The Australind colonists included its leader, Marshall Waller Clifton, ancestor of a notable line of public servants, politicians, architects and artists; John Ramsden Wollaston, the first Anglican archdeacon and author of journals throwing a valuable light on colonial conditions; Dr John Ferguson, colonial surgeon for many years, who built the colony's first substantial hospital and founded a Swan Valley winery that has lasted to this day; and the forebears of three notable Premiers, Forrest, Newton Moore and Mitchell.³⁵

Four hundred more migrants came during the early 1840s, either independently or under the auspices of the Perth Agricultural Society.

Others were sent out under official assisted immigration schemes, including the first harbingers of convictism. Several parties of juvenile offenders from the Parkhurst penitentiary were despatched by the British Government between 1842 and 1851. One 15-year-old, John Gavan, became the first non-Aboriginal resident to be hanged for murder. He was taken in a cart for execution at the Round House at Fremantle, and many years later his victim's brother remembered the finale:

He wanted to know if it was going to hurt to be hanged and they told him it wouldn't hurt. It wouldn't take long. Then he started to take off the new pair of boots with which he had been fitted out for his trial. When told he need not do that he said 'I don't want my nice boots to be spoiled'. They were probably the first boots he ever had. And the last.³⁶

The official responsible for the Parkhurst boys, John Scholes, probably owed his lapse into alcoholism to the trauma of this case. Most of the Parkhurst boys seem to have given little trouble, but imperceptibly the Swan River Colony was edging into the culture of convictism.

The influx of immigrants stimulated economic activity and property values, but when it ceased in 1843 a slump followed. Business confidence faltered; Charles Bussell and his brother Alfred held 'Much conversation about future prospects and lamentations at the dark and cheerless void that lay before us'.³⁷ Others responded with a number of new initiatives, modest of necessity but enough to diversify the economy. The Legislative Council in 1844 mounted what would be the first of many campaigns exhorting Western Australians to buy locally. Others looked to East and South Asia for export markets. In 1844 horses were exported for the first time to India, thus beginning a trade in cavalry remounts in which some settler families such as the Brockmans specialised for many years. Next year a small experimental cargo of sandalwood was despatched to India, stimulating landowners and merchants to develop a direct trade with China. Communications were uncertain. When the Hong Kong merchants Jardine, Matheson & Co. wrote to W. E. Stockley in Perth, it took nine months for the letter to reach him and ten months for his reply to return via Bombay, but the Western Australian Bank in 1846 appointed Jardine, Matheson to act as its agents in Hong Kong and China.

Wool remained the leading export commodity, though squeezed by dull markets. Most of the accessible country in the South West and the Avon Valley was now under occupation. Some of it was already showing signs of soil exhaustion, and introduced exotics such as double-gees and capeweed were beginning to infest the local pastures. The quest for 'better country further out' stimulated several expeditions to the eastward, the last by Roe in 1848 extending east of Esperance, but little was found to attract settlement. Permanent water was scarce. There was little good grass in the forest land, and a good deal of country was infested with poisonous plants.³⁸ By this time Roe was over 50. His best work was done as mentor to younger men, notably the Gregory brothers who, arriving in the colony as children in 1829, grew up as proficient colonial bushmen able to adapt English technology and saddlery to the demands of the Australian environment. In the spring of 1846 Augustus, Francis and Charles Gregory followed Grey's reports and spent seven weeks examining Yamatji country 500 kilometres north of Perth. They returned with reports of good grazing land and a seam of coal on the Irwin River. This news prompted some Avon Valley landowners to back Augustus Gregory in leading a second expedition in 1848.³⁹ This party mapped the lower course of the Murchison River and reported traces of lead in the Chapman Valley. The country was thrown open for settlement and its port at Geraldton was named for Governor Charles Fitzgerald, who attended its foundation. During this visit he was lucky to escape with his life when a Yamatji warrior put a spear through the fleshy part of his leg; like Governor Phillip in the first years of settlement in New South Wales, Fitzgerald may have been enduring payback for the offences of another European. Undiscouraged, several Avon Valley graziers such as the Burges and Brown families took up properties in the region.

The occupation of new country was not in itself enough to ensure growth. Pastoralists complained of the scarcity and cost of labour, perhaps unjustifiably, but shepherding was a hard, monotonous life, and more could be made by sandalwood-cutting. Shepherds were often either alcoholic deadbeats who could get nothing better, or poor youngsters such as Walter Padbury, orphaned at 10 years old and keen to accumulate experience and modest capital. Padbury soon progressed out of shepherding into butchering, and thence to the career as businessman

and investor that would bring him in time to the status of Perth's first local philanthropist.⁴⁰ From the 1840s, some properties employed Aboriginal shepherds. Conflicting stories survive about their treatment. In the hinterland of Albany, two shepherds were accused of flogging the back and testicles of an Aboriginal fellow worker suspected of theft. The *Perth Gazette* thought it 'one of the most horrible and brutal cases brought before a court of justice'. The accused were sentenced to three years' hard labour. Immediately below this report is the case of three Aborigines found guilty of stealing a sheep. They were each given seven years' transportation to Rottnest.⁴¹ Against this can be told the story of Mary Elizabeth Garratt in the same district, who found herself about to give birth at a time when everyone was away from the homestead except for one Nyungar woman, herself heavily pregnant. Mrs Garratt had her baby with the help of her companion, and then acted as the other woman's midwife. 'Within three days both women were in the saddle assisting with the mustering.'⁴²

It was taken for granted that marriage and childbearing were the natural destiny of colonial women. Married in their late teens, many were still having children when the first grandchild arrived. If widowed, a woman with children lost no time in securing another husband for the sake of economic security. Ann Farmer was by no means exceptional. In February 1832, at 25 years of age, she was left a widow with four young sons when her husband, a private in the 63rd Regiment, drowned in the Swan River. By the end of June she was married again to William Watson, the innkeeper at Redcliffe, by whom she had five more children. Six months after his death in May 1843, she took a third husband.⁴³ Some families tried to manage their fecundity. The nine sons of William and Margaret Forrest were born at regular intervals of between twenty-one and thirty months, suggesting a regime where the conception of one child occurred only after the previous one was weaned at around the age of twelve months. Western Australia was usually considered a healthy environment for raising children, although accidents were frequent. Georgiana Molloy and Eliza Shaw were among the better-known women to lose little boys through drowning while temporarily unsupervised.⁴⁴ A census of Western Australia's 4,622 non-Aboriginal inhabitants in 1848 showed that 2,487, or more than half, were under 14. Margaret Anderson

has calculated that in the late 1840s, 64 per cent of Western Australian families included seven or more children, reflecting and enhancing the youthfulness of the settler population. And the population was healthy; in 1842 a medical officer reported:

*Measles, small pox, typhoid, or puerperal fevers, or any of those dire diseases to which the Mother country is subject, are here unknown. Among the diseases most prevalent, I may mention ophthalmia, and a mild form of dysentery, both of which prove but trifling, if common care be taken, and proper remedies applied...*⁴⁵

The pastoralists still complained of labour shortages, real or imagined. Led by the Fremantle merchants, financiers of much colonial enterprise, and abetted by the York Agricultural Society (itself losing momentum, though including some influential colonists among its number), the pastoral lobby sought a bold remedy for its labour problems: the admission of convicts. The timing was fortunate. Australia's eastern colonies, having outgrown their need for convict labour, had repudiated transportation, and in 1848–49 were vigorously resisting British Government moves to renew the practice. Within Western Australia the desperation felt by many veteran settlers was voiced by George Fletcher Moore:

*The whole aspect of the colony seems to be unhinged...the gentry are going down the hill most fearfully, their own servants, the working men and butchers, public house-keepers and retail dealers, are rising on the ruin of others.*⁴⁶

With minimal public consultation, the Legislative Council endorsed the pastoralists' plea for convict labour, and the Colonial Office soon responded, as it suited its plans. So it was that on 1 June 1850, precisely twenty-one years after Stirling founded the Swan River Colony as a society of free citizens, the first chain-gangs disembarked from the *Scindian* to provide Western Australia with a labour force of unwilling immigrants. The pastoralist Gerald de Courcy Lefroy, who happened to be in Fremantle, thought them a fine set of men much superior to their guards, and would have engaged some on the spot if regulations had permitted it.⁴⁷

Convictism was to transform Western Australia. Until 1850 the history of the colony was the history of the south-western corner. The inhabitants of the large remainder of Western Australia continued to lead a traditional life that left no written records, though they must have known something of the disruption and dispossession of the Nyungar and Yamatji communities. Often short of resources, neglected by private investors and the British authorities, the shabby, genteel Swan River Colony could grow only slowly until the convict system brought increased manpower and capital. Just because Western Australia was now a penal colony, imperial authority would increase its reach and range of activities. In the three decades after 1850, the process of land taking would accelerate. Although Western Australia would continue to lag behind the other Australasian colonies, the settler imprint would deepen, the conquest of Aboriginal communities would spread across the colony, and the pioneers would consolidate their grip on the land—and in the process the land would consolidate its grip on the settlers.