



STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

**THE 1868 ABORIGINES
AND OTHER INDIGENOUS PERFORMERS
IN MID-VICTORIAN BRITAIN**

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Title page figures, clockwise from top left:

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I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me and that any help I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in the thesis.

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PREFACE

All histories are provisional and historians generally accept that their raw materials and conclusions are incomplete. Nevertheless, I should foreshadow several difficulties which I faced in this study.

It is problematic for a white Australian like myself to write histories of Aborigines and other indigenous people. I recognise that my life experiences and methodological predispositions do not equip me to adequately reflect the perceptions of recently colonised people from non-European cultures. I have acknowledged the methodological issues and attempted to incorporate a range of contemporary Aboriginal views but realise that this imperfectly addresses a significant historiographic problem.

Secondly, I am based in Sydney and was able to undertake only a brief research visit to England. It is probable that significant manuscript material relating to the 1868 tour remains buried in British archives and private collections.

Because material representation of race is a central theme, appropriate contemporary illustrations are a crucial aspect of the study. As they are an inextricable aspect of the history and ideology of race, I have reproduced illustrations as close as possible to the relevant written text. At the suggestion of Professor Ann Curthoys of the Australian National University, I have adopted double-sided printing so numerous illustrations do not render the physical bulk of the thesis unwieldy.

Finally, although the familiar terminologies of race, culture, evolution, anthropology and colonialism - "civilised"; "savage", "primitive", "barbarous", "native" etc. - are Eurocentric and deeply problematic, their frequent use is unavoidable in a work which focuses on the racial ideologies and practices of the mid-Victorian era. Although I have rejected the awkward practices of repeatedly enclosing them in inverted commas, prefacing them with "so-called" or following them with "[sic]", I hope that the attitudes throughout this thesis convey a rejection of the connotations implicit in colonialist terminology.

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ABSTRACT

Enshrined by cricket history, the 1868 Aboriginal cricket tour of England has become popularly established as a uniquely benign public transaction in the history of contact between Aborigines, pastoralist settlers and British colonialism. Embraced by two Australian Prime Ministers and celebrated by a commemorative Aboriginal tour, film documentaries, museum displays, poetry, creative fiction, sporting histories, special edition prints and a national advertising campaign for the centenary of Australian federation, the zeal for commemoration has overwhelmed critical enquiry. Incorporating some critical interpretations of the tour which are current in Aboriginal discourse, this re-examination subjects the tour to approaches commonly applied to other aspects of Aboriginal history and relations between colonialism and indigenous peoples.

Although it is misleadingly understood simply as a cricket tour, the primitivist displays of Aboriginal weaponry during the 1868 Aboriginal tour of Britain were more appealing to spectators than their cricketing displays. Viewed solely within the prism of sport or against policies leading to extermination, dispersal and segregation of Aborigines, there is little basis for comparative analysis of the tour. But when it is considered in the context of displays of race and commodified exhibitions of primitive peoples and cultures, particularly those taken from peripheries to the centre of empire, it is no longer unique or inexplicable either as a form of cultural display, a set of inter-racial relations, or a complex of indigenous problems and opportunities.

This study re-examines the tour as a part of European racial ideology and established practices of bringing exotic races to Britain for sporting, scientific and popular forms of display. It considers the options and actions of the Aboriginal performers in the light of power relations between colonial settlers and dispossessed indigenous peoples. Their lives are examined as a specific form of indentured labour subjected to time discipline, racial expectations of white audiences and managerial control by entrepreneurs seeking to profit from the novelty of Aborigines in Britain.

Comparative studies of Maori and Native American performers taken to Britain in the mid-Victorian era flesh out sparse documentation of the Aboriginal experience in an alien environment. Elements of James Scott's methodology of hidden and public transcripts are utilised to identify the sources of concealed tensions and discontents. A detailed study of the two best known 1868 tourists, Dick-a-Dick and Johnny Mullagh, considers two strategies by which Aborigines confronted by a situation of acute disadvantage used their developed performance skills and knowledge of European racial preconceptions in partially successful attempts to satisfy their emotional and material needs and further Aboriginal goals. Finally, the disjunctions between commemoration and critical history are resolved by suggesting that the 1868 tour and its performers deserve to be commemorated as pioneers in the practice of recontextualising and popularising Aboriginal culture in the western metropolis.

