from the palimpsest of cultural studies, their mixture of motives and methods is better appreciated.

The pastoral occupation proceeded apace. During the 1820s stockholders moved out of the Cumberland Plain (which was now surrounded by nineteen new counties of New South Wales that extended more than 250 kilometres from Sydney), over the Blue Mountains and along the inland creeks and rivers. In the 1830s they breached the boundaries of the nineteen counties, and rapidly occupied the grasslands south of the Murray, which became known as the Port Phillip District. In Van Diemen’s Land the lines of settlement north and south of the estuarine basins met in 1832 and quickly broadened. Sheep numbers on the mainland increased from 100,000 in 1820 to one million in 1830, and from 180,000 to a million in the island colony. Production of other livestock, especially cattle, and cultivation of cereals also increased rapidly, but in the next two decades sheep surpassed all instruments of the European economy. They were the shock troops of land seizure. New South Wales flocks numbered 4 million in 1840 and 13 million in 1850. By then there were some two thousand graziers operating on a crescent that stretched more than 2000 kilometres from Brisbane down to Melbourne and across to Adelaide.

Australian sheep produced wool for British manufacturers to spin and weave. The mechanisation of textile production began the industrial revolution that turned Britain into the workshop of the world. While Lancashire’s cotton industry was the more spectacular, the mill towns of Yorkshire turned out ever-increasing quantities of woollen cloth, garments, blankets and carpets that consumed ever-increasing volumes of fine wool. Between 1810 and 1850 British imports of fleece increased tenfold. First Spain and then Germany catered to this growing demand, but as Australian producers improved the quality of their wool with the introduction of the Merino breed, they captured an increasing share of the British market – one-tenth in 1830, a quarter in 1840, half by 1850. By then sales of Australian wool amounted to over £2 million per annum, more than 90 per cent of all exports. Here was the staple that sustained Australian prosperity and growth for a century.

It was produced in circumstances that allowed newcomers to achieve rapid success: plentiful land at minimal cost, a benign climate that required no handfeeding in winter, a high-value product that could absorb transport costs. Such opportunities attracted army and naval officers discharged after the Napoleonic Wars, and younger sons of gentry families in England and Scotland who sought their own estates. An entrant required some initial capital to buy stock; he then hired labour and drove his animals to the edge of settlement; laid claim to an area that might extend 10 kilometres or more; arranged his flocks under the care of shepherds who pastured them by day and penned them by night; put rams to the ewes to build up numbers; clipped the fleece, washed and pressed, and dispatched it for sale.

There were fortunes to be made in this first, heady phase of the pastoral industry, but it was a young man’s calling and not one for the faint-hearted. Drought, fire or disease might ruin the most resolute. A downturn in British demand at the end of the 1830s caused prices to tumble, and millions of sheep had to be boiled down for tallow. The insecurity of conditions, as well as the absence of land title, kept the pastoralist’s eye fixed on speedy returns so that beyond improvement of stock lines, there was little effort to increase efficiency or conserve resources. Stock quickly ate out native grasses. The cloven hoof hardened the soil and inhibited regrowth. Patches of bare earth round the stockyards, eroded gullies and polluted water-courses marked the presence of the pastoral invader.

So did the signs of human loss, the ruined habitats and desolate former gathering places of the Aboriginal inhabitants, the skulls and bones left unburied on the sites of massacres, and the names that became associated with some of them. There was ‘Slaughterhouse Creek’, on the Gwydir River of northern New South Wales, where perhaps sixty or seventy were ‘shot like crows in the trees’ in 1838; ‘Rufus River’ on the lower Murray where the water ran red in 1841; and other such places that recorded past atrocities with chilling frankness: ‘Mount Dispersion’, ‘Convincing Ground’, ‘Fighting Hills’, ‘Murdering Island’, ‘Skull Camp’. White settlers sometimes suppressed the memory of such disturbing events and sometimes preserved it in local lore, so that in a pub conversation in rural New South Wales 170 years later an old hand could relate how the firstcomers had ‘rounded all the blackfellas up at the top of the gorge, and shot at them till they all jumped off’.
Aboriginal versions of these encounters have an additional dimension. Their stories are at once specific and cumulative, telling of particular events at particular places and of their larger meaning. ‘Why did the blackfellows attack the whites?’ the South Australian commissioner of police asked Aboriginal survivors after the Rufus River affray. ‘Because they came in blackman’s country’, he was told. So far from obliterating the indigenous presence, the white onslaught produced an enlarged awareness of a pattern of conquest that began with the first British landfall. ‘You Captain Cook, you kill my people’, expostulated a Northern Territory stockman in the 1970s.

The violence was on such a scale that white colonists spoke during the 1820s and 1830s of a ‘Black War’. That designation was quickly abandoned, and has resurfaced only in the past twenty-five years as the Aboriginal presence in Australian history has been more fully restored. In 1979 the historian Geoffrey Blainey suggested that the Australian War Memorial should incorporate a recognition of Aboriginal-European warfare. In 1987 the pre-eminent white historian of frontier contact, Henry Reynolds, argued that the names of the fallen Aborigines be placed on our memorials and cenotaphs ‘and even in the pantheon of national heroes’.

The desire to install Aborigines into a more inclusive national mythology meets continuing resistance. White supremacists oppose it utterly. White traditionalists are reluctant to accept the disturbing implications of conquest as an essential component of the Australian story, and condemn the ‘black armband’ historians for insisting on such dissonant themes. Resistance hardened recently into denial when a freelance historian, Keith Windschuttle, asserted that the frontier massacres are a myth invented by self-serving humanitarians and perpetuated by dishonest intellectuals. His accusation that leading historians had fabricated their history was manna to conservative publicists. Windschuttle insists that the British settlement was peaceful since it was conducted under the rule of law and the guidance of Christianity. He insists that the Aborigines were a primitive and dysfunctional people incapable of fighting a war since they had no government and no territory, and were capable only of ‘senseless violence’. This counter-history of race relations on the colonial frontier was taken up in the media and imposed on cultural institutions such as the National Museum. It has become the most fiercely contested aspect of the national story.

There are also historians sympathetic to the Aboriginal cause who query the emphasis on frontier violence and destruction, and who suggest that the martial interpretation fails to understand Aboriginal actions in their own terms. The pastoral incursion was undoubtedly traumatic. Indigenous populations shrank dramatically (one national estimate suggests from 600,000 to fewer than 300,000 between 1821 and 1830), but disease, malnutrition and infertility were the principal causes. Aboriginal survivors responded to this disaster with a variety of strategies, and accommodation was one of them. During the 1830s and 1840s they incorporated themselves into the pastoral workforce as stock workers, shepherds, shearers, domestic servants and sexual partners. There was loss but there was also persistence.

The idea of a Black War undoubtedly attests to the extent of Aboriginal resistance. In Van Diemen’s Land, where in a single month of 1828 there were twenty-two inquests into settlers killed by Aborigines in the outlying districts of Oatlands, the governor declared a state of martial law. After parties of bounty hunters failed to quell the threat, he ordered 3000 men to form a cordon across the island and drive the Aborigines southwards to the coast. The Black Line, 200 kilometres in length, captured just one man and one boy, and even while it was moving down the island during 1830, four more settlers were killed and thirty houses plundered.

Martial law was declared also in mainland regions where Aborigines inflicted sufficient casualties and caused enough damage to check the white advance: in the late 1830s pastoralists abandoned nearly 100 kilometres of land along the Murrumbidgee River. Yet these successes could only delay the white advance. In contrast to the Iroquois of northern America or the Zulu of southern Africa, the Aboriginal warriors did not fashion a confederation capable of concerted hostilities but rather presented a more localised resistance. This was not a single, unified Black War but an extended series of engagements.

Sometimes the invaders fought with regular troops. More than 500 soldiers were employed in Van Diemen’s Land as part of the futile Black Line exercise in 1830 and afterwards for punitive
purposes. The governor of the infant colony in Western Australia led a detachment of the local regiment into the Battle of Pinjarra of 1834, when perhaps thirty of the Nyungar were shot, and military garrisons were deployed in the other new settlement in South Australia as late as 1841. Alternatively, the governors deployed forces of mounted police, and subsequently native mounted police. The mobility and firepower of such paramilitary forces were difficult to withstand, and the enlistment of Aborigines allowed the British to follow the common imperial device of using conquered peoples to overrun the remaining independent societies. Under the command of Major James Nunn, the mounted police of New South Wales conducted a ‘pacification’ expedition during 1838 that inflicted heavy casualties on the Kamilaroi people of the northern plains.

Yet these set-piece encounters again give a misleading impression of the conflict. When trained men fell on assemblies of Aborigines in open country, the firearm prevailed over the spear, especially after the repeater rifle replaced the musket. The Aboriginal warriors had no fortifications, and made little use of their enemies’ military technology. In contrast to the Maori, who tied up 20,000 British troops in New Zealand for years, they could not sustain a formal warfare of massed battle. They quickly learned to avoid such encounters, and typically used their advantages of mobility and superior bushcraft to conduct guerilla resistance. Destruction of livestock and surprise attacks on pastoral outstations exacerbated the fear and insecurity of white settlers ‘waiting, waiting, waiting for the creeping, stealthy, treacherous blacks’.

The result was a particularly brutal form of repression conducted by the settlers themselves. The most notorious instance occurred in 1838 near the Gwydir River at Myall Creek in northern New South Wales, when a group of stockmen riding in pursuit of Aboriginals wanted for spearing cattle came instead upon a party of Kwiambal people, mostly women and children, who had taken shelter with a hutkeeper. There was goodwill between the men of the station and the Kwiambals, who cut bark, helped with the cattle and were allowed to keep up their hunting of game; several of the Aboriginal women had formed relationships with the white men. There was foreboding and irresolution among the station hands when the white vigilantes took the Aborigines into the bush and butchered the entire party. There was bombast from the murderers when they returned alone, and then futile guilt as they returned to try to destroy the remains of their victims. We know about the Myall Creek massacre because the station overseer reported it at a time when the governor had been put on notice by the British government that such atrocities were not to be condoned. He brought those responsible to trial, and when a Sydney jury found them not guilty, ordered a retrial.

Seven of the murderers were eventually convicted and executed, an outcome that astounded most colonists. The official response to the Myall Creek massacre was quite exceptional, both in the decision to prosecute and in the availability of white witnesses prepared to give evidence against them. Since Aborigines could not swear on oath that they would tell the truth, they were unable to testify against those who did them injury. The ostensible even-handedness of British justice – proclaimed by Lieutenant-Governor Arthur of Van Diemen’s Land in a message board that depicted first a black spearing and then a white shooting, each treated as crimes and each
punished – rested on a fundamental inequality. In both panels it was the white man who prescribed the rules and meted out the punishment. The Aboriginal rejoinder to such one-sided justice was delivered in the year that Arthur conducted his Black Line: ‘Go away, you white buggers! What business have you here?’

Earlier encounters between Aborigines and colonists had established the fundamental incompatibility of two ways of life. The Aborigines had tried through negotiation and exchange to incorporate the Europeans into their ways, but the Europeans had little desire to assimilate into Aboriginal society. Even so, the restricted nature of colonial settlement up to the 1820s left open the possibility of some form of coexistence. The rapid extension of the pastoral frontier removed that possibility since it resulted in a succession of sudden, traumatic encounters. There was still room for both peoples, for the Europeans spread along open grasslands, leaving the more heavily timbered higher slopes, and some initial accommodation based on mutual exchange of goods and services did occur. But Aborigines were loath to accept the occupation of their hunting ranges and despoliation of their waterways, while pastoralists commonly responded to stock losses with unilateral action aimed at nothing less than extermination of the original inhabitants. The colonial authorities, having set this lethal chain reaction in motion, were unable to prevent the spread of killing.

There were some whites who recoiled before the enormity of their compatriots’ actions, who perceived that such inhuman conduct compounded the unjust expropriation, and who warned that ‘the spot of blood is upon us’. The formation by evangelical Christians in London of the British and Foreign Aborigines’ Protection Society in 1836 encouraged local humanitarians to establish their own branch of the society in Sydney in 1838. The society also pursued the cause in the British parliament, and a select committee of the House of Commons found in 1837 that the colonisation of South Africa, Australia and northern America had brought disastrous consequences for the native people: ‘a plain and sacred right’, an ‘incontrovertible right to their own soil’, had been disregarded. The British government was already concerned by reports of massacres and martial law against the natives of the Australian colonies. ‘To regard them as aliens with whom a war can exist’, the minister for the colonies
Similar reserves or mission stations were established on the mainland during the 1820s and 1830s, usually by Christian missionary societies with government support. Some well-wishers, including the judge who presided over the trial of the Myall Creek murderers and who had earlier experience at the Cape Colony, wanted larger reserves on which the natives might be settled and protected from the perils of white civilisation. Settlement was a word of many meanings.

The Aborigines were to be settled so that colonial settlement could proceed unhindered: indeed, one of the Myall Creek culprits announced that he and his mates had ‘settled’ the ‘blacks’. The governors of New South Wales, however, preferred incorporation to segregation and appointed white protectors to accompany Aborigines in their wanderings and help settle them. George Robinson became the chief protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District, sometimes able to curb the worse abuses, powerless to prevent the continuing encroachment on their lands.

There was another possible course of action. In 1835 a group of entrepreneurs from Van Diemen’s Land led by John Batman crossed Bass Strait to take up land in the Port Phillip District. In return for a payment of blankets, tomahawks, knives, scissors, looking-glasses, handkerchiefs, shirts and flour, and an undertaking to pay a yearly rent, they claimed to have received 200,000 hectares from the Kulin people. This unofficial and contrived agreement fell a long way short of the treaties negotiated by British colonists with indigenous people in New Zealand (it was more like the ‘trinket treaties’ arranged in the American West), but did suggest some acknowledgement of Aboriginal ownership. The minister for the colonies dismissed the arrangement on the grounds that ‘such a concession would subvert the foundation on which all property rights in New South Wales at present rest’. Yet in the same year the Colonial Office insisted that the new colony proposed for South Australia must respect the ‘rights of the present proprietors of the soil’, and its commissioners stipulated that the land should be bought and a portion of purchase price paid to the Aborigines.

The South Australian settlers ignored these conditions. Within five years the Aboriginal people on the outskirts of the new
of Aborigines and returned to a state of nature, or of white women who survived their ordeals in the wild.

The most celebrated of these was Eliza Fraser, who survived a shipwreck in 1836 and for fifty-two days lived with the Nguluungbara, Batjala and Dulingbra peoples on an island off the coast of central Queensland. Her ‘Deliverance from the Savages’, as the title of one of many contemporary publications put it, dwelt on the killing of her husband and male companions, and the sexual degradation of an unprotected white woman. Fraser herself appeared as a sideshow attraction in London’s Hyde Park, telling her tale of barbarous treatment, and the episode has formed the basis for a novel by Patrick White, paintings by Sidney Nolan, music by Peter Sculthorpe and several films.

By such means the land was taken, settled and possessed. To make it productive and profitable there were the convicts. Between 1821 and 1840, 55,000 convicts landed in New South Wales, and 60,000 in Van Diemen’s Land where transportation continued for a further decade. The great majority were assigned to masters and most served out their time in rural labour. There was keen demand for them since a pastoral station needed large numbers of shepherds, stockmen and hutkeepers, and bond labour could be made to endure the isolation and insecurity that deterred free labour. Convicts, who cost no more than their keep, underwrote the rapid growth and high yields of the pastoral economy.

Assignment was now accompanied by a far tighter regulation. Convicts were no longer allowed free time at the end of the day, or permitted to receive ‘indulgences’. As Bigge had recommended, there were fewer pardons and no more land grants to convicts on the expiry of their sentences. Officials exercised a closer control over the treatment of assigned convicts and the magistrates before whom they were brought for breach of the rules. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur in Van Diemen’s Land went furthest in his construction during the 1820s and 1830s of an elaborate system of supervision documented in ‘Black Books’ that set out a full record of every felon’s behaviour ‘from the day of their landing until the period of their emancipation or death’. His regimen was less brutal than that of his predecessors, though one convict in six was still