

BLACK AND WHITE HISTORY REVISED

THE BLACK RESISTANCE. By Fergus Robinson and Barry York. Widescope. \$4.95 pb, \$9.95 hb.

Reviewer:
ANDREW MARKUS

IN 1797 Governor Hunter reported to the Duke of Portland that Aborigines were destroying houses, stock, killing settlers and making threats of further attacks. In 1828 constant attacks by Aborigines induced the Van Diemen's Land (Tasmanian) Executive Council to resolve that the only way of dealing with Aborigines was to "inspire them with terror".

A decade later a Victorian pastoralist wrote of his encounter with Aborigines: they murdered one of his employees, burned his hut, his stores, all his wheat and killed nearly 3,000 head of cattle. He lamented "I have lost my capital . . . my wealth . . .". In 1853 a Lands Commissioner in Maryborough, Queensland, wrote that "it is almost impossible for me to describe the constant state of alarm in which the Townspeople are kept from a dread of the aggressions of the blacks".

Citing repeated instances of Aboriginal resistance and European repression, Robinson and York set out to establish that the physical resistance of Aborigines to British settlement was an "on-going and continent-wide response". In doing so, they claim to be playing a part in initiating discussion of a vital aspect of Australian history. Their book is the first attempt to examine the resistance in each colony, though it has been preceded by several specialist studies.

The major novelty of the book lies not so much in the area of content as in the methodological approach employed. 'Black Resistance' is an attempt by Maoist writers to revise Australian's conceptions of their history, and in the process, of themselves. The aim of the book is to demonstrate the applicability of the

which furthers the argument. Yet

maxim: "wherever there is oppression, there is resistance to that oppression".

In the view of the authors, the settlement of Australia was the product of British colonialism. It was inherent in the nature of colonialism to seize the Australian continent and its resources entirely in the interests of British capitalism. The greed for land and the genocidal activities of the colonists were endemic to the system of colonialism.

In the task of dispossession the British ruling class employed a number of tactics. One tactic was the use of naked force. Another was the soft approach, the resort to this tactic reflecting the ability of Aborigines to resist armed encroachments. The historical role of missionaries and protectors was, and is, to undermine the resistance of Aborigines. Missionaries played a vanguard role in weakening the cultural unity and identity of the Aboriginal people. They entered Aboriginal society armed with the "sugar-coated" bullet.

Most historians will challenge Robinson and York's use of evidence. Divisions within England, within the colony and between the Colonial Office and settlers, are seen to be insignificant, as are individual idiosyncrasies. All individuals, with the possible exception of convicts and labourers, effectively further the task of dispossession. Uncritical use is made of evidence; criticism on this level is not entirely satisfactory. A view of the function-

ing of society is involved. It is more meaningful to take the authors on their own terms.

Mao Tse-tung wrote that in studying a problem it is necessary to shun one-sidedness. To be one sided "means not to look at problems all-sidedly . . . Or it may be called seeing the part but not the whole, seeing the trees but not the forest . . . It is one-sided to regard everything either as all positive or as all negative".

The definition of resistance employed for the greater part of this

ployed for the greater part of this book is a very narrow one, being restricted to violent resistance. More subtle forms receive inadequate attention. Numerous incidents are discussed but there is insufficient exploration of broad patterns. The decision to devote a chapter to each colony, rather than adopt a thematic approach, hinders analysis.

From my personal viewpoint, the most disappointing aspect of this paeon to the struggles of the oppressed is that it fails to live up to claims of being a humanising history.

The use of jargon, more marked in some chapters than in others, builds up a picture in positives and negatives. This Aboriginal was a "great people's warrior". That group of Aborigines "repulsed the aggressors . . . in an awesome show of strength". In a raid on a property the Aborigines "liberated all useful material". That European "unfortunately" escaped. This European fell a "victim to people's justice". With his "defences down he was executed".

There is very little attempt to understand Aborigines on their own terms. Aborigines act "like all sensible people". We are left with a picture of Aborigines as the puppets of inexorable laws of history.