Introduction

In 1836 the explorer-surveyor Thomas Mitchell penetrated into the region later named ‘Victoria’ and was delighted by what he saw: crossing the Wimmera River as it flowed strongly past the mountains of Gariwerd he observed that ‘Every day we passed over land which for natural fertility and beauty could scarcely be surpassed; over streams of unfailing abundance and plains covered with the richest pasturage. Stately trees and majestic mountains adorned the ever-varying scenery of this region, the most southern of all Australia and the best.’ An empty Arcadia, he emphasised its potential for colonisation: ‘This territory, still for the most part in a state of nature, presents a fair blank sheet for any geographical arrangement whether of county divisions, lines of communication, or sites of towns.’ The existing inhabitants were seemingly invisible, intimated only by distant spires of camp-smoke, or by the ‘camp litter’ they had left behind.

But for the Wotjobaluk people, far from being a ‘fair blank sheet’, the landscape was already filled with social and ecological meaning. Although they also saw the land as a flat plane, over which arched the sky, the Wotjobaluk oriented themselves according to relations between people, the natural world, and specific localities that were dynamic but indubitable. They divided the whole universe, including humankind, into either ‘Gamutch’ (black cockatoo) or ‘Krokitch’ (white cockatoo) and links to particular places and ‘totems’ created further allegiances, each of which had a particular ancestral home. So in the 1890s two elderly Wotjobaluk men spent two hours laying out their own map of this landscape with sticks on the ground, showing anthropologist Alfred Howitt in diagram form the ‘space-names’ and directions of the totems.
and classes, ‘all fixed with reference to the rising sun’ (Figure 9.1). These determined the direction that a person faced when they were buried, and the spatial as well as social relationships between people – so that a person could speak ‘of some as being “nearer to him” than others’.\(^4\) The palimpsest created by overlaying these two spatial systems in the process of colonisation shaped human interaction in the region, as the invaders erased, redrew or glimpsed something of the Indigenous world order.

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**Figure 9.1** Wotjobaluk map showing the space-names and directions of the totems and classes. From A. W. Howitt [1904], *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, London and Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1996, Figure XXX, p. 454.