‘Aboriginality must be understood as an artefact of the colonial encounter. Both native and settler began to articulate it in the process of coming to terms with one another’s presence and redefined it as the local and global context of their interaction changed’ (Beckett 1989: 118). Beckett has Australia in mind, but his remark is equally pertinent to the meetings between indigenous peoples and Europeans in other settler societies. When French persons stepped ashore along what is now called the St Lawrence river in Canada, and their British counterparts alighted on Antipodean shores, they encountered diverse peoples with their own polities, economies and social mores. These were richly tied within complex belief systems embracing all aspects of their lives and the environments within which they and their ancestors had lived from time immemorial. After differing periods of initial contact, reflecting varying degrees of mutuality and highly localised variations in social and political relations, such peoples were to endure a strikingly similar series of experiences. The result was the formation of what I have called aboriginal minorities. This chapter describes the processes through which ‘aboriginality’ and ‘the aboriginal’ were created, and how their minority status was established despite ongoing competing definition and resistance among those whom these processes affected. Initially, let us look at our case studies to sketch in particular patterns of political relations and then turn to broader comparative questions of similarity and difference.

Canada and North America

The explorers and traders who arrived in North America in the sixteenth century were preceded by Vikings, Basques and other European visitors who made fleeting contact with the peoples and resources on the
continent. But the arrival of the French was the starting point of a train of events leading to a clash between modernising states and pre-modern ‘nations’. This encounter completely transformed the global position of what was to become Canada and the United States and irrevocably changed the nature of the lives of the indigenes and their internal relations. The process of invasion and settlement of North America was a lengthy one. By the early nineteenth century much of the continent still remained substantially unsettled by Europeans with the indigenous peoples in the far north of Canada isolated from incursions until the Second World War, when, ironically, joint Canadian and United States government initiatives to establish military bases and refineries to safeguard their states against the threat of an external invasion, finally brought full-scale internal invasive forces into native territories.

The French, English and, for a time, Dutch, who competed for trade and political influence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had to negotiate with powerful Iroquoian and Algonkian speaking peoples. These societies with their own shifting political alliances had traded, fought, and formed their own ethnocentric evaluations of each another, long before European arrival, so the subsequent fur trade and relations between the French and English severely compounded rather than created political tensions in the area.

Initially, settlers relied on aboriginal people for ‘advice, support, technology and foodstuffs’, in their roles as trading partners, military allies and enemies (Coates 1999: 143). Many Europeans, particularly the Jesuit missionaries, saw ‘Indians’ as eminently civilisable. The indigenes, in turn, were eager to trade in furs for material goods, but were less impressed with the idea of exchanging their souls. Ultimately, mutual interdependence and cautious regard waned. By the mid-eighteenth century, the power balances between natives and settlers had shifted in line with declining demand for furs, greater settler self-sufficiency as their numbers grew, and the eventual military and political victory of the English over the French. Yet the ascendancy of the British state was hardly assured. Aboriginal peoples were still able to mount political and military resistance to settlement despite the depredations of introduced pathogens, the death toll from internecine use of muskets, and the wholesale disruption of their economies and ecologies by the inroads of capitalism.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 was designed to kill several political birds with one juridical stone. It sought to placate Indian dissatisfaction with British rule in North America by seeming to offer official recogni-