the FABRICATION *of* ABORIGINAL HISTORY

KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE

VOLUME ONE

VAN DIEMEN'S LAND 1803–1847

VOLUME ONE

VAN DIEMEN'S LAND 1803-1847

Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land as it was originally known, is widely regarded today as the worst example of relations between Aborigines and colonists in Australian history. Historians claim the Tasmanian Aborigines were subject to 'a conscious policy of genocide'. International writers now routinely compare the actions of the British in Tasmania with the Spaniards in Mexico, the Belgians in the Congo and the Turks in Armenia. The 'Black War' from 1824 to 1831 and the 'Black Line' of 1830 are two of the most notorious events in the history of the British Empire.

This book is the most exhaustive analysis yet undertaken of relations between settlers and Aborigines from the time the British founded the colony in 1803. After re-examining all the historical and archival evidence, Keith Windschuttle concludes that, despite its infamous reputation, Van Diemen's Land was host to nothing that resembled genocide or any attempt at it. Nor did the limited conflict that occurred ever deserve the name 'warfare'.

The extensive and fully documented statistics produced in this book demonstrate that, in the entire history of Europe's colonization of the Americas and the Pacific, Van Diemen's Land was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed.

KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE

Keith Windschuttle was born in and grew up in Sydney. In the 1950s he attended Canterbury Boys' High School and in the 1960s the University of Sydney, from which he graduated with first class honours in history. He has a Master of Arts with honours in politics from Macquarie University.

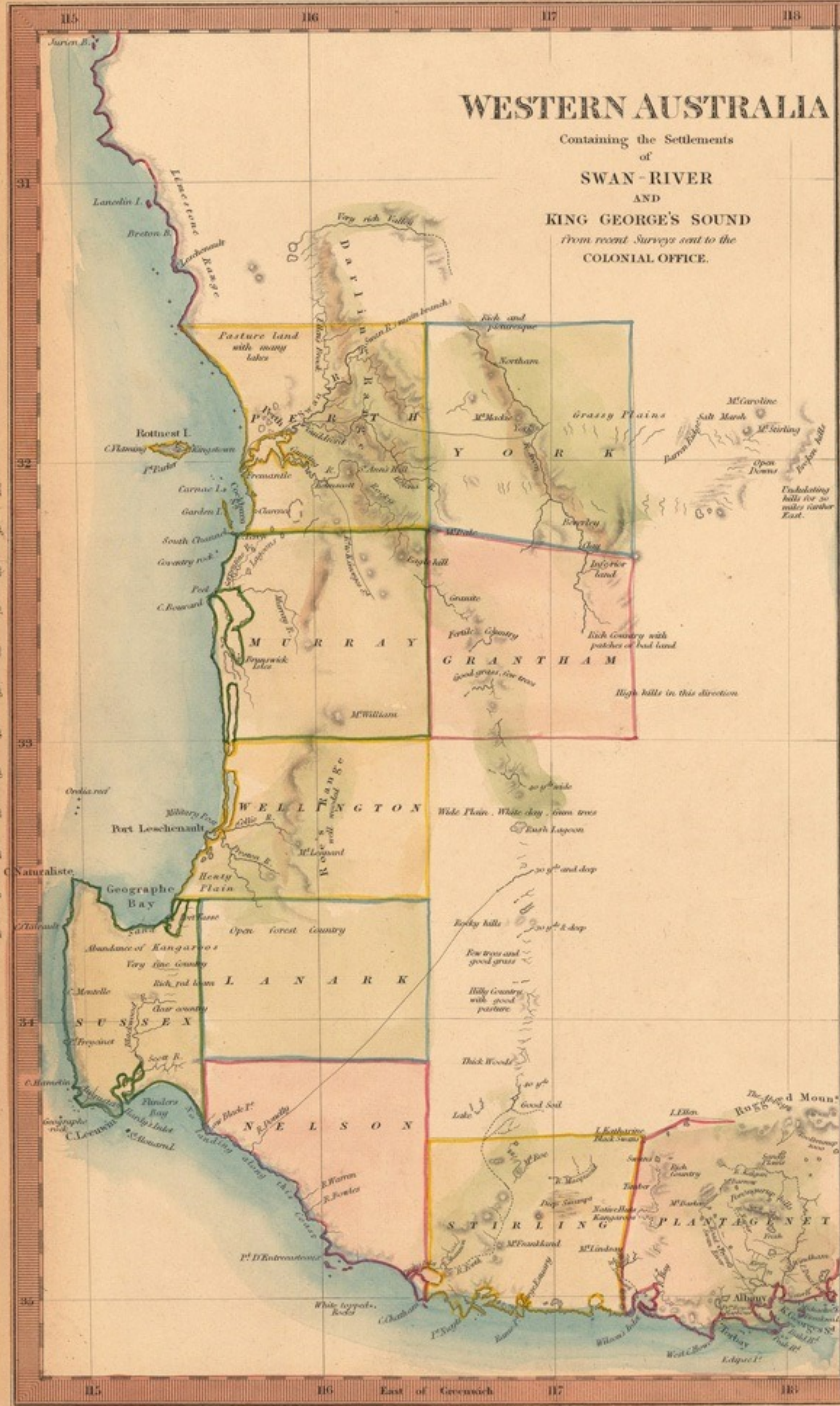
In the 1970s and 1980s he taught Australian history and social policy at the University of New South Wales and other academic institutions. He also had a career as a journalist and magazine editor. Since 1992 he has worked as an author and publisher, writing principally for *Quadrant* in Sydney and the *New Criterion* in New York. He is author of six other books, including *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists* (1994), now in its fourth edition. He has written extensively on history and historiography for both academic and popular journals. His more recent articles are published on his website, www.sydneyline.com.

He is married, has two children and lives in Sydney.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH
George Tobin, *'In Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land, 1792'* (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales). The painting depicts the ships of Captain William Bligh at anchor in the bay, with an Aboriginal domed hut in the foreground.

END PAPERS
Map of Van Diemen's Land, published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, London, 1833 (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales). Despite its good intentions, the society wrongly entitled the map *'Van Diemen Island'*.

JACKET DESIGN
Graham Rendoth | renodesign.com.au R22053



WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Containing the Settlements
of
SWAN-RIVER
AND
KING GEORGE'S SOUND
from recent Surveys sent to the
COLONIAL OFFICE.

VAN-DIEMEN ISLAND

Published under the Superintendence of the Society for the
Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.
From the M.S. Map in the
COLONIAL OFFICE.

B. Bay C. Cape Hd. Head I. Island L. Lake Mt. Mount N. North
P. Port Pt. Point R. River S. South Y. Yard

The heights of the hills are expressed in Yards.

The tract of Country between Hobart town and Launceston is divided into 36 counties, but the divisions are too minute to be introduced here without confusion.

London Published by Baldwin & Cradock 47 Paternoster Row April 1st 1833.
Printed by E. Brain.

J. & C. Walker Sculp.

VAN-DIEMEN ISLAND

Published under the Superintendence of the Society for the
Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.
From the M.S. Map in the
COLONIAL OFFICE.
and the Surveys of George Frankland Surv. Gen.

B. Bay C. Cape H.d Head I. Island L. Lake Mt. Mount N. North
P. Port Pt. Point R. River S. South Y. Yard

The heights of the hills are expressed in Yards.

The tract of Country between Hobart town and Launceston is divided into 36 counties, but the divisions are too minute to be introduced here without confusion.

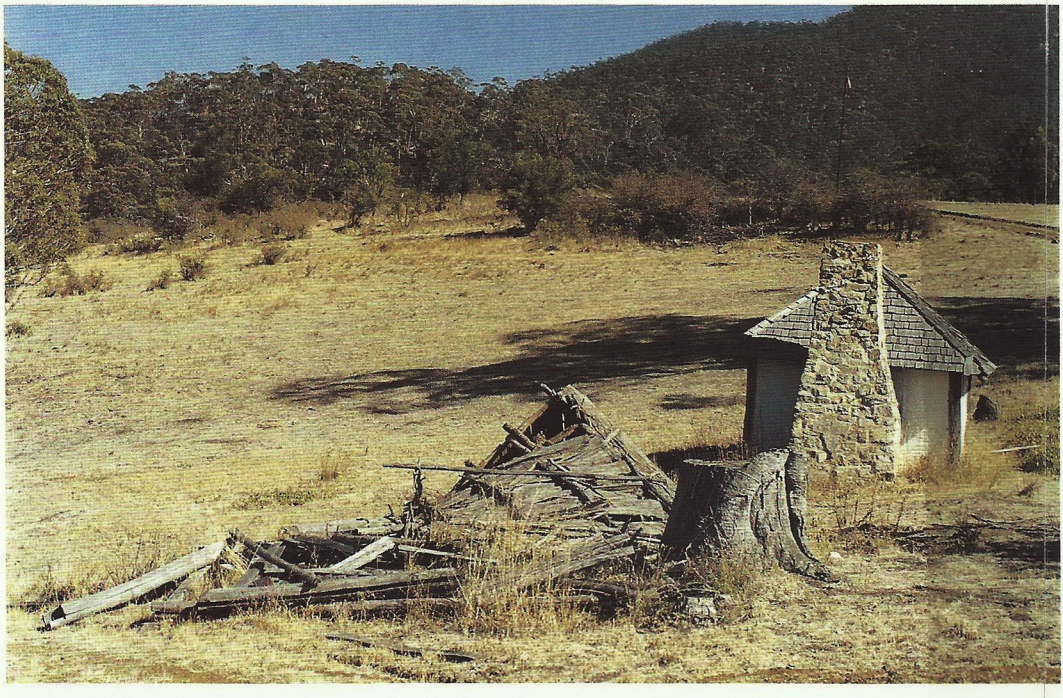
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Containing the Settlements
of
SWAN RIVER
and
KING GEORGE'S SOUND
from Surveys sent to the
COLONIAL OFFICE
and by
Surveyor General Rowe.

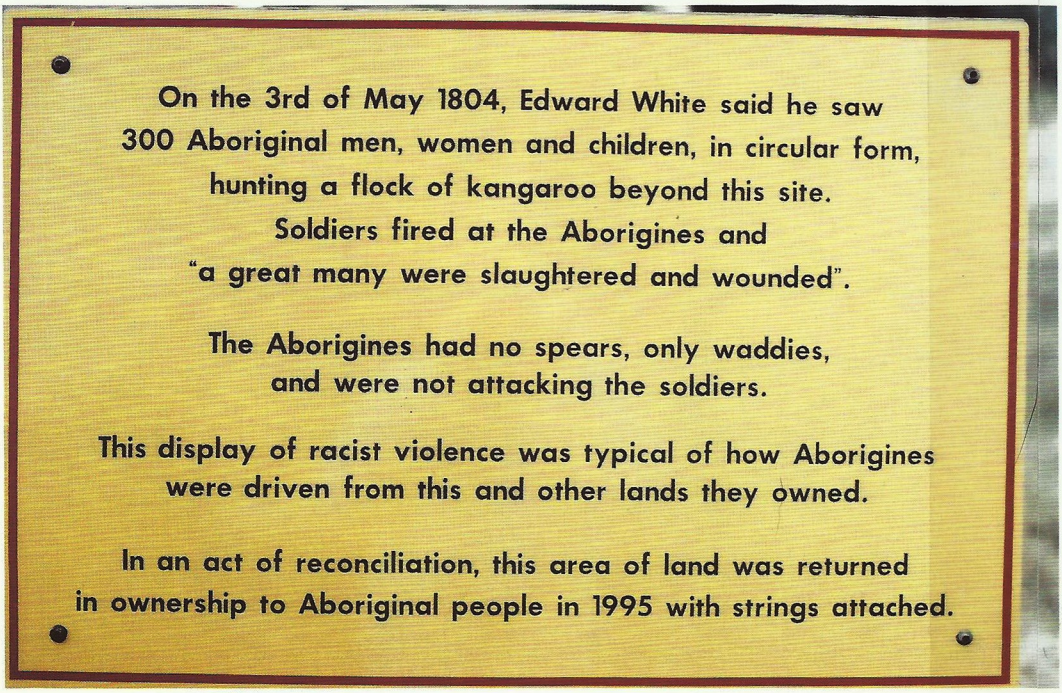
London Charles Knight. Jan.y 1st 1852.

J. & C. Walker Sculp.

Risdon Cove under Aboriginal ownership. The former National Parks and Wildlife Service's 173-acre heritage site commemorating the first British settlement in Tasmania was ceded to the descendants of the Aborigines in 1995 as a gesture of reconciliation. Since then, the once carefully excavated remains of the original buildings have been eroded and overgrown with weeds. Heritage signs have fallen down and restorations neglected. In their place, Aboriginal signs warn off visitors from inspecting the site. (Photos Keith Windschuttle)



More of Risdon Cove under Aboriginal ownership. The reconstructed huts of the original settlement have been left to fall into disrepair. Below: This historically inaccurate sign was erected at the Risdon Cove entrance in 2003 in response to this book's critique that the incident in May 1804 took the lives of only three Aborigines, not the 50–100 claimed by activists today. The sign relies upon a convict's claim made not in 1804 but 26 years later. In 1978, a metal detector search of the entire National Parks and Wildlife reserve failed to find even one musket ball or piece of grapeshot in the fields of this alleged massacre site. (Photos Reg Watson)

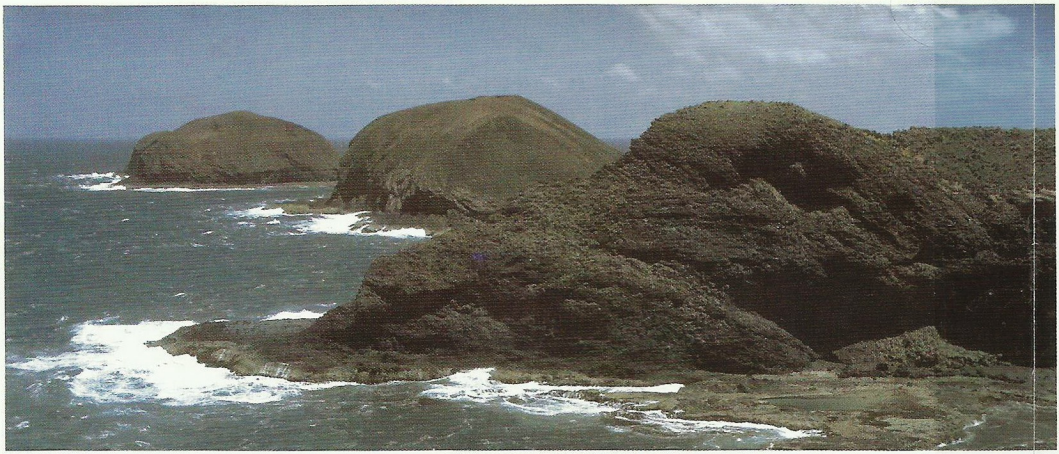


Above: Aboriginal camp portrayed by French explorers: 'Terre de Diemen, habitations', 1807, by Francois Denis Nee, Charles Alexandre Lesueur and Francois Péron (Tasmaniana Library, State Library of Tasmania)

Below: Aboriginal women diving for shellfish, by Colbron Pearse (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery)

'Hobart Town and view of the Derwent River Taken from Signal Hut, Mount Nelson', 1819, by Phillip Parker King (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Cape Grim, 2001. Above: *Suicide Bay is at right, below what G. A. Robinson called the 'rapid declivity' (a sandstone cliff above a steep basalt slope). Mount Victory is in the centre. The rocks where Robinson allegedly found human bones two-and-a-half years later are those at the base of this 200 feet (65 metres) high cliff facing out to sea. At left is the first of the Doughboys islands. In the far distance at right is Trefoil Island. Robinson claimed Aborigines were captured on the rocks at the waterline, escorted to the top of Mount Victory where they were shot and their bodies thrown off the cliff.* Below: *Mount Victory at left and the first of the Doughboys at right. Robinson described the land on top of Mount Victory as 'grassy hills', which it remains today. (Photos Keith Windschuttle)*

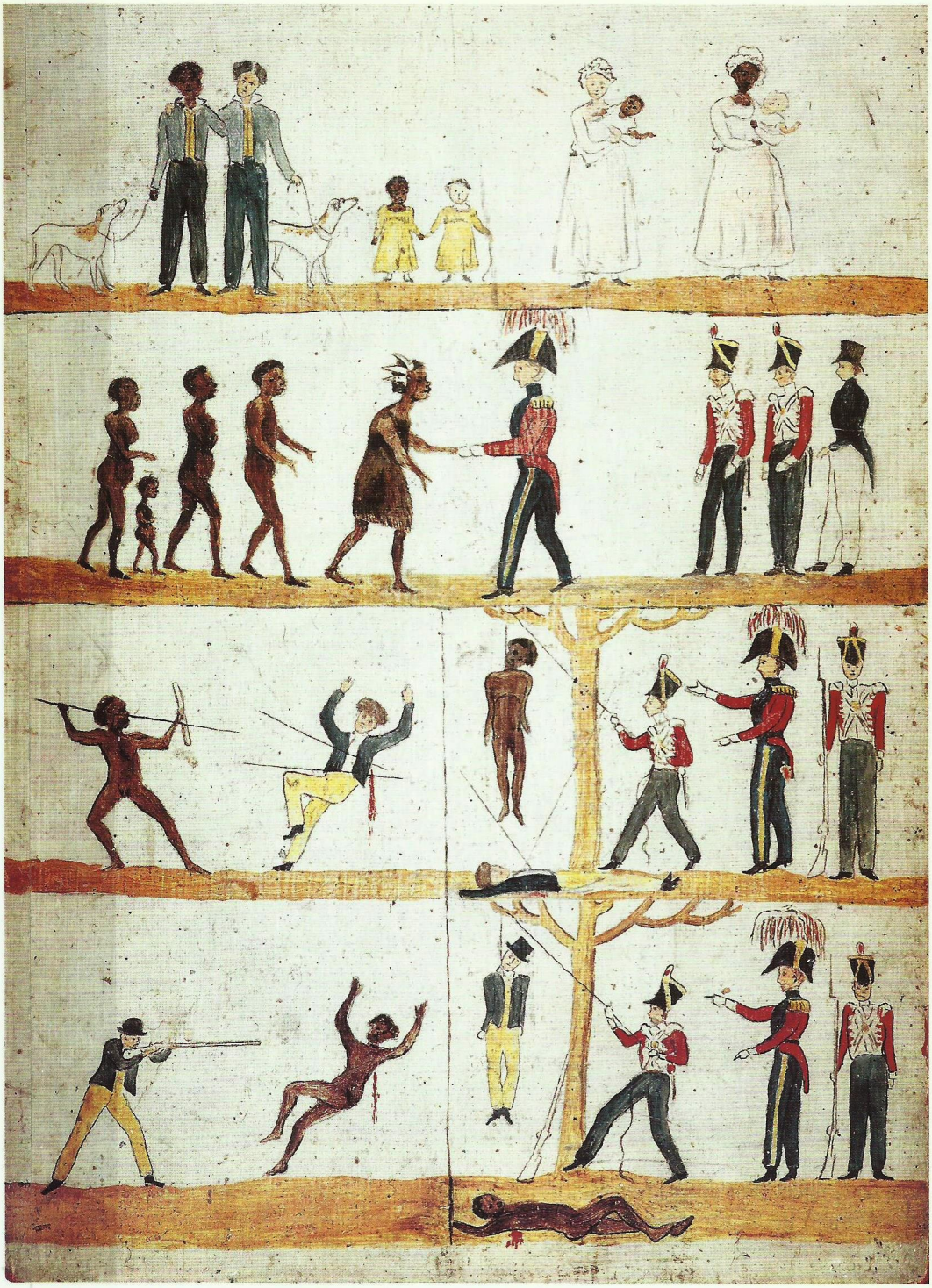


Top: *Mount Victory and the Doughboys.* Middle: *Looking down onto Suicide Bay from the top of the 'rapid declivity'.* Bottom: *Suicide Bay at sea level. The only access by land to Suicide Bay is down the slope at the far right of the bottom picture, about 200 yards from Mount Victory. Henry Reynolds claims four stockmen at the top of the 'rapid declivity' fired down on the Aborigines on the rocks below. With single shot muskets, they purportedly killed thirty of them. (Photos Jeff Jennings)*

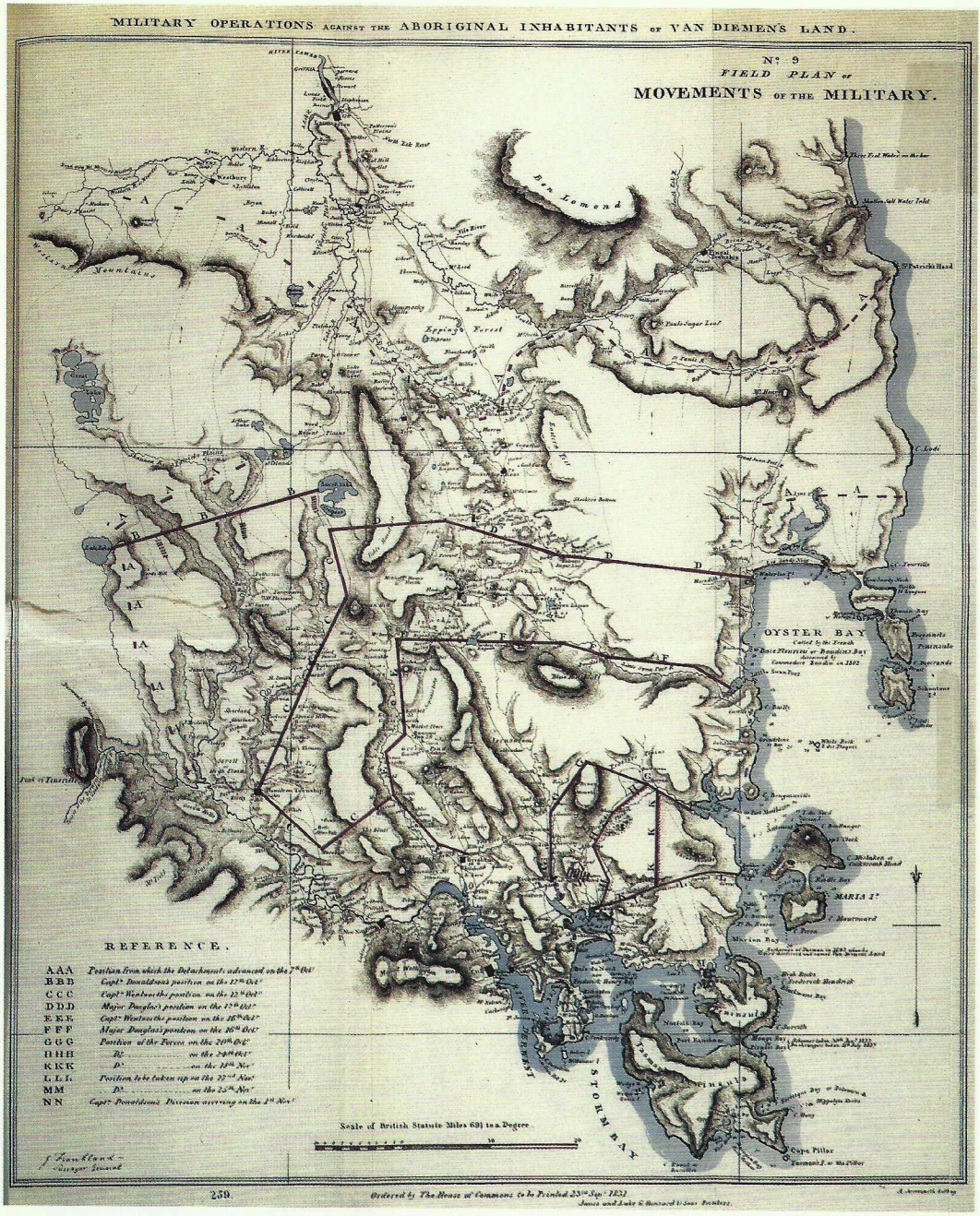
A new map of Van Diemen's Land by James Tyrer, from Views in Australia or New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, by J. Lycett, London 1825 (National Library of Australia)

Above: 'June Park, Van Diemen's Land', 1825, by Augustus Earle (Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia). Despite claims by orthodox historians that fences impeding Aboriginal access were a major cause of the outbreak of violence at the time, this property, like many of the period, was completely bereft of fences.

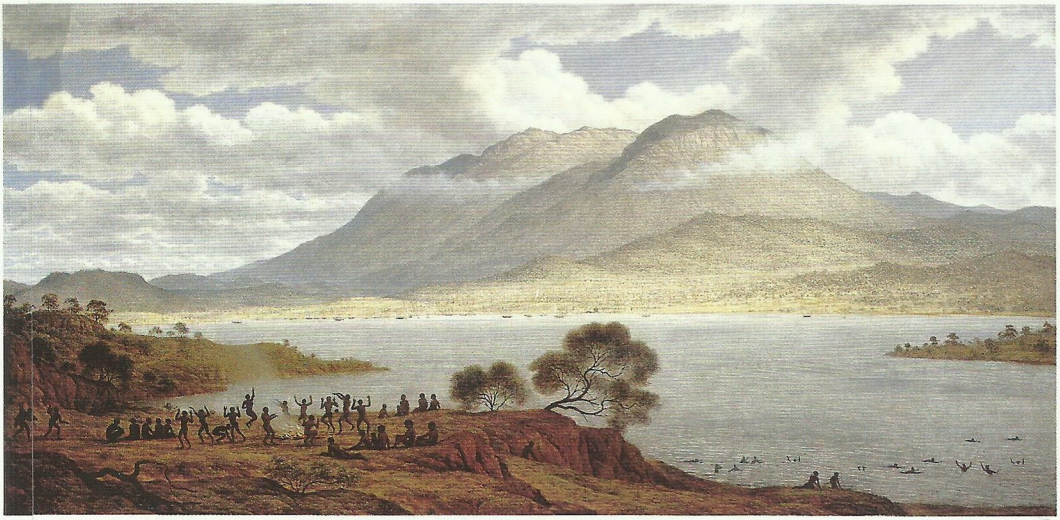
Below: In the 1820s, many of the land grants in the settled districts were not occupied by full-scale farms but were simply partly-cleared, unfenced stock runs containing a stock hut, like that illustrated below. This one on the Macquarie River, near what later became the central midlands town of Ross, belonged to William Thomas Stocker. It was sketched by Thomas Scott in 1821. The sketchbook is annotated: 'One of the original stock huts of the colony built of mud and thatched with grass of the most rude description, the Natives having burnt a former one about a year before. No other hut within 6 miles.' (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)



Lieutenant-Governor Arthur's proclamation to the Aborigines, 1828. (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales) These painted boards were placed on trees and in places frequented by the Aborigines. The signs were a proclamation of the intention to treat all people, black and white, as equals. They were an illustration of the Evangelical and Enlightenment sentiments of the time.



Field plan of the movements of the military during the Black Line, October-November 1830. Source: *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia, 4 (Irish University Press series, Shannon). The starting position was the roughly V-shaped broken line near the top of the map. The solid lines indicated stages to be reached as the line moved south.*



Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point by John Glover, 1833 (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery)

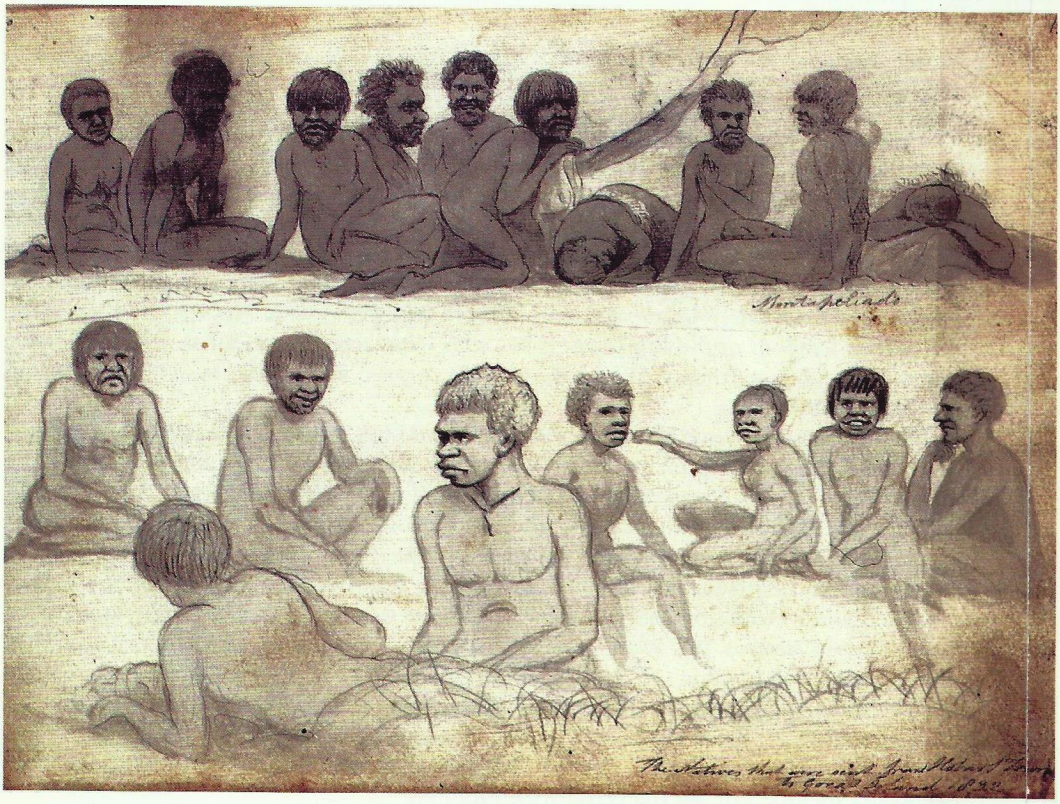
The last days of freedom of the Big River tribe? In November 2001, this oil painting came onto the market. Painted by John Glover, its foreground is set on the eastern side of the Derwent River, depicting a camp of Aborigines dancing around a fire and frolicking in the river. The historian Henry Reynolds, a trustee of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, said it was 'a painting of exquisite historical significance' for the state. Although Glover did not indicate the precise date of the scene or the identity of the Aborigines, Reynolds was confident he recognized both. He told the Hobart *Mercury*: 'It captures the last days of freedom of the Big River tribe, who were brought to Hobart by George Augustus Robinson in January 1832 before being shipped to Flinders Island.' (*Mercury*, 10 November 2001, p 38)

These comments, made before the auction, helped boost the price the Museum eventually had to pay to $1.5 million. This was a record price for a Glover and, not having the budget to fund it, the Museum had to launch a public appeal for donations.

However, Reynolds's advice about the historical significance of the painting was mistaken. The Big River tribe never visited Kangaroo Point (Bellerive) in January 1832. They came into Hobart from the west and, for the ten days they were in the town, they remained under Robinson's surveillance. They were first put onto a boat described by the *Hobart Town Courier* as 'the Swan River packet', which was moored at the wharf, and they then camped in Robinson's Elizabeth Street yard until 17 January when they got aboard the *Tamar* for Flinders Island. They never went across the river. While in Hobart, they always remained on the western side of the Derwent. (For references, see p 222, n 70.) Anyway, the painting depicts at least forty-seven Aborigines, while there were only twenty-six members of the Big River tribe captured.

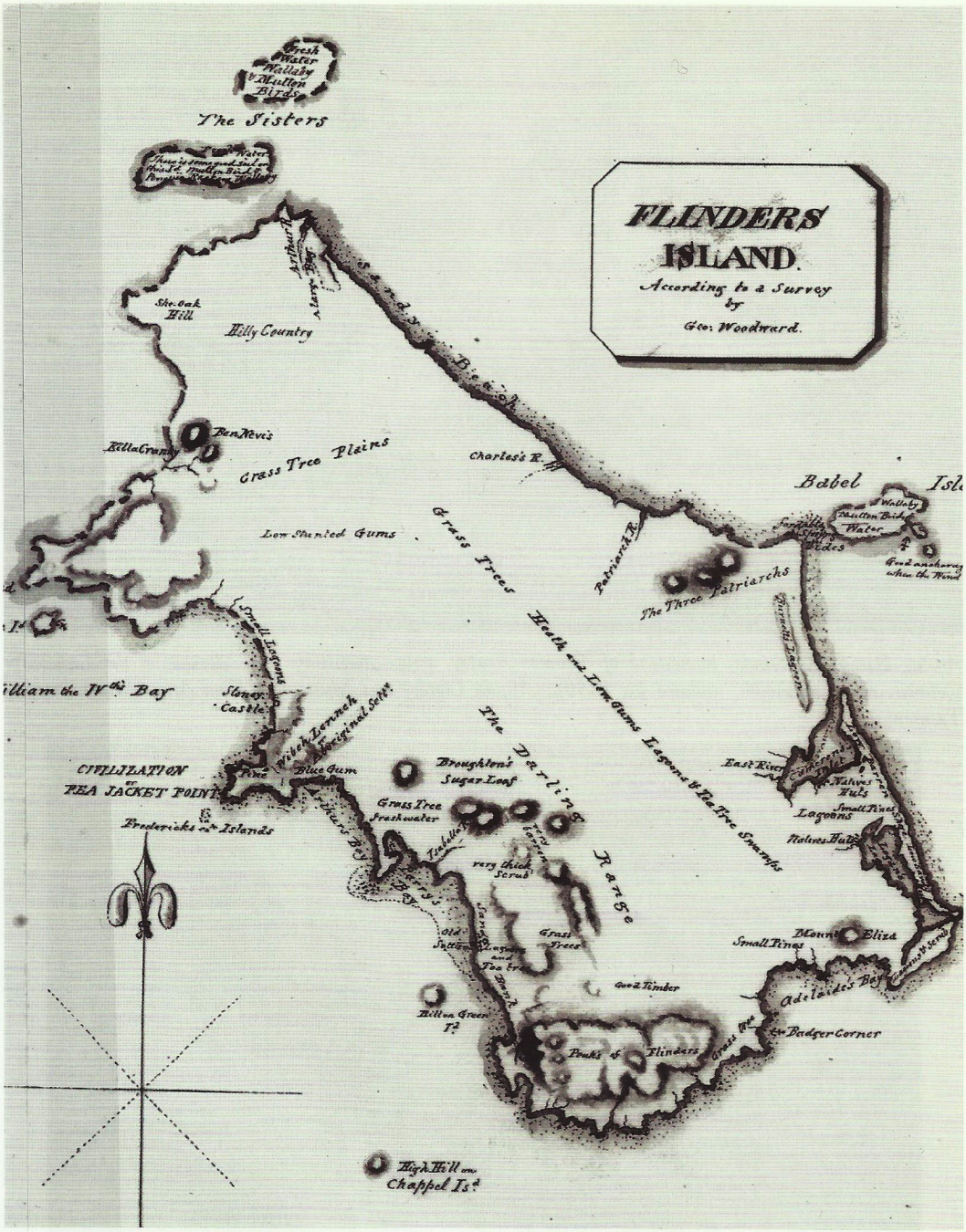
In *Whitewash* (ed. Robert Manne, Melbourne, 2003, pp 225–9), a curator at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, David Hansen, rejects the case made here, accusing this book of 'egregious factual errors'. First, he says the credit line on the Mount Wellington picture is wrong, for it was painted in 1834. However, when the auctioneers Christie's Australia put it on the market, they dated it as 1833 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 2001). The painting itself is undated. It was sent to London in January 1835 and a date of either 1833 or 1834 is possible. Second, Hansen says the credit line fails to attribute the National Gallery of Australia as part-owner. However, when TMAG gave its permission to reproduce the painting it requested acknowledgement of itself only. It failed to mention

any joint owner, so its own omission is equally egregious. But these are trivial matters. The real issue is whether the Mount Wellington painting is a historical depiction of the last days of the Big River tribe. Hansen concedes there was no evidence that Robinson's captives ever went across the river between 7 and 17 January, but concludes this 'must remain an open question'. This is hardly plausible. Robinson had just spent a grueling three months pursuing the tribe across the central highlands before he eventually captured them. They constituted the biggest and most important haul of his career. He was hardly likely to have allowed them to go off to have their picture painted on the other side of the Derwent, where they could readily escape. Hansen is right, however, to say that the picture is 'an artificial studio construction, a picturesque confection', that rearranges the topography and was intended not as an historical snapshot but an elegy for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. But for that, Glover did not need Robinson's captives to pose for him at Kangaroo Point. Given (i) the absence of evidence they went there, (ii) the numerical disparity between the tribe and those depicted, (iii) Robinson's powerful reasons to keep them in Hobart Town, and (iv) Hansen's own interpretation of the ahistorical nature of the painting, this is not a portrait of the Big River tribe celebrating its last days of freedom.



'The natives that were sent from Hobart Town to Great Island 1832' by John Glover, from his sketchbook (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

It is this unromantic drawing, not the painting on the previous page, that portrays the last days in Van Diemen's Land of the Big River tribe before they were shipped to Flinders Island (Great Island). Glover indicated the chief of the band by inscribing his name 'Montapeliado' (Montpeliatter). This drawing depicts eighteen of the twenty-six Aborigines brought in to Hobart by Robinson. It must have been done between 7 and 17 January 1832 at his place in Elizabeth Street, where its subjects camped awaiting their removal.

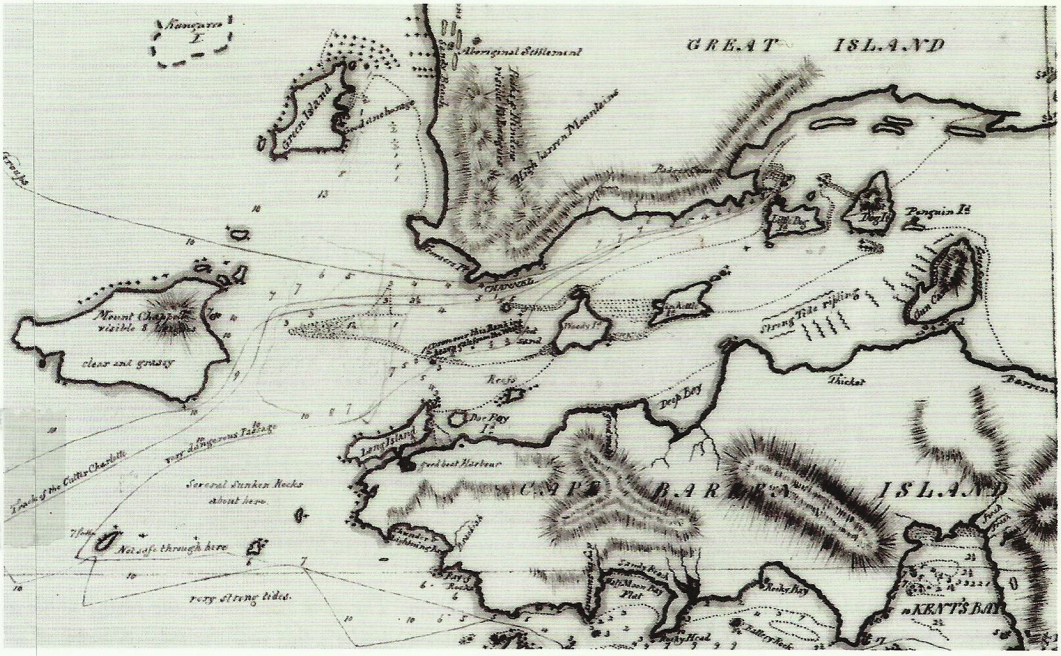


Flinders Island, from a survey by George Woodward, 1832. It shows the then new settlement 'Wibeh Lenneh' at Civilization or Pea Jacket Point on the mid-west coast, and the recently abandoned site at The Lagoon on the south-west coast of the island. (Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Anstey Barton, Oatlands, homestead of Thomas Anstey, police magistrate and Member of the Legislative Council. Artist unknown, undated (ca 1850). (Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, State Library of Tasmania)

'Mr Robinson's First Meeting with Timmy' by Benjamin Duterrau, 1840 (National Gallery of Australia)

The Conciliation, by Benjamin Duterrau, 1840. Robinson is surrounded by the Aboriginal members of his expeditions, including Truganini, two figures to the right of him, with her arms and leg raised. (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery)



Furneaux Islands, 1832, (detail) by George Woodward (Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Residence of the Aborigines, Flinders Island, by John Skinner Prout, 1846 (Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, State Library of Tasmania)

'Quamby's Bluff from Westbury' by William Gore Elliston, 1838. The peak rises out of the plains south of Westbury. Despite the legend of 'Quamby, the Aboriginal resistance leader', this was the most peaceful of all the settled districts between 1827 and 1831. (Tasmaniana Library, State Library of Tasmania)

KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE

The Fabrication of Aboriginal History

VOLUME ONE

VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

1803–1847

MACLEAY PRESS
Sydney

First published 2002. Reprinted with corrections 2003. Reprinted with corrections and revisions 2005

Macleay Press
PO Box 433
Paddington NSW 2021
Sydney, Australia

Edited by George Thomas
Cover design by Reno Design Group, Sydney
Printed in Australia by Southwood Press, Marrickville

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Windschuttle, Keith, 1942– .
The fabrication of Aboriginal history. Vol. 1, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847.

Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 1 876492 05 8.

1. Aborigines, Tasmanian – History. 2. Historiography – Australia. I. Title.

994.60049915

CONTENTS

In memory of Edward James Windschuttle
1907–1994

INTRODUCTION

The Final Solution Down Under

THE centenary of Federation in 2001 was ostensibly to celebrate one hundred years of independent, democratic Australian government. Given the very few other societies that have recorded such an achievement, the event should have been an occasion to focus on national virtues. Instead, many of the centenary commemorations, especially those addressed by the then Australian Governor-General, focused on a great flaw that allegedly lay at the heart of the nation. In speech after speech he gave around the country, Sir William Deane turned the celebrations into an opportunity to lecture Australians about their failings over one issue. One hundred years of stable and successful government meant little compared to the treatment meted out to the Aborigines. The nation would remain diminished, he said, until it came to terms with this fundamental defect at its core. Deane told one of his audiences:

> The oppression and injustice to which indigenous Australians were subjected in our land and under our Federation were not merely the acts of individuals who are long since dead and for whose acts living Australians might deny responsibility. They are properly to be seen as acts of the nation itself of which all living Australians are members. As such, that past oppression and injustice remain part of the very fabric of our country. They reach from the past to blight the present and to demand redress and reconciliation in the future.[1]

[1] 2001 Sydney Peace Prize lecture, University of Sydney, 8 November 2001

In June 2001, in his last symbolic gesture as Governor-General, Deane went to the Kimberley district of Western Australia where he apologized to the Kija people for an infamous massacre their tribe had suffered at Mistake Creek as recently as the 1930s.

Deane was anything but a lone voice. A number of the cultural expressions produced for the centenary took up the same theme and candidly identified where the fault lay: Australia had committed genocide against the Aborigines. The accusation was not simply of action by default, such as inadvertently introducing diseases that killed people who had no immunity to them. Australia was allegedly guilty of conscious, wilful genocide resembling the kind the Nazis perpetrated against the Jews. In a book written for the centenary, *Australia: A Biography of a Nation*, the expatriate journalist Phillip Knightley was one of those who drew this analogy. He wrote:

> It remains one of the mysteries of history that Australia was able to get away with a racist policy that included segregation and dispossession and bordered on slavery and genocide, practices unknown in the civilized world in the first half of the twentieth century until Nazi Germany turned on the Jews in the 1930s.[2]

When the National Museum of Australia was opened in 2001, it commemorated the genocide thesis in the very design of the building itself. Architect Howard Raggatt borrowed its central construction — shaped as a lightning bolt striking the land — from the Jewish Museum in Berlin, signifying that the Aborigines suffered the equivalent of the Holocaust. The museum housed its 'First Australians' or Aboriginal collection within this zigzag structure. Its director described the opening of the institution as 'a birthday gift to Australia', but to symbolically accuse the nation of the most terrible crime possible was a strange present to offer. Yet, apart from a handful of conservative objectors, the country accepted it without demur.

The reason was that the Governor-General, the journalist and the architect were all reflecting the consensus reached by the historians of Aboriginal Australia over the previous thirty years. This is a consensus that has been largely accepted by the country's intellectual and political classes. It commands an overwhelming majority of support in the media, the arts, the universities and the public service. While the historians themselves might not have overtly used the Nazi comparison, they have created a picture of widespread mass killings on the frontiers of the pastoral industry that not only went unpunished but had covert government support. They created the intellectual framework and gave it the imprimatur of academic respectability. They

[2] Phillip Knightley, *Australia: A Biography of a Nation*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2000, p 107

have used terms such as 'genocide', 'extermination' and 'extirpation' so freely that non-historians like Deane, Knightley and Raggatt readily drew the obvious connection. From the very outset, as Deane had said in 1992 from his then High Court bench in the historic Mabo judgement, the colonisation of Australia was 'a conflagration of oppression and conflict which was, over the following century, to spread across the continent to dispossess, degrade and devastate the Aboriginal peoples and leave a national legacy of unutterable shame'.[3]

In short, the debate over Aboriginal history goes far beyond its ostensible subject: it is about the character of the nation and, ultimately, the calibre of the civilization Britain brought to these shores in 1788.

This book is the first volume in a series that examines the credibility of the received interpretation. It is a study of the historiography, the nature of the written history, of the relations between colonists and Aborigines. It examines the major claims of the prevailing consensus that 'violence was ever present along the ragged line of early interaction', that 'invasion and conquest prepared the way for settlement' and that the Aborigines put up a brave but futile resistance through a century-long campaign of guerilla warfare.[4] I am not giving anything away here by saying the findings of this series are radically at variance with the story now so widely accepted. This volume and those that follow argue that the story the historians have constructed does not have the empirical foundations they claim.

This series is not only a study of historians. Embedded within its critique is an alternative version of its subject, a counter-history of race relations in this country. It finds the claim of a 'conflagration of oppression and conflict' misinterprets the whole process. The British colonization of this continent was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World. It did not meet any organized resistance. Conflict was sporadic rather than systematic. Some mass killings were committed by both sides but they were rare and isolated events where the numbers of dead were in the tens rather than the hundreds. The notion of sustained 'frontier warfare' is fictional.

A great many Aborigines willingly accommodated themselves to the transformation. They were drawn to and became part of the new society. Many others, however, were subject to a policy that kept them separate from the white population. The officials who initiated this strategy claimed it was to protect them from white violence and

[3] Deane and Gaudron JJ, High Court of Australia, *Mabo versus Queensland*, in Richard H. Bartlett (ed.) *The Mabo Decision*, Butterworths, Sydney, 1993, p 79

[4] Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, Viking, Ringwood, 1999, pp 151, 166

white exploitation. However, the worst crime Australia committed against the Aborigines was not violence or exploitation but this very policy of separating and interning them on missions and reserves. Those who did this are still celebrated by historians today as great humanitarians and as the Aborigines' friends. These volumes severely question that assessment.

Although the series starts in Tasmania, it will eventually cover the whole of the continental mainland. The colony of Van Diemen's Land, as it was originally known, comes first because it has long been widely regarded as the worst-case scenario. Those historians now upheld as the most reputable on this subject assure us that the Tasmanian Aborigines were subject to 'a conscious policy of genocide'.[5] International writers routinely compare the actions of the British in Tasmania with the Spaniards in Mexico, the Belgians in the Congo, the Turks in Armenia and Pol Pot in Cambodia.[6] The English journalist James (Jan) Morris once entitled an article on Tasmania 'The Final Solution, Down Under'.[7]

Tasmania was also the location of what one of its historians, Henry Reynolds, has called 'the biggest internal threat that Australia has ever had': the so-called Black War of 1824–31.[8] This was purportedly a guerilla war of momentous proportions in which Aboriginal warriors conducted a violent, protracted, but ultimately tragic war in defence of their homeland against European invaders.

The long-term policy that Australia eventually devised to manage Aboriginal affairs also had its origins in Tasmania. The settlement established on Flinders Island from 1831 to 1847 became the model for all the missions and reserves that followed in the next 130 years. Moreover, the rationalisation that violence between the races could only be resolved by the separation of blacks from whites was born here too, with arguments that were to be repeated right up to the present.

Another reason to start with Tasmania is because its records are so good. On the mainland, the supporters of the genocide thesis often hide the weakness of their case behind what they claim is a paucity of historical documents. One of them has written: 'Most of the historical sources that might have enabled us to enumerate the number of

[5] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, (1981), Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2nd edn. 1996, p 255

[6] See Chapter One, p 14

[7] James Morris, 'The Final Solution, Down Under' (1972), reprinted in F. Chalk and K. Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990

[8] Henry Reynolds, interviewed by Bruce Montgomery, 'The First Patriots', *Australian*, 3 April 1995, p 10

Aboriginal people killed on the frontier have, for various reasons, either never existed or have since been lost or destroyed.'[9] This is definitely untrue for Van Diemen's Land. Its Lieutenant-Governor from 1824 to 1836, George Arthur, knew his relations with the Aborigines would engender controversy and so he had all the records in his possession preserved in seventeen consecutive volumes, which today are readily available on microfilm at the Archives Office of Tasmania in Hobart. The government records are supported by complete sets of almost all contemporary newspapers plus diaries, letters and submissions from local settlers. There was even a questionnaire survey conducted in 1830 to determine settler attitudes towards the blacks. Hence, rather than evidence 'never existing' or being lost or destroyed, the documentary record here is comprehensive and accessible. The early colony was a very small society where, except for a handful of gaps, there are good records of the activities of almost the entire colonial population from 1803 to the 1840s. Moreover, through the voluminous diaries of George Augustus Robinson, who traversed the colony for five years accompanied by local Aborigines, we get a unique insight into the black side of the frontier as well as the white. Overall, there is good evidence about the intentions of the colonial authorities, the attitudes of the settlers and the motives of the Aborigines. Few colonial encounters anywhere in the world are as well documented as those of Van Diemen's Land. Overall, the history of this colony provides the best opportunity to test the claims of the prevailing interpretation and to make some confident findings about its accuracy.

THE POLITICISATION OF ACADEMIC HISTORY

Most of the authors to be examined in this series were educated in, or at least strongly influenced by, the ideas about history that emerged in the 1960s. The most conspicuous notion from that turbulent decade was that history was unavoidably political. It did not take long for this concept to be applied to Aboriginal history, a field that took it up with gusto. In 1974, in one of the earliest works, *Aborigines, Race and Racism*, the Marxist author Humphrey McQueen declared:

> This book is deliberately biased. It has to be biased in order to tell the truth. For nearly two hundred years white Australians have lived a lie about the Aborigines. To see the truth clearly the balance has to be drawn

[9] Bain Attwood, 'Attack on Reynolds Scholarship Lacks Bite', *Australian*, 20 September 2000, p 35

> in favour of the Aborigines which means that this book begins by accepting that white Australians are prejudiced against Aborigines.[10]

In 1981, in probably the most influential book of the whole genre, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Henry Reynolds made a similar declaration:

> Yet the book was not conceived, researched or written in a mood of detached scholarship. It is inescapably political, dealing as it must with issues that have aroused deep passions since 1788 and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.[11]

This politicisation has not been confined to the text. Some of the historians discussed in this book have been prominent activists at the national level, and, indeed, have been highly successful at it. As Reynolds has recorded in a widely celebrated memoir, he and his colleagues have played major roles in movements for Aboriginal land rights, acting as consultants to and advocates for the plaintiffs. The High Court's Mabo and Wik judgements of 1992 and 1996 were strongly influenced by their arguments.[12]

It has been less publicized that they have also played academic politics with much the same success. No one who disagrees with them need now apply for any position teaching Australian history at an Australian university. No graduate student seeking to write a dissenting thesis should waste his time applying to any of our academic schools of history. The ruling intellectual environment that has long controlled Aboriginal history has warned off book publishers from recalcitrant authors and even led one press to break a contract to publish a high profile work it had already accepted.[13]

In the 1980s, a number of these historians were responsible for the most disreputable campaign in Australian academic life: the attack on Geoffrey Blainey for publicly questioning the level of Asian immigration and daring to suggest that Aboriginal society might have been more violent *before* colonization than afterwards. Although Blainey's book *Triumph of the Nomads* (1975) was regarded outside the academy as a work largely sympathetic to the Aborigines, Henry Reynolds found it had sinister political implications. He said the book had been taken up by the mining industry and 'other opponents of land rights'. Blainey's findings about Aborigines, Reynolds claimed, had 'laid an intellectual foundation for others to use racism as a means of swinging

[10] Humphrey McQueen, *Aborigines, Race and Racism*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1974, p 2

[11] Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia,* (1981), Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, p 1

[12] Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?,* Chapters 12 and 14, pp 185–225

[13] See Chapter Seven, pp 199–200

Australian intellectual and political life sharply back towards the right'.[14] In 1985, announcing a new, specially compiled book of critical essays, Reynolds claimed Blainey had 'lost the respect of practically the whole profession'. It was time for a new generation of historians to pull down his 'edifice', Reynolds asserted, so 'a whole team got together with the jackhammers' to criticise Blainey's views.

> What you've got to expect if you engage in that sort of public controversy is that you are going to be shot at ... if you are going to get down there and engage in the crossfire you have got to expect to be clobbered and people will really jump on you.[15]

Although widely recognized as one of this country's greatest historians, Blainey eventually resigned from his chair at the University of Melbourne.

THE 'COLOSSAL FICTIONS' OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY

In 1942, Paul Hasluck, a journalist, historian and politician who by the early 1970s had himself become Governor-General, wrote *Black Australians*, a history of Aboriginal policy in his home state, in which he said:

> There have been two colossal fictions in popular accounts of the treatment of natives in Australia. One suggests that settlers habitually went about shooting down blacks; the other, framed as a counterblast, is that every settler treated natives with constant kindness. There is no evidence to support either statement in Western Australia.[16]

It is a pity that Sir William Deane was not more familiar with the writings of his predecessor. They might have left him more sceptical of the oral history he heard about the events at Mistake Creek in the Kimberley, where he made his last symbolic gesture as head of state. In his apology for a massacre the local tribe suffered, and for all those perpetrated by whites on Aborigines, Deane said:

> The facts — nobody could claim the facts were crystal clear. What is clear is there was a considerable killing of Aboriginal women and children. It seems it was over a mistaken belief that they were eating a stolen cow. In fact, the cow turned up afterwards ... It's essential that we hear, listen to

[14] Henry Reynolds, 'Blainey and Aboriginal History', in Andrew Markus and M. C. Ricklefs (eds.) *Surrender Australia? Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp 85, 89
[15] Reynolds interviewed by Helen Trinca, 'Historians tackle the legend of Blainey head on in new book', *Australian*, 16–17 February 1985, p 3
[16] Paul Hasluck, *Black Australians: A Survey of Native Policy in Western Australia 1829–1897*, (1942) 2nd edition, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1970, p 179

> and acknowledge the facts of what happened in the past, the facts of the dispossession and the facts of terrible events such as what happened here at Mistake Creek in the 1930s, which is in my lifetime. I'd like to say to the Kija people how profoundly sorry I personally am that such events defaced our land, this beautiful land.[17]

However, what actually *is* clear is that Deane got the facts of this case completely wrong. According to the Western Australian police records, the incident took place in 1915, not the 1930s. It was not a massacre of Aborigines by whites and had nothing to do with a stolen cow. It was a killing *of* Aborigines *by* Aborigines in a dispute over a woman who had left one Aboriginal man to live with another. The jilted lover and an accomplice rode into the camp of his rival and shot dead eight people. This is not the kind of incident for which the Governor-General of Australia should be apologizing.

Even though he had been using the same incident in speeches for at least two years, Deane never bothered to do the most elementary research to find out the facts. Yet eyewitness statements from the Aborigines who survived the massacre and the evidence of police who found the bodies and pursued the killers would all have been available to him in the Western Australian archives and in a previously published account by a well-known author.[18] Rather than an example of what Deane has called our 'diminished nation',[19] the tale he told about Mistake Creek is just one more of the many myths and legends now routinely recounted as historical fact but which, when properly examined, reveal a different story. In a speech in November 1999 when he also used Mistake Creek to illustrate his plea for Aboriginal reconciliation, Deane said:

> It matters not whether this particular story is accurate in all its details, for the elements undoubtedly occurred in many parts of our nation in the 211 years since European settlement.[20]

[17] Transcript, 'A Look at Sir William Deane's Term as Governor-General', *7.30 Report*, ABC Television, 11 June 2001

[18] Ion L. Idriess, *Tracks of Destiny*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1961, pp 27–52. See also Keith Windschuttle, 'Wrong on Mistake Creek', *Australian Financial Review*, 18 June 2001, p 54 and letters 20 June, 21 June, 25 June, 26 June, 29 June 2001. The most thorough account of the incident, which provides full citations of the police investigation and the charges laid, is: Rod Moran, 'Mistaken Identity: The Massacre of Aborigines at Mistake Creek', *Quadrant*, May 2002, pp 14–17

[19] Sir William Deane, Governor-General, Australia Day message, 26 January 1998

[20] Sir William Deane, 'A Few Instances of Reconciliation', address to the Millennium Dinner, Southern Queensland Theology Library, Toowoomba,

But, of course, it *does* matter greatly whether stories about crimes of this magnitude are accurate in their details, and it is most surprising to find a former judge of the High Court thinking otherwise. If the factual details are not taken seriously, then people can invent any atrocity and believe anything they like. Truth becomes a lost cause.

Similarly, the symbolism Howard Raggatt built into the structure of the National Museum and the assertions in Phillip Knightley's book comparing the fate of the Aborigines to the Jews of Europe, are both false and irresponsible. It is heavily ironic that Knightley, the author of a very good book on war reporting and propaganda, *The First Casualty*, has himself succumbed to the kind of atrocity stories he has criticized others for accepting.[21] As even the narrow focus of this first volume alone is enough to make clear, the Aborigines were *not* the victims of a holocaust. To compare the intentions of Governor Phillip or Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, or any of their successors, to those of Adolf Hitler, is not only conceptually odious but wildly anachronistic. There were no gas chambers in Australia or anything remotely equivalent. The colonial authorities wanted to civilize and modernize the Aborigines, not exterminate them. Their intentions were not to foster violence towards the Aborigines but to prevent it.

This is the first book in a series that attempts not only to present a more credible factual record of this subject but also to explain why there have been so many people throughout our history who have *wanted* so badly to believe the worst possible story. As this volume shows, this desire is by no means new but goes back to those early colonists who originally saw themselves as saviours of the Aborigines, but whose historical track record reveals something else entirely.

The series has been written in the belief that the factual details are matters not to be waved aside but to be critically examined. Those historians who have advanced the 'genocide' and 'frontier warfare' theses have believed they were taking the Aboriginal side in a great national debate. However, the real interests of Aboriginal people themselves can never be served by those who take a cavalier attitude to the evidence, no matter how sympathetic their intent. Indeed, the surviving Aboriginal cultures have only been debilitated by the belief that their people were once subject to a conscious policy of extermination, when the reality was that nothing remotely like this occurred. If Australians of Aboriginal and European descent are to look one another straight in the eye, they have to face the truth about their

5 November 1999, p 5, reprinted in Sir William Deane, *Directions: A Vision for Australia*, St Pauls Publications, Sydney, 2002, p 38

[21] Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo*, (1975), Revised edn., Prion, London, 2000

mutual history, not rely upon mythologies designed to create an edifice of black victimhood and white guilt.

This series is also an excursion into the methodology of history. It examines how we can know about the past, the kinds of evidence we can regard as reliable, and how to detect false claims when they are made. Many readers will find this first volume an unusual exercise, to say the least. It pays so much attention to footnotes, citations and archival references that some will probably find it uncomfortably difficult. There was, however, no other way to proceed. The corruption of this story has been accomplished by historians under the cloak of academic respectability. There was no choice but to address the fabric of their scholarship in order to unpick their work and to establish what really happened.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this first volume was done primarily in the Archives Office of Tasmania in Hobart and the Mitchell Library in Sydney, two institutions that remain exemplars of public service and professional practice. I am grateful for all the assistance I have had from their staff. I would also like to acknowledge the editors of two journals, Paddy McGuinness of *Quadrant* in Sydney and Roger Kimball of the *New Criterion* in New York, who both encouraged me to continue with this project by publishing essays in which I originally presented some of these unfashionable ideas. My wife Elizabeth introduced me to Van Diemen's Land through her own historical research, which gave me an insight into the cultural and religious values of its settlers that assured me I was on the right track. She has also been my most severe and hence most valued critic.

REVISIONS AND CORRECTIONS TO THIS EDITION

This edition is the second reprint of the first edition but with some revisions and corrections. Despite the publication of an anthology critical of this volume (*Whitewash*, ed. Robert Manne, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2003), nothing in that book required a revision of any historical substance. Chapter Ten's tally of Aboriginal killings has been increased by one, so that the total is now 121. I responded to *Whitewash* in some detail in *Quadrant* magazine, October 2003. A far more extensive response is John Dawson, *Washout: On the academic response to the fabrication of Aboriginal history*, Macleay Press, 2004. For more of this debate, see my website www.sydneyline.com.

Keith Windschuttle, May 2005

CHAPTER ONE

The killing fields at Risdon Cove May 1804

HOBART, Australia — On a fall day in 1804, soon after the first convicts arrived here in Tasmania, Aborigines pursued a mob of kangaroos to the fringes of white settlement beside the Derwent River. The hunting party, which included women and children, carried only clubs. Soldiers fired at them with a cannon, the opening shot in a war that would result in the near-extermination of Tasmanian Aborigines. Some of the 50 or so killed that day were salted down and sent to Sydney as anthropological curiosities.

THIS is the opening paragraph of a front-page story of the *Wall Street Journal*, America's biggest-selling daily newspaper, on 21 August 2000. The story was written by two Australian journalists and was designed to publicize the view that, beneath the surface of the apparently benign society that was about to host the 27th Olympic Games, lurked a dark and shameful history it had yet to come to terms with.[1] It was followed by a similar story in the English-language daily, the *Bangkok Post*. Written by the expatriate Australian Ben Kiernan, professor of history and director of the Genocide Studies Program at Yale University, this article was entitled 'Australia's Abo-

[1] Geraldine Brooks and Tony Horwitz, 'As Olympics loom, Australians agonize over Aborigine issues', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 August 2000, p 1

riginal Genocides'.[2] Kiernan said that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British colonists had mounted untold 'punitive expeditions' against the blacks and had committed 'hundreds of massacres'. The Aborigines 'were hunted like wild beasts, having lived for years in a state of absolute terror of white predators'. Among the atrocities he recorded was the same 1804 incident on the Derwent River, where he put the total number killed at forty. In Tasmania today, the descendants of the Aborigines themselves tell a similar story about this event, only they claim the death toll was much higher:

> Close to a hundred were killed that day, whole families; the exact number will never be known. Bodies were dragged back to the settlement, butchered and boiled down so that the bones could be packed in lime and sent back to Sydney. When the Moomairremener returned to bury the dead many could not be found.[3]

Those authors who want to paint Western imperialism in its blackest terms often use Tasmania as one of their most compelling cases. In his 1998 book *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold*, about the impact of European expansion on the indigenous peoples of the world, Mark Cocker, a journalist on the *Guardian* newspaper in England, chose the British colonisation of Tasmania as one of the four worst illustrations. The others were the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the destruction of the Apaches by the United States, and the German subjugation of South-West Africa.[4] In Robert Hughes's best-selling tirade against Australian history, *The Fatal Shore*, the expatriate art critic called the events in Tasmania the one indisputable genocide of English imperialism.[5] Other critics in the US and UK who want to disparage the moral track record of the West routinely drop the name Tasmania. In the *Times Literary Supplement* in February 2001, for instance, an American historian compared his own country's treatment of the Indians with the worst examples of imperialism by putting it 'on a moral par with Belgium's Congo or Britain's Tasmania'.[6]

[2] *Bangkok Post*, 10 September 2000, Perspective, p 2

[3] Greg Lehman, 'Our story of Risdon Cove', *Pugganna News*, 34, April 1992, p 45. The Moomairremener was the name of a band of Aborigines who were sometimes seen in the Pitt Water district. However, no one at Risdon Cove in 1804 knew the tribal name of the Aborigines concerned and Lehman is merely guessing who they were.

[4] Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1998

[5] Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868*, Pan Books, London, 1987, p 120

[6] Ronald Wright, 'Living on haunted land', *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 February 2001, p 9

Within Australia, the local counterparts of these authors believe early Tasmania gives them their strongest case. The now widely accepted version of this history claims that before the first British settlement in 1803 there were about 6000 natives on the island.[7] Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land as it was called until 1855, is a territory of 26,393 square miles, or 68,358 square kilometres, a little larger than Sri Lanka and a little smaller than Scotland. At the close of what became known as the 'Black War' of the 1820s and early 1830s, this story says those Aborigines who had not been shot dead by settlers and troopers were rounded up and transported to Flinders Island in Bass Strait where the remnant of about 200 people slowly perished from disease. By 1876, with the death of the last full-blooded Aborigine, the woman named Truganini,[8] the indigenous population had been exterminated, although mixed-blood descendants today still identify themselves as Tasmanian Aborigines.

According to the principal historian of the ruling interpretation, Lyndall Ryan, these tribal people were 'victims of a conscious policy of genocide'.[9] She compared the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines under the British to that of the Jews under Hitler, noting Clive Turnbull's 1948 book *Black War* provided 'a reminder that extermination policies were not exclusive to Nazi Germany'.[10] The author of the most recent general history of Tasmania, Lloyd Robson, concurs: 'they were dispossessed and destroyed by their invaders and conquerors in an impressive example of extermination'.[11] In their script for the documentary film *The Last Tasmanian*, the pre-historian Rhys Jones and producer-director Tom Haydon describe the actions of the British as 'a holocaust of European savagery'. Jones says: 'To the colonists, the problem of the Tasmanians was a practical one, to rid the country of such vermin.' He compares the atrocities committed

[7] Michael Roe, 'Tasmania', *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p 628

[8] This is now her most familiar name, which in the past has been spelt variously as Trugernanna, Truganina and Trucanini. She was also known as Lalla Rookh and Lydgugee. She was the last to die in Tasmania itself but was actually outlived by some other full-blooded Tasmanian Aboriginal women on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, the last of whom died unnoticed in 1888. See Norman Tindale, 'Tasmanian Aborigines on Kangaroo Island', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, Adelaide, 1937, 6, 1, pp 29–37

[9] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, (1981), 2nd edition, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p 255

[10] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 2

[11] Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Volume 1*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p vii

against the Aborigines to those of Buchenwald and My Lai.[12] The news media today routinely reproduce this interpretation. Even a recent newspaper article that questioned the validity of the prevailing orthodoxy about conflict on the Australian mainland could still write that 'no Australian would deny the genocide committed against Tasmania's Aborigines'.[13]

The international reputation of Tasmania has long been every bit as bad as its domestic version. Raphael Lemkin, the Polish jurist who, in the aftermath of the Second World War, invented the term 'genocide' and successfully urged the United Nations to adopt a convention on the subject, believed Tasmania to be one definite site of genocide. He rated its victims on a par with those of the Belgian Congo, the Huguenots of France, the Incas of Peru and Ukrainians under the Soviet Union.[14] The evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond has used Tasmania as an example of genocide comparable to that of East Pakistan in 1971 and Cambodia in the late 1970s, each with more than a million victims, and the Sudan and Indonesia in the 1960s and Burundi and Uganda in the 1970s, where more than one hundred thousand people died in each case.[15] Another American author has compared the fate of the Tasmanians under the British to the Armenians and Jews at the hands of the Turks and the Nazis.[16]

The orthodox version of this interpretation argues that the shooting of the kangaroo hunting party in 1804 set the pattern for subsequent race relations in Van Diemen's Land. Historians who hold this view call the incident the 'Risdon massacre'.[17] It took place at Risdon Cove,[18] which had been the initial British settlement in 1803 before it was relocated further down the Derwent River to the site that became Hobart Town. It was widely believed by subsequent commen-

[12] *The Last Tasmanian*, script by Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon, produced and directed by Tom Haydon, Artis Film Productions, Sydney, 1978; Rhys Jones, Rocky Cape and the Problem of the Tasmanians, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971, p 9

[13] Deborah Cassrels, 'History of Manne', *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 2 June 2001, BAM Section, p 4

[14] Helen Fein, *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective*, Sage Publications, London, 1990, p 11, citing Lemkin's unpublished work

[15] Jared Diamond, 'In Black and White', *Natural History*, 10, 1988, p 14

[16] Florence Mazian, *Why Genocide? The Armenian and Jewish Experiences in Perspective*, Iowa State University Press, Ames, 1990

[17] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995, p 76

[18] Some authors today use the name Risdon for the settlement, most of which was on a hill above the Derwent River, and keep the term Risdon Cove for the circular bay at its foot. However, in 1804 the whole locale was called Risdon Cove: see Collins to King, 30 September 1804, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 238–9

tators that this incident was the initial cause of the later hostilities. In one of the first histories of the Australian colonies, William Charles Wentworth wrote in 1819 that the officer in charge that day had committed an 'unmerited and atrocious act of barbarity'. After his 'murderous discharge' of grape and canister shot, dealings between Aborigines and settlers became defined by 'the spirit of animosity and revenge'.[19] Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, who took up his post in 1824, attributed the outbreak of native violence during his own period to the 'unfortunate step' taken by the officer in command of the garrison at Risdon Cove twenty years earlier.[20] In 1830, a government committee of inquiry into Aboriginal hostilities, chaired by the Anglican Archdeacon William Broughton took a similar line. In this 'lamentable encounter', the Aborigines were not the initial aggressors and probably had peaceful intentions at the time. The numbers slain, the committee reported, 'have been estimated as high as 50'.[21]

As is clear from the story in the *Wall Street Journal*, this version of events has persisted, largely intact, until the present day. In the 1990s, those claiming to be descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines laid claim to a large portion of land on the island, demanding compensation for the death and dispossession of their forebears. Part of their claim included what they termed the 'killing fields' at Risdon Cove. In 1995, the conservative Premier of Tasmania, Ray Groom, responded by transferring 3800 hectares of land at a number of locations to Tasmanian Aborigines, including seventy hectares (173 acres) at Risdon Cove, which till then had been a heritage site commemorating the founding of British settlement.[22]

In other words, the story told in the international press in 2000 has had considerable support down the years, from the very early colonial period to our own times. This does not, however, make it true. In fact, the events at Risdon Cove provide a good case study of how the conflict between Aborigines and settlers has long been exaggerated by people far removed from the scene and by rumours and myths that have perpetuated themselves. Let me illustrate this by examining all the evidence we have about the events of May 1804.

[19] William Charles Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales* ..., Whittaker, London, 1819, pp 116–7
[20] Arthur to Goderich, 10 January 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia,* Volume 4, Irish University Press series, Shannon, p 175
[21] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 209
[22] *Australian*, 18 October 1995, p 5

THE EVIDENCE FROM RISDON COVE

On Thursday 3 May at 2 p.m. the new settlement at Sullivan's Cove, later named Hobart Town, heard a cannon shot six miles up the river at Risdon Cove, the first site of the colony. The Risdon Cove settlement had by then been replaced as the administrative centre but there were still some troops and settlers located there. The Lieutenant-Governor, David Collins, sent a message to Risdon Cove to enquire about the cause. The first report of the incident was written immediately after the event by the surgeon, Jacob Mountgarrett, who lived in a hut there. Mountgarrett sent a short note to the colonial chaplain, Rev Robert Knopwood, at Sullivan's Cove. Knopwood copied the full text of the note into his diary:

> Dear Sir,
> I beg to referr you to Mr. Moore for the particulars of an attack the natives made on the camp today, and I have every reason to think it was premeditated, as their number farr exceeded any that we have ever heard of. As you express a wish to be acquainted with some of the natives, if you will dine with me tomorrow you will oblige me by christening a fine native boy who I have. Unfortunately, poor boy, his father and mother were both killd. He is about two years old. I have likewise the body of a man that was killed. If Mr. Bowden [the colonial surgeon] wishes to see him desected [dissected] I will be happy to see him with you tomorrow. I would have wrote to him, but Mr. Moore waits.
> Your friend
> J. Mountgarret, Hobert, six o'clock
> The number of natives I think was not less than 5 or 6 hundred — J.M. [23]

The same evening, the temporary commander of the Risdon Cove troops that day, Lieutenant William Moore of the 102nd Regiment of the New South Wales Corps, called on Knopwood:

> At 8, Lt. Moore came to my marquee and stayd sometime; he informed me of the natives being very numerous, and that they had wounded one of the settlers, Burke, and was going to burn his house down and ill treat his wife etc. etc. [24]

The only other document written at the time was by Lieutenant Moore. On 7 May he sent a report to Lieutenant-Governor Collins. This is the full text:

[23] *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1803–1838*, ed. Mary Nicholls, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977, entry for Thursday 3 May 1804, p 51
[24] Knopwood, *Diary*, 3 May 1804, p 51

> Agreeable to your desire I have the honour of acquainting you with the Circumstances that led to the attack on the Natives, which you will perceive was the consequence of their own hostile Appearance.
> It would appear from the numbers of them and the Spears etc. with which they were armed, that their design was to attack us, however it was not till they had thoroughly convinced me of their Intentions by using violence to a Settler's wife and my own Servant who was returning into camp with some Kangaroos, One of which they took from him, that they were fired upon on their coming into Camp, and Surrounding it. I went towards them with five soldiers, their appearance and numbers I thought very far from friendly; during this time I was informed that a party of them was beating Birt, the Settler, at his farm. I then dispatched Two Soldiers to his assistance, with orders not to fire if they could avoid it; however they found it necessary, and one was killed on the Spot, and another was found Dead in the Valley.
> But at this time a great party was in Camp, and on a proposal from Mr Mountgarrett to fire one of the Carronades to intimidate them they dispersed.
> Mr Mountgarrett with Some Soldiers and Prisoners followed them Some distance up the Valley, and had reason to suppose more were wounded, as one was seen to be taken away bleeding; during the Time they were in Camp a number of old men were perceived at the foot of the Hill near the Valley employed in preparing spears.
> I have now Sir, as near as I can recollect given you the leading particulars and hope there has nothing been done but what you approve of.[25]

There are a number of points to be made about these documents. For a start, while Moore's report is obviously that of a man trying to justify his actions, it is also clear he was simply doing his duty by rescuing a settler and protecting his camp. His words are not those of someone who thought he could kill natives on any pretext or with impunity. His casualty list of two Aborigines killed and some wounded derived from three separate confrontations: when the Aborigines first came into the camp, at the farm of Birt, and then when the 'great party' came into the camp. However, Moore's account is not all that different from that of Mountgarrett, except that the latter recorded three killed. Mountgarrett had no ostensible reason to downplay the conflict. He was not part of the military. He had been replaced as colonial surgeon when Matthew Bowden arrived that February and, at the time, was a free settler.[26] Given the matter-of-fact invitation to his fellow surgeon to come over and see the body

[25] Moore to Collins, 7 May 1804, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series III, Vol I, pp 242–3
[26] Isabella J. Mead, 'Jacob Mountgarrett', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2, 1788–1850, I–Z, p 264

and perhaps dissect it, he was not acting as someone trying to hide what had happened.

The carronade fired 'to intimidate them' was a small ship's cannon often used for ceremonial purposes to fire a salute to welcome or farewell important visitors and naval vessels, or on public celebrations such as the Queen's birthday or victory over the French. [27] This purpose was the most likely reason the carronade was still kept at Risdon Cove, since it was not a weapon normally used by English field artillery.[28] Despite William Wentworth's assertion in 1819 that it fired grape and canister shot, none of the original documents tell exactly what it discharged. It might have fired ammunition but it was more likely to have been loaded with one of the blanks regularly used for ceremony. The sound of a blank being fired would have dispersed the natives just as well.

There is one part of Moore's report that rings very true. This is his statement that when the Aborigines saw his servant with some kangaroos, they took one from him. As Chapter Two will demonstrate, all the subsequent incidents of violent conflict with Aborigines up to 1808 occurred when settlers took native game, especially kangaroos. As these later incidents revealed, the Aborigines clearly regarded native game as their sole prerogative. So it is highly plausible that this action incensed them in May 1804 just as it did in the following years. Hence, Moore's report is not only consistent with that of Mountgarrett but also with later incidents of conflict. This is another reason to regard it as credible. On the other hand, Mountgarrett's claim that the Aborigines must have planned an attack, because of the numbers they had assembled, seems dubious. If the natives were on a large-scale kangaroo hunt, then this would explain the size of their assembly, the fact that women and children were among them, and their resentment about the British taking their game.

Rev Knopwood did not take up Mountgarrett's invitation to come up to Risdon Cove the following day. Neither he nor surgeon Bowden could get a boat. He did not cross the river until seven days later. During that visit he christened the orphaned native boy, as Mountgarett had requested, and then took a walk to see where the natives

[27] Knopwood, *Diary*, records many ceremonial volleys, such as the regular artillery firings in honour of the Queen and Lieutenant-Governor on 18 or 19 January 1805, 1806, 1807 and 1808. In October 1814, to celebrate the taking of Paris, a royal salute of twenty-one guns was fired from the battery at Government House and guns were fired from all quarters of Hobart Town: Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Vol 1*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p 78.

[28] Donald Featherstone, *Weapons and Equipment of the Victorian Soldier*, Blandford Press, Poole, 1978, Chapter 8 'Artillery'

had attacked the camp and settlers.[29] Knopwood was a terse but keen observer who liked to note down in his diary morbid events such as murders, hangings and burials. However, he recorded nothing of this kind on his visit to Risdon Cove. If there had really been a large number of Aborigines killed at the time, they would have been buried or cremated on the spot and Knopwood would almost certainly have inspected the site on his walk. He would also have spoken to somebody about a mass grave or mass cremation, which would have been a remarkable occurrence in the colony at the time. In this case, the complete absence from his diary of any such detail is telling.

On 15 May, when he wrote his next despatch to Governor King in Sydney, Lieutenant-Governor Collins sent him a copy of Moore's report. Collins himself accepted that three Aborigines had been killed in the affray. He also told King he had ordered the orphaned native boy to be returned to his own people, rather than sent to England as Mountgarrett had proposed. If they never saw the child again, the Aborigines would 'imagine we had destroyed it'.[30]

It was not until 1830 that the death toll that is now routinely cited by historians was first proposed. This occurred at Archdeacon Broughton's committee of inquiry into Aboriginal violence. The committee took a wide range of verbal and written evidence. One witness was identified as Mr Kelly, who said he had arrived in the colony in 1804. He said 'forty or fifty' natives were killed in the incident. However, he admitted that he had not been at Risdon Cove himself at the time. He also said three Aborigines were killed when they attacked the colonists at Hobart Town near the hospital.[31]

Another witness, a former convict named Edward White, told the committee that in May 1804 he was out 'hoeing new ground near a creek' that formed the boundary of the Risdon Cove settlement. On the morning in question, he had actually seen three hundred Aborigines coming down the valley from the east, in a circular formation, with kangaroos hemmed in between them. They were a hunting party of men, women and children, who were astonished to see him: 'they looked at me with all their eyes'. He thought that before they came to Risdon Cove they did not know there was a white man in the country. Even though he told the committee he did not know how many Aborigines were killed, he nonetheless said 'there were a great many of the Natives slaughtered and wounded'. White added

[29] Knopwood, *Diary*, 11 and 12 May, pp 51–2
[30] Collins to King, 15 May 1804, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 238
[31] Minutes of evidence taken before the Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, Mr Kelly, 10 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 223

that 'some of their bones were sent in two casks to Port Jackson by Dr Mountgarrett'.[32]

There were other versions about what happened at Risdon Cove that were told during the colonial period. In 1820, the naval officer Charles Jeffreys published a guide for prospective settlers to Van Diemen's Land in which he included an account of the early history of the colony. He wrote that in 1804, when the natives approached the soldiers' camp, they were singing. Each of these 'innocent and well-disposed creatures' held a green bough, 'a well-known emblem of peace in all savage countries'. However, 'their tokens of friendship were returned by a heavy firing of musquetry from the military detachments which was drawn up for the purpose'.[33] His image of the green boughs was so vivid that later settlers, such as the surgeon James Scott, repeated it to the Aborigines Committee in 1830.[34]

In James Bonwick's nineteenth-century history of the Black War, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, he said one of his informants, 'a settler of 1804', told him that when Lieutenant Moore ordered his troops to fire on the natives, he was drunk. Moore 'saw double that morning from an over-dose of rations rum'. The reputation Moore and his 102nd Regiment had for hard drinking led some people, Bonwick wrote, to think the shooting occurred during 'a half-drunken spree, and that the firing arose from a brutal desire to see the *Niggers* run'.[35] This last story has made its way into much of the twentieth-century literature on early Tasmania. In his widely-acclaimed history of Tasmania, Lloyd Robson repeats Bonwick's account without questioning it, as does the pre-historian Rhys Jones, in both his PhD thesis and his documentary film *The Last Tasmanian*.[36] Journalists invariably quote the story for its dramatic effect. Among them have been the Melbourne journalist Clive Turnbull, in his book *Black War*, the *Guardian* journalist Mark Cocker, in his book on Western imperial brutality, the *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Bruce Elder, in his popular history of the massacres of Aborigines, and the Australian ex-

[32] Minutes of evidence, Edward White, 16 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 225

[33] Lieutenant Charles Jeffreys R.N., *Van Diemen's Land. Geographical and Descriptive Delineations of the Island of Van Diemen's Land*, J. M. Richardson, Cornhill, London, 1820, pp 114–5

[34] Scott to Aborigines Committee, 10 March 1830, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, p 316

[35] James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians: Or the Black War of Van Diemen's Land*, Sampson Low, Son and Marston, London, 1870, p 35

[36] Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Vol I*, p 46; Rhys Jones, Rocky Cape and the Problem of the Tasmanians, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971, p 8; *The Last Tasmanian*, script by Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon

patriate historian Ben Kiernan, writing in the *Bangkok Post* in 2000.[37] The descendants of the Aborigines also tell the same story, although they claim that it was not just Lieutenant Moore but most of the whites at the settlement who 'appeared to be drunk'.[38]

However, none of the later accounts of what happened at Risdon Cove deserve to replace the original versions given by Mountgarrett, Moore, Knopwood and Collins. The evidence to the 1830 committee might seem to us at this distance to be contiguous enough, but it was given twenty-six years after the event. Much of it was shown at the time to be unreliable. Even though the committee's report dignified the evidence of the witness Kelly by reporting the numbers killed 'have been estimated as high as 50', it should have been more circumspect in repeating this figure. This witness was Captain James Kelly, the sealer and harbour pilot, who would have been only twelve years old in May 1804.[39] Kelly admitted he was not at Risdon Cove at the time and could not have seen what occurred. Moreover, the committee knew Kelly was not a reliable witness and was prone to recounting rumours. His story about the killing of Aborigines near the hospital at Hobart Town was a matter on which other witnesses were questioned. Kelly swore they were fired on with grape shot and three natives were killed. However, Rev Knopwood said this particular story originated some years after the settlement was formed when excavations on Hospital Hill uncovered some skeletons and some grape shot. 'The shot were the remains of stores brought from Port Philip,' Knopwood said, 'and the bones those of persons who arrived from India, died, and were buried there.' Two other witnesses, Robert Evans and William Stocker, both rejected Kelly's story about the Hobart Hospital killings.[40]

[37] Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, (1948), Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974, p 34; Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold*, p 125; Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 1998 edn., p 32; Ben Kiernan, 'Australia's Aboriginal genocides', *Bangkok Post*, 10 September 2000, Perspective p 2

[38] Lehman, 'Our Story of Risdon Cove', p 44

[39] E. R. Pretyman, 'James Kelly', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2, I–Z, pp 36–7. Although the witness was only identified in the minutes as 'Mr Kelly', Brian Plomley agrees he was James Kelly: N. J. B. Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices as Tribal Indicators among the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Occasional Paper 5, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992, p 13

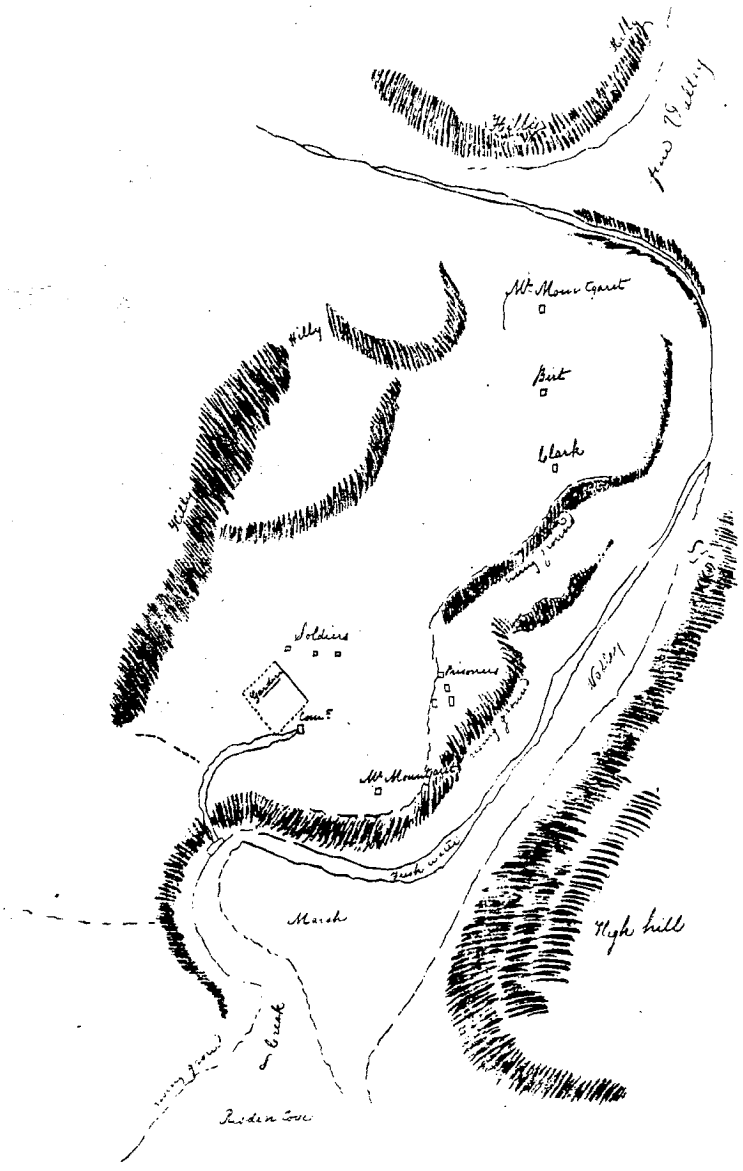
[40] Minutes of evidence, Rev Robert Knopwood, W. T. Stocker, 11 March 1830, Robert Evans, 16 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 53

Edward White had more credibility since he was on the Risdon Cove side of the Derwent at the time and he first saw the Aborigines coming towards the settlement. However, his claim that 'a great many' natives were killed and wounded has to be read in the context of his other evidence. He was a convict assigned to work for the free settler Richard Clark, whose five-acre farm was about a quarter of a mile from the soldier's camp. If, as White said, he was near the creek, it is quite plausible that he would have seen the Aborigines come in from the valley to the east. However, he was not in a position to see what subsequently happened, since most of the settlement lay on a hill well above the creek and, from it, was out of sight.[41] White's testimony as an eyewitness — albeit one recalling what he saw twenty-six years earlier — related to the action at the hut of the other free settler, William Birt, which was next to Clark's property. White said the Aborigines came close to Clark's house but did not go near Birt (whose name was mistakenly transcribed as Burke in the minutes of the 1830 committee[42]): 'the Natives were never within half a quarter of a mile of Burke's house ... they were not on Burke's side of the creek; never heard that any of them went to Burke's house'.

This comment shows White's awareness of events was not good because, as shown by Lieutenant Bowen's September 1803 sketch map of the settlement reproduced here, the huts of Birt and Clark were both on the same side of the creek as the soldiers' camp. The Aborigines definitely crossed the creek to enter the camp. No part of the settlement was on the other side of the creek. So if White was unaware the Aborigines crossed the creek, he was unaware of most that happened. Since he was down at the creek, out of the line of sight, this was understandable. This was where he remained the whole time. After he saw the Aborigines, he reported their arrival to some nearby soldiers and 'then went back to my work'. Moreover, he contradicted all the other evidence about the course of events, which agreed that Birt and his wife were either assaulted or threatened. For this reason, the 1830 committee discounted White's evidence. 'It appears unquestionable,' the final report noted, 'that a person named Burke, whose habitation was considerably advanced beyond the rest, was driven from it by the Natives, whose number was estimated at upwards of 500, and much violence was threatened by them towards

[41] Bowen to King, 18 October 1803, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 199; plus my personal inspections of the site in 2001 and 2002.

[42] Both William Aaron Birt and William Richard Clark are mentioned in several documents about the Risdon Cove settlement in *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I. See index to that volume. There was a soldier named Burke but no settler named Burke or Bourke at Risdon Cove in 1804.



Lieutenant John Bowen's 1803 sketch map of the 173-acre settlement at Risdon Cove. In May 1804, the Aborigines came towards the settlement from the 'fine valley' to the east (top of map). Source: *Archives Office of Tasmania CO 201/26*

this man and his wife and dwelling.'[43]

According to Lieutenant Moore's original report, only two soldiers were sent to assist Birt and his wife. Two soldiers were not equipped — armed as they were with only eighteenth century, single shot muskets — to shoot 'a great many' natives. The two deaths attributed to them by Moore were the most they probably could have managed. They would have been able to get off only two shots before the natives ran away, out of range. In other words, White's claim about a large number of Aboriginal casualties appears, like that of Kelly, to derive more from the common gossip of 1830 than from any direct observation of what actually happened in 1804.

White's claim about the two casks of bones sent by ship to Sydney by Mountgarrett is in the same category. As a convict working as an assigned servant on a farm, he was not in a position to have any direct knowledge of what Mountgarrett, a surgeon and member of the small colonial elite, had done in a matter of this kind. No one else at the time mentioned anything about bones being sent to Sydney. There was no word from Mountgarrett himself to suggest he did this, nor any record in his surviving correspondence of his having done so.[44] So, again, the story is no more than a rumour told twenty six years after the event, for which there was no contemporary corroboration.

The story about the fate of the bones told by the modern descendants of the Aborigines is even less plausible. There was no mention in any of the early colonial evidence of bones being 'packed in lime'. In fact, the settlement did not have any quantity of lime at its disposal. When lime was needed for mortar, the convicts were sent out to collect oyster shells and burn them.[45]

The claims in Charles Jeffreys's book are just as unbelievable. He was not at Risdon Cove in 1804. He did not arrive in the colony until 1814 so everything he wrote about it was hearsay.[46] His claim that each native carried a green bough was contradicted by all the eyewitnesses, including Edward White. They agreed the Aborigines carried either spears or waddies, that is, the clubs they used on kangaroo hunts. Jeffreys's assertion that the natives were fired on by a military detachment 'drawn up for the purpose' derives from literary

[43] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 209

[44] Archives Office of Tasmania (hereafter AOT), correspondence file under Mountgarrett; Mitchell Library (hereafter ML), MS cat. under J. Mountgarret

[45] Collins to Hobart, 31 July 1804, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 247

[46] E. Flinn, 'Charles Jeffreys', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2, 1788–1850, I–Z, p 15

licence rather than contemporary evidence. The Aborigines had not been anticipated before they appeared and there were no troops drawn up, waiting for them to arrive.

James Bonwick's allegation that Lieutenant Moore was drunk and wanted to 'see the Niggers run' is the least credible of all. No one mentioned this story at the time or even in evidence to the 1830 committee. It first surfaced in Bonwick's book in 1870, that is, sixty six years after the event. Bonwick said his informant was 'a settler of 1804', whom he does not name. However, there were only four possible witnesses to the event who fitted the description of 'settler' and, by the time Bonwick arrived in Hobart from England in 1841, none of them remained in the colony to inform him. According to the records of the first settlement, Risdon Cove in 1803 and 1804 was populated by soldiers, convicts and four other people. The last were the only ones who could be defined as settlers. They were: the surgeon Jacob Mountgarrett, the storekeeper Thomas Wilson, plus the two free settlers, William Birt and Richard (William) Clark.[47] Mountgarrett died in 1828, Wilson returned to Sydney in November 1803 and Birt returned to Sydney in July 1804.[48] Clark was later appointed a superintendent of convicts at Hobart but after his discharge from this position in 1807 he dropped out of the historical record.[49] He does not appear in Brian Plomley's listing of 550 officers, settlers and convicts in Van Diemen's Land in 1831.[50] In other words, when Bonwick arrived in 1841, there was no 'settler of 1804' still in the colony who could have observed Lieutenant Moore's condition or heard him speak on 3 May. The story that he was drunk and the words he purportedly used are plainly Bonwick's inventions. Bruce Elder's more recent description of Lieutenant Moore's condition — 'hung over, depressed and antagonistic, he saw the approaching group

[47] Return of first settlers, stock and provisions, 31 August 1803, *Historical Records of Austr*alia, III, 1, pp 196-7

[48] Mead, 'Jacob Mountgarrett', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2, I-Z, 1788-1850, p 264; *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, pp 206, 249, 251

[49] *Historical Records of Australia,* III, I, pp 248, 252, 262, 269, 283, 342, 558. Clark was recorded as both Richard Clark and William Clark. There was a William Clark recorded as overseer of blacksmiths in 1820 but he was a free settler who arrived in 1818: *Historical Records of Australia* III, III, p 600, Knopwood, *Diary*, p 683 n 31a. A third William Clark, a retired captain of the 6th Regiment of Foot, arrived in the colony in 1824 from the Cape of Good Hope: *Historical Records of Australia*, III, V, p 651

[50] Brian Plomley, 'List of officials, settlers, convicts and others, with biographical notes', Appendix 8, *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1929–1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, pp 1021–47

through bloodshot eyes'[51] — is even more inventive than Bonwick's original fiction. Despite its repetition by Lloyd Robson, Mark Cocker, Clive Turnbull, Rhys Jones, Greg Lehman and Ben Kiernan, this fabricated tale should never have been accepted as legitimate historical evidence. It reveals more about the motives of those who recycle it than it does about Lieutenant Moore.

Overall, the weight of the evidence does not support the interpretation about the Risdon Cove conflict now current in history books and the news media. It was not a slaughter of 'up to fifty' innocent men, women and children. It was a defensive action by the colonists in which three Aborigines were shot dead and at least one, though possibly more, wounded. The first suggestions that more than this were killed were not made until decades later by people who were not there at the time and, in most cases, were not even in the colony. Moreover, it was an incident in which neither party could be easily blamed. The Aborigines were on a kangaroo hunt and were incensed to see some of their game expropriated by these strange new white people. The colonists mistook the natives' purposes and believed they were under attack. The troops had no intention beforehand to kill any of them. The commander in charge was concerned to justify his actions by the threat to his own people. He did not believe he could shoot Aborigines without good justification. The reaction by the colonial authorities, both at the time and for decades afterwards, ranged from regret to repugnance. Indeed, the fact that the colonists were so ready to blame their own side was telling. No one took the event lightly and no one urged that shooting Aborigines was an acceptable thing to do. To call the incident a 'massacre' is to beat it up beyond credibility. To fabricate a death toll of 'close to a hundred', as descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines have done, is to abandon any semblance of veracity in order to milk the event for maximum political gain.

THE ORTHODOX INTERPRETATION OF TASMANIAN HISTORY

The following chapters are a critical examination of the prevailing historical orthodoxy about racial conflict in Van Diemen's Land. What I call the 'orthodox' interpretation of these events is actually very old. The fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines has attracted a number of authors over the past 170 years. Those who have used the issue to condemn the British colonists have included Henry Melville in *The History of Van Diemen's Land* (1835), James Bonwick in *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1870), Clive Turnbull in *Black War* (1948), and David Davies in *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1973).

[51] Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*, p 32

Although some of these works are discussed in the chapters that follow, my main target is the orthodoxy that has been produced by academic historians over the last thirty years. It is the academics who have taken up the old story and given it a new scholarly authority who have been the most influential. As noted earlier, the principal author of this period has been Lyndall Ryan, whose book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* was published in 1981, with a second, revised edition in 1996. The first volume of Lloyd Robson's *A History of Tasmania*, published in 1983, dealt extensively with race relations from within much the same genre. Henry Reynolds published a widely discussed book about Tasmanian Aborigines, *Fate of a Free People*, in 1995. He followed it in 2001 with a book about genocide against the Aborigines, *An Indelible Stain?*, in which two of the ten chapters were devoted to Tasmania.

The most scholarly and reliable of the orthodox historians is Brian Plomley, the editor of the journals of George Augustus Robinson, which he published as *Friendly Mission* (1966) and *Weep in Silence* (1987). Plomley, who continued to publish monographs on the Tasmanian Aborigines until his death in 1994, is sometimes dismissed today by academics like Lyndall Ryan as insufficiently sympathetic to current Aboriginal political objectives.[52] However, Plomley saw himself working within the same tradition as Melville, Bonwick and Turnbull[53] and, as subsequent chapters will show, several of his arguments are identical to those of Ryan. One of Plomley's protégés is Sharon Morgan, whose 1992 book, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*,[54] is the most overtly moralistic work of the orthodox school, in that it expresses unreserved disdain for the British colonizers and unqualified praise for the indigenous inhabitants. Cassandra Pybus's 1991 history, *Community of Thieves*, which intertwines the story of her own Tasmanian colonial family with that of Robinson's 'Friendly Mission', runs a close second to Morgan. The pre-historian and archaeologist Rhys Jones is also a member of the school, not only for his writings about Aboriginal society in the pre-contact period, but especially for the 1978 documentary film, *The Last Tasmanian*, whose script Jones co-wrote with the producer-director Tom Haydon. This film draws its evidence from the written histories and fashions its drama almost exclusively from the claims of the orthodox school. There are several other authors sharing all or part of the same

[52] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edition, pp xxiv–xxv. See also my Epilogue, pp 420, 433

[53] Plomley, *Friendly Mission,* p 37 n 33

[54] Morgan was employed by Plomley to write this book on a commission from the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston. See her Acknowledgments, p x

interpretation who have published in journal articles, anthologies and academic theses. A number of them are discussed throughout the following chapters as well.

What these works have in common is an intellectual mindset or framework that has largely determined the questions they have asked, the research they have done and how they have interpreted their evidence. To argue this is not to say they agree on every point — far from it, as shown in the chapters that follow. Nor is it to allege a conspiracy, even though many of the academics now in the field acknowledge they are friends.[55] There is nothing unusual about the existence of an outlook of this kind. It means people bring to their historical research the same set of assumptions about what they expect to find, and go looking for evidence that fits these assumptions. Historiography has long been full of examples of authors working within such interpretive frameworks or schools, often very productively.

While the existence of a particular interpretation is not uncommon, what makes the Tasmanian orthodoxy more unusual than most is that it has overt political objectives. Rather than adopt the traditional stance of the academic historian and profess at least a modicum of detachment from their subject, Reynolds, Ryan, Pybus and several others quite openly state that their objectives are to serve the interests of the descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines. In particular, they seek to justify 'land rights' and the transfer of large tracts of land to the descendants. This is not only a highly politicized approach to history but is also unusual in the success it has won, even in political circles that once resisted it. As noted above, the conservative Premier of Tasmania, Ray Groom, made the first gestures in this direction with a series of land grants in 1995. The Labor governments of Jim Bacon and Paul Lennon made much more extensive land grants in 2001 and 2005. The orthodoxy has had this success because people have accepted its account of Tasmanian history as largely true. 'Tasmania committed acts of great evil against its first settlers,' the Hobart *Mercury* wrote in 1992. 'It has an obligation to the descendants of those Aborigines to offer them more than platitudes.'[56]

The chapters that follow examine whether such an explicitly political and unambiguously moral interpretation of Tasmanian history really does follow from the evidence.

[55] In the second edition of *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Lyndall Ryan thanks Henry Reynolds for lending her his Hobart house (p xvi). In *Fate of a Free People*, Reynolds acknowledges the invaluable ideas and information he has received from both Ryan and Pybus (p ix). In *Community of Thieves*, Pybus got Reynolds to write the Foreword and she offers special thanks to 'my friend' Lyndall Ryan (pp xi, xiv).

[56] *Mercury*, Hobart, 2 September 1992, p 8

CHAPTER TWO

The Black Legend in Van Diemen's Land 1804–1831

THE colonization of Van Diemen's Land took place early in the rise of what is now known among historians as the 'second' British Empire. The first empire had begun in the Americas in the late sixteenth century. The second empire began in the late eighteenth century when the British wrested control of India. The despatch of the First Fleet to Botany Bay was part of the decision made in the wake of the British defeat in the American War of Independence to turn imperial attention towards Asia. Nonetheless, the two hundred years of American experience was not shed quickly. When they first arrived on Australian shores, the American legacy continued to dominate the thoughts of the colonial administrators. To understand the mentality of those in authority in Van Diemen's Land we need to look at the intellectual milieu they inhabited. Today this is not easy because so many historians take a simplistic, ideological attitude towards European imperialism and fail to recognize distinctions that the historical actors of the day took for granted.[1]

[1] The recently published five volumes of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* have gone a long way towards dispelling many of the myths on which most current thinking has been based: *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, editor-in-chief Wm. Roger Louis, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, *Vols I–II*, 1998, *Vols III–V*, 1999. The concept of the first and second British Empires derives from this series. For an examination and review, see Keith Windschuttle, 'Rewriting the history of the British Empire', *New Criterion*, May 2000

Some historians of imperialism still like to show how closely the British version resembled the Spanish, thereby tainting the British Empire with the brutal reputation of the *conquistadores*. Both empires, they argue, were rationalized by the objective to convert the heathen of the New World to the Christian faith and both employed the same form of persuasion: conquest. It is true that in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Britain did imitate Spain in both word and deed. Its initial intentions in Virginia were to copy the conquest of Mexico and Peru. In his *Pamphlet for the Virginia Enterprise*, Richard Hakluyt in 1585 defined the objectives of the new colony as 'to plant Christian religion, to traffic, to conquer'.[2] The royal charters of the Virginia Company in 1606 authorized the invasion of any legitimate ruler's territory and the seizure of its property. The Governor of the Roanoke colony of Virginia in 1608, John Smith, admired both the 'unparalleled virtues' and the 'mountains of wealth' of the Spanish imperialist adventure.[3]

However, as the seventeenth century unfolded, the two powers moved far apart in both imperialist theory and practice. While Spain retained its original rationale and objectives, the British colonies in America became sites of economic development, commercial enterprise, trade and investment. The economic historians P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins have argued that the foundations of the later British Empire were laid in the financial revolution that followed the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This led to the emergence of a class of 'gentlemanly capitalists' or 'merchant bankers and merchant princes' centred on the financial houses of the City of London. Gentlemanly capitalism, Cain and Hopkins argue, had close ties to the government and the military and helped to promote the expansionist forces of British investment, commerce and migration throughout the world.[4] In contrast, Spanish America remained largely a site of imperial expropriation. Until the final demise of the Spanish empire in the Americas in the 1830s, the extraction of precious metals had remained the crown's principal economic concern. Despite reforms in the 1770s and 1780s designed to implement diversification and allow limited free trade, Spain continued to look to the importation of gold

[2] Richard Hakluyt, *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts*, ed. E. G. R. Taylor, Vol I, Hakluyt Society, London, 1935, p 332

[3] First Charter of Virginia, 10 April 1606, in *Documents of American History*, ed. Henry Steele Commager, 8th edn, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1968, pp 8–10; Smith quoted in Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640*, Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa, 1980, p 166

[4] P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914*, Longman, London, 1993

and silver from its South American mines as its ultimate and only fully reliable source of wealth.[5] The radical divergence of the economies of the two colonial empires derived from, and in turn fed into, their equally different legal and religious foundations.

The legal status of the American colonies had never been a source of anxiety to the Spanish crown. Their occupation had been sanctioned by the famous papal bull of 1493, *Inter Caetera*, which divided the New World between Spain and Portugal. Moreover, in Mexico and Peru, they had taken control of territories previously occupied by legitimate rulers. Hence, the Spanish settlers in America called themselves conquerors, *conquistadores*. In his comparative study of the ideology of the three main European empires, Anthony Pagden argues the Spanish crown was as much concerned with its potential rights over the American Indians themselves as it was with their property. The grants made by the crown to settlers in Spanish America were known as *encomiendas*, feudal titles to labour.[6] This was in marked contrast to the British concern with commercial rights in property, especially land. British culture legitimated the ownership of things, not people. Another contrast, Pagden says, was that the British regarded conquest as both indefensible in theory and unsustainable in practice. Since 1066, British political culture had been committed to the 'continuity theory' of constitutional law in which the legal and political institutions of the conquered were deemed to survive a conquest. So, even after colonization, indigenous peoples would have retained all their laws and customs until they voluntarily surrendered them.[7] 'Conquest,' John Locke wrote on the eve of the revolution of 1688, 'is as far from setting up any government, as demolishing an House is from building a new one in the place.'[8]

These arguments were not merely abstract salves for the consciences of British colonists. They had profound practical implications, especially in determining their attitude to indigenous peoples. In America it meant they initially chose to settle on vacant land with the consent and, usually, the co-operation, of the local native population. The seal of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1629 depicted an

[5] David Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492–1867*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991; David Brading, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763–1810*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1971

[6] Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, 1500-1800*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, p 91

[7] Pagden, *Lords of all the World*, p 77

[8] John Locke, 'Of Conquest', *Second Treatise of Government*, paragraph 175 in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, Mentor, New York, 1965, p 431

Indian saying: 'Come over and Help Us'.[9] When William Penn organized his colony of Pennsylvania in 1681 he drew up a charter of concessions and conditions aimed primarily at securing the good relations he already had with the local Indians.[10] Hence the British regarded their settlements as peaceful exercises, mutually beneficial to both colonist and native. Rather than a mission to coerce the natives into accepting their religion, the early British objectives towards the indigenous people were primarily to trade useful products and to demonstrate by example the benefits of the civil and polite customs of Europe.

This is not to say that the British were indifferent to spreading their religion. As Chapters Six and Nine will discuss in more detail, by the time the first Australian colonies were established in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Evangelical revival within the Church of England was being felt politically both at home, in movements to uplift the poor, and abroad, in the campaign to end the slave trade and to bring the gospel to the peoples of the Pacific. All of this, however, was a stark contrast in British minds to what they believed were the designs of Spain.

Ever since the Spanish Armada of 1588, English Protestants had been nourished on a steady diet of anti-Spanish stories designed to show that the adherents of the Roman Catholic Church were capable of any cruelty. What became known as the 'Black Legend' began with stories about Catholic atrocities perpetrated on the Dutch Protestants during their revolt against the Spanish crown. The legend became firmly entrenched when stories emerged about the treatment of the natives in the Spanish colonies of the Americas. The most dramatic testimony came from a book by the Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas. Written in 1542, Las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* became a frequent point of referral for the officials of the British Empire until the late nineteenth century.

Before he entered the Dominican order, Las Casas had been the prosperous master of Indians on Hispaniola and Cuba. He underwent a religious conversion and subsequently dedicated his life to the abolition of the basic organisation of Spanish colonial rule, the *encomienda*, an institution he regarded as worse than slavery. His famous book was written to persuade the Spanish monarchy of the exploitation and atrocities being committed in its name in the Caribbean and on the Spanish Main. It was a collection of horror stories of natives being killed, maimed, raped and tortured, of bloodthirsty

[9] Pagden, *Lords of all the World*, p 88

[10] Concessions to the Province of Pennsylvania, 11 July 1681, *Documents of American History*, ed. Commager, pp 35–6

massacres of whole tribes, and of a total death toll of twelve to fifteen million people.[11] The method Las Casas adopted in his account of each of the Spanish settlements was to contrast the peace and happiness of the idyllic Indian society before conquest with the unspeakable atrocities they suffered after the Spanish arrived. 'The indigenous peoples of the region,' he wrote, 'are naturally so gentle, so peace-loving, so humble and so docile.' He said: 'It would constitute a criminal neglect of my duty to remain silent about the enormous loss of life as well as the infinite number of human souls dispatched to Hell in the course of such "conquests"'.[12]

Las Casas's book became widely known in England after 1583 and confirmed everything the Black Legend predicted about Spanish rule in the Americas. Spain had wilfully destroyed the blameless American Indian society, which before 1492 had been an arcadian paradise. In their lust for gold, the Catholic Spaniards had taken more lives in America than they had subjects in Europe. Among Protestant opinion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, Spanish colonialism gained a reputation for sadistic cruelty matched only by the Turks, with whom they were commonly identified as enemies of enlightened values. Increasingly, the British came to regard themselves not only as the Indians' friends but also their saviours from Spanish tyranny. The English had once assisted the liberation of Spain's Protestant subjects in the Netherlands, they rationalized, so now they might save their even more oppressed subjects in America from a similar fate.[13]

Ironically, however, the British also adopted part of the Spanish mindset itself in the form of Las Casas's own opinions. The ideas that inspired the Spanish priest's critique — that all men 'are our brothers, and Christ gave his life for them', and that 'all the races of humankind are one' — originated in Spanish Catholicism. They came out of the upheaval within Spanish Dominican philosophy in the early sixteenth century as a direct result of the encounter with the New World.[14] They were the precursor to largely identical sentiments adopted by the British Evangelical revival in the late eighteenth century. Hence, in both their overt anti-Catholicism and their reproduction of a Catholic critique, the British used the treatment of the American Indians to fuel the ongoing propaganda war against Spain at home

[11] Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. Anthony Pagden, Penguin Books, London 1992, p 12
[12] Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, p 6
[13] Pagden, *Lords of all the World*, p 87
[14] John M. Headley, 'The Universalizing Principle and Process: On the West's Intrinsic Commitment to a Global Context', *Journal of World History*, 13/2 (2002):291-321

and to provide a moral sanction to their imperial adventures abroad. They also generated the widespread belief within England that their brand of colonialism was mutually beneficial to both settler and native and that the burgeoning British Empire was creating a more virtuous social order in the New World.

LAS CASAS IN VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

The colonies in Australia were established because of their strategic location in the Asia-Pacific region but initially functioned as penal settlements. They were repositories of criminals from Britain, most of whom had committed what were regarded at the time as serious felonies. Transportation was an alternative to capital punishment. Convicts were sentenced for periods of seven or fourteen years transportation. The punishment was primarily that of exile. Once in the colony, prisoners were required to work out the unexpired term of their sentences. They were not otherwise punished by being confined or shackled unless they committed further offences in the colony itself, in which case they received secondary punishment ranging from flogging to imprisonment or execution. In other words, most convicts lived in the colony with a status similar to that of indentured labourers, working either on government projects such as roads and buildings, or as assigned servants to farmers.

Because most convicts were criminals who were at large in the community, the governors of the penal colonies acknowledged the potential for conflict between their lower orders and the natives. In the first three decades of the colonization of Van Diemen's Land, the governors made a number of statements blaming both convicts and ex-convicts, especially those employed as stockmen and sealers on the outskirts of white settlement, for the deterioration in relations with the Aborigines. In April 1830, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur held them largely responsible for the violence then sweeping the island:

> That the lawless convicts who have, from time to time, absconded, together with the distant stock-keepers in the interior, and the sealers employed in remote parts of the coast, have, from the earliest period, acted with great inhumanity towards the black Natives, particularly in seizing their women, there can be no doubt, and these outrages have, it is evident, first excited, what they were naturally calculated to produce in the minds of savages, the strongest feelings of hatred and revenge.[15]

There were also free settlers who took a similar view. In Van Diemen's Land, as Henry Reynolds has documented in *Fate of a Free*

[15] Arthur to Murray, 15 April 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 187

People, a number of the colonists in the 1820s and 1830s were disturbed about the demise of the Aborigines and sympathized with their plight. They included the landowner Richard Dry, the police constable Gilbert Robertson, the newspaper editor Henry Melville, the 'conciliator' George Augustus Robinson, the colonist R. M. Ayrton, the historian John West, plus the newspaper correspondents 'Zeno', 'A Border Settler' and 'J. E.'[16] They blamed those on their own side for the conflict. They took the principles of the virtuous social order on which they felt English colonization should have been based, and found it wanting. To make their case in the strongest possible rhetorical terms, some of these men invoked the Spanish comparison. They likened the fate of the Tasmanians to the Indians of the New World and compared the actions of the British to those of the Spaniards.

Some of these people had fairly obvious reasons for taking this line. Henry Melville was a political opponent of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur. His principal Hobart newspapers, the *Colonial Times* and the *Tasmanian*, were for years nagging critics of many aspects of Arthur's regime. In 1835 his criticism got Melville convicted of contempt of court and sentenced to prison. While in jail he wrote *The History of Van Diemen's Land from 1824–1835*, intended largely as a critique of Arthur's administration. The history was published in both Hobart and London later that year with the aim of having Arthur recalled and his governorship terminated. To damn Arthur's policy towards Aborigines in terms he knew would be most telling, Melville made the Spanish comparison: 'These poor bewildered creatures had been treated *worse* than were any of the American tribes by the Spaniards.'[17]

Others, like George Augustus Robinson who became superintendent of Aborigines in the 1830s, had different reasons for invoking the same assessment. Part of his motivation was, like Las Casas, inspired by religion, but much of it was, as Chapter Seven discusses in detail, his desire for secular influence and wealth. To achieve these ambitions, his principal biographer has argued, he became 'a liar and a cheat, a man of little honour',[18] whose reports about the conditions of the Aborigines under his control turned out to be largely fraudulent. In November 1830, after learning of the shooting of two of the

[16] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995, pp 30–1, 82–5

[17] Henry Melville, *A History of Van Diemen's Land from the Year 1824 to 1835, inclusive, During the Administration of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur*, ed. George Mackaness, Horwitz-Grahame, Sydney, 1965, p 30. His emphasis.

[18] Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p 82

brothers of an Aboriginal woman in his expeditionary party, Robinson lamented in his diary:

> The cruelties exercised upon them beggars all description, and their sufferings have been far greater than those of the Indians at the hands of the Spanish.[19]

In December 1831, Robinson heard that one of his former convict servants, Alexander McKay, now a rival of his in the business of conciliating the natives, had gone in pursuit of natives who had killed a white stockman. McKay had shot and killed four of them. In response, Robinson wrote a long denunciation of the government's decision to employ his competitor.

> A precedent is now established and as the government has patronized this outrage by sending this man out again, we may of course expect to hear of similar massacres by other white ruffians who have only wanted permission to imbrue their hands in the blood of the aborigines... it is a refinement of cruelty not to be met with in the present day and is parallel only with those cruelties practiced upon the South American indians by the blood-thirsty Spaniards.[20]

Some settlers made the Spanish comparison without mentioning Spain specifically but by making the same comparison as Las Casas between pre-colonial innocence and peace, and post-colonial horror. The *Launceston Advertiser*'s correspondent 'J. E.' wrote in 1831:

> The Aborigines were originally the rightful owners and possessors of the island — they were inoffensive, innocent and happy. The British Colonists have taken their country from them by force; they have persecuted them, wantonly sacrificed them, and taught them to hate the whites.[21]

Even though 'J. E.' did not give his name, it is not hard to work out who he was. Given his interest in the natives and the fluency of his prose, it was most likely the surveyor J. E. (James Erskine) Calder, who arrived in the colony in 1829 aged twenty-one and in later life wrote the book *The Native Tribes of Tasmania* (1875).

Another of Tasmania's nineteenth-century historians also emphasized the similarity between the two European colonial powers. In his

[19] Robinson, diary, 15 November 1830 in *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson*, ed. N. J. B. Plomley, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, p 276

[20] Robinson, diary, 26 December 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 566. In fact, during this pursuit there were only two Aborigines killed by the ex-convict Alexander McKay, plus one other later: see Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 686 n 18

[21] *Launceston Advertiser*, 26 September 1831, cited by Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 84

1870 work, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, James Bonwick quoted a Dr Broca who asserted that the English: 'have committed upon the Tasmanian race, and that in the nineteenth century, execrable atrocities a hundred times less excusable than the hitherto unrivalled crimes of which the Spaniards were guilty in the sixteenth century in the Antilles'. Bonwick recounted the story of a convict bushranger in Van Diemen's Land who confessed on the scaffold 'that he had actually been in the habit of shooting the black Natives to feed his dogs'. Bonwick quotes the 'Rev Dr Lang' as his source for this story but otherwise provides no details which might verify the confession: no name of the convict, no date except 'a few years ago', and no place of the execution. Bonwick also compared the fate of the Tasmanian natives to Las Casas's account of the Caribs under the Spaniards:

> It is a small satisfaction to be told that other nations have been as bad as ourselves: that a million of Caribs in Hispaniola were reduced by the Spaniards to sixty thousand in fifteen years; that, according to Las Casas, fifteen millions of Indians perished at their hands; or that, as Cotton Mather reports of the English American colonies: 'Among the early settlers, it was considered a religious act to kill Indians.' Some Spaniards made a vow to God to burn or hang every morning, for a certain time, thirteen Indians; one was to be in compliment to the Saviour, and the others to the twelve Apostles.[22]

The four authors quoted here, Melville, Robinson, Calder and Bonwick, cannot be dismissed as unrepresentative or eccentric figures. They were the four most influential nineteenth-century voices in framing opinion about the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines. To compare England with Spain and to tell atrocity stories of this kind is a highly effective rhetorical strategy. The images are memorable and, without the benefit of counter argument, readers usually find passages of this kind persuasive. The legacy of this comparison is one of the main reasons why, in the annals of imperial brutality, Tasmania is today compared to the Belgian Congo and German South-West Africa.

The readiness of nineteenth-century observers to resort to this tactic, however, poses a problem for later historians. For even Las Casas's most sympathetic editors today acknowledge that, while the Spanish colonies were undoubtedly sites of homicide and exploitation, very little of what the priest had to say had any empirical basis. To use the comparisons drawn by the four above authors as evidence of the moral status of the British in Van Diemen's Land is to pile myth upon myth. This can be readily demonstrated with some examples from Las Casas's book. One of his constant themes was how the Spaniards

[22] James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians: Or the Black War of Van Diemen's Land*, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1870, pp 66, 68

allegedly seized children and killed them before their mothers' eyes. On Hispaniola:

> They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could manage to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual's head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mothers' breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks. Others, laughing and joking all the while, threw them over their shoulders into a river, shouting 'Wriggle, you little perisher'. They slaughtered anyone and everyone in their path, on occasion running through a mother and her baby with a single thrust of their swords.[23]

Another theme was the feeding of people, either dead or alive, to dogs. Every chapter of Las Casas's book has examples of atrocities about dogs. The following three sentences give examples on three consecutive pages:

> He cut the hands off some; others, women as well as men, he threw to wild dogs who tore them to pieces ...
>
> The death toll was huge, and countless others, men and women, had their hands and noses hacked off while yet others were thrown to wild dogs who tore them to pieces and devoured them ...
>
> Some forty or fifty perished in the flames and yet others were thrown to wild dogs who tore them to pieces and devoured them.[24]

Two of his most unforgettable anecdotes are also about dogs. On the Yucatan Peninsula:

> A Spaniard who was out hunting deer or rabbits realized that his dogs were hungry and, not finding anything they could hunt, took a little boy from his mother, cut his arms and legs into chunks with his knife and distributed them among his dogs. Once they had eaten up these steaks, he threw the rest of the carcass on the ground for them to fight over.[25]

And in New Granada:

> It has already been stated that in the New World the Spaniards have a number of wild and ferocious dogs which they have trained especially to kill the people and tear them to bits. It is not difficult to discover who are the real Christians and who are not when one learns that, to feed these dogs, they ensure that wherever they travel they always have a ready sup-

[23] Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, p 15
[24] Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, pp 120–2
[25] Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, p 74

> ply of natives, chained and herded like so many calves on the hoof. These they kill and butcher as the need arises. Indeed, they run a kind of human abattoir or flesh market, where a dog-owner can casually ask, not for a quarter of pork or mutton, but for 'a quarter of one of those likely lads over there for my dog'.[26]

In works on early American history, these stories are still widely recycled by academics of the political left. In 1985, the postmodern literary critic Tzvetan Todorov dedicated his book about the Spanish conquest of Mexico to an unknown Mayan woman, whom the conquistadors had torn apart by dogs.[27] However, you do not need an especially sceptical turn of mind to find such stories dubious. They were written to shock the sixteenth-century Spanish court into changing the legal status of natives in the Americas and to give the Church a greater role in colonial rule. Anyone who contemplates their feasibility with an open mind, especially the technicalities of implementing some of these exploits, will find many of them inherently implausible. Most likely, the Spanish monarchs found the same because they remained unmoved in their policies, which stayed in place for another two hundred years.

Despite their popularity among radical academics, many of the stories of Las Casas are today recognized by less politicized scholars as fancifully inflated and largely rhetorical accounts of places he never visited and events he never saw. His death toll is several times higher than the most plausible estimates of the total native population of the region. In particular, some of his stories were inspired more by Roman histories and Biblical narratives than by events in the Indies. One of Las Casas's major influences was the account by the Roman-Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, of the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus Vespasianus in 70 AD and his description of mass killings of Jews, of starvation, infanticide, cannibalism and of people being eaten by dogs.[28] Another of the major sources of his inspiration was the Old Testament. For instance, Psalm 137, 'By the rivers of Babylon' contains the Israelite curse on their captors: 'O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us — he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks'; Isaiah 13: 'Their infants will be dashed to pieces

[26] Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, p 125

[27] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, HarperCollins, New York, 1985

[28] Las Casas's other major work, *History of the Indies*, cites Flavius Josephus at length in its prologue, Anthony Pagden, 'Introduction', *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, pp xiii–xiv, xxxi–xxxii; Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, (75–79 AD) J. M. Dent and Sons, London, 1915, Books V and VI, especially pp 411, 416–9, 428

before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished'; 1 Kings 14: 'Dogs will eat those belonging to Jeroboam who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country'; 2 Kings 8: 'You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women'.

It was only to be expected that a Catholic priest, writing at the end of the Middle Ages, would have a head full of Old Testament imagery. The Bible was his principal source of literature and determined the foundations of his thought. But when observers in the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century told stories about local incidents that bear uncanny resemblances to those Las Casas claims for the Spanish colonies in the seventeenth century, which themselves had similarities to Biblical atrocities willed or suffered by the Israelites, this should be a signal for historians to question their sources closely.

Instead, as this and subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the members of the orthodox school of Tasmanian history have seen such claims primarily as fodder for their own arguments. They have repeated numerous tales about violence done towards the Aborigines without questioning their veracity. These stories have been handed down to our own time where they form what now passes for the historical record. There are many claims made by modern historians about what happened to the Aborigines of Tasmania that have the same degree of credibility as Las Casas's tales about what happened to the Indians of the Americas. Indeed, some have been directly inspired by the very myths invented by Las Casas himself.

RHYS JONES AND THE YAHOOS

This may be illustrated with examples from the work of two authors. They could have come from the wilder anecdotes of journalists like Clive Turnbull and Mark Cocker, who have made the demise of the Tasmanian Aborigines into a highly dramatic, tabloid newspaper story. Instead this chapter provides a sample of the work of two of the most widely respected and frequently cited academic scholars in the field, the pre-historian and archaeologist Professor Rhys Jones, who, until his untimely recent death, was a member of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University, and Dr Lloyd Robson, who spent most of his academic career in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne.

Even though he later fell out with them for not paying sufficient attention to modern Aboriginal politics,[29] Rhys Jones's work in the 1970s provided some of the foundations of the orthodox school. His

[29] see my Epilogue, p 432

1971 PhD thesis at the University of Sydney, 'Rocky Cape and the Problem of the Tasmanians', was the source of a number of his journal articles on which later historians relied. In particular, Lyndall Ryan was indebted to him for her account of the Aboriginal population and tribal distribution in the early chapters of her 1981 book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. The first chapter of Jones's thesis is entitled 'Houyhnhnms and Yahoos'. The title is taken from the most misanthropic tale in Jonathan Swift's eighteenth-century satire *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver was cast ashore in a land ruled by the Houyhnhnms, noble and generous creatures who looked and acted like horses but who had a language and culture like human beings. Their good nature was contrasted to that of the other inhabitants of the island, the Yahoos, naked creatures in human form, hideously hairy and smelly. The brutal and greedy manners of the Yahoos threatened the orderly civilization created by the horses. Jones likens the Tasmanian Aborigines to the Houyhnhnms and the British settlers to their antagonists. The section of his chapter on the establishment of the British colony in Van Diemen's Land is called 'The arrival of the Yahoos'. After recounting the events at Risdon Cove in 1804, in which he regurgitates James Bonwick's fabricated tale that 'a drunken Lieutenant Moore opened fire on a large group of Aborigines' in order 'to see the niggers run', Jones summarizes the atrocities the British committed against the natives.

> One's gorge rises at this sorry tale — of psychopathic sadism, of punitive parties and concentration camps, of Sunday afternoon man hunts, of sexual mutilation, of cutting flesh off living bodies and feeding it to dogs, of burying a baby up to its neck in sand and kicking its head off in front of its mother, of tying the severed head of a husband around the neck of the raped spouse.[30]

Jones recorded these atrocities without saying where or when they happened or in what documentary sources he found evidence for them. Despite its complete lack of verification, this passage has since been repeated verbatim by two books on modern Aboriginal politics, *Generations of Resistance*, by Lorna Lippmann, and *'It's Coming Yet ...' An Aboriginal Treaty within Australia between Australians*, by Stewart Harris.[31] Both books cite the passage as credible evidence of what the

[30] Rhys Jones, Rocky Cape and the Problem of the Tasmanians, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971, p 9

[31] Lorna Lippmann, *Generations of Resistance: The Aboriginal Struggle for Justice*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne 1981, p 21; Stewart Harris, *'It's Coming Yet...' An Aboriginal Treaty within Australia between Australians*, Aboriginal Treaty Committee, Canberra, 1979, p 35

British did in Tasmania and why all Australian Aborigines deserve compensation, reparations, land rights and a treaty.

Jones repeated a similar list of atrocities in the 1978 documentary film *The Last Tasmanian*, whose script he co-wrote with producer-director Tom Haydon. This time, however, he indicated a historical source for his allegations.

> The atrocities committed by sealers and convicts and reported to the 1830 committee included rape, flogging of women, burning with brands, roasting alive, emasculation of men, cutting flesh off and feeding it to dogs, dashing out the brains of children, kicking off a baby's head in front of its mother. Most common was the abduction and enslaving of women and children.[32]

The source Jones indicates here is the 1830 Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, a government inquiry in Hobart into the causes and remedy of the native hostilities of the time. However, anyone who checks out the documents before this committee will find very few of Jones's claims gain any support there. The minutes of evidence of the witnesses who appeared, plus the final report itself, were published in the British Parliamentary Papers in 1831.[33] In addition, the Archives Office of Tasmania holds three hundred pages of settlers' letters on the topic, which were collected and put before the committee.[34] Nowhere in all this documentation is there any mention of burning with brands, emasculation of men, cutting flesh off Aborigines and feeding it to dogs, or kicking a baby's head off in front of its mother. Indeed, this last atrocity is one that only the unusually gullible could take seriously. It is not pleasant to contemplate but it is obviously the case that kicking a baby's head would probably crush it and break the neck, but would not decapitate it. Yet Jones finds this image so compelling that, despite the complete lack of evidence, he uses it in both his thesis and his film script. (In 1981, the same story was retold by another author, only this time there were several babies involved and the event took place in north-east Victoria.[35]) Similarly, there was no evidence given to the 1830 Hobart

[32] *The Last Tasmanian*, script by Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon, produced and directed by Tom Haydon, Artis Film Productions, Sydney, 1978

[33] Minutes of evidence taken before the Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, 23 February–17 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 219–27

[34] Suggestions relative to the capture of the natives, AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 62–286; Answers by settlers and others to certain questions submitted to them by the Aboriginal committee, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 287–383. Chapter Nine analyzes the answers provided in the latter series.

[35] Jan Roberts, *Massacres to Mining: The Colonization of Aboriginal Australia*, Dove Communications, Blackburn, 1981, p 19. Roberts heard the story, she

committee that any convict or settler had cut the flesh off live natives to feed his dogs. Even though James Bonwick's 1870 history put the words of a similar tale into the mouth of an unnamed convict at an unspecified execution, this does not warrant academic historians repeating it without some corroboration. The claim that this kind of thing happened in Van Diemen's Land is based on no credible evidence and is just as unbelievable as Las Casas's absurd tale about a human flesh market for dogs in New Granada.

Of the above atrocities claimed by Jones, only three were mentioned to the 1830 committee. One witness reported one case of an Aboriginal woman who had been thrown onto a fire and had burnt to death. Another witness spoke of a massacre of Aborigines near Campbell Town in 1828 in which, after the men had been shot, the perpetrators dragged the women and children from crevices in the rocks, 'dashing out their brains'.[36] A third witness, James Hobbs, said a convict named James Carrett, known as Carrotts, had 'told him he had once cut off a Native man's head at Oyster Bay, and made his wife hang it round her neck, and carry it as a plaything; from Carrotts' manner he credited the story'.[37]

The third of these atrocities was the only one the committee found credible enough to include in its final report. It was a story that the witness, James Hobbs, said he had been told, not something he had seen himself, but it clearly shocked the committee members. Although even the most judicious of the modern historians of first race contacts in Tasmania, Marie Fels, finds this story of a woman wearing the skull 'horrifying' and says 'it may have been more shocking in that culture than ours',[38] the ethnographic evidence shows the natives would not have regarded it in these terms. Several contemporary observers noted that Tasmanian Aborigines often wore not only amulets of ashes and bones but also whole jawbones, thigh bones and skulls of dead relatives around their necks or on their bodies both as mementos of the deceased and as highly valued charms against illness and pain.[39] Carrotts's story may well have originated in

claims, from a local Aboriginal man who said his mother witnessed the atrocity. She footnotes the story as: 'Account given anonymously to author'.

[36] Minutes of evidence, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 220, 226

[37] Minutes of evidence, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 221–2

[38] Marie Fels, 'Culture Contact in the County of Buckinghamshire, Van Diemen's Land 1803–11', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 29, 2, June 1982, p 60

[39] H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899, p 64; Robinson, diary, 27 February 1832, 7 April 1834, *Friendly*

a similar sighting. We have no way of verifying whether he killed the woman's husband or not, but the story of her wearing a skull around her neck would not, in Aboriginal culture, generate the same repulsion as it would in colonial society.

Whatever the case, Hobbs had a predilection for exaggerating atrocities done to the Aborigines and was not a reliable witness. He gave other evidence in 1830 that can definitely be shown to be untrue. He claimed that in 1815 the 48th Regiment massacred twenty-two Aborigines at Oyster Bay. As Chapter Five demonstrates, however, this incident not only did not happen, but *could not* have happened in the way Hobbs claimed. Similarly, the story about the massacre at Campbell Town in 1828 in which Aboriginal women and children had their brains dashed out is, as Chapter Five also shows in some detail, every bit as fictional as the other claims made here.

LLOYD ROBSON AND THE SEALERS' ATROCITIES

Lloyd Robson's highly acclaimed and award-winning book, *A History of Tasmania, Volume One,* published by Oxford University Press in 1983, contains passages with a similar degree of credibility. Later, Chapter Five examines in detail some of the more notorious massacres Robson claimed were perpetrated on the Aborigines, but let us here focus on just one passage. Robson writes:

> Great and barbarous cruelties were practised. Sealers were said to have burnt women alive. Some cut the flesh off the cheek of an Aboriginal boy and made him eat it, and tied up an Aboriginal woman to a tree and then cut off her ears and the flesh off her thigh and made her eat it because she had run away.[40]

Anyone who stops to contemplate these stories with an open mind will soon come up against the dilemma that faced Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*: how can you cut a sizeable portion of flesh from a living body without killing its owner? Robson, however, presents these anecdotes with a straight face, as if they were common practice at the time. He does not provide a footnote for them, but they come

Mission, pp 591, 874. When the Big River tribe were brought into Hobart by George Augustus Robinson in January 1832, the *Hobart Town Courier* reported: 'The women were frightfully ornamented with human bones hung round them in various fantastic forms, even to the rows of teeth and skulls.' (14 January 1832, p 2). On Flinders Island in 1837, the Aboriginal woman, Queen Adelaide, wore the skull of her favourite child around her neck. Another woman, Pauline, wore the jawbone of a relative's brother around her stomach to relieve severe pain: Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 129-30

[40] Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, Vol I, p 231

from the diaries of George Augustus Robinson. They were from a series of stories retold by Robinson, who said he heard them from one of the Bass Strait seal hunters, James Munro. The information is in Robinson's diary entry of 28 May 1831.[41] After the above passage, Robson goes on to recount more atrocity stories from the diary, but then, on the following page, adds his one and only note of caution: 'Perhaps not all the stories told to Robinson were accurate.'[42]

This way of presenting information is, of course, far more circumspect than Rhys Jones's practice of simply making it up. Robson knew that, if it ever came to a dispute, he could plead that he was doing no more than repeating stories that were there, on the historical record, and that he did warn readers to be wary of the tales. However, Robson failed to give his readers any of the background about how or why these stories came to be in Robinson's diary. Yet both the diary itself, and the lengthy annotations provided by its editor, show that Robinson had powerful reasons of his own to invent stories of this kind.

At the time, Robinson was engaged in a struggle with the Bass Strait sealers for control of their women. There were about thirty sealers on the islands of the strait, mainly in the Furneaux group. Some of them had been there since the 1790s and all were accompanied by at least one Aboriginal woman, while some kept two or three. Robinson wanted to remove these women to Gun Carriage Island to rectify the severe shortage of females at his newly-established Aboriginal settlement. In the preceding months he had already seized fourteen Aboriginal women from the English sealers on the grounds that they had been abducted and were kept by force. He wanted the rest of their women as well.

However, the sealers responded by delegating James Munro to go to Hobart to plead with the Lieutenant-Governor to put a stop to Robinson's activities. They complained that Robinson had removed women who were their long-standing common law wives and the mothers of their children. Munro's own wife was one of those taken. He was left by himself on Preservation Island with their three children.[43] There were similar complaints from the other sealers. The women, they argued, wanted to remain with their husbands and children, rather than be taken to Robinson's settlement to become the mistresses of a new group of Aboriginal strangers. Arthur saw their point and took their side. He sent, via Munro, an order for Robinson

[41] Robinson, diary, 28 May 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 357
[42] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol I, p 232
[43] Robinson, diary, 11 October 1830, 9 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 246, 269

to return a number of women to the sealers. Munro delivered this letter to Robinson on 24 May.[44] The letter also said Arthur had decided that, since the sealers often traded with the northern tribes and were well acquainted with them, he intended to authorize them to become 'conciliators' of the Aborigines. Robinson, however, was indignant about anyone else acting in this role, in which he so far had the monopoly.[45] So Munro's visit not only meant Robinson had to return the sealers' women and thus reduce the size of his Aboriginal settlement, it also threatened his lucrative position as the sole captor of Aborigines.

Four days later, Robinson began recording in his diary stories that he claimed Munro had told him about atrocities committed by the sealers, including the tales eventually reproduced in Lloyd Robson's book. One does not need an especially cynical turn of mind to see Robinson's motives. He was accumulating evidence to present to Arthur to show that the sealers were such depraved beasts that they were not fit either to keep their women or to act as government agents in conciliating the Aborigines. By claiming Munro as his chief informant, he was specifically trying to undermine the man who had gained the Lieutenant-Governor's confidence.

Now, all this was well known to Robson when he wrote the above passage. The editor of Robinson's diary, Brian Plomley, provides lengthy annotations to the entries from which Robson quotes, recording no fewer than thirteen letters and reports that circulated between Bass Strait and Government House between 16 April and 8 June 1831, in which both parties to this dispute denounced each other's morals and motives.[46] Yet Robson pretends he is oblivious to this background and the objectives involved. He presents the stories of sealers forcing Aboriginal women and children to eat their own flesh as if they were simply part of a series of plausible tales from the time. Of course, the idea that Munro would have volunteered such self-incriminating information to Robinson at a time when both were locked in a contest for control of the same women stretches all credulity. It would be deceitful for any historian to omit this context. But Robson does not give his readers any reason to be sceptical of these claims and not the slightest hint of the political agenda behind their notation. Robson's omissions are every bit as dishonest as Rhys Jones's inventions.

[44] Robinson, diary, 24 May 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 355

[45] A full account of Robinson's role as 'conciliator' or captor of Aborigines is in Chapter Seven.

[46] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 457-60 n 166

The point that stands out most about the catalogue of violence cited in this chapter is that it derives more from Las Casas than from Van Diemen's Land. The stories are replicas of atrocities the priest originally credited to the Spaniards. This is a telling example of how the myths of imperial cruelty have resounded down the centuries. Whether or not Rhys Jones or George Augustus Robinson had ever read Las Casas, it is clear that, either directly or indirectly, they had absorbed his rhetoric and the detail of his tales. The stories sound dramatic, they fit the purpose at hand, so they get used. In the chapters that follow, there are many other examples of the same phenomenon — people who are so desperate to paint British colonists in Australia as the most reprehensible kind of Yahoos that they take the rhetoric to its furthest extremity, which means invoking the atrocity stories originally invented by Las Casas to condemn the Spaniards in the Americas.

Apart from the generation of myths, Las Casas did have a real influence on early nineteenth-century Australia, but not in the way the orthodox school imagines. The Black Legend formed part of the mental framework of the British authorities in Van Diemen's Land and gave them a counter model for their own behaviour. The reputation of the Spaniards in Mexico and Peru marked a level to which the British knew they must not descend. This was especially true of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, who was appointed to govern Van Diemen's Land in 1824. He had previously been at Belize, a British outpost surrounded by Spanish colonies on the Yucatan Peninsula of the Central American mainland. As commandant of the settlement, Arthur had imbibed the anti-Spanish spirit of the era. In 1820 he limited the power of local settlers to punish their slaves. In 1821 he was responsible for a proclamation that went beyond his formal orders, setting free the American Indian slaves of Belize.[47] So, at the time of the greatest conflict between settlers and Aborigines in Tasmania, during the period the orthodox school calls the 'Black War' of 1824–1831, colonial authority was held by a man well aware of the reputation of Spanish rule in the Americas and determined to use it as an example of how *not* to govern indigenous people. Arthur's background and his intentions towards the Aborigines are examined in detail in Chapter Six.

Among all the macabre details given by Jones and Robson above, there are only two claims that have any credible support in the wider historical evidence. These are the charges about the abduction of native women and children. These aspects of the Black Legend of

[47] A. G. L. Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart 1784–1854*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1980, pp 50–3

Van Diemen's Land are discussed, together with the reasons for the first conflicts with the natives, in the following sections.

NATIVE GAME AND THE NATURE OF FIRST CONFLICT

The first British settlements in both the north and south of Van Diemen's Land had problems maintaining their supplies. Within three weeks of their establishment, they suffered an acute shortage of salt meat provisions. Supply ships failed to arrive from Sydney or the Cape of Good Hope. To provide a supply of fresh meat, the commandants of both settlements sent parties of convicts with dogs into the bush to hunt kangaroos. Without this source of food, the colony would not have survived. Reverend Robert Knopwood, the first chaplain of Van Diemen's Land, recorded in his diary on 23 October 1805, the day the supply ship *Governor Hunter* arrived to relieve the settlement at Hobart Town:

> I may say truly that the colony was in a very dreadful distress and visible in every countenance. Had it not have been for the good success in killing kangarros, the colony would have been destitute of everything. We had only three weeks flower in the colony and 5 weeks pork.[48]

From 1804 to 1808 kangaroo was the major source of fresh meat for the colonists. Lyndall Ryan says this brought Aborigines and Europeans into direct competition for the same food resource. [49] Competition over game took place not only between Aborigines and those hunters approved by the colonial authorities. Kangaroo hunting became a lucrative business for the civil and military officers, since the government's commissariat paid them such high prices that hunting became more profitable than agriculture. This encouraged a number of convicts to abscond from their service. They survived mainly as kangaroo hunters who traded illicit kangaroo meat with accomplices in the settled areas. By 1808, Ryan records, there were twenty men of this kind, called bushrangers at the time, roaming between Hobart and Launceston. Some of them abducted Aboriginal women and some made uneasy liaisons with Aboriginal bands.

This combination of legal and illegal kangaroo hunters became, Ryan records, 'a visible source of annoyance to the Aborigines'.[50] At first, the Aborigines avoided the hunters but they eventually retaliated and tried to take the kangaroos from them. Violent conflict burst into the open. She writes:

[48] Mary Nicholls (ed.), *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1803–1838*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977, diary entry 23 October 1805, p 94

[49] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 77

[50] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 78

> The first European was killed by the Aborigines in 1807. By 1808 conflict between Aborigines and Europeans over kangaroos had so intensified that twenty Europeans and a hundred Aborigines probably lost their lives.[51]

The authority Ryan quotes for these twenty white and one hundred black deaths is the Reverend Robert Knopwood, whose daily diary from 1803 to 1838 is one of the most commonly used sources about the early years of the Hobart settlement. However, neither the pages Ryan cites, nor any of Knopwood's other entries between 1804 and 1808, confirm a level of homicide on anything like the scale she claims. To support her death toll above, Ryan cites pages 128, 140 and 146 of the diary.[52] On page 128 Knopwood wrote two entries about conflict between Aborigines and colonists. On 28 February 1807, he reported the natives attacked a colonial hunting party and fatally speared one hunter, George Brewer, and took a kangaroo from him. On 2 March 1807, he explained the background details of this incident. Two of Knopwood's convict servants, while out hunting, were attacked by sixty blacks. Two of the natives, who tried to spear the hunters, were shot dead. These entries are the only ones cited by Ryan that related to Aboriginal deaths. The diary entries on pages 140 and 146 (31 July–9 August 1807 and 11–25 September 1807) contain no mention at all of anyone, black or white, being killed or injured, except the chaplain's dog Spott who was killed by a native spear. In fact, over the entire period from 1804 to 1808, apart from the incident at Risdon Cove, Knopwood's diary recorded a total of only five incidents where confrontations between Aborigines and settlers caused death or injury on either side. They are described in his entries on 16 June 1806, 27 November 1806, 14 February 1807, 28 February 1807, 2 March 1807 and 19 April 1807. Instead of Ryan's figure of one hundred blacks killed, the Aboriginal casualty list from this diary is only four dead. Instead of twenty, the British lost two convict kangaroo hunters killed and one wounded, plus, of course, poor Spott.

The only accurate statement in Ryan's account of violence in this period is the reason she gives for it. All the recorded conflicts at this time, bar one, were with kangaroo hunters. In these incidents, the Aborigines attempted to take game the hunters had killed. Significantly, if the whites surrendered the game, no blood was spilled. In November 1806, for instance, two of Knopwood's men out hunting near Frederick Henry Bay had their haul of nine kangaroos seized by the natives. Even though their boat was taken as well, the two did

[51] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 77
[52] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 82, n 15

not resist and there was no violence on either side.[53] On the other hand, whenever hunters refused to give up their catch, a fight developed. In all the incidents listed above where death or injury occurred, it was because hunters took this stand.

Throughout 1806 and 1807, Knopwood's diary often records comments such as: 'the natives are very troublesome to the men out a-kangarroing'.[54] But as Marie Fels has pointed out in a detailed analysis of conflict in the early colony, kangaroo hunting was about the only cause of the limited violence that did occur. 'At this stage it appears to be not so much the presence of the invaders that Aborigines object to, but the specific practice of taking food which they considered to be theirs.'[55] Moreover, Fels puts the morality of those casualties that did occur into a balanced perspective. 'These killings are not murders,' she writes, 'whether of Aboriginal by European or *vice versa*: they arose out of ownership disputes about property — food to which each culture felt itself legally entitled. Malice, the essence of murder, was absent.'[56]

There was only one recorded clash at this time that was not with kangaroo hunters. This occurred in March 1805 between Aborigines and a party of eight sealers camped on an island in Oyster Bay. The natives set fire to their house, took their provisions and destroyed their sealskins.[57] The motive for this assault, however, would appear to be indignation similar to that caused by the taking of kangaroos, since seals were also game for coastal Aborigines.

Fels has also analyzed the evidence about the violence done at the time by convict bushrangers. Until her study, several historians had attributed numerous Aboriginal deaths to the activities of these outlaws. They had taken their lead from Governor George Arthur, who in 1828 had blamed much of the later hostility of the blacks on atrocities committed by runaway convicts. Arthur wrote:

> we are undoubtedly the first aggressors, and the desperate characters amongst the prisoner population, who have from time to time absconded into the woods, have no doubt committed the greatest outrages upon the Natives, and these ignorant beings, incapable of discrimination, are now filled with enmity and revenge against the whole body of white inhabitants.[58]

[53] Knopwood, *Diary*, 27 November 1806, p 120
[54] Knopwood, *Diary*, 18 February 1807, p 127
[55] Fels, 'Culture Contact', p 56
[56] Fels, 'Culture Contact', pp 56, 67
[57] Knopwood, *Diary*, 5 March 1805, p 78
[58] Arthur to Huskisson, 17 April 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Australia 4*, Irish University Press series, p 177

Fels examined every report about bushranging between 1804 and 1811. The first convicts to escape into the bush did so in 1805. Fifteen of them remained at large for various periods of three to five months. They lived in the bush just outside the Hobart settlement. The use by historians of the term 'bushrangers' conjures up images of armed and mounted criminals like Ben Hall and Ned Kelly. But the early Tasmanian variety were simply convict absconders roaming on foot — 'poor creatures ... half-dead with cold and hunger', as one colonist described them[59] — who eventually begged to return. While at large, they had the opportunity to annoy the Aborigines, Fels notes, but 'whether they could have caused much physical harm is doubtful, as they possessed no firearms'.[60] They hunted kangaroos with dogs. In 1806 there were another seventeen convicts who were at large for periods of up to five months. But, again, they were mostly unarmed and on foot, so they could not have done much harm to the natives either.

The first reports of genuine conflict between bushrangers and Aborigines did not come until 1808. Richard Lemon and John Brown were two convicts who escaped from Port Dalrymple in June 1806 and murdered three soldiers and another convict. In February 1808, Lemon was killed by troopers near Hobart and Brown recaptured.[61] A newspaper report later claimed that, while on the run, the pair killed two male and three female Aborigines and wounded four others.[62] There were two other convicts who also probably killed Aborigines. William Russell and his companion George Getley were bushrangers from 1808 until 1810. Little is known of what they did but the Aborigines eventually killed both of them. Lieutenant-Governor Collins thought they would have been slain in acts of revenge. Russell was probably punished, Collins speculated, 'by the hands of those very people who have suffered so much from him; he being well known to have exercized his barbarous disposition in murdering or torturing any who unfortunately came within his reach'.[63] It is

[59] Fels, 'Culture Contact', p 54
[60] Fels, 'Culture Contact', p 52
[61] *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, pp 563, 685-6
[62] Fels, 'Culture Contact', p 61. Fels saw only a press cutting of the story but could not identify the newspaper or its date. The *Sydney Gazette*, which reported Brown's trial for murder in Sydney, gave a different account. He was reported to have committed 'many acts of barbarity against the straggling natives' but only to have killed one of them: *Sydney Gazette*, 5 June 1808
[63] Lieutenant-Governor David Collins, General Order 29 January 1810, cited by John West, *The History of Tasmania*, (1852), ed. A. G. L. Shaw, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971, p 264, quoting from the now missing *Derwent Star and Van Diemen's Land Intelligencer*, 29 January 1810

probable that, while at large, he had Aboriginal victims. Overall, these four convicts may rightly be suspected of killing more Aborigines in other, unrecorded conflicts, but the summary of the evidence provided here is the most we can say with any confidence. Thus, up to 1808, the total recorded native dead at the hands of bushrangers was five.

Fels also canvassed the possibility that white stockmen in the interior might have assaulted Aborigines in this period. As noted earlier, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had himself confidently asserted, 'That the distant convict stock-keepers in the interior ... have, from the earliest period, acted with great inhumanity towards the black Natives.'[64] However, Fels points out that between 1803 and 1811 the entire livestock population of Hobart was clustered around the banks of the Derwent — a meagre total of 489 cattle and 1091 sheep in the whole settlement. The most distant individual stockholder was just eight miles up the river. Beyond that, the only livestock was at the government stockyard established in 1808 at New Norfolk, twenty miles away. Thus, since there were no sheep or cattle in 'the interior', there would have been no white stockmen there either. Arthur's generalisation about distant stock-keepers acting with inhumanity 'from the earliest period' cannot be true. Hence, not only does Lyndall Ryan's own cited evidence fail to support her claim that one hundred Aborigines were killed by colonists in early conflicts over kangaroo hunting, but there is also no other evidence that supports a total anywhere near this high.

Moreover, this last example demonstrates how even the Lieutenant-Governor of the colony was not himself an infallible source of knowledge about events that preceded his own term of office. He had to rely on old reports, hearsay and speculation about what occurred on the frontier of settlement. As Arthur's comments above demonstrate, he sometimes accepted propositions that could not have been true. The most revealing aspect of Arthur's comments, however, were not that they were wrong but that the British colonists were so ready to blame their own side for the origins of Aboriginal hostility. These were not the sentiments one would expect to accompany an intention to commit genocide against an indigenous people.

KIDNAPPING OF CHILDREN AND ABDUCTION OF WOMEN

According to Ryan, the first fifteen years of white settlement wrought a terrible devastation on the Aborigines. In this brief period, the indigenous population was reduced by more than half. 'By 1818,' she writes, 'the Aboriginal population of Van Diemen's Land had fallen

[64] Arthur to Murray, 15 April 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, 4*, p 187

from an estimated four thousand to somewhere below two thousand.'[65]

In accounting for this loss of two thousand people, Ryan excludes from contention the cause that many readers would expect, disease. Unlike the mainland, where Aborigines were recorded dying from European diseases after even minimal contact with whites, there were no epidemics in Van Diemen's Land, she says.[66] Moreover, in this early period few Tasmanian Aborigines succumbed to alcohol. On the mainland, alcohol addiction cut a swathe through Aboriginal society but not in Van Diemen's Land, where alcohol remained in scarce supply until the 1820s. 'The first inebriated Aborigines were not recorded until 1823,' Ryan records. 'Aborigines did not plunder alcohol from stock-keepers' huts; indeed it was noted as late as 1823 that they openly rejected the one form of alcohol that was readily available — rum.'[67]

Instead of disease and alcoholism, Ryan advances three alternative explanations for the deaths of the two thousand Aborigines between 1804 and 1818. First, there was widespread kidnapping of Aboriginal children to provide a labour force for the settlers. Second, the Aboriginal tribes were depleted of women as colonists abducted them or the natives exchanged them for provisions. Third, the Aborigines were shot by stockmen in the settled districts and by sealers and bushrangers beyond the frontiers of settlement.

Tasmanian economic development in the settled districts went through three stages during the period of conflict with the Aborigines, Ryan argues. The first stage, from 1804 to 1807, was dominated by kangaroo hunting, as discussed above. The second stage, from 1807 until around 1819, was the agricultural, or 'peasant proprietor', phase of British occupation. The third stage, which took off between 1817 and 1824, was the pastoral phase, which, Ryan argues, produced the most severe dislocation of the Aborigines.

The second, or peasant proprietor phase, from 1807–19 had a profound effect upon the Aborigines but nonetheless produced a degree of exchange and reciprocal arrangements between the two cultures, she argues. The bulk of the new British arrivals in 1807 were from the colony at Norfolk Island. This had originally been established at the same time as Sydney Cove in 1788. It proved too expensive to maintain and was eventually closed down, with 700 of its inhabitants shipped to Van Diemen's Land. Most were ex-convicts who had turned to farming. They were settled mainly at New Norfolk in the

[65] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 79
[66] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp 175–6
[67] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 176

south and Norfolk Plains in the north, where they were given farms of from forty to fifty acres. According to Ryan, these small farmers generated a big demand for Aboriginal labour. However, rather than recalcitrant adult males, the settlers preferred their children:

> The agriculturalists who suffered an acute shortage of labour were more attracted to the Aboriginal children as a labour force. For a time some mutual arrangements operated whereby Aboriginal children were 'lent' by their parents. However, by 1810 Collins was warning the settlers that the kidnapping, rather than borrowing, of Aboriginal children would provoke retaliation by their parents.[68]

There is no evidence, however, that Collins ever gave such a warning. He did make a general order in 1810 about the treatment of Aborigines and two versions of it were published. Neither, however, mentioned the kidnapping of children.[69] The order warned settlers against the 'abominable cruelties' that had been done to the Aborigines by 'white people', but was mainly concerned about acts of this kind done by the bushrangers Russell and Getley. Collins said that anyone assaulting or murdering a native would be proceeded against as if they had done the same to a 'civilized person'. There is no mention by Collins of the kidnapping of children in any of the references Ryan cites.[70]

Nonetheless, two of the Lieutenant-Governors who succeeded Collins certainly believed kidnapping had become widespread. Lieutenant-Governor Davey said he had found strong evidence of the

[68] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 78

[69] Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1870) pp 39-40, says he found a copy of the order in the colony's Muster Book of 1810. According to Fels, p 69, this book has been missing since 1915. West, *History of Tasmania*, (1852) p 264, quotes another version of the order published in the *Derwent Star*, 29 January 1810, which is also now missing (see next footnote). Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 26, quotes the Bonwick version, but does not provide his source. It is possible that both the Bonwick and West versions are extracts rather than the full text of the original.

[70] None of Ryan's references on page 82, footnote 19, discuss the kidnapping of children, except perhaps the *Derwent Star* of 29 January 1810, which I have not seen. That edition of the newspaper has been missing since the nineteenth century, so it is hard to understand how Ryan could have sighted it in the 1970s. As explained on the facsimile copy of *Derwent Star*, 3 April 1810, in Mitchell Library, no edition of that newspaper published on any other date has survived. The edition Ryan claims as her primary source is the same one that John West quoted from in 1852. See West, *History of Tasmania*, p 264 and p 623 n 11. West's published version, however, does not mention kidnapping.

practice when he investigated the reasons for Aboriginal hostilities in the Coal River district in 1813:

> He has learnt that the resentment of these poor uncultivated beings has been justly excited by a most barbarous and inhuman mode of proceeding acted upon towards them, viz. the robbery of their children! Had not the Lieutenant-Governor the most positive and distinct proofs of such barbarous crimes having being committed, he could not have believed that a British subject would so ignominiously have stained the honour of his country and of himself; but the facts are too clear. [71]

Lieutenant-Governor Sorell expressed similar sentiments in 1819 when he described 'occasional outrages of miscreants whose scene of crime is so remote as to render detection difficult; and who sometimes wantonly fire at and kill the men, and at others pursue the women, for the purpose of compelling them to abandon their children'.[72] Most settlers, Ryan comments, rejected these entreaties. 'They believed they were saving the children from starvation and barbarism as well as using them as a cheap labour force'. By 1817, she says, there were at least fifty Aboriginal children in settlers' homes. [73]

Unfortunately, neither Davey's nor Sorell's statements provide details of how often kidnapping occurred or of how many children were taken this way. In Sorell's proclamation, he mentions only one incident in which two native children were taken in by a settler. In the surviving records about all of these cases, the children concerned were very young. At Risdon Cove in 1804, the Aboriginal boy whose parents were killed, and who was subsequently baptized by Reverend Knopwood, was only three years old.[74] At New Norfolk in 1819, two boys were found in the bush, apparently abandoned after their parents had run off at the approach of stockmen. The younger was a baby who was given to a wet nurse. The age of the elder was not recorded but he would have been of early school age. He was christened George Van Diemen and, under the care of Sorell, was taught to read and say his prayers. Instead of being put to work in the fields, he was sent to England in 1821 for five years of further educa-

[71] quoted in Report of the Aborigines Committee, 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers*, 4, p 208

[72] quoted in Report of the Aborigines Committee. 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers*, 4, p 209. The full text of the proclamation is in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 42–3

[73] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 78

[74] Collins to King, 30 September 1804, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 238

tion.[75] In these cases, the children were obviously too young to be greatly prized for the agricultural labour force.

Ryan says that in March 1819 Sorell decided to put an end to the practice. 'Sorell ordered,' she writes, 'that all Aboriginal children living with settlers must be sent to the charge of the chaplain, Robert Knopwood, in Hobart and placed in the Orphan School.'[76] This, however, could not be true. There was no orphan school in Hobart in 1819 or at any time during Sorell's administration. The first orphanage in the colony, the King's Orphan School, was opened in 1828 by Lieutenant-Governor Arthur. Rev. Knopwood was never involved in running it.[77] The original document of the proclamation Ryan cites as her evidence merely ordered that magistrates and constables were to 'take an account' of any cases of native children living with settlers and to report the details to the Colonial Secretary in Hobart.[78]

The only firm figure for native children living among the whites at the time was provided by a general return of baptisms, marriages and deaths within Hobart Town compiled by Rev. Knopwood and published in 1820. He recorded that he had baptized a total of twenty-six native children between 1809 and 1819.[79] At the time, baptism or christening was not only a religious ritual. It was the early nineteenth-century equivalent of registering a birth, of officially recording the entry of a child into the community. However, there might have been native children within the white settlement who Knopwood did not baptize because their custodians did not want their presence widely known. If so, it is possible there could have been twice the recorded figure of twenty-six children, that is, a tally of about fifty acquired between 1809 and 1819.

[75] Sorell to Kermode, 15 September 1821, quoted in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 475

[76] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 79

[77] For history of the Hobart orphanage see Joan C. Brown, *Poverty is not a Crime: The Development of Social Services in Tasmania 1803–1900*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1972, pp 8, 15, 22–4; That Knopwood never had charge of Aboriginal orphans or the orphan school can be seen from his diary entries for 1819, 1820, 1828, as well as from Rex and Thea Rentis, 'Some notes on the ancestry and life of the Rev. Robert Knopwood', *Papers and Proceedings Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, 12, 1964–5

[78] Government and General Orders of Lieutenant-Governor, signed H. E. Robinson, Secretary, 13 March 1819. Full text is in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 42–3

[79] Robert Knopwood, A return of baptisms, marriages and deaths within the District of Hobart Town, 12 March 1804 to 31 December 1819, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, III, p 510

Either way, the numbers involved still provide little support for Ryan's main argument. Even if there were fifty Aboriginal children living on settlers' farms, and even if all of them had been kidnapped, they would not have made a great impact on the agricultural labour force needed by the 700 'peasant proprietors' from Norfolk Island. In particular, such a figure would not go very far towards explaining the demise of the indigenous population by two thousand.

Another of the 'significant' factors in the collapse of Aboriginal numbers, according to Ryan, was the loss of women. Up to 1828, she claims, 'most conflict between Aborigines and stock-keepers took place over women and kangaroos'. In the first twenty-five years of settlement, there was a shortage of European women, with three males to every female in the colony. In some cases, the Aborigines exchanged their women with whites for provisions. In others, rival tribes abducted women from others for exchange with the whites. Ryan writes:

> Aboriginal society faced its first major upheaval with Europeans over the 'gift' of women to the stock-keepers in return for European provisions as a means to incorporate the stock-keepers into the obligations of Aboriginal society. While some tribes were anxious to develop strong ties of obligation with the Europeans, others found themselves with only a small number of women, having lost many to neighbouring bands who appropriated them for exchange with the Europeans. The loss of women led to an immediate decline in the birth rate.[80]

Unfortunately, this point in Ryan's discussion is not enlightened by any statistics about the women involved. However, in an appendix at the back of the book she does include a table that calculates the number of Aborigines 'accounted for in the literature' between 1800 and 1835.[81] There she records seventy-four Aborigines who were 'with sealers' on the islands of Bass Strait. Almost all of these were women, since the sealers were not interested in male labourers. Ryan lists their tribal origins but gives no indication of where her information came from. However, when Brian Plomley compiled his own list in 1966 he could find only forty-nine of these women. He named each one of them and gave the names of the sealers with whom they lived plus a brief account of the information known about each individual.[82] Since Ryan provides no evidence or references to support her figure and since Plomley, a far more reliable scholar, has actually done the research to uncover their backgrounds, his is the only credible tally we have.

[80] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 176
[81] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Appendix I, p 313 in 2nd edition
[82] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 1017–20

Over the same period 1800–1835, Ryan claims, fifty-eight Aborigines were 'with settlers'. On her own calculations, however, there were about fifty children working as labourers for settlers, so they would account for virtually all this latter group. The remaining columns in her table are figures of Aborigines allegedly either captured or shot. Hence, over this entire thirty-five-year period, the only women Ryan can find to explain the depletion of Aboriginal numbers were the seventy-four she claims had been acquired by the sealers. Given that we are trying to extract from her work an explanation for the demise of two thousand Aborigines over the much shorter period from 1803 to 1818, even if her figures were accurate, they would not establish her case. The loss of women, and the loss of their potential offspring for fifteen years, must have had some impact on the tribes of the coastal north and east of the island, but it could hardly have been as significant as Ryan claims for the entire indigenous population.

So, if there were two thousand fewer Aborigines in 1818, and they didn't die of disease or alcohol, the overwhelmingly majority of them — about 94 per cent using Ryan's figures — must have been killed by the settlers. The problem for this hypothesis is that there is no recorded evidence of conflict on anything like this scale in this period. In fact, in Brian Plomley's 1992 survey of all archival and published reports of clashes between Aborigines and settlers, he recorded only ten Aborigines killed between 1804 and 1818.[83] My own calculation in Chapter Ten, Table 10, is that the public records show there were eighteen natives killed in this period.

At one point in her narrative, Ryan suggests briefly that bushrangers and military deserters might have been involved in depleting Aboriginal numbers.[84] Killings by them would not have figured in the public records, so is it plausible that the decline of the Aboriginal population was caused by unrecorded deaths at their hands in the interior?

As well as the early convict absconders in the period 1805–8 there was a renewal of bushranger activity in the middle of the decade of the 1810s. Some bushrangers cohabited with Aboriginal women and some, Ryan claims, had contact with inland tribes. In 1815, the depredations of the bushrangers against white settlers became so serious that Lieutenant-Governor Davey declared martial law against them. For this, he was severely chastised by his superior, Governor Mac-

[83] N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land*, Queen Victoria Museum and Gallery, Launceston, 1992, pp 54–7. His reference for this incident is the *Hobart Town Gazette*, 7 September 1816

[84] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp 77–8

quarie of New South Wales, for 'adopting so illegal and unwarrantable a measure without my previous concurrence'.[85] Davey's measure was nonetheless probably justified. From 1814 to October 1818, when the most notorious of the bushranger leaders, Michael Howe, was finally killed by police, there was a great deal of collusion between them and a number of convict and ex-convict stockmen and settlers around Hobart. At one stage in April 1815, the bushrangers took over the town of New Norfolk, robbing houses at will. Some parts of Hobart Town were not safe, even in daylight. The ability of the authorities to maintain public order was in jeopardy.[86]

However, little of this affected relations between blacks and whites. The bushrangers' attacks were entirely directed at white society, which possessed the goods and arms they wanted. The only thing they wanted from the Aborigines was women. For three years, Michael Howe had a black mistress, a women named Mary, who he eventually abandoned and who subsequently became the most effective guide to the troops who tracked him down. In one attack at Christmas 1816, a second black woman accompanied Howe's gang.[87] But there appears to have been little other contact between the bushrangers and the Aborigines. The conventional historical record is devoid of evidence that these gangs had any noticeable impact on the size of the indigenous population. Even if they had committed outrages that went unrecorded, it is beyond credibility that this small number of criminals, who had no plausible reason to do so, would have embarked, at considerable risk to themselves, on a pointless campaign of mass murder that would have eliminated half the Aboriginal population of the island.

There is little, then, to substantiate the claim that British colonisation caused the number of Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land to decline by anything like two thousand between 1804 and 1818. The evidence that Ryan produces does not support such a figure, the explanations she provides of how such a decline might have occurred lack credibility, and surveys by other historians suggest that this was a period when there was very little conflict, and indeed only limited contact, between whites and blacks on the island.

No matter how implausible Ryan's account may be, however, she has raised a real problem that requires answers. As noted in Chapter One, most historians and anthropologists today accept a pre-contact indigenous population of about 6000. Yet by the mid-1820s, when

[85] Macquarie to Davey, 18 September 1815, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, II, p 125
[86] Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, I, pp 82–101
[87] Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, I, p 89

the colonists began to try to calculate their numbers, they could not reach a tally of more than 320 among the known tribes.[88] So an explanation of how this decline occurred is sorely needed. It is possible that large numbers of Aborigines, unobserved by the colonists, could have died in the interior from imported diseases. If so, several thousand of them must have perished in less than two decades without any of the British settlers noticing. On an island as small as Tasmania, this stretches credulity. If these figures are questionable then the most likely explanation is that the currently accepted population estimates are far too high and pre-contact Aboriginal numbers of about 6000, or anything like this, are untenable. The credibility of estimates of the pre-colonial population and a discussion of the various explanations for the demise of the Aborigines are discussed further in Chapter Ten.

[88] The figure of 320 in both 1825 and 1826 is estimated (or rather guessed) in Hull's 'Statistical Summary of Tasmania', 1866, cited by H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899, p 164

CHAPTER THREE

Black bushrangers and the outbreak of Aboriginal violence, 1823–1827

> That winter [1824], when settlers and stock-keepers refused provisions, the Big River people killed three stockmen and a settler, wounded two others, and burnt two stockhuts. The resistance of the Big River people had begun. They believed they were defending their land against invasion, and their methods of attack were acts of patriotism.
>
> — Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*[1]

EVEN though they sing her praises in general, few of her peers among the orthodox historians of Van Diemen's Land share Lyndall Ryan's view of the degree of violence in the first two decades of colonisation. Instead, most emphasize that, up to 1824, relations between Aborigines and settlers were comparatively free of conflict. Until that year, Henry Reynolds has argued, 'the common view among colonists was that the Tasmanians were a mild and peaceful people'. He cites a surgeon who settled at Jericho in 1822 who said the local Aborigines 'at that time came amongst the settlers familiarly

[1] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edn., Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p 115

and fearlessly'.[2] Most acts of violence in the first two decades were the result of conflicts between individuals, and anything beyond this was either sporadic or temporary. Reynolds cites the editor of the *Hobart Town Gazette* who remarked in 1824 that the local blacks were 'the most peaceable creatures in the universe'.[3] Similarly, Brian Plomley argues that, in the first twenty years of the colony, 'there was no concerted resistance on the part of the Aborigines'. The number of their assaults on settlers averaged no more than 1.75 per year.[4] Plomley says the little violence that did occur was motivated not by any general grievance but by particular causes. 'For the first twenty years of European settlement, attacks by the Aborigines upon the settlers were in retaliation for wrongs inflicted upon them,' Plomley argues. 'It is clear that attacks occurred at irregular intervals and that their frequency was low until 1824.' That year everything changed. Plomley says from then on 'the attacks were purposeful, being motivated by a need to drive the settlers from their territories in order to live their natural lives, as well as by the starvation which was the outcome of that territorial occupation.'[5]

These authors agree that what made the difference was pastoralism. After kangaroo hunting, and peasant proprietorship, pastoralism represented stage three of Ryan's model of development of the colony. Between 1817 and 1824, she argues, pastoralism emerged to dominate both the social structure and economic activity. In this period, Ryan reports that the white population grew from 2000 to 12,643 and the sheep population from 54,600 to over 200,000. While most people in the early colony had been convicts, ex-convicts or those sent to guard them, pastoralism ushered in a new social class, the gentry. Ryan says they comprised retired army and naval officers from the Napoleonic wars, sons of the English, Irish and Scottish landed gentry, as well as sons of colonial officials. They all arrived with capital to invest in the pastoral industry. They were attracted by the fact that land, in the form of grants of from 400 to 800 hectares, and labour, in the form of convict servants, were given them free. Ryan says they came to make their fortune growing wool to supply the

[2] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995, p 29. He gives the original source for this quotation as AOT CSO 1/322, p 327. This is the wrong location. It is at AOT CSO 1/323/7578, p 327

[3] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 30. Reynolds cites the *Hobart Town Gazette*, 10 July 1824, as his source, but the quotation was in the edition of 16 July 1824, p 2

[4] Brian Plomley, *The Tasmanian Aborigines*, Plomley Foundation, Launceston, 1993, p 85

[5] N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992, pp 22, 23

keen demand from the textile mills of northern England. The plains of the Tasmanian midlands had the perfect climate for the production of fine wool. Pastoral properties quickly spread up the rivers of these plains, producing a ribbon of settlement between the two formerly separated centres of Hobart and Launceston. The economic basis of society changed dramatically, she claims, and there was a profound impact on relations between colonists and Aborigines. Pastoralism ended any chance of reciprocal relations or some form of accommodation between blacks and whites. 'Pastoralism ushered in the most severe dislocation to Aboriginal Tasmanian society,' Ryan writes, 'and the greatest level of conflict.'[6]

The surge in development was marked by a change in political authority. In 1824, George Arthur, the former commandant of British Honduras, arrived in Hobart Town to succeed William Sorell as Lieutenant-Governor. In November 1825, Van Diemen's Land was made a separate colony, freeing Arthur from subordination to the Governor of New South Wales.

The orthodox thesis holds that the expansion of pastoralism had two closely related consequences for the native people. First, it led to the destruction of the game upon which the Aborigines fed. This pushed them to the brink of starvation. Historians who argue this case have some powerful supporters. Arthur himself used this explanation for the growth of hostilities. He wrote in 1828:

> They already complain that the white people have taken possession of their country, encroached upon their hunting grounds, and destroyed their natural food, the kangaroo; and they doubtless would be exasperated to the last degree to be banished altogether from their favourite haunts.[7]

In 1830, one of the pastoralists of the Launceston district, Richard Dry, offered a similar explanation. Henry Reynolds quotes Dry observing:

> the Rapid increase of Settlers who now occupy the Best portions of the Land, extensive plains and fine tracts, where formerly Emu and Kangaroo fed in such numbers, that procuring subsistence was a pastime to a Black Native, and not as it is now, attended with Toil & uncertainty.[8]

The loss of native game and the prospect of starvation, according to Brian Plomley, produced a burning resentment among Aborigines that led to the outbreak of the Black War. Plomley writes:

[6] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 83
[7] Arthur to Goderich, 10 January 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 176
[8] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 30, quoting from AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 288–93

> There is evidence that the Aborigines generally came to realise that they were going to starve only about 1824, and it was then that their clashes with the settlers moved from retaliation for specific wrongs to a determination to drive the settlers from their territories, in other words, 1824 marked the beginning of the Black War.[9]

The second consequence of pastoralism, according to this thesis, was the dispossession of Aborigines from the land. The pastoralists physically excluded them from land that had traditionally been theirs. They did this by building permanent structures for their homesteads but, especially, by constructing miles of fencing that imposed fixed barriers to Aboriginal passage. Reynolds again quotes Richard Dry: 'From this land they are excluded and daily witness our encroachment in the extensive Fences erected by the Settlers.' [10] This led the Aborigines to regard the whole white population as their enemy. It was the fact that the pastoralists came to dominate the landscape physically, Reynolds writes, that provoked the Aborigines into hostility.

> There is no doubt that fierce competition over the use of, and access to land, underlay the escalating conflict... Abundant convict labour allowed the settlers to rapidly build stone houses and farm buildings, to lay out miles of fencing and to plant extensive hedgerows. They put roots down quickly and deeply. [11]

This escalating conflict, Reynolds claims, provoked the Aborigines into guerilla warfare. Some colonists recognized at the time, he says, that this was what they were engaged in. Reynolds cites the Hobart journalist Henry Melville using the phrase 'the "*Guerilla*" war with the Aborigines' in his history of Van Diemen's Land in 1835.[12] The term itself derived from the Peninsula War against Napoleon (1808–14) in which small bands of Spanish partisans made surprise attacks on the French army and quickly retreated. Melville put the term in italics and inverted commas to emphasize its newness.

Reynolds argues that in the early years of the conflict in Van Diemen's Land, tactics of this kind produced a deep fear and hatred

[9] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 6

[10] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 30, citing AOT CSO 1/323/7578, p 289. Dry's comments were made in an unpublished submission to the 1830 committee of inquiry into the Aborigines. See also footnote 77 of this chapter and discussion of Dry's views in Chapter Nine.

[11] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 31

[12] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 66. Reynolds says Melville's usage was the first time the term was used in Australia. However, the *Colonial Times* in 1830 used the term 'Guerilla parties' to describe the roving parties of Gilbert Robertson: Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, (1948), Sun Books, Melbourne, p 103

among many colonists. However, as hostilities continued, others began to understand the Aborigines and came to respect, even to admire, the strategy of their adversaries. Reynolds writes:

> Comments on black brutality and treachery were balanced by others referring to their skill in warfare. The editor of the *Colonial Times* observed that the war bands displayed 'superior tact and clearness of head'. In fact, their attacks evinced 'a cunning and superiority of tactic which would not disgrace some of the greatest military characters'.[13]

The guerilla warfare thesis is now the consensus among the orthodox historians of Van Diemen's Land. As well as Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan describes the Aboriginal response from 1824 onwards as 'guerilla activity'.[14] Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon say the Aborigines waged 'classic guerilla warfare'.[15] Brian Plomley takes the same line: 'The Aborigines attempted to gain their ends by waging guerilla warfare against the settlers: tactically it was highly successful, defeated only by the declining number of the Aborigines and the rapidly increasing number of the settlers.'[16]

THE CAREER IN CRIME OF MUSQUITO, 1823-1824

The winter of 1824, according to the passage from Ryan at the start of this chapter, marked the beginning of the resistance of the Big River tribe. They were defending their land against invasion, and their guerilla assaults, she argues, were acts of patriotism. There are, however, a number of problems with this thesis. The first one is that this particular outbreak of hostilities had a far more mundane explanation.

In the winter of 1824, there was certainly a major eruption of violence by Aborigines. In fact, there were seven separate assaults on settlers in June, July and August. In these incidents, six whites were killed, one wounded and one hut was burnt. All attacks except one were in the southern midlands and Big River districts: at Jericho, Abyssinia, Big River, Clyde River, Lake Sorell and York Plains near Oatlands. Only one, however, was the work of the Big River tribe who frequented these districts. Six of the seven attacks were made by a small group of Aborigines from the Oyster Bay tribe led by a man named Musquito.

[13] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 68, citing *Colonial Times*, 1 June 1831 and 16 July 1830
[14] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 115
[15] *The Last Tasmanian*, script by Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon, produced and directed by Tom Haydon, Artis Film Productions, Sydney, 1978
[16] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 23

Central midlands of Van Diemen's Land, from Ross in the north to Hobart Town. The broad divisions represent police districts. Detail from map by J. Arrowsmith, London, 1832 (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Musquito was not defending his tribal territory or trying to reclaim his hunting grounds. He was an Aborigine from Sydney who had lived among the whites in Hobart for ten years. He had been sent down by the government in 1813 to help track bushrangers. He later worked as a stock-keeper and in February 1818 accompanied his employer, Edward Lord, to Mauritius to buy cattle.[17] He was employed as a black tracker in the search for the bushranger Michael Howe, and

[17] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 14 February 1818 and 21 February 1818, records two natives, Musquito and James Brown, both servants of Edward Lord, were leaving the colony with him. Ryan incorrectly dates the voyage in 1816, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 79

assisted in his capture in October 1818.[18] Because of this and earlier assistance to the authorities, the convicts and ex-convicts of the colony regarded him as a turncoat.[19] Shunned by the society of the lower orders in Hobart, Musquito asked to return to Sydney.[20] However, his passage was never approved and, feeling betrayed, he eventually took to the bush. He fell in with one of the groups of detribalized Aborigines, or 'tame mobs', who since at least 1813–14 had been frequenting Hobart, Richmond and the southern midlands, begging provisions from the residents.[21] Native life obviously attracted him because of the female companionship it provided him. He was soon seen at settlers' homesteads with three black mistresses.[22] The tame mob Musquito joined, a band of the Oyster Bay tribe, had been living on the edge of white settlement in the Pitt Water district.[23] He

[18] Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Vol I*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p 101

[19] Evidence of Gilbert Robertson to the Aborigines Committee, 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 220

[20] Sorell to Macquarie, 13 October 1817, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, II, p 284

[21] Descriptions of these visits are in *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1801–1838*, ed. Mary Nicholls, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977, pp 217, 232. They are also discussed by Henry Melville, *A History of Van Diemen's Land from the Year 1824 to 1835, inclusive, During the Administration of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur*, ed. George Mackaness, Horwitz-Grahame, Sydney, 1965, p 32. Knopwood told the Aborigines Committee of 1830 that in the years 1813 and 1814 a number of natives 'were constantly fed from his door' and Robert Evans also gave evidence that 18 or 20 natives frequented his house at Muddy Plains near Jericho for six years until they were discouraged by Musquito: *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 225, 226

[22] Deposition by Thomas McMinn, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, p 197

[23] As well as the evidence cited above by Gilbert Robertson, who knew him well, accounts of Musquito's background and exploits are in Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp 32-9; J. E. Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c., of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn and Co, Hobart, 1875, pp 46–55, John West, *The History of Tasmania*, (1852) ed. A. G. L. Shaw, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971, pp 267–9; Clive Turnbull, *Black War*, (1948) Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974, pp 61–2; Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 79. The Marxist historian Humphrey McQueen sees Musquito as a heroic warrior who led an Aboriginal resistance. McQueen's familiarity with the subject can be seen from his claim that, within 'a few months of his arrival' in Van Diemen's Land from Sydney, Musquito had organized his gang into 'a formidable fighting force': Humphrey McQueen, *Aborigines, Race and Racism*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1974, p 21. Musquito had actually been employed in Van Diemen's Land for ten years before he became an outlaw.

recruited one of this group, Black Jack, as his chief accomplice. Musquito also enticed another detribalized Aborigine, Tom Birch, better known as Black Tom, who had grown up since childhood in the Hobart household of the merchant and landowner Thomas Birch,[24] to leave his service and join the group.

On 15 November 1823, Musquito and his gang attacked a settler's hut on the east coast at Grindstone Bay, south of Little Swan Port. They killed two stock-keepers and wounded a third. Both Musquito and Black Jack were positively identified by the survivor, John Radford.[25] After this, Musquito's gang went on a fifteen-month crime spree of robbery, assault, arson and murder. In the Grindstone Bay incident, the witness said Musquito was accompanied by about sixty-five other Aborigines, including women and children, but after this the few descriptions that mention numbers say his group contained from fifteen to twenty. In March 1824 they killed a stockman at Blue Hill, near Oatlands, and burnt down his hut.[26] They then wounded another stockman at Old Beach on the northern outskirts of Hobart.[27] In June, a small mob led by Black Tom, described in the press report as 'the notorious companion of Musquito', killed the settler Matthew Osborne, wounded his wife and robbed their property at Jericho in the midlands. In this murder, Black Tom was assisted by a white convict, whom Mrs Osborne identified.[28] Soon afterwards, the same band

[24] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 16 July 1824, p 2. Black Tom's formal name was Thomas Birch and he was also known as Birch's Tom. In his diaries George Augustus Robinson called him Kickerterpoller. See: *Colonial Times* 15 December 1826 p 3; Report on outrages etc by Aborigines at Oatlands, Anstey to Arthur, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 762; and N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land*, Blubber Head Pres, Hobart, 1991, pp 75, 95, 96 and 146n. Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, p 75, says he was brought up by Mrs E. Hodgson. This is correct. She was the widow of Thomas Birch.

[25] A lengthy account by the survivor is in Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp 38–9.

[26] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 26 March 1824, p 2

[27] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 87, says this assault occurred at Salt Pan Plains near Tunbridge and that the stockman was killed. However, the reference she herself cites, the *Hobart Town Gazette*, 2 April 1824 p 2, says the stockman, James Taylor, was wounded at the Old Beach property of John Cassidy.

[28] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 16 July 1824, p 2, has a detailed report of the incident. The convict was identified as an assigned servant to a settler named 'Beagent'. This was probably Eli Begent, a former convict and associate of bushrangers himself, who was granted 50 acres in 1823: Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p 131. Begent himself later told George

killed a man named Bamber at Michael Howe's Marsh, west of Oatlands.[29] Musquito and his gang then made four further assaults in the Abyssinia district in which they killed three convict servants and assaulted the convicts employed by two other settlers. Abyssinia was the high country between the River Clyde and the River Jordan, with Bothwell to its north and New Norfolk to its south. The assaults in this district in the winter of 1824 are those Lyndall Ryan attributes to the Big River tribe. However, the information about them was provided in a letter to the Lieutenant-Governor by Charles Rowcroft, a Justice of the Peace at Norwood near Bothwell on the River Clyde, who identified Musquito as leader of the culprits. On 16 June, Rowcroft wrote:

> I beg leave to represent to your Honor that, the party of natives headed by Musquito a black native of Sydney, continue to infest the District of Murray, & the parts adjacent. In addition to the murder of two men, convicts assigned to Mr Parkes at Abyssinnia, within seven miles of my house; to the murder of one convict servant in the employ of Mr Tuffett at the Big River; to the maltreatment of two convicts assigned to Mr Wood; & in addition to their ill treatment of Captn Wood's servants at one of the Great Lakes about 18 miles to the north of the Clyde; where they also burned his stock hut; I was informed yesterday that the same party had murdered a Settler of the name of Osborne or Osman at his farm, a short distance from the high road to Launceston in the Jericho district, and that the life of his widow, who at the same time has been speared by them, was despaired of.[30]

The gang then moved to the south-east coast where in early August they wounded another stockman at Pitt Water. The *Hobart Town Gazette* reported: 'The man it seems was enticed from his house by Musquito cooying till he brought him within his reach, when he drove the spear into his back, while returning to get him some bread.'[31] It is probable that the same gang attacked and killed a convict servant of George Meredith at Swan Port in late July, but the report of this incident did not positively identify the attackers.[32] Some time before August, they also murdered Patrick McCarthy, a stockkeeper at Sorell Plains.[33]

Augustus Robinson that he had been a bushranger with Michael Howe: Robinson, diary, 19 September 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 428

[29] Statement by Robert Jones sworn on 15 March 1830, reproduced in Plomley (ed.) *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, pp 94–5

[30] Rowcroft to Arthur, 16 June 1824, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 8–9

[31] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 6 August 1824, p 2

[32] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 24 July 1824, p 2

[33] This was the man Black Jack was found guilty of murdering; see Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, p 39

There was only one killing by the Aborigines that may be plausibly attributed to the Big River tribe in the winter of 1824. In early August, two stock-keepers employed by James Hobbs on his cattle run at the Eastern Marshes, near Oatlands, arrived at Hobart with the news that one of their fellow servants, James Doyle, had been speared to death. A tribe the stock-keepers estimated at 'no less than two hundred' were responsible. According to the *Hobart Town Gazette*, this incident had begun with the unexpected appearance of the tribe on the property. The stock-keepers were alarmed. To deter the tribe from approaching the house they fired at them. However, 'owing to the fire-arms being improperly discharged all at once, and not having time to charge again, the Natives one and all suddenly advanced, thereby compelling the men instantly to retreat, leaving their fallen companion on the ground.'[34] The size of this group, which was much bigger than Musquito's gang, indicates it was probably the Big River tribe, thought to be the largest in the colony at the time. The story also shows that the Aborigines were not the initiators of this violence, so their assault on the men does not lend any obvious support to the guerilla warfare thesis.

In fact, this account portrays a credible explanation for the escalation of hostilities in the southern midlands at the time. The series of murders committed by Musquito's gang had left convict servants in the affected districts alarmed by the appearance of any blacks. The stockmen sought to defend themselves from what they imagined to be the hostile intent of tribal Aborigines. So when these blacks appeared on their run, the stockmen fired at them first, thereby causing an understandably violent response. As part of this process of settling of scores, the same tribe made two more attacks, both non-fatal, on Hobbs's men at the Eastern Marshes property between August and October.[35] But there were no reports that this tribe harassed any other settlers that year. In other words, rather than guerilla warfare in defence of their country, the Big River tribe were simply engaged in retaliation for an unprovoked attack by convict stock-keepers upon themselves.

Instead of warrior patriots, their record makes it clear that Musquito, Black Jack and Black Tom were simply outlaws. They were bushrangers who happened to be black. They were no more nationalistic than the white convict who was accessory to their murder of Matthew Osborne in March 1824. As such, they were among a number of like-minded criminals who took to the bush at roughly the same time and lived by pillaging the property of outlying settlers.

[34] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 6 August 1824, p 2
[35] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 29 October 1824, p 2

Van Diemen's Land from 1824 to 1826 experienced a renewed bout of bushranging. The most notorious of Musquito's white counterparts was Matthew Brady, one of nine convicts who escaped from Macquarie Harbour on 9 June 1824 and who committed murder, armed robbery and other crimes against both settlers and the military for the next two years. In response, the new Lieutenant-Governor, George Arthur, set up a number of military posts throughout the settled districts and established his own field headquarters at Jericho at the head of the 40th Regiment. He offered rewards for any accomplices who informed on the bushrangers or for settlers who assisted in their capture.[36]

Musquito was one of those with a price on his head. As a result, the settler Gotfried Hanskey and a Tasmanian Aboriginal youth named Teague tracked Musquito to Grindstone Bay on the east coast where they found him camped on his own with two women. Teague shot and wounded him. He was taken to Hobart on 12 August 1824.[37] Black Jack was arrested about the same time. Both were tried and found guilty of murder, Musquito for the two killings at Grindstone Bay in 1823, Black Jack for killing the stock-keeper Patrick McCarthy at Sorell Plains. Both were executed on 24 February 1825.[38]

While these two were awaiting the hangman, a group from the Oyster Bay tribe decided to 'come in' to the white settlement. This was a completely unexpected development. 'We announce with the most cordial satisfaction,' wrote the *Hobart Town Gazette* on 5 November 1824, 'from some cause unknown, no fewer than sixty-four Aborigines came into town on Wednesday, of their own accord, and in a pacific manner well calculated to conciliate even those who had been most prejudiced against them.'[39] This was by far the largest number of Aborigines to come as a body into any township on the island. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur saw the visit as an opportunity to display the goodwill and generosity of his government. He offered the natives the Hobart market house as temporary accommodation, had three large fires kindled for them, provided them with food and clothing from the convict stores, and posted four constables 'to guard their repose from interruption'. The day after their arrival, Arthur issued a general order:

[36] Robson, *History of Tasmania, Vol I*, pp 141–4
[37] *Hobart Town Gazette*. 20 August 1824 p 2; Knopwood, *Diary*, 12–13 August 1824; Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, p 37 n
[38] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 25 February 1825, p 2; Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp 37–9
[39] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 5 November 1824, p 2

> A body of the Natives having come into Hobart Town, the Lieutenant-Governor begs to request that the utmost kindness may be manifested towards them, until some arrangement can be made by the government for providing for their accommodation, and removing them to some proper establishment. It is in particular very earnestly desired that no spirits or other intoxicating liquor may be given them.[40]

The Aborigines were subsequently moved across the river to Kangaroo Point (Bellerive) where huts were erected for them and they were regularly supplied with fresh food and clothing. Arthur gave them 'the strongest assurances of protection'. For the next two years, this community was supplied by the government, leaving the natives 'in the habit of departing and returning as often as their own convenience dictated'.[41] At this stage, Arthur did not believe he was facing any kind of general hostilities. He hoped that Kangaroo Point might be the first stage in a process that would establish a native institution, as Governor Macquarie had done at Parramatta in 1815, and would eventually lead to the civilization of the Aborigines.[42]

Over the next two years, Arthur made benevolent gestures to other gatherings of Aborigines, such as the body of 160 who met at Birch's Bay in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel in April 1825, to whom he sent a supply of rugs, blankets and bread.[43] His hopes, however, were to be disappointed. Instead of his hospitality and goodwill generating peace between natives and colonists, Arthur eventually came to believe that the growth of contact between the two races was the very cause of the conflict he was trying to avoid.

After the execution of Musquito and Black Jack, the year 1825 was comparatively less violent, even though assaults by Aborigines did continue. In March, a group of eighty Aborigines killed two stockkeepers employed by Jonathan Kinsey on the upper Macquarie River.[44] In April, James Hobbs's property near the Eastern Marshes again came under attack and one stockman was killed.[45] In the same district that year, the Oatlands police magistrate, Thomas Anstey, reported another stockman went missing, presumed killed, after an

[40] Government and general order, 4 November 1824, *British Parliamentary Papers*, 4, p 191

[41] Report of the Aborigines Committee of 1830, and Arthur to Murray, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers*, 4, pp 211, 232

[42] *Hobart Town Gazette,* 5 November 1824, p 2

[43] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 15 April 1825, p 2

[44] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 25 March 1825, p 2, 1 April 1825, p 2

[45] Report on outrages etc by Aborigines at Oatlands, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 774

attack by Aborigines.[46] In September, a sawyer was speared to death near Green Ponds.[47] Anstey reported a further attack in early 1825, but did not specify what month. Aborigines had held siege to the settler Robert Jones, of Four Square Gallows in the Oatlands district. Black Tom was identified as leader of this mob who surrounded the hut 'daring Jones to fire at them, threatening to put his wife into the bloody river'.[48] Nonetheless, the five deaths recorded here were the only credibly reported killings of whites by blacks that year.[49] This compared to eight white deaths the year before. Moreover, in 1825, the assaults that did occur were concentrated largely in the one region, the southern midlands. The rest of the colony breathed easier, thinking the worst of the robbery and assaults were over.

BLACK TOM AND THE OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE IN 1826

In 1826, however, there was a substantial increase in violence by Aborigines. In the first six months of the year there were nine separate attacks on the colonists, leaving two settlers and three stockmen dead and four other whites wounded. One of these attacks took place in April at Oyster Bay in which a stock-keeper, Thomas Colley, was killed.[50] In May, Jack and Dick, two Aborigines being provisioned by the government at Kangaroo Point, were tried for this murder. They were found guilty and sentenced to death. On 13 September they were executed.[51] Those still camped at Kangaroo Point promptly left and never returned.

In the spring and summer of 1826, Aboriginal violence accelerated. From September to December they made fifteen separate assaults in which nineteen settlers and stockmen were killed and five wounded.[52] In most cases there is enough evidence to show that it

[46] Report on outrages etc by Aborigines at Oatlands, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 779

[47] *Colonial Times*, 29 September 1825, p 2

[48] Report on outrages etc by Aboriginal tribes at Oatlands, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 762. Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 61, mistakenly dates this incident in November 1826.

[49] There was a report in the *Colonial Times* on 29 September 1826 that two other men were killed about a year earlier, that is, in September 1825. But neither the names of the men nor the location were given.

[50] *Colonial Times*, 14 April 1826; 2 June 1826; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 445, n 106

[51] *Colonial Times*, 15 September 1826; Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, pp 56–8, has a critical report of their trial and execution.

[52] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, pp 61-2. The *Hobart Town Gazette*, 2 December 1826, p 2, reports two more killings of stockmen that Plomley's survey missed. The Report of the Aborigines Committee of 1830, *British*

was Black Tom who was responsible. Before he became part of Thomas Birch's household, Black Tom had been born into the Oyster Bay tribe. He remembered his tribal infancy when he saw the first sailing ships arrive at Maria Island.[53] After the execution of Musquito and Black Jack, he made contact with his old tribe and led some of them on a series of robberies and murder of settlers and stockmen throughout the southern midlands region. Of the twenty-three attacks on settlers in all of Van Diemen's Land in 1826, fourteen were either in the southern midlands or the adjacent settlements on the Coal River, north of Pitt Water.

During 1826, Black Tom led between ten and thirty Aborigines, including women and children. In April that year, he was part of an attack at Dromedary Mountain in which the settler J. Browning was killed, his assigned servant wounded, and his hut plundered.[54] He was also present at the assault and robbery of three stockmen and their overseer at Jerusalem in June.[55] In November and December he was seen in five separate incidents: at Millers Bluff on the Macquarie River where the son of a settler was killed,[56] at Penny Royal Creek (Liffey River) below the Western Tiers, where a stock-keeper was killed and his hut plundered;[57] at Cross Marsh near Green Ponds where a sawyer was harassed and robbed,[58] at Macquarie Plains south of Abyssinia where two stockmen were murdered,[59] and at Brown Mountain, north of Pitt Water, where a stockman was harassed.[60] After this last incident on 8 December, Black Tom was tracked by the chief district constable at Sorell, Alexander Laing, and a troop of the 40th Regiment. He was found camped with four other

Parliamentary Papers, 4, p 211, records another two killings and one wounding.

[53] Robinson, diary 19 November 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 524, 580 n 50. Brian Plomley says these were probably the French vessels of the Baudin–Péron expedition which visited Maria Island and Oyster Bay in February 1802. Tom would have been about two years old at the time.

[54] Report on murders etc by Aborigines at New Norfolk, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 pp 792–3

[55] Report on outrages etc by Aborigines at Richmond, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 832

[56] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 6 January 1827 p 2

[57] *Colonial Times*, 17 November 1826 p 3; a report in the *Hobart Town Gazette*, 18 November 1826, also records a string of robberies, assaults and murders by Black Tom, but most of these are the same as those reported in footnotes 55–60.

[58] *Colonial Times*, 1 December 1826 p 3

[59] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 2 December 1826 p 2

[60] *Colonial Times*, 15 December 1826, p 3

Aboriginal men, four women and a child. He was captured at daylight the following day.[61]

As well as these assaults and robberies, there were another four in which Black Tom was probably involved. Although he was not personally identified, the reports say that at least one of the natives 'could speak very good English'. A black who spoke very good English was unlikely to have been a tribal Aborigine. In one incident at the Shannon River in early November, the man cursed the whites in terms known to be used by Black Tom: 'fire, you white buggers'.[62] The Shannon River was normally inhabited by the Big River tribe, but Tom later told George Augustus Robinson that he and his Oyster Bay mob often ranged this far west, and even beyond to Lake Echo, sometimes to rob settlers, at other times to fight wars with the Big River tribe.[63] The other three incidents were at Tea Tree Brush near Bagdad in June, at Pitt Water in September, and Macquarie Plains in November, all within the vicinity of Tom's other assaults.[64] Overall, then, in 1826 Black Tom was positively identified with seven attacks on settlers and probably responsible for another four.

In other words, Black Tom's career in 1826 does have the potential to be portrayed by a sympathetic historian as that of a leader of a campaign by the Oyster Bay Aborigines to harass and expel the invaders. Even though none of the proponents of the guerilla warfare thesis have gone into his background in the detail provided here, Black Tom seems just the person they need. He became much more integrated with tribal Aborigines than the other black bushrangers, Musquito and Black Jack. In fact, an Aborigine like Black Tom, who returned to his people after a Western upbringing with an insider's view of the process of colonisation, would be just the sort of person the guerilla warfare thesis would expect to lead an indigenous uprising. In fact, at the height of Tom's activities, this was the very opinion expressed by the *Colonial Times* newspaper:

> From black Tom and others, who, like him, have been reared among Europeans, and who have ultimately absconded into the bush, the savages have acquired a certain degree of the manners of the whites. Aboriginal natives, who are reared from their earliest years among us, if even they

[61] *Colonial Times,* 15 December 1826, p 3

[62] *Colonial Times*, 10 November 1826 p 2. In one assault where he was positively identified, Tom had said, 'you white bugger, give me some more bread, and fry some mutton for us': *Colonial Times*, 15 December 1826, p 2

[63] Robinson, diary, 25 October 1830, 29 November 1831, 8 December 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 257, 534, 545

[64] *Colonial Times*, 16 June 1826 p 3; *Colonial Times*, 29 September 1826 p 3; *Colonial Times*, 10 November 1826 p 2; Wells to Arthur, 26 November 1826, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 13

> should be kept until they arrive at maturity, always evince a disposition to rejoin their black brethren, and when they do so, they carry with them those seeds of civilization which have been sown in their own minds, and which they disseminate among their tribes, thereby rendering them more formidable by thus enlightening them — not that we are enemies to the civilization of the blacks — far from it, but as by nature they are prone to enmity against the Europeans; any increase of knowledge is only stirring up a flame within their bosoms, and by their becoming acquainted with our manners, they are less to be intimidated by us, as it is now clear that fear alone has kept them so harmless as they have been. Now they are in possession of cutlasses, pistols, muskets, bayonets, &c. which they have learnt the use of by those who have been brought up (under the hope of ameliorating their condition) in civilized society.[65]

Black Tom certainly had enough disdain for white authority to be a rebel leader. After his capture, he was not sentenced to death for any of the murders in which he was clearly implicated. Perhaps the increase in assaults on settlers that occurred after the execution of the Aborigines from Kangaroo Point made the colonial authorities wary of repeating the exercise. He was convicted of inciting murder and sentenced to be transported to the penal station at Macquarie Harbour for life. However, his white foster mother, Mrs Edmund Hodgson, appealed to the Lieutenant-Governor and had him released into her care, much to the chagrin of the local settlers.[66] However, in April and June 1827 he was again identified robbing and assaulting workers on outlying stations in the southern midlands districts. He was finally recaptured in November 1827.[67]

Unfortunately for the guerilla warfare thesis, after his second capture Black Tom showed little inclination to act as the leader of the Tasmanian national liberation front. Instead of confining him to prison, the government discharged him by proclamation in July 1828 on condition that he work as a tracker and guide.[68] In this position,

[65] *Colonial Times*, 10 November 1826, p 3

[66] Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, p 75; O'Connor to Arthur, 11 December 1827, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 70–1

[67] *Colonial Times*, 20 April 1827, p 3; *Colonial Times* 29 June 1827, p 3; *Hobart Town Courier*, 17 November 1827, p 1; Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 65. In his memoirs, the roving party leader, Jorgen Jorgenson, wrote that in this last round of outlaw activities, Tom was with the Big River tribe. However, Tom later discussed his actions several times with George Augustus Robinson and always identified his tribe as the Oyster Bay mob, who were traditional enemies of those at Big River: Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, p 75; Robinson, diary, 25 October 1830, 29 November 1831, 8 December 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 257, 534, 545

[68] George Hobler, diary, 29 July 1828, in The Diaries of 'Pioneer' George Hobler, unpublished, ML, p 94

over the next four years he accompanied the expeditions the government sent out to capture other Aborigines. Black Tom's most notable achievement was to guide the party of Gilbert Robertson, which in November 1828 captured the Stony Creek tribal chief, Umarrah (or Eumarrah). Subsequently, Black Tom and Umarrah both acted as guides to the Friendly Mission expeditions of George Augustus Robinson that finally rounded up the remaining tribal Aborigines and shipped them off to Flinders Island. In this position, the only challenge Tom gave to Robinson's authority was over Tom's unrestrained appetite for the native women of the party, several of whom became his lovers, much to his white leader's discomfort. 'He is a bad man,' Robinson complained. 'There is not a woman but he is endeavouring to cohabit with.'[69] It was on the Friendly Mission's expedition at Emu Bay in the north of the island in May 1832 that Tom contracted dysentery and died.[70]

PASTORALISM, FENCES AND LAND ACCESS

As noted at the start of this chapter, the guerilla warfare thesis advances two explanations why violence broke out in 1824: the destruction of native game that left the Aborigines to starve, and the alienation of Aborigines from their traditional lands by the expansion of pastoralism. Chapter Four will take up the claims about native game and starvation. Here, let us discuss the second of these reasons, which Henry Reynolds calls the underlying problem of the escalating conflict: the fierce competition over use of, and access to, land. This thesis has a number of flaws.

For a start, its account of the growth of the pastoral economy up to 1824 is grossly exaggerated. Lyndall Ryan claims the year 1820 was crucial for European–Aboriginal relations. By that year, she says, the colonists had already 'effectively depleted' the Oyster Bay and North Midlands tribes, even though 'the Europeans occupied less than 15 per cent of Van Diemen's Land'.[71] This statement gives the impression that the land alienated at the time amounted to something approaching 15 per cent of the island, whereas in reality it was only a fraction of this. According to Sharon Morgan's detailed study of early

[69] Robinson, diary, 20 December 1830, 24 December 1830, 1 September 1831, 8 September 1831, 10 September 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 298, 299, 418, 421–3

[70] Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, p 75; Robinson, diary 16 May 1832, *Friendly Mission*, p 608

[71] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 81

land grants, between 1803 and 1820 they amounted to 85,370 acres, which was a mere 0.5 per cent of land in the colony.[72]

In 1823, there were 441,871 acres allocated in 1027 grants, by far the largest area alienated in a single year. In some cases, the grants made that year went to settlers who were already occupying the land concerned, but in other cases the grants were not taken up until years later, and sometimes never.[73] The 1823 grants, however, still brought the total land alienated since 1803 to only 527,241 acres, or 3.1 per cent of the island.

Ryan is also wrong about the size of the individual grants made and their purpose. She says settlers arrived from London with letters recommending they be granted between 400 and 800 hectares, or 990 to 1980 acres, on which they were to grow wool for the textile mills of northern England.[74] In reality, however, the early 1820s saw a continuation of the previous policy of small land grants. In 1820 the average grant was 160 acres, in 1821 the average was 406 acres, in 1822 no land grants were made, and in 1823 the average was 430 acres.[75] A 400-acre farm was too small for profitable wool growing. Rather than a pastoral economy based on sheep grazing, settlement in the early 1820s was characterized by the same kind of small-scale mixed farming as the previous two decades. A small number of fine wool Merino rams were imported after 1820 but most sheep were bred not for the export of their fleeces but for local consumption. In 1823, the royal commissioner and colonial investigator, J. T. Bigge, observed that the predominant type of sheep in Van Diemen's Land was a mixture of Teeswater, Leicester and Bengal, breeds raised for meat rather than wool.[76] In other words, Ryan's attempt to provide a quasi-Marxist explanation for the outbreak of Aboriginal violence in 1824, by linking it to developments in the imperial economy, does not work.

The same is true of Henry Reynolds's argument about the enclosure of the land. As noted earlier, he claims that, as well as constructing stone houses and farm buildings, the settlers laid out 'miles of fencing' and planted 'extensive hedgerows'. Reynolds's evidence for this came from only one contemporary comment by the Launceston land owner Richard Dry, who told Archdeacon Broughton's 1830

[72] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania,* p 13. These are my calculations from her Table 1.1. Tasmania has an area of 26,393 square miles, or 68,358 square kilometres, or 16,891,520 acres.

[73] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 155

[74] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 83

[75] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 13. My calculations from Table 1.1

[76] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 59

committee of inquiry that the cause of Aboriginal hostility was their exclusion from their traditional land. They 'daily witness our encroachment in the extensive Fences erected [sic] by the Settlers'.[77] The only other observation of this kind cited by Reynolds was made in 1852 by John West in his *History of Tasmania*. West attributed the outbreak of conflict to economic development and the enclosure of the land. West wrote:

> The rapid colonisation of the island from 1821 to 1824, and the diffusion of settlers and servants through districts hitherto unlocated, added to the irritation of the natives, and multiplied the agents of destruction. Land unfenced, and flocks and herds moving on hill and dale, left the motions of the native hunters free; but hedges and homesteads were signals which even the least rationality could not fail to understand, and on every reappearance the natives found some favorite spot surrounded by new enclosures, and no longer theirs.[78]

This has all the appearance of a plausible scenario. As its author says, even 'the least rationality' would find it understandable. Like the pastoralism thesis, however, it exaggerates the degree to which the settlers had alienated the land at the time.

When the early colonial government made a land grant, it required the settler to 'cultivate, fence and improve' the property for five years before he obtained freehold title.[79] Despite these regulations, the enclosure of properties was a slow process that only occurred years after the granting of land. The evaluator of colonial policy J. T. Bigge complained when he saw this in Van Diemen's Land in 1820. 'The cultivated lands of each farm are entirely open, and except an estate of Colonel Davey and one of Mr Lord, I did not observe a single fence.'[80] There were three reasons for this: the expense, the lack of surveyed boundaries, and the fact that the agricultural practice of the time did not require grazing livestock to be fenced.

[77] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 30, citing AOT CSO 1/323/7578, p 289 (it is actually on p 290). The original document containing Dry's comment said 'the extensive fences erecting by the Settlers', not 'erected', as transcribed by Reynolds. This might seem a minor point but Dry was using the present tense to indicate that the fences were now being erected in 1830, rather than erected several years earlier when the violence began.

[78] West, *History of Tasmania*, p 272, cited Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 31

[79] Anne McKay (ed.), *Journals of the Land Commissioners for Van Diemen's Land 1826–28*, University of Tasmania and Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1962, p 25

[80] J. T. Bigge, *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry, on the State of Agriculture and Trade in the Colony of New South Wales*, London, 1823, cited by R. M. Hartwell, *The Economic Development of Van Diemen's Land 1820–1850*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1954, p 129

The first colonial fences were constructed 'in the American manner'. This meant that when land was cleared, the felled timber was split and fences were constructed by post and rail without nails, which were in short supply.[81] Fences of palings needed nails, so were not common. There was no fencing wire in the early nineteenth century so there were none of the timber and wire fences that we now associate with the Australian pastoral landscape. In 1824, Edward Curr complained about the appearance of the settled areas, with their absence of English hedgerows and their prevalence of American log fences.[82] The cumbersome and expensive construction of log fences meant they were preserved only for the most necessary enclosures: to keep livestock from gardens, vegetables, orchards and crops, and to isolate stud animals. In the 1820s, some settlers began to plant the hawthorn hedges that remain part of the Tasmanian landscape today. However, this was also a slow and expensive process. The plants had to survive several months of sea transport from England and one mile of hedgerow required between 8000 and 10,500 plants. The early hedges were used primarily as windbreaks for the house, and were planted close to it. Before the 1830s, Sharon Morgan writes, 'stone walls were almost unknown, and hedges were rare'.[83]

Until the land commissioners were appointed in 1826, the colony was largely bereft of surveyors. Land grants were rarely based on precise boundaries and settlers were unclear about the exact demarcation of their properties. Hence boundary fences were few.[84] This led to one of the colony's most common sources of dispute. On unfenced properties that lacked natural barriers, livestock invaded neighbours' land, became intermixed with other stock and spread disease. There were so many quarrels over this problem that a law was introduced in 1820 appointing pound-keepers to impound wandering stock.[85]

When the three land commissioners made a complete tour of the settled districts between 1826 and 1828, they complained about how many properties were unfenced. They found the wealthiest man in the colony, David Lord, was in possession of 20,000 acres of prime land in the midlands and south-east. In the central midlands, from Murderers Plains to York Plains, Lord had bought up and consoli-

[81] King to Bowen, 18 October 1803, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 205

[82] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 142, citing Edward Curr, *An Account of the Colony of Van Diemen's Land, Principally Designed for the Use of Emigrants*, London, 1824

[83] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, pp 96, 142

[84] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 51

[85] McKay (ed.) *Journals of the Land Commissioners*, p 87–8; Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 63

dated the choicest farms to create one extended property covering most of the district, on which he grazed 1500 head of cattle and 4500 sheep.

> The only improvement he makes on *all* these Farms, is one miserable Log Hut upon Williams's hundred acre grant, He does not cut one Tree, he makes no Fences, save enclosing about five or six acres, he employs no more Men that suffice to keep his Sheep together, the Cattle being allowed to roam a distance of eighteen or twenty miles ...[86]

The land commissioners were fierce defenders of small farmers who could establish a small property of from 100 to 400 acres. They despaired of the practice whereby wealthy landowners had been granted acreages around prime sites such as river fronts and springs, thereby rendering all the adjoining land suitable only for stock runs, which they left unfenced and unimproved. How could the small farmer who wanted to improve his property, the commissioners asked rhetorically, 'afford to sell his Sheep, his Cattle, his Wool on the same terms as men such as Simpson, Ritchie, Stocker, Gibson and Field and such like? who possess themselves of immense Tracts, and who often do not even support one Stock-keeper ...' They also cited the example of Edward Lord, who had 30,000 acres of land, which 'is at present nothing but Stock runs, occupied by ruffians of Stock keepers under no controul, galloping after wild Cattle in every direction'.[87]

Even by 1829, there were still very few fences in the colony. That year, in his book *The Present State of Van Diemen's Land*, H. Widowson complained this remained true not only of grazing land but even of much of that under crops. 'A great deal of land at present under cultivation has never been enclosed,' he wrote, 'and much of it only fenced in with the branches of trees piled on each other.'[88]

The most common reason for the lack of fences was that it was not the practice to fence grazing animals, especially sheep, at the time. The task of overseeing a flock belonged to the shepherd or stock-keeper. Settlers had convict servants to fill this role. No one at the time believed sheep needed fencing because they confined themselves to pastures, did not forage in the woods and, apart from properties on the edge of the mountain tiers where Tasmanian tigers were a problem, required little protection from predators. As Sharon Morgan herself records, sheep were not fenced or penned. They roamed free and fed at will.[89] The replacement of shepherds and hut-keepers by

[86] McKay (ed.) *Journals of the Land Commissioners*, p 52
[87] McKay (ed.) *Journals of the Land Commissioners*, p 12
[88] H. Widowson, *The Present State of Van Diemen's Land*, London, 1829, cited by Hartwell, *Economic Development of Van Diemen's Land*, p 127
[89] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, pp 57-8

the now-familiar practice of grazing sheep in fenced paddocks was not widely adopted by the pastoral industry in Australia until the 1870s.[90]

In other words, the portrait by Henry Reynolds of early Tasmanian farms being surrounded by 'miles of fencing' that inhibited Aboriginal passage is an anachronistic myth derived from a *late* nineteenth-century vision of the pastoral landscape. In the 1820s, no matter what the size of the farm, fences enclosed only a few acres, usually around the house, garden, orchard, crops, stud and dairy. The bulk of the property, with its pastures cleared for grazing, was invariably unfenced.

As the footnotes to this chapter acknowledge, a number of the facts it relies upon come from Sharon Morgan's 1992 study, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*. Morgan has performed the industrious task of collating a great deal of information about the early land grants and the uses to which the colonists put them. Her study is rich in facts but poor, sadly, in interpretation. Such is the power of the now dominant paradigm in Tasmanian history that, even though her own information about the dearth of enclosure goes against the thesis advanced by Reynolds, Ryan and West, she cannot see it herself. In her chapter on relations between settlers and Aborigines, she writes:

> The buildings and fences considered by many colonists as signs of European civilisation impeded the path of Aborigines and caused resentment. Fences and hedges, slow though they were to be built, hindered the natives' progress over traditional hunting grounds. Friction was natural.[91]

This is a victory of theory over evidence. Morgan's own account of just how slowly the fences and hedges were actually built proves that up to 1823, when her study ends, there were far too few of them to hinder much of the progress of the Aborigines at all.

[90] Keith Hancock, *Discovering Monaro*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1972, pp 122–4

[91] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 155

CHAPTER FOUR

The guerilla warfare thesis and the motives of the Aborigines, 1824–1831

IN an interview with the *Australian* newspaper in 1995 to launch his book *Fate of a Free People*, Henry Reynolds described the guerilla war waged by the Tasmanian Aborigines as a struggle of momentous proportions. 'It was the biggest internal threat that Australia has ever had.' The Tasmanians, he said, were a superior force of guerilla fighters who outclassed the bumbling, red-coated British soldiers who were trained for the open fields of Europe, not the dense bush of Van Diemen's Land. Before the Aborigines were finally overcome, the Black War had taken 400 to 500 lives on both sides, a per capita death toll Reynolds claimed was much higher than Australia suffered in either World War One or World War Two. The Aborigines who died were patriots, he said, killed on their home soil in defence of their country, but their deaths have gone unrecognized. He wanted the Australian War Memorial Act amended so that the Australian National War Memorial could honour these guerilla fighters. Until this happened, the Canberra war memorial 'discriminates against the Aborigines as a matter of policy', he said. 'Anzac Day will never be an inclusive national day until the nation also commemorates and mourns black Australians who died defending their homelands from

invading Europeans.'[1] The Tasmanian guerillas were not only patriots, Reynolds said, they were also honourable fighters, unlike their British adversaries. 'It is clear from the reference material that the Tasmanians were entirely motivated by self-defence, that they were not the aggressors.' They were also more chivalrous. While Reynolds claimed there were countless instances of black women being raped by the Europeans during the war, he could find no reference to Aborigines acting in a similar way.[2]

Some people reading these statements might dismiss them as marketing hype, nothing more than a bevy of sensational claims designed to draw attention to a new book. Reynolds, however, is serious about all these points. He concludes *Fate of a Free People* with the same demands for the National War Memorial and Anzac Day to commemorate the guerillas of the Black War and others on the mainland, and he has repeated them often in public speeches over the past five years.[3] This chapter is an examination of the validity of this case. As the previous chapter argued, the events of the first three years of the so-called 'Black War' from 1824 to 1826 cannot reasonably be interpreted as frontier warfare. This chapter provides a summary of actions by Aborigines over the whole period 1824 to 1831, a critique of orthodox versions of the story, and an alternative interpretation of what actually happened.

From 1824 to 1831 inclusive, there were a total of 729 incidents of conflict between Aborigines and settlers. As Table 4.1 shows, the period known as the Black War saw a total of 187 settlers killed and 211 wounded. The most intense period of hostilities was from 1828 to 1830. The worst year for violence against the person was 1828 in which a total of 151 settlers or their convict servants were killed, wounded or assaulted, but the year with the most number of hostile incidents was clearly 1830. Given the size of the white population, which increased from 12,303 people in 1824 to 26,640 in 1831, the tally of casualties meant that roughly 2 per cent of the white population were serious victims of Aboriginal assaults. On these grounds, Reynolds is technically correct in his estimate of the scale of casualties. The World War One total of 213,000 killed and wounded represented 4 per cent of the then Australian population of 5 million.

[1] Bruce Montgomery, 'The First Patriots', *Australian*, 3 April 1995, Features p 10; Henry Reynolds, 'A War to Remember', *Weekend Australian*, 1–3 April 1995, Features p 3

[2] Bruce Montgomery, 'The First Patriots', p 10; Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995, p 64

[3] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 211

TABLE 4.1 INCIDENTS AND ASSAULTS BY ABORIGINES ON SETTLERS, VAN DIEMEN'S LAND, 1824–1831

	Settlers and servants killed	Settlers and servants wounded	Settlers, servants assaulted, harassed	Dwellings plundered	Dwellings set on fire	Assaults on stock/crops and stacks destroyed	Total number of incidents
1824	10	2	3	1	2	0	11
1825	8	3	4	7	1	2	14
1826	21	6	13	13	1	0	29
1827	36	16	26	21	4	7	78
1828	40	48	63	63	8	12	146
1829	29	58	40	74	5	5	153
1830	32	53	57	115	9	8	227
1831	11	25	27	29	2	1	71
Total	187	211	233	323	32	35	729

Source: N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803–1831* (1992). This is a compilation from Plomley's tables 2, 3, 5 and 6. The separate figures for those killed and wounded are calculated from his appendix. The table includes assaults on the property and employees of the Van Diemen's Land Company, which Plomley lists separately. The total killed also includes three people Plomley listed as wounded (Esther Gough p 72, William Gangell p 94 and Mrs Cunningham, p 97) who later died from their wounds. The number of incidents each year is less than the total of separate offences such as killings, assaults, robberies and arson because some incidents involved several offences. Plomley employed research assistants to go through the archival records and newspapers of the time to compile a tally of all incidents of violence. He produced a relatively sound piece of work, whose sources I have double-checked. There are a small number of mistakes, especially with page numbering of archive documents, and some others mentioned in relevant footnotes, but overall the survey is largely true to the originals, and there are only a few omissions to be found. Where there are different versions of the one incident, Plomley resists the habit of most of the orthodox school of always using the one most favourable to the Aborigines. Anyone pursuing Plomley's references in the Archives Office of Tasmania needs to know the shorthand he adopted. He was working mainly from the Colonial Secretary's Office file no. 1/316/7578 and a reference in his survey such as 'CSO 832' is actually to CSO 1/316/7578 page 832.

The World War Two total of 45,000 killed and wounded was 0.6 per cent of the population of 7.5 million.[4] So casualties among the colonists of Van Diemen's Land lie proportionately in between. If we added the number of Aborigines killed and wounded to the Tasmanian total this would not change things much because, as Chapter Ten documents, Aboriginal casualties were much lower than white.

But whatever adjustments we make, the numbers are hardly comparable. The relatively tiny total in Tasmania is so out of proportion to the numbers affected during the two world wars as to make comparison completely meaningless. As for these losses amounting to 'the greatest internal threat Australia has ever had', this is a tabloid headline grabber, not a serious historical proposition.

Reynolds's claim that the Aborigines were more gallant towards women than their white counterparts is equally implausible. It is true that there are no records of Tasmanian Aborigines raping white women during the 'Black War', but they nonetheless murdered and assaulted a number of them in circumstances that were disturbing enough. One of the worst incidents occurred on 9 October 1828 near Oatlands where Aborigines killed the wife of Patrick Gough and her daughter, aged four years. Both were speared, then clubbed to death. They severely wounded another daughter, aged seven, and a baby thirteen months old. They also killed the Goughs' neighbour, Anne Geary, putting an axe through her skull and spearing her several times in the breast. The inquest into their deaths heard that, before she died of her wounds, Esther Gough told how she fell to her knees before her attackers and begged: 'Spare the lives of my Picaninies'. One of the blacks replied in good English: 'No you white bitch, we'll kill you all.'[5]

In both the Geary and Gough family killings, the natives waited until the men were absent before attacking their huts. They did the same two weeks later at Green Ponds when fifteen to twenty Aborigines found the wife and two children of the Langford family at home. The mother held her small son trying to protect him, but the Aborigines speared him to death in her arms. They also speared his fourteen-year-old sister, but she and her mother survived their wounds.[6] On 10 June 1830, some natives went to rob a dwelling at

[4] Battle casualties in World War I and World War II, *Australians: Historical Statistics*, ed. Wray Vamplew, in *Australians: A Historical Library*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, Sydney, 1987, pp 414–5

[5] Proceedings of an inquest on the bodies of Anne Geary and Alicia Gough, 11 October 1828, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 pp 168, 170–1; Anstey to Burnett, 21 December 1830, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 759

[6] In this incident, Plomley, in *Aboriginal/Settler Clash* p 73, mistakenly records the daughter, not the son, as killed. Both the *Hobart Town Courier*, 25

Dennistoun, near Bothwell on the Clyde River. The men were not at home but Mary Daniels was there caring for her five-month-old twins. The Aborigines killed all three of them.[7] Henry Reynolds spares his readers details of this kind and thus avoids the need to explain how the killing of little children and babies fitted into Aboriginal guerilla warfare strategy.[8] All told, between 1824 and 1831, the Aborigines killed ten white women and seven children, and wounded fifteen white women and nine children.[9] That is, more than ten per cent of white casualties were women and children.

THE 'STARVING NATIVES' THESIS

Brian Plomley has argued that the impact of British colonisation on Tasmanian Aboriginal culture was devastating. Within two decades it produced such a crisis within their society that the Aborigines were reduced to starvation. 'With the spread of settlement,' Plomley says, 'the Aborigines were deprived of their natural living areas, and this led both to a disruption of their normal lives and to an increasing scarcity of food and eventually to starvation.'[10] He says this was the underlying cause of why the Aborigines adopted guerilla warfare:

> After 1824 the attacks were purposeful, being motivated by a need to drive the settlers from their territories in order to live their natural lives, as well as by the starvation which was the outcome of that territorial occupation.[11]

Sharon Morgan agrees that hunger was one of the main reasons the Aborigines took up violence:

October 1828, p 1, and Anstey to Burnett, 21 December 1830, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 766, named the boy, John Langford, as the fatality. *Hobart Town Courier*, 1 November 1828, p 2, has further details.

[7] 'Nominal list of inquisitions held by Mr Anstey', AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 760–1; *Hobart Town Courier*, 19 June 1830, p 2

[8] Reynolds does include the Gough family killings in a brief list of assaults near Jericho. However, he provides no details such as the ages of the victims or the circumstance of their death: *Fate of a Free People*, p 58. Moreover, he omits any mention of the Langford or Daniels family killings.

[9] This is a tally from the appendix to Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*. Plomley recorded Mrs Gough as wounded, as well as Mrs Cunningham, who was attacked east of the Tamar in March 1831, as wounded. However, both later died from their wounds, as two separate passages in George Augustus Robinson's diary make clear: *Friendly Mission*, pp 341, 455 n 155. So the total here has two more female deaths than Plomley's survey.

[10] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 12

[11] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 23

> Faced with ever-decreasing indigenous food sources, the Natives were forced to turn to European foodstuffs. This too caused friction: many settlers could not, or would not, see that they had destroyed the island's food chain and therefore saw no obligation to feed the people they had dispossessed.[12]

The notion of native starvation is now routinely passed off as a truth so obvious it needs no empirical support. In his 1997 ABC television series, *Frontier*, Henry Reynolds claimed that the Tasmanian tribes endured seven long years of war and hunger before they were defeated.[13] In a public debate with me in Sydney in November 2000, he rejected the explanations I advanced for Aboriginal behaviour in Van Diemen's Land, claiming the cause was self-evident: 'They were starving,' he said.[14] Similarly, in her ABC Boyer lectures in 1999, Inga Clendinnen repeated the claim, without specifically mentioning Tasmania but with the thesis of its historians no doubt in mind. 'It is painfully clear that in some regions the food balance, always precarious, tipped towards active starvation with white intrusion.'[15]

The one thing that is painfully clear, however, is that none of these authors have bothered to think the issue through, let alone investigate the evidence. Of all the claims about the impact of British settlement on Aboriginal society, the thesis about starving natives is the least plausible. There are two reasons that make it dubious in itself but which none of these writers ever consider. First, when the hostilities began in 1824, as Chapter Three demonstrated, the settlers had occupied only 3.1 per cent of land in Tasmania. This land, of course, contained some of the best pasture, and when roads and public constructions were added, the settled areas actually contained more land than that officially granted to individual colonists. Nonetheless, the non-alienated land still accounted for about 95 per cent of the island, leaving plenty of fodder for kangaroos, emus, possums, wombats and other native game. It is true, as Chapter Two records, that in the early days of the colony the white settlers themselves supplemented their supplies by hunting native game, mainly kangaroo. However, this only lasted until January 1811 when more reliable supplies of tra-

[12] Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p 156

[13] Episode One, '1788–1830 They must always consider us as enemies', *Frontier*, ABC Television, 5 March 1997

[14] Reynolds, public debate with Keith Windschuttle, Bob Gould and Paddy McGuinness, Gould's Book Arcade, Newtown, 12 November 2000

[15] Inga Clendinnen, *True Stories*, Boyer Lectures 1999, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ABC Books, 1999, p 48

ditional British food became available.[16] Moreover, the settlers occupied only a very small proportion of the coastline and estuaries from which several tribes gained food such as shellfish, crayfish (the Aborigines did not eat scaled fish), swans, ducks and eggs. According to the settler and roving party leader, Jorgen Jorgenson, the seasonal visits to the seacoast by those tribes who gathered shellfish and eggs were 'left uninterrupted', even during the height of the 'Black War'.[17]

Second, these writers forget what they have argued elsewhere about the size of the Aboriginal population. Plomley says the pre-contact population was about 5500. By the time of the 'Black War' it had declined to less than one-tenth of that figure.[18] Reynolds says there were between 5000 and 7000 Tasmanians before white settlement. By 1824, he claims this figure had fallen to 1500 and by 1831 it was down to 350.[19] Yet both of them want us to believe that this dramatic decline in the human population was accompanied by an even greater decline in the population of kangaroos, possums and other native game. However, if there were fewer Aboriginal mouths to feed and thus far fewer animals that needed killing, the native game population of Tasmania should have seen a corresponding *increase*. In fact, the number of game animals — whose populations had been regulated by thousands of years of human hunting — should have soared once their principal predator was all but removed from the natural environment. The thesis that the animal population would have done the opposite — toppling from a peak in 1803 when it could feed 5000 people to a trough in 1824 when it left 500 Aborigines to starve — is inherently implausible. A decline in the number of hunters, other things being equal, will always cause an increase in the number of the hunted.

Like all good hypotheses, this last one is confirmed by the empirical data. One piece of information the orthodox historians are careful to keep from their readers is that Reverend Broughton's Aborigines Committee of 1830 investigated this very question. The committee inquired if there was a shortage of native game and, if so, whether this could have been a cause of the hostilities. The Oatlands land-

[16] Marie Fels, 'Culture Contact in the County of Buckinghamshire, Van Diemen's Land 1803–11', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, June 1982, pp 50–9

[17] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1991, p 78

[18] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 10. He cites H. M. Hull's 1866 guess that there were 340 Aborigines remaining in 1824 but says that is probably too low. He says a more realistic figure would be about 350 by 1831.

[19] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 4; Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?* Viking, Melbourne, 2001, p 71

owner James Hobbs told them the natives were in no want of kangaroos; they could still kill fifty or sixty of them at a time. George Espie complained that native game like kangaroos and possums were in such numbers that they constituted a problem for Big River farmers like himself because they destroyed pease and wheat.[20] The Clyde River landowner, Patrick Wood, observed in a letter to the committee that 'there can have been no scarcity of food as the Kangaroo at present seem to be more numerous than at any former period'.[21] The committee's conclusion was that 'the Kangaroo actually abounds in the districts most frequented by the natives'.[22]

The local press took a similar view. The *Hobart Town Courier* observed in 1832 that 'the numbers of the kangaroo seem daily and rapidly to increase'. It continued:

> Whether this arises from the latterly diminished slaughter among them, owing to the decrease of the blacks who formerly fed upon them, or from the effects of the dog act, which induced many to destroy their dogs and to desist from the chase, or from the relish which the animal itself has acquired for the corn and other artificial food it finds upon the cultivated farms we cannot say, but certain it is, that not only patches, but whole acres of corn in many situations are this year destroyed by their nightly inroads, coming as they do in droves of fifties and hundreds. As an instance we may mention that on Mr Gunn's farm on the Coal river alone, a fine field of 5 acres of wheat has lately been completely eaten down by them.[23]

Other empirical data confirming this assessment was recorded in the journals of George Augustus Robinson, who set out with a party in January 1830 to traverse the island to recruit Aborigines for his proposed sanctuary for them in Bass Strait. Plomley, the editor of these journals, tries to argue that Robinson found 'a depletion of food supplies in areas not actually occupied due to the activity of kangaroo hunters'.[24] Before he set out, Robinson himself was prepared to believe this. On 23 November 1829 he wrote that there was a tradi-

[20] Minutes of Evidence, Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, 23 February, 9 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 219, 222

[21] Wood to Aborigines Committee, 7 March 1830, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, p 296

[22] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 216

[23] *Hobart Town Courier*, 14 January 1832, p 2

[24] N. J. B. Plomley, 'The causes of the extinction of the Tasmanians', Appendix 4 of *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, p 964

tion among the Aborigines that the white men 'have driven them into the forests, have killed their game and thus robbed them of their chief subsistence'.[25] However, Robinson and his party of up to fourteen convict servants and Aboriginal guides found no trouble in living off the land for the next two years. Everywhere they went on the island they killed fresh game each day. Plomley's claim about the depletion of food supplies is denied by the evidence of the very work he edited. Here is a sample of extracts from Robinson's diary, selected for their geographic and seasonal diversity:

> *23 May 1830, south of Sandy Cape on the west coast:* Kangaroo abounds very much in this part of the country.
>
> *17 August 1830, in the Surrey Hills in the north-west:* The kangaroo were in droves, bounding away in every direction, and resembled a troop of horsemen galloping one after the other.
>
> *22 August 1830, on the Wilmot River in the north-west:* The kangaroo bounded before us as we passed. ... The whole of this country abounds with game.
>
> *20 and 21 October 1830, near Cape Portland on the north-east coast:* Saw several hundreds of swans and numerous ducks and pelicans; an abundance of young swan was swimming about and above a hundred swan's nests studded the water. I never saw so many before ... My natives swam to the nests and obtained near a hundred eggs ... The kangaroo bounded before us in every direction.
>
> *8 and 9 January 1831, south of St Patricks Head, on east coast:* Saw numerous kangaroo all this day, and wild cattle ... The natives killed five swans in this river with stones, and two teal or ducks, which they ate ... On crossing over some hills saw many boomer kangaroo, which would frequently sit upon their hind quarters and cock up their ears and wait our approach.
>
> *23 July 1831, inland from Ringarooma Bay in the north-east:* Towards the close of this afternoon came to a large plain of tolerable good feed; it was of great extent and abounded in kangaroo ... I named it Kangaroo Park.
>
> *11 August 1831, near Anson's River on the east coast:* Caught today eight kangaroo.
>
> *21 October 1831, adjacent settled districts, just north of Eastern Marshes:* Kangaroo bounded before us in our way ... Kangaroo as before in abundance.
>
> *3 November 1831, within settled districts, property of Sir John Owen, just south of Oatlands:* The kangaroo bounded before us in all directions ... The natives caught numerous opossums today. This animal is in abundance.

[25] Robinson, diary, 23 November 1829, *Friendly Mission*, p 88

> *5 November 1831, near Bothwell, on the Clyde River:* Travelled over some grassy hills, the kangaroo bounding in all directions around us and which were frequently chased by the natives and dogs.
>
> *28 and 29 November 1831, on the central plateau, north of Lake Echo:* Kangaroo was here in great numbers: from where I stood I counted fifty feeding on the acclivity of the plain. Numerous wild cattle was here also grazing, and the kangaroo might be seen feeding by the side of the cattle. The natives caught seven kangaroo this evening ... kangaroo is in abundance so that there would be no fear of their wanting food ... The natives also caught several young ducks which they gave to me as a present.

Moreover, Robinson often recorded his concern about how very wasteful of game his Aboriginal companions were:

> *2 November 1830, near Anson's River:* The natives hunted as they went along and killed a great number of kangaroo, but left them behind, putting them upon some fallen timber where they could be seen. Having a long way to go the people did not carry them, yet they hunted with the same zest as if they was starving for food. The kangaroo was exceeding numerous.
>
> *20 and 23 October 1831, east of Oatlands:* Caught abundance of kangaroo, which the natives leave behind after cutting off the tail and hind legs ... The natives hunted as on the previous day, and when they had obtained a kangaroo would cut off the tail and hind legs, leaving the thighs and carcass behind.

These diary entries describe conditions in the east, west, north, the central midlands and the central plateau of the island, including areas both distant from and close to the settled districts, during all four seasons. None of them paint a picture of a countryside depleted of game in which natives would starve.

Rather than exhausting the food supplies available to the natives, the British colonists in fact augmented them. They brought with them three important kinds of livestock: sheep, cattle and dogs. Of the three, the dogs were actually the most valuable to the Aborigines. They were hunting dogs, much like modern greyhounds and deerhounds, and were eminently suited to hunting kangaroo. The Aborigines had never seen dogs until the British arrived but nonetheless recognized their potential from the outset. They either traded or stole them from settlers from 1804 onwards. The settlers often remarked on how attached the Aborigines became to their dogs. 'Dogs of the English breed,' the *Hobart Town Gazette* observed in 1824, 'have been perceived in considerable numbers with the Natives, whose remarkable fondness for them is such, that they have been noticed to carry in their travels the young pups which are unable to walk.'[26]

[26] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 6 August 1824, p 2

By the 1820s, their numbers had increased to the stage where huge packs of dogs accompanied native bands wherever they went. James Hobbs said in 1830 that some tribes had 300 or 400 dogs.[27] Like other stories Hobbs told, this was probably an exaggeration, but a more reliable observer was the surveyor James Calder. He said that when the last twenty-six members of the Big River and Oyster Bay tribes surrendered and walked down Elizabeth Street, Hobart, in January 1832 they had with them one hundred dogs.[28] When John Batman raided an Aboriginal camp in September 1829 it contained about sixty Aborigines and forty dogs.[29] At Port Sorell on the mid north coast in September 1830, Robinson saw a band of eight Aboriginal men plus women and children, who had twenty dogs. In November 1830, when a group of seven Aborigines from Ansons River joined Robinson's party, they brought their thirty dogs with them. He described the scene in his diary:

> As the people walked along they hunted kangaroo. Caught numerous kangaroo, each of my people carrying one. To look back and see the people following me with their numerous train of dogs was truly delightful and would form a fine picture.[30]

The presence of these European dogs greatly enhanced the Aborigines' ability to hunt kangaroo and so *increased* their available food supply. In particular, dogs made it much easier for their native owners to target the forester or 'boomer' kangaroo, which easily outran human pursuers. Describing the hunt in 1852, John West wrote: 'A tolerably good kangaroo, will generally give a run of from six to ten miles.' The dogs would chase and exhaust the animal, eventually bailing it up so when the native hunter arrived he could despatch it with a club. A good-sized boomer provided its hunters with fifty to sixty kilograms of meat.[31] The dogs' sense of smell also augmented the range of game normally present in the Aboriginal diet. Robinson observed dogs being used by Aborigines to find 'badgers' or wombats in their underground burrows, as well as wallabies, emus, possums,

[27] Minutes of Evidence, Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, 9 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 222

[28] J. E. Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Haibits, &c. of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn and Co, Hobart, 1875, p 62. Calder arrived in Hobart in 1829 and wrote as a witness to this event.

[29] Batman to Anstey, 7 September 1829, AOT CSO 1/320/7578 pp 142–5

[30] Robinson, diary, 2 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 264

[31] John West, *The History of Tasmania*, (1852) ed. A. G. L. Shaw, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1981, pp 247–8, provides a striking description of the hunt. The 'boomer' is the male of *Macropus giganteus* species.

kangaroo rats, and 'hyaenas' or Tasmanian tigers (thylacine).[32] Even if we discount their contribution to increasing the Aborigines' food supply, the mere presence of these dogs poses a fatal objection to the Plomley and Reynolds starvation thesis. If the thesis was correct and the natives really were starving, how could they possibly have fed such an excessive number of dogs?

There was a similar story with sheep and cattle. The settlers provided a plentiful supply of these two nutritious and easily killed food sources. By 1827, according to the English Parliamentary Blue Books, there were 436,256 sheep in the colony; in 1830 there were 682,128. At the same time cattle numbers increased from 67,190 to 91,088.[33] As Chapter Three showed, most of these animals were kept on unfenced pasture where they were vulnerable to theft. Instead of the high-risk strategy of raiding settlers' huts and chancing gunfire, if the natives had simply been hungry they could have safely picked off animals as they grazed on the borders of pasture and woodland. While there were a small number of spectacular killings of sheep, such as the 930 burnt to death in a grass fire in 1815,[34] the Aborigines did not show the kind of interest one would expect if they were starving. Apart from infrequent incidents of this kind, settlers were not seriously troubled by native theft or killing of livestock.

Moreover, contemporary observers noted that when they did kill sheep or cattle, the Aborigines were not interested in eating them. 'The natives do not eat cattle or sheep,' a resident of Van Diemen's Land wrote in 1819 to the *Asiatic Journal* in London, 'but they often destroy them, and, if not interrupted, burn the carcases.'[35] 'They wantonly kill sheep, but never eat them,' complained the midlands pastoralist, William Adams Brodribb, to the 1830 inquiry into Aboriginal affairs. His counterpart from the Big River district, George Espie, said exactly the same: 'None of the sheep killed by the natives

[32] Robinson, diary, 29 March 1830, 22 August 1830, 7 July 1831, 16 July 1831, 18 August 1831, 23 October 1831, 15 November 1831, 23 May 1833, 14 March 1834, *Friendly Mission*, pp 140, 204, 372, 379, 404–5, 489, 519, 728, 863. See also Rhys Jones, 'Tasmanian Aborigines and Dogs', *Mankind*, 7, 1970, pp 267–8

[33] Cited by Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Vol I,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p 260. Lyndall Ryan says there were 200,000 sheep in 1823 and one million by 1830, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edn., Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p 83, but her figures, as usual, are unreliable.

[34] Mary Nicholls (ed.) *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood, 1803–1838*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977, entry for 8 November 1815, p 216

[35] 'Memoranda relating to Van Diemen's Land', transmitted to England by a resident upon the Island, June 1819, *Asiatic Journal*, September 1820, p 219

were eaten.'[36] Even though these introduced animals might not have initially been to the natives' taste, if they really were starving they surely would have expanded their cuisine to include leg of lamb and fillet of beef.

Sharon Morgan claims that native killing of sheep and cattle had political motives. 'Realising the value placed on livestock by the Europeans,' she argues, 'they sought to destroy this mainstay of settlement'.[37] This explains why they killed sheep and cattle but did not eat them. Morgan has apparently forgotten that elsewhere she argues that the Aborigines were really driven by hunger. As noted above, she says they were forced to turn to European food stocks because the settlers had 'destroyed the island's food chain'. If this were true, they might have shown more interest in satisfying their appetites than their antipathy.

Neither of Morgan's explanations, however, is plausible. The statistics with which this chapter opened show that assaults by Aborigines on the livestock, crops and harvest stacks of the settlers were relatively minor compared to their other hostile actions. As Table 4.1 shows, Plomley could find only thirty-five incidents of this kind between 1824 and 1831. This was less than one tenth of the number of huts robbed or set on fire and was the least preferred of all hostile native actions. Given that it was much easier to kill livestock or fire a crop than to attack a hut and confront the armed occupant, if the Aborigines were serious about adopting this kind of economic warfare the number of such incidents should have been much higher.

The conclusion, then, is hard to avoid. Starvation, hunger and economic warfare had little to do with Aboriginal hostilities. None of these motives provide the orthodox school with a credible explanation for the causes of the 'Black War'.

THE 'GUERILLA WARFARE' THEORY

Those historians who support the starving natives thesis usually combine it with the guerilla warfare theory. The term 'guerilla warfare', as the previous chapter noted, derived from the tactics used on the Peninsula against Napoleon. Instead of large, set-piece battles, small groups of Spaniards would attack French forces and then quickly withdraw. Repeated over a long period, the tactic was a way for a small force to damage and, in particular, to demoralize a much larger one. Henry Reynolds claims that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had fought in Spain and recognized he faced the same military

[36] Minutes of evidence, 11 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 224

[37] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 155

tactic.[38] This is not true. Arthur's military career included Italy, Sicily, Egypt and the Netherlands, but never Spain.[39] Nonetheless, there is one passage written by Arthur about conflict with the Aborigines that Reynolds interprets as confirmation of his theory. Arthur wrote:

> The species of warfare which we are carrying on with them is of the most distressing nature; they suddenly appear, commit some act of outrage and then as suddenly vanish: if pursued it seems impossible to surround and capture them.'[40]

Reynolds claims Arthur's description anticipated the anti-colonialist tactics of the twentieth century: it 'could have come from the manuals of guerilla warfare which proliferated in the 1960s'.[41] He says it shows Arthur had grasped the military problem confronting him. It was 'a classic statement of the frustrations of a commander of conventional forces facing elusive guerilla bands'.[42] However, the full text of this statement reveals that Arthur was not talking about confrontations between conventional forces and guerillas at all. He was discussing assaults by Aborigines on isolated stockmen on the fringes of white settlement. Just before the statement Reynolds quotes, Arthur gave the context for what he said: 'Whenever they can successfully attack a remote hut, they never fail to make the attempt, and seldom spare the stockkeepers when they can surprise them.' Reynolds omits this part of the text to give the false impression that Arthur was talking about *troops* coming under surprise attack by Aboriginal warriors. He misrepresents Arthur's concerns, which were reserved entirely for isolated civilians.

The truth is that the Aborigines steered well clear of British troops. Rather than attack or try to demoralize the colony's armed forces, the Aborigines avoided them whenever they could. 'The presence of soldiers,' the Lake River pastoralist Roderic O'Connor told the 1830 committee of enquiry, 'prevents Natives from coming into the neighbourhood.' He said, 'the Natives watch the stock-huts incessantly, and if a soldier is in one they never come near'.[43] The record

[38] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 66
[39] A. G. L. Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart, 1784–1854*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980, pp 5–16
[40] Reynolds cites this passage (*Fate of a Free People*, p 223, n 59) from Arthur to Murray, 12 September 1829, *Historical Records of Australia*, I, XIV, p 446. This is the wrong volume; it is in XV, same page.
[41] Henry Reynolds, 'The Black War: A New Look at an Old Story', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*, 31, 4, December 1984, p 2.
[42] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 66
[43] Minutes of evidence, 17 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 226

of military encounters shows O'Connor's picture was largely accurate. There were very few incidents during the 'Black War' in which Aborigines directly confronted colonial troops. In 1828 Corporal Hooper of the 40th Regiment was wounded in the shoulder by a spear at Quoin (Coyne) Hill on the Clyde River.[44] In October 1830, during the Black Line military campaign, Aborigines trying to break through colonial ranks at night speared a sentry in the leg and shoulder.[45] In 1831, two soldiers were wounded on Norfolk Plains.[46] The only soldier recorded killed by Aborigines during the whole of the purported 'Black War' was a private of the 63rd Regiment who died at Boomer Creek, Oyster Bay, in September 1830, when a party of Aborigines descended on the farm of George Meredith and killed two men.[47] These four incidents constituted the sum total of British military casualties at the hands of Aborigines from 1824 to 1831. For a guerilla war, this is not an impressive record.

Reynolds writes as if the question of whether Aboriginal assaults amounted to warfare needs no supporting argument. He assumes it was warfare from the outset and embeds the assumption within his narrative. In October 1830, Reynolds says Arthur looked upon the Aborigines as his warrior equivalent. 'Governor Arthur showed an old soldier's respect for his Aboriginal adversaries.'[48] But Reynolds omits to tell his readers that Arthur specifically denied that Aboriginal tactics amounted to anything that resembled real warfare. In November 1828, Arthur wrote to London:

> It is doubtless very distressing that so many murders have been committed by the Natives upon their [the settlers'] stockmen, but there is no decided combined movement among the Native tribes, nor, although cunning and artful in the extreme, any such systematic warfare exhibited by any of

[44] *Tasmanian*, 19 December 1828, p 3; *Hobart Town Courier*, 20 December 1828, p 2

[45] *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2. The wounded sentry was normally employed as a shepherd, not as a soldier.

[46] *Hobart Town Courier*, 26 March 1831, p 2

[47] Francis Aubin, Report of the Outrages Committed by the Aborigines at Great Swan Port, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 841; *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 3. There were another two men killed who were still known by their old military titles. One was Captain Bartholomew Thomas who, with James Parker, was killed by the blacks on his property near Port Sorell in September 1831 in a highly publicized incident: Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 99 has list of references. However, 'Captain' Thomas had resigned his commission in England in 1814 and was no longer serving. The same was true of 'Searjent' William Gangell, speared in October 1830 at his farm at Pitt Water and who died later of his wounds: *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2

[48] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 36

> them as need excite the least apprehension in the Government, for the blacks, however large their number, have never yet ventured to attack a party consisting of even three armed men.[49]

Arthur repeated these sentiments several times. It is true that he did on occasion use the term 'warfare' to describe Aboriginal actions but it was always clear from the context that he never meant either traditional set-piece warfare or guerilla warfare. Even at the height of the hostilities in November 1830, he wrote:

> although their natural timidity still prevents them from openly attacking even two armed persons, however great their number, yet they will, with a patience quite inexhaustible, watch a cottage or a field for days together, until the unsuspecting inhabitants afford some opening, of which the savages instantly avail themselves, and suddenly spear to death the defenceless victims of their indiscriminate vengeance; and success in various instances seems now to have made them as eager in this mode of warfare (their object being to plunder as well as to destroy the white inhabitants,) as they were in pursuing the kangaroo. Two Europeans who will face them will drive 50 savages before them, but still they return and watch until their unerring spears can bring some victim to the ground.[50]

Nothing here resembles the grudging respect of an old soldier for his adversaries. In this context, Arthur's use of the term 'warfare' does not concede to the Aborigines any status as warrior counterparts. It is a figure of speech, a surrogate term for mere violence. Similarly, in October 1828, when they made their decision to impose martial law in the settled districts, the members of Arthur's Executive Council spoke in broad terms of a general uprising by the Aborigines. The minutes recorded: 'The outrages of the aboriginal Natives amount to a complete declaration of hostilities against the settlers generally.' However, on the same page, the council acknowledged the reality of the Aborigines' lack of either political or military organisation: 'so totally do they appear to be without government amongst themselves, that the Council much doubt if any reliance could be placed upon any negotiation which might be entered into with those who appear to be their chiefs, or with any tribe collectively.'[51]

The evidence about what happened on the Aborigines' side of the frontier in the 1820s shows it did not amount to warfare in any plausible meaning of the term. The overwhelming majority of the Abo-

[49] Arthur to Murray, 4 November 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 181

[50] Arthur to Murray, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 233

[51] Minutes of the Executive Council, 31 October 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 183

rigines' targets were not troops or police but the convict stockmen who worked as assigned servants on the most outlying land of the white settlements. Some of these men were employed on their own, others with a mate or an overseer. In the 1820s these men, though convicts, were usually armed with muskets because of the threat of Aboriginal assault. However, while they were clearing fields, chopping down trees or splitting timber, they had to put down their guns while they worked. Most of the attacks by Aborigines occurred during unguarded moments of this kind. In other words, the whites were usually assaulted or killed while they were unarmed. Often, the blacks would lie in the thickly forested hills for days watching stock-huts on the plain below, waiting for the right moment to strike.

In her chapter entitled 'War: The Aboriginal Response', Lyndall Ryan has five pages of description of assaults by Aborigines between 1824 and 1830 that fit this pattern.[52] In almost every case, the action consisted of the natives approaching a hut containing from one to three people, who they greatly outnumbered, then assaulting or killing the inhabitants and making off with quantities of food, blankets and portable goods. A small minority of the incidents she records were provoked by revenge for assaults by settlers. On the surface, most of the actions by the Aborigines were nothing more than what would be recognized as crimes in any human culture: robbery, assault and murder.

For the guerilla warfare thesis to be credible, these acts have to be elevated above the level of crime or revenge. For this they needed two qualities: a political objective and a form of organization to achieve their end. It is true, as Reynolds demonstrates, that there were some settlers in the early colonial period who interpreted Aboriginal violence as patriotism and the defence of their country. But the fact that Reynolds has to rely entirely on the *colonists* to express these ideas is illuminating in itself. Despite their best efforts, Reynolds, Ryan and Plomley have never found a statement made by a tribal Aborigine during the Black War that expressed a patriotic or nationalist sentiment.

There is not even a statement of this kind to be found in the diaries of George Augustus Robinson in which he records in considerable detail the numerous conversations he had with Aborigines between 1829 and 1834. Robinson himself thought the Aborigines were patriots and wrote in November 1829 that 'they have a tradition among them that the white men have usurped their territory'.[53] But this is Robinson speaking, not an Aborigine, and was recorded in his diary

[52] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp 115–21
[53] Robinson, diary, 23 November 1929, *Friendly Mission*, p 88

before his expedition started out. Similarly, in 1832 he also wrote that Aborigines complained 'that their country had been taken from them'.[54] This was not a diary entry but an official report he wrote in Hobart in January 1832, a month after he had captured the last outstanding band of the Big River–Oyster Bay tribes. He made a similar comment in June 1832 while at Cape Grim, but again this entry did not record a conversation with an Aborigine.[55] Tellingly, Robinson never recorded even one phrase in his discussions with Aborigines in which they express these ideas themselves. In Robinson's diaries, the Aborigines give plenty of explanations for their actions based on individual wrongs, such as being assaulted by whites and having their women stolen or enticed away, but none about defending their country.

The best the orthodox school can come up with are two invectives heard by victims during Aboriginal attacks on settlers. The first was heard on 3 November 1826: 'go away, go away'; the second on 21 February 1830: 'parrawar, parrawar, go away you white bugger, what business have you here?' Orthodox historians routinely quote these lines, thinking it self-evident that they express nationalist complaints about dispossession. Brian Plomley says they 'suggest their reason for attacking was a wish to rid their country of the European settlers'.[56] Sharon Morgan thinks they showed the natives wanted to be rid of the brutality and racism the invaders brought with them.[57] The only thing these comments really suggest is how desperate these historians are to shore up their thesis with evidence so transparently unconvincing. The reason for historians' inability to produce genuinely patriotic statements from the Aborigines during the Black War is simple: none were made. This absence is telling. Had a tribal native ever made a statement of this kind, we can be sure it would have featured prominently in both the contemporary and the historical literature.

The only comment by an Aborigine that comes even close to being a complaint about dispossession was allegedly made by Black Tom in November 1828 during an interview with the Lieutenant-Governor. At the time, Tom was employed as a member of Gilbert Robertson's roving party. In discussing his policies for ending the hostilities, Arthur said he would set up a territory for the natives from which white men would be banned from entry. Tom replied that the Aborigines could not be confined to any territory and they would

[54] Robinson, report, 25 January 1832, *Friendly Mission*, p 571.
[55] Robinson, diary, 4 June 1832, *Friendly Mission*, p 612
[56] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 22; Reynolds cites the same invective, *Fate of a Free People*, p 48
[57] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 157

leave and spear more whites. Arthur replied that he would jail those who did. Tom replied:

> Put him in a gaol, Mata Guberna!! You take it him own country, take it him black woman, kill 't right out, all him litta child — den you put him in your gaol. Ah, Mata Guberna, dat a very good way. 'Pose you like dat way — 'pose all same dat black un! I nebber like dat way. You better kill it right out.[58]

This conversation is not from a government source but from Henry Melville's book denouncing Arthur's policy towards the Aborigines. The dialogue was, Melville says, 'reported by a by-stander', whom he does not name. In itself, this is highly unlikely since Tom did not speak in the kind of American Negro vernacular reproduced by Melville. Moreover, no one in Australia, black or white, addressed those in authority as 'Mata' or Master. Several other accounts of statements by Tom indicated he spoke like an Englishman. His white foster mother said 'he spoke English perfectly',[59] as he would have since he was brought up from early childhood in the middle-class household of the Hobart merchant Thomas Birch. Even if we accept the conversation as authentic, however, it still does not count as the opinion of a tribal Aborigine, which Tom was not.

In fact, the sheer paucity of such sentiments is itself evidence that political motives were unlikely to have been behind the outbreak of violence. If the Aborigines really had political objectives, then, to give themselves at least a platform for negotiation, they would have made the colonists well aware of them. The fact that they never in twenty-five years made any political approaches to the British, who they knew were much more powerful and numerous than they, and never attempted any kind of meeting, bargaining or negotiation with them, speaks of a people who not only had no political objectives but no sense of a collective interest of any kind.

In *Fate of a Free People*, Henry Reynolds attempts to put as favourable a gloss as he can on the political abilities of the Tasmanians, portraying their final capitulations to George Augustus Robinson between 1831 and 1834 as attempts at negotiating 'terms of settlement'.[60] As Chapter Seven argues, however, these were not procedures conducted by viable communities but abject surrenders, enacted in most cases by collections of individuals from several different tribes that had all but disintegrated. In the whole period of their relationship

[58] quoted by Henry Melville, *The History of Van Diemen's Land*, ed. George Mackaness, Horwitz-Grahame, Sydney, 1965, p 76

[59] Tom's foster mother told this to James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Sampson, Low, Son and Marston, London, 1870, p 96

[60] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 151

with the British after 1803, the Tasmanian Aborigines showed no evidence of anything that deserved the name of political skills at all.

The second quality that would have elevated Aboriginal violence into something more than criminal behaviour would have been some form of military organization. But, again, this is conspicuous by its absence. In fact, this was one of the great frustrations of Arthur's regime. The indigenous Tasmanians were most unlike the indigenous tribes of North America, who had political authorities, military commanders and military alliances. In Van Diemen's Land, Arthur could find no one to negotiate with. While the minutes of his Executive Council in August 1830 did say that the murders of settlers by the natives 'can be considered in no other light than as acts of warfare against the settlers generally, and that a warfare of the most dreadful description', at the same time they also complained about Aborigines 'who live in tribes independent of each other, and who appear to be without government of any kind, and ... are without sense of the obligation of promises'.[61] As noted earlier, Arthur also said that 'there is no decided combined movement among the Native tribes, nor ... any such systematic warfare exhibited by any of them as need excite the least apprehension in the Government'. Not even the most sympathetic of the colonists disagreed with this.

None of the historians who support the guerilla warfare thesis have ever shown Arthur was mistaken. The Aborigines never developed any of the forms of organization, command, strategy, intelligence or weapons supply that have been associated with genuine guerilla warfare in other countries over the past two hundred years. Even though the historians of Tasmania use the term, none of them have ever discussed its meaning in any detail to demonstrate what they are trying to prove. They never advance any criteria by which an action could be judged as guerilla warfare or otherwise. Any kind of black hostility from 1824 onwards is automatically labelled this way, with no critical analysis ever thought necessary. The clearest illustration of this is the following statement by Lyndall Ryan describing the actions of a group of Tasmanian Aborigines who were taken across Bass Strait to the Port Phillip District (Victoria), where they absconded:

> In August 1841, Truganini, Matilda, Fanny, Timmy and Pevay, had begun a series of raids in the Western Port–Dandenong districts, looting shepherds' huts and wounding four stockkeepers. Their tactics had all the marks of sustained guerilla resistance to white settlement.[62]

[61] Minutes of the Executive Council, 27 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia,* 4, pp 235, 236

[62] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 197

Now, none of this can have had anything to do with guerilla warfare. These raids were not made on enemy troops but, as usual, on remote shepherds. Moreover, these 'guerillas' were in what was to them a completely foreign country where they were intruders just as much as anyone from Europe. The notion that they were offering 'resistance' to white incursions onto the tribal lands of mainland Aborigines, with whom they had no cultural, linguistic, tribal or kin connections of any kind, is absurd. But this is what passes for historical analysis in the book described by Henry Reynolds as 'by far the best and most scholarly work on the Tasmanian Aborigines'.[63]

The argument that the hostilities amounted to a patriotic guerilla war depends entirely upon interpretations of the Aborigines' overt actions made by white historians. In making this case, these historians have not tried to stand outside the parameters of their own culture to encompass the very different mentality of the Tasmanian natives. Instead, they have taken concepts derived from the political structure of the modern world and imposed them, with no cultural filter of any kind, onto the mental universe of a hunter-gatherer people. The strategy of guerilla warfare was adopted by European nationalists in the early nineteenth century. In the 1950s and 1960s it was taken up by a number of anti-colonial political movements in Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia. The orthodox historians of Tasmania want us to believe that the Aborigines intuitively anticipated all this by spontaneously adopting a form of combat that was not a part of their existing cultural repertoire and whose methods and objectives they had never read about or heard explained. This is not history; it is the imposition onto Aboriginal history of an anachronistic and incongruous piece of ideology.

ABORIGINAL CONCEPTS OF LAND OWNERSHIP AND TRESPASS

The assumption by the orthodox school that British occupation of Aboriginal territory meant that conflict would have been 'natural' is another assumption that deserves to be investigated rather than simply asserted as an obvious truth.[64] It might seem natural to a European mind, accustomed to the notions of measuring territory, dividing it into areas and conferring exclusive usage on them, to resent the intrusion of newcomers onto one's own tracts of land. However, we cannot impose the notion of exclusive use of private property, or even the concept of 'land' itself, onto the mentality of nomadic hunter-gatherer tribesmen without at least some evidence that they

[63] cover blurb on Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians,* 2nd edn. 1996

[64] 'Friction was natural', according to Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 155

thought this way. To do so is to breach the historian's duty to try to see the world through the eyes of his subjects. One of the long-standing principles of the discipline is that historians should not impose their own values, judgements, biases and assumptions onto the people they study. In the nineteenth century, the influential German school of historiography said historians should aspire to *verstehen*, that is, the ability to think themselves into the mentalities of their subjects.[65] This has always been one of the historian's most difficult tasks. It is hard enough to think oneself into the mentality of people who lived at different times in one's own culture, let alone those of other cultures *and* other times. Nonetheless, the obligation is always there.

Yet this is precisely what the orthodox historians of Tasmania have failed to do when they discuss Aboriginal attitudes to land tenure. They have assumed that the presence of the settlers on the land caused resentment and violence for no better reason than this is how they themselves would feel if someone else moved onto their land. As Reynolds has demonstrated, there were a number of colonists at the time who sympathized with the Aborigines' plight and tried to see things from their perspective. One of the most eloquent spokesmen Reynolds cites, the *Launceston Advertiser*'s correspondent 'J. E' (J. E. Calder), asked of the natives: 'are they not rebellious subjects but an injured nation, defending in their own way, their rightful possessions?'[66] To see things this way is to look through the eyes of England. Every concept in this statement — rebellion, subjects, nation, even 'rightful possessions' — derives from European culture. Men like Calder were doing no more than saying how *they*, as Englishmen, would respond if they saw *their* country invaded. It is not good enough, as Reynolds has done, to simply quote these contemporary Englishmen as evidence of the native mentality. They were operating with the same Euro-centric assumptions as the orthodox historians themselves. Significantly, not one of the colonial sympathizers ever cited a comment by the Aborigines themselves about their views on the subject. None of these men — James Calder, Richard Dry, Gilbert Robertson, Henry Melville, George Augustus Robinson, R. M. Ayrton, or the newspaper correspondents 'Zeno' and 'A Border Settler' — ever provided a direct quotation from an Aborigine objecting to his dispossession from the land by the colonists.[67]

[65] *Verstehen* is a concept best known as part of the philosophy of history of Wilhelm Dilthey. While some modern cultural historians think the concept is exclusively confined to an interpretative and literary approach to history, it is quite compatible with an empirical approach to the discipline.
[66] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 84. For identification of 'J. E.' as Calder, see my Chapter Two, p 36
[67] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp 30–3, 83–5

Some orthodox historians, especially Lyndall Ryan, have supported their thesis with evidence from anthropological studies about the attitudes of the Tasmanian Aborigines towards the territories on which they hunted and foraged.[68] This evidence comes from observations made at a time when the discipline of anthropology was in its infancy. The last groups of Aborigines were removed to Flinders Island in the early 1830s before any extended field studies of their tribal life had been conducted. The most 'scientific' studies were made by the French maritime explorers Jacques de Labillardière in 1792–3 and François Péron during voyages from 1800 to 1803, but neither spoke native languages and both spent only short periods with the Aborigines. For historians and anthropologists, the principal source for information about all aspects of Tasmanian Aboriginal life, including information about their tribal territories, are the diaries written by George Augustus Robinson during his 'Friendly Mission' from 1829 to 1834. Robinson had no academic training but wherever he went he recorded ethnographic information, with an eye to eventually publishing it himself. Modern anthropologists have stressed how limited are the conclusions that may be drawn from his diaries, especially since they were written at a time when Aboriginal society was breaking down irretrievably. Nonetheless, the six years of Robinson's observations provide the nearest equivalent to anthropological fieldwork among the Tasmanians that we have. The most comprehensive survey of Robinson's ethnographic data was made in 1974 by Rhys Jones.[69]

At the time of British colonization, Jones argues, the basic social unit in Tasmania was the band, which usually numbered from forty to seventy people, including children. Each band had its own territory, the core of which was a prominent geographical location and foraging zone, such as a headland or estuary. Each band's territory occupied about 200 to 300 square miles, which was known as the 'country' of the band it belonged to. Although bands lived mainly in the vicinity of their country they also foraged widely on the territories of other bands. In some cases this was sanctioned by their neighbours, in other cases it was resisted. It all depended on the tribal affiliation and the relationships both among bands and between tribes.

[68] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Chapter One

[69] Rhys Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', appendix to Norman Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974. A more recent study by Brian Plomley was published in 1992, but it is a much slighter account: N. J. B. Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices as Tribal Indicators among the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Occasional Paper 5, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992

There is good evidence, Jones argues, for the existence of at least fifty-three to fifty-five bands. Bands were part of larger tribal affiliations. There were nine major tribal groups and all were cultural rather than political associations, composed of bands who shared a language and intermarriage. The borders of tribal territory ranged from well-defined lines associated with prominent geographical features to broad transition zones between friendly tribes. Bands often entered and passed through the territory of neighbouring and even distant tribes along well-defined tracks.

Jones himself acknowledges there were so many exceptions to the boundaries of his map (reproduced on page 368), that they make it misleading. Tasmanian tribal divisions should not be read as a patchwork of small states like Europe, with fixed boundaries. The Aborigines held very fluid versions of their territory, which changed with the seasons. Here is a partial list of their movements: the people from the south-west around Port Davey paid regular visits to, and spoke the language of, the people on the south-east and on Bruny Island. They also made regular visits up the west coast, as far north as the Arthur River, and sometimes to Cape Grim. Some of them even had a name for Table Cape on the north coast. The bands from the north-west, who normally ranged from Circular Head to Sandy Cape, sometimes travelled as far east as the Mersey River, as far south as Port Davey, and as far inland as the Surrey Hills where they met people from Big River. People from Bruny Island made seasonal visits along the southern coast as far west as the sealing grounds of the Maatsuker and De Witt Islands. They also visited the Tasman Peninsula on the east coast and were sometimes seen at Oyster Bay. The Oyster Bay Aborigines traversed the same country on the east coast but also went inland, deep inside the territory of the Big River tribe, travelling as far west as the Ouse River and Lake Echo. They also went up the east coast, as far north as the Bay of Fires. The Oyster Bay Aborigines could converse with people from both the south-east and the north-east. The coastal people of the north travelled as far south as Lake Echo, in Big River territory. And the Big River people were the most mobile of all, annually visiting Cape Grim on the far north-west tip of the island, Port Sorell on the mid north coast, Oyster Bay on the east coast and Pitt Water and Storm Bay in the south.[70]

[70] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', pp 331–46. In describing these movements, Jones uses the tribal categories applied by the colonists rather than those of the Aborigines. To call a group, for instance, 'the Big River tribe' or 'Oyster Bay people' is actually to apply European terminology and to identify them in geographic terms invented by the colonists rather than those of Aboriginal culture, which did not recognize these categories. Brian Plomley is highly

Despite their mobility, Jones argues each of the bands had a keen sense of possession and of the exclusive use of territory, as well as the notion of trespass. To unwelcome incursions into their own country, they responded with violence. Jones writes:

> Movements outside this territory, and of alien bands into it, were carefully sanctioned and had reciprocal economic advantages to the bands concerned. Trespass was usually a challenge to or punished by war.[71]

If Jones's analysis is accurate, the Aborigines certainly had the mental framework and cultural predisposition to respond violently to the presence of interlopers on their land. The problem with this argument, however, is that the evidence Jones himself presents does not support it.

Jones has gone through the 1000 published pages of Robinson's diaries and extracted information about each tribal group's location, language, population, seasonal movements and political relationships. He has then compiled this information under a profile of each of the nine tribes he identifies. So it is possible to look at his summary of information about each tribe to see how possessive it was about its territory and how often it engaged in conflicts with other tribes over breaches of its territorial sovereignty. Jones records a number of the reasons Robinson gave why members of some tribes and bands fought with others. Among the North West tribe, for instance, the bands from Port Davey, Pieman River and Sandy Cape had joined together to fight the West Point band. This quarrel had started, Robinson recorded, when some Sandy Cape men had speared and abducted some women from the West Point band.[72] On another occasion, bands from Oyster Bay and the Tasman Peninsula had united to fight a band from the Great Lake district because the latter had refused to give them red ochre and shell necklaces. In the ensuing struggle, several Great Lake women were killed or abducted.[73] One of the most common reason for fighting among tribes was the existence of long-standing vendettas. Robinson recorded the case of an Aboriginal boy in his party who came from what Jones called the North tribe. The other natives said he was likely to be killed by north-eastern Aborigines because of a long-standing war in which his father had already been killed. This war was perpetuated for no

critical of Jones's categorisation for just this reason: Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices*, pp 15–16

[71] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 328

[72] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 333

[73] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 340

known reason apart from revenge for previous killings on both sides.[74]

In Jones's own analysis of tribal conflicts, he offers only one case where territorial intrusion might have led to conflict. This was in September 1830 when three natives from Robinson's travelling party left him on the north coast to return to their own country. Two of them met a party of hostile natives who chased and tried to kill them. However, when you check the relevant diary entry, you find Robinson does not suggest any reason at all why these men were chased. Jones makes the supposition that it was because they were 'intruders' on the territory of their attackers but the chase could just as easily have been provoked by any one of the previously documented reasons. There is no indication in Robinson's diary either way.[75]

If you go through all the diary entries, you find there are numerous references to internecine conflicts between Aboriginal bands and tribes and plenty of reasons given for them. However, the offence of trespass is conspicuous by its absence. I read the whole of Plomley's edition of Robinson's diaries looking for confirmation of Jones' statement that 'trespass was usually a challenge to or punished by war', but could find none. I then double-checked three of Plomley's index entries: the forty references in the index to *tribal matters: inter-tribal animosity and conflict*; the eight references to *tribal matters: migrations and movements of tribes* and the eighteen references to *tribal matters: tribal boundaries etc.* None of these sixty-six references provides even one example of trespass provoking violence.

This is not because Robinson failed to discuss the reasons for conflict between tribes. As Jones's own summary shows, Robinson recorded these details when he knew of them. The most common reason for inter-tribal warfare was the abduction of women. The second most common cause was the existence of a long-standing vendetta between bands in which one killing had to be repaid in kind, and it avenged in turn. My own tally of the causes of inter-tribal conflict recorded in Robinson's diaries is:

Disputes over women: ten [76]

Long-standing vendettas: five [77]

[74] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 345

[75] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 334; Robinson, diary, 26 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 220

[76] Robinson, diary, 21 June 1830, 24 July 1830, 25 October 1830, 16 July 1831, 15 November 1831, 11 December 1831, 15 December 1831, 19–20–22 June 1832, 19–21 June 1834, *Friendly Mission*, pp 181, 187, 257, 379, 520, 548, 554, 618–9, 887–8

Conflicts over goods, including game, ochre and guns: three [78]
Tribal honour and treaties: two [79]

In the majority of his records of inter-tribal hostilities, Robinson does not venture their cause because his discussion with his native informants was not prolonged enough, but in several cases he had the opportunity to hear the details of tribal conflict at great length. Internecine combat and the injury and death wreaked on other tribes was one of the favourite topics of native story tellers. The orthodox opinion that, before the British arrived, the Aborigines enjoyed an arcadian existence that was 'inoffensive, innocent and happy',[80] is belied by the pleasure they took in describing the pain and suffering they regularly inflicted on their tribal enemies. On 15 July 1831, for example, Robinson made the following diary entry.

> Tonight Woorrady entertained us with a relation of the exploits of his nation and neighbouring nations or allies. ... Said that the Brayhelukequonne natives spear plenty of his and neighbouring tribes, that they stop behind trees and when they see a native go by himself they go and spear him. When the natives relate those exploits they do it by singing it, accompanying the same with different gestures corresponding with the circumstances of the story — the manner of fighting, the blows given, where inflicted and how, whether by spear, waddy or stones, or wrestling, or cutting with sharp stones, pointing to the parts of the wounded. Wooraddy is very animated in his relation of the circumstances of his nation, and having a good voice it is peculiarly interesting to attend to him.[81]

It is telling that in all these native accounts of inter-tribal hostilities, some of which took hours to narrate, there is not one reference to trespass as a cause of conflict. There are no statements of the kind: 'we fought them because they came onto our territory', or any variants thereof. This absence is itself strong evidence that the culture of the Tasmanian Aborigines did not have such a concept.

A more recent analysis of Tasmanian Aboriginal tribal and territorial divisions by Brian Plomley supports this interpretation, even

[77] Robinson, diary, 28 March 1830, 30 August 1830, 13 November 1831, 15 December 1831, 19 June 1834, *Friendly Mission*, pp 140, 416, 517, 554, 887

[78] Robinson, diary, 25 September 1830, 24 January 1834, 28 February 1834, *Friendly Mission*, pp 219, 837, 854

[79] Robinson, diary, 25 October 1830, 1 August 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 257, 392

[80] 'J. E.', *Launceston Advertiser*, cited by Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 84

[81] Robinson, diary, 15 July 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 378–9. See also diary, 31 May 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 166

though Plomley himself starts from the assumption that tribal groups must have had some restrictions on access to their territory. He says that various native roads gave access to tribal territories and that there was 'probably' some regulation of this access. However, in his own analysis of the evidence from Robinson's diary, Plomley admits he could find none. He says the coastal tribes permitted the inland tribes to cross their territories to visit the coast, but then acknowledges: 'The circumstances under which permission was given to them to do so are quite unknown.'[82] He should have added that whether any permission was ever required, sought or given is equally unknown. This was also true of the very concept of 'permission' itself. There is no evidence that the Aborigines had such a concept in relation to access to land.

Overall, Robinson's diaries indicate that some Aborigines did identify themselves with certain territories to which they had an emotional affinity because of childhood and family connections. For instance, when Robinson was on the high plains on the west bank of the Ouse River in mid-November 1831, one woman who accompanied him said this was the place of her nativity and was the country of the Lairmairrener nation.[83] Beyond this, however, there is no evidence from what we know of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture that they had a concept of what other societies know as 'land' at all. They did not even have the sacred sites found in some mainland Aboriginal cultures. They certainly had the notion that the game and other fruits of the land belonged to them, as Chapter Two discusses. But the idea of 'land' itself as property is quite different and is a concept that derives from agricultural society, not that of hunter-gatherers. The Aborigines did not even have a word for it. None of the four vocabularies of Tasmanian Aboriginal language compiled in the nineteenth century, nor any of the lists of their phrases, sentences or songs, contained the word 'land'. Nor did they have words for 'own', 'possess' or 'property', or any of their derivatives.[84] In her attempt to excoriate English colonists for settling the country, Sharon Morgan claims they displaced the existing landowners:

> To the Aborigines, the land was the centre of life. They knew it intimately, and without it they were set adrift. They belonged to the land as much as it belonged to them.[85]

[82] Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes* and *Cicatrices*, pp 9, 14
[83] Robinson, diary, 13 and 19 November 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 517, 523
[84] H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899, Appendices A, B, C, D, E and F, pp i–xxxiii
[85] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 154

But Morgan has simply plucked these loaded phrases out of late twentieth-century black politics and offers no ethnographic or any other kind of contemporary evidence in their support — because there is none. Nowhere in Robinson's extensive diaries, nor in any of the other studies of Tasmanian Aboriginal language and culture, is there any suggestion of land as property. The notions of the British, and of agricultural society in general, of the exclusive possession of territory and the defence of it by law or by force, were not part of the Aborigines' mental universe. In short, the Tasmanian Aborigines did not own the land. The concept was not part of their culture.

THE DELAYED RESPONSE TO THE BRITISH PRESENCE

The strongest argument that the colonists' possession of their land was not the reason behind the Aborigines' violence was that they took so long to respond to the British presence. All the orthodox historians except Ryan agree that for the first twenty years of European settlement, relations between the Aborigines and the settlers were peaceful. From 1803 until 1824, attacks were irregular, their frequency was low — an average of one or two a year, mostly in retaliation for assaults on themselves — and the colonists regarded the natives, as noted in the previous chapter, as 'the most peaceable creatures in the universe'. In his survey of all incidents of native attacks on settlers, Brian Plomley admits: 'Between 1803 and 1823 there was no concerted effort by the Aborigines to drive the settlers from the lands they had appropriated.'[86] If the Aborigines had a concept of preserving their own land against invaders, then this should have been evident right from the outset. It would have been at first contact when the intrusion would have been the most offensive to native sensibilities.

I have only found two documented incidents in the period of initial colonisation that could possibly be interpreted as Aboriginal assaults on intruders for trespass, rather than disputes over the taking of native game. The first occurred in November 1804 when about eighty Aborigines came into the newly established Port Dalrymple camp and attacked the guard of marines. They seized the sergeant and tried to throw him into the sea but were driven off by gunfire, which killed one and wounded another.[87] The second incident occurred late in 1805 when the storekeeper Alexander Riley, and a soldier, Private Bent, out surveying a stock route for the Port Dalrymple settlement, encountered a group of fifty natives who wounded them with

[86] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 13

[87] Paterson to King, 26 November 1804, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 607. It is probably stretching things too far even to blame this assault on resistance to trespass. It is more plausibly interpreted as attempted robbery.

spears.[88] Even if other historians want to interpret some other incidents this way, it is clear their number would still be small. Yet this was the time when the intruders were numerically weakest and physically at their most vulnerable.

Elsewhere in the South Pacific, this combination did lead to immediate violence. British sailors encountered sustained hostilities in the eighteenth century during their first attempts to make landfalls in the fiercely territorial Polynesian societies of Tahiti and New Zealand. When Captain Samuel Wallis tried to enter Matavai Bay in 1767, he was surrounded by between 400 and 600 Tahitian canoes and showered with rocks. Captain James Cook's first visit to New Zealand in 1769 was greeted with violent opposition by the Maoris, as had been Abel Tasman's first attempt to land on the South Island in 1642.[89]

If the Tasmanian Aborigines had a concept of trespass that obliged them to challenge intruders to war, it was unlikely they would have waited twenty years before they put it into practice against the British. After the initial shock of the appearance of these strange new people, the Aborigines quickly recognized them as men like themselves. They never regarded them as supernatural beings and were not afraid of them. As the conflicts over kangaroo hunting in Chapter Two demonstrated, whenever they found the British taking native game, they confiscated it under threat of violence. They continued to do this even after they had experienced the firepower of British muskets. The Aborigines clearly had a sense of proprietorial rights towards their game that impelled them to respond. Just as clearly, however, they did not put the same value on the occupation of their territory. If, like other indigenous societies of the South Pacific, their culture had defined the British as invaders of their land, then the Aborigines would have been obliged to act immediately, not delay the process for two decades.

Moreover, as noted in the previous chapter, some groups of Aborigines had been frequenting Hobart, Richmond and the southern midlands townships since 1813–14. If they were coming in to the white settlements for food and shelter more than ten years before the hostilities began, this also indicates that some of them, at least, did not

[88] Paterson to King, December 1805, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, pp 649–50

[89] J. E. Heeres (ed.) *Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal of his Discovery of Van Diemen's Land and New Zealand in 1642*, Amsterdam, 1898; George Robertson, *The Discovery of Tahiti: A Journal of the Second Voyage of* HMS Dolphin *Round the World 1766–1768*, ed. H. Carrington, Hakluyt Society, London, 1948; J. C. Beaglehole, *The Life of Captain James Cook*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1974

regard the colonists as invaders who deserved to be punished for dispossessing them.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PORT DAVEY MOB

There is one group of Aborigines whose actions and motives clearly do not fit the thesis that Aboriginal hostilities represented a patriotic defence of their homelands. For this reason, the orthodox historians rarely mention them. There is evidence that suggests the Port Davey Aborigines were one of the most active bands in murdering and robbing white settlers in 1829. In July that year, when George Augustus Robinson was providing rations to the Aborigines on Bruny Island, a group of nine of the Port Davey band arrived to visit their friends at his mission. The next day, after they had left, one of the Bruny Island women told Robinson about their role in the hostilities.

> I learnt to my greatest surprise that this very tribe had been above all others most active in the perpetration of those atrocities which have filled our newspaper columns and caused such a general consternation throughout the settled districts of this colony. This accounts for the sudden departure of those newcomers, being apprehensive of remaining lest they should be overtaken by the iron rod of justice. It now appears beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Port Davey tribe are in league with others who have conjointly carried on their bloody massacre.[90]

Now, just because a native told Robinson this story and he recorded it in his diary does not make it true. Nonetheless, in December that year there was confirmation the Port Davey mob undertook these kinds of activities when twelve Aborigines attacked a farm in the New Norfolk district and speared its owner. Robinson went with four constables to investigate the incident and interviewed the farmer before he died from his wounds. Robinson found a number of indicators that the Port Davey mob was responsible, such as the description of the offenders, their language and behaviour, and the direction from which they came. He concluded that this attack, plus a series of others in the district at the same time, was the work of the natives from Port Davey.[91]

This band of Aborigines poses a number of problems for the orthodox thesis. No one had taken their land or disturbed their hunting grounds. They largely inhabited the south and west coasts, from south of Macquarie Harbour to the South East Cape. There was no white settlement in their area in 1829 and, in fact, there is still none, even today. It remains uninhabited wilderness. Moreover, the Port Davey

[90] Robinson, diary, 11 July 1829, *Friendly Mission*, p 67
[91] Robinson, diary, 20 December 1829, *Friendly Mission,* pp 91, 107 n 63

blacks had no hunting grounds that they had to defend from colonial invaders. Away from the immediate coastline, the land is mountainous, barren, and equally useless for hunting, farming or grazing. The Aborigines lived mostly on the rocky coast where their staple diet was not kangaroo but shellfish. So they had no patriotic or territorial motives for assaults and murders in the settled districts on the east of the island.

Rather than try to account for this discrepancy in their thesis, the orthodox historians simply pretend the Port Davey mob's actions never happened. Reynolds does not mention them in either of his books on Tasmania. Lyndall Ryan has an appendix in her book where she records the number of Europeans killed by individual tribes between 1800 and 1835. She gives all the tribes some white deaths to their credit, except the South West tribe, that is, the Port Davey mob, who score nil.[92] Yet it is hard to believe that Reynolds and Ryan could be unaware of their activities, since both have made extensive use of Robinson's diaries, the very document in which he records their involvement in the 'bloody massacre' of white settlers. Because the Port Davey mob not only fails to support their thesis but also provides an example contrary to it, the members of the orthodox school have simply airbrushed them out of history.

HISTORICAL ORTHODOXY AND THE CONTROL OF DEBATE

Overall, then, the thesis that the Aborigines engaged in guerilla warfare in response to the violation of their territory and the usurpation of their tribal lands is implausible. Their hostilities were not of the guerilla kind and they did not act as if they regarded the colonists as trespassers. To say this, however, is not to argue that the arrival of the British did not have a profound effect on the Aborigines nor to claim that they accepted the colonists with equanimity. There must have been a profound psychological trauma in Tasmania, just as there was everywhere else in the Pacific when isolated native tribesmen, who had previously imagined they were the only people in all the world, were forced to come to terms, virtually overnight, with an alarming expansion of their mental universe, as well as the questioning of their religions, the breaking of their taboos, and the restructuring of their hierarchies.

There have long been debates among historians and anthropologists over the impact of the arrival of Europeans elsewhere in the Pacific.[93]

[92] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Appendix 2, 2nd edition, p 314

[93] The most publicized and most instructive of these debates has been between Marshall Sahlins in *Islands of History* (1985) and *How 'Natives' Think* (1995) and Gananath Obeyesekere in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1992),

These debates have ranged across historical evidence left by European observers and anthropological analyses of native custom, religion and culture. Their aim has been to explain how the pre-existing culture of the native peoples of the Americas and the Pacific islands responded when history so abruptly intervened with the arrival of the European explorers, missionaries, traders and colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Tasmania, by contrast, such debates are notable for how superficial they have been. You can read almost the entire body of work of the orthodox historians and, apart from the guerilla warfare thesis, never come away with any sense of how Aboriginal culture and religion reacted to the arrival of the strangers, or indeed any sense that their cultural reaction even needs to be considered. Apart from the work of Brian Plomley and Rhys Jones, there has been little cross-disciplinary debate or intellectual fertilization between anthropology and history. Even Plomley separates most of his writings into one or the other of the two fields of study and offers only a cursory discussion of the cultural consequences of the colonization of Aboriginal land.[94] His most extensive analysis of the British disruption of tribal culture is confined to four pages towards the end of his commentary in *Friendly Mission*, where he writes:

> The occupation of the tribal territories may also in some degree have disrupted the cultural life of the tribe, but it is unlikely that it would have done so in any other sense than in preventing the use by the tribe of familiar camping grounds, drinking places and hunting and food-gathering areas, because the Tasmanian aborigines lacked the highly organized sacred life of the Australian aborigines, which was identified with the spirit of place.[95]

These comments are not reproduced here simply because they support the thesis of this book. It is also to underline the fact that the academic literature contains so few comments of this kind. It is important to recognize, however, that the absence of such a debate is not a mere oversight. Nor can it be blamed on the paucity of the Tasmanian evidence, because this has been an endemic problem for

over the impact of first contact between the British and the Hawaiian islanders in the eighteenth century. For a summary and commentary see Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering our Past*, 4th edition, Encounter Books, San Francisco, 2000, Chapters Three and Nine.

[94] Brian Plomley's *The Tasmanian Aborigines*, Plomley Foundation, Launceston, 1993, is a time-free anthropological study of their pre-contact culture and society, in contrast to his introductions and commentaries on Robinson's diaries and Jorgenson's chronicle, which trace the historic details of their relations with the colonists.

[95] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 967

attempts everywhere in the Pacific to understand first contact. In other cultures, however, scholars have been able to tease a good deal of information out of very limited evidence. In Tasmania, no one has seriously tried.

The responsibility for this lies in the way the orthodox interpretation of Tasmania has stifled debate. The assumptions of orthodox history, especially its deference to the concept of guerilla warfare, have done more to close discussion on this question than anything else. This interpretation has made its supporters feel absolved from the need to probe Aboriginal culture further. Instead, they have been able to get away with the ideological sleight of hand that a nomadic hunter-gatherer people made the same kind of response as the national unification movements of Europe in the nineteenth century and the anti-colonial struggles of Asia and Africa in the twentieth.

Moreover, the orthodoxy has functioned as a moral regulator that has inhibited other historians from thinking beyond its parameters. It has denigrated those who might doubt that the Aborigines were anything but valiant defenders of their traditional lands. If you dare to question the nobility of the Aboriginal response and the compensation due to their descendants, you invite political censure. For instance, Lyndall Ryan has denounced both Brian Plomley and Vivienne Rae-Ellis for failing to support current Aboriginal demands for land, for engaging in 'the politics of denial', and for acting as 'apologists' for the British invasion.[96]

Rather than be publicly charged with such cultural offences, any historian sceptical of the orthodox story has either kept quiet or walked away from the subject. In other words, Tasmanian history has deferred to a political ideology that has prevented thought, proscribed research and impeded the development of a more convincing interpretation grounded in the Aborigines' own culture. With the objective of breaking these constraints, the rest of this chapter presents an alternative thesis about Aboriginal motivations.

BROUGHTON'S FINDINGS: VENGEANCE AND PLUNDER

In February 1830, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur appointed a committee of inquiry into the escalating violence by the Aborigines. He asked the committee to investigate the reasons for the outbreak and advise him on the policy he should adopt in response. The new Anglican Archdeacon of New South Wales, William Grant Broughton, was visiting Hobart at the time and Arthur prevailed upon him to chair the committee. Broughton was a well-educated man. He had a

[96] The denunciations of Plomley and Rae-Ellis are in the introduction to the 2nd edition of Ryan's *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp xxiv–xxvi

BA and MA from Cambridge University and was a literary scholar with publications to his name. At his primary visitation in St James Church, Sydney, in December 1829, he had announced that his policy for the church would have a paternal care for the lower orders of the colony, especially its convicts and Aborigines. He immediately took steps to finance a revival of missionary activities among the natives.[97] With such a background and such concerns, one would expect his findings about Van Diemen's Land to be considered seriously by historians. His specific brief was to investigate the causes of the hostilities. One might therefore have anticipated that Broughton's report would figure prominently in historical discussions about the causes of the Black War.

Among most orthodox historians of Tasmania, however, the opposite is the case. They have provided very little discussion of Broughton's conclusions. This is not because they have not read his report. A number of authors have mined the minutes of his committee's hearings to extract evidence from witnesses to suit their own interpretation. None, however, have properly discussed the arguments that Broughton himself put forward. Henry Reynolds tries to pass off the report as worthless because of one phrase it used. At one stage, Broughton described Aboriginal violence as the result of 'a wanton and savage spirit inherent in them'.[98] So Reynolds dismisses the report as a classical statement of 'the compulsions of savagery' and considers it unworthy of any further attention.[99] Lloyd Robson discusses the committee and some of the statements made by its witnesses, indicating he has read the minutes of evidence. But he obviously did not bother to read the main report, for he does not even realize that Broughton was on the committee, let alone that he signed the report himself.[100] Only Lyndall Ryan treats the report as the

[97] G. P. Shaw, *Patriarch and Patriot: William Grant Broughton 1788–1853*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1978, pp 23, 41–3

[98] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 207. The original transcripts of this committee from February to September 1830, later reprinted in the *British Parliamentary Papers*, are in the Archives Office of Tasmania at CBE/1, pp 3 ff. Some of the minutes are under its original name, the Committee for the Care and Treatment of the Captured Aborigines. In his select bibliography in *Fate of a Free People*, Reynolds lists other papers relating to the committee as being located at AOT CSO 1/318/7578. This is wrong. The correct location is AOT CSO 1/319/7578. Submissions to the committee from local settlers and related documents are located at AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 67–383

[99] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 67

[100] Robson, *History of Tasmania, Vol I*, pp 216–8. For some reason hard to understand, Robson lists the other committee members but omits

policy document it was. She discusses its recommendations for increased policing of the settled districts and describes their reception by the press. However, she too avoids discussing the principal causes the committee identified for the hostilities.[101]

The reason these historians are so shy about informing their readers of the main findings of this report is not hard to find. Its arguments are directly at odds with their own theses about Aboriginal patriotism, starvation and guerilla warfare. Rather than explaining Broughton's reasoning and evidence and then debating whether his conclusions were sound, as they should have done, the orthodox school acts as if his case was never made.

Broughton advanced two explanations for the violence: revenge and plunder. He thought revenge was the cause of early Aboriginal grievance but that the desire to plunder the food and household goods of the colonists subsequently took over. His inquiry went back to the start of settlement in search of causes. It accepted the evidence of some witnesses that the Aborigines had grounds for complaint over the 'lamentable encounter' at Risdon Cove. The report said the estimates of Aboriginal dead were 'as high as 50', even though it remained sceptical of the accuracy of this figure:

> the Committee from the experience they have had in the course of this inquiry of the facility with which numbers are magnified, as well as from other statements contradictory of the above, are induced to hope that the estimate is greatly overrated.[102]

The report also accepted that the Aborigines had been ill-treated by convicts and bushrangers. The latter had carried off native women and children, while the former were probably guilty of a number of atrocities. The committee noted proclamations made by former Lieutenant-Governors Collins, Davey and Sorell, condemning such acts of white 'barbarity'. The committee said it had:

> no hesitation in tracing to the manifold insults and injuries which these unhappy people have sustained from the dissolute and abandoned characters whom they have unfortunately encountered, the universal and permanent excitement of that spirit which now prevails, and which leads them to wreak indiscriminate vengeance, as often as they find opportunity, on the persons and property of the white population.[103]

Broughton, even though the main report itself, published on 19 March 1830, is signed with Broughton's name as chairman.

[101] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp 107–8

[102] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 209

[103] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 210

However, the report did not confine its accusations to the criminal elements and lower orders. It included the full range of settlers among those it held responsible:

> There is too much reason to apprehend that, as the white population spread itself more widely over the island, and the settlers came more frequently in contact with the Natives, many outrages were committed which no interposition of the government, however well disposed, could, with the means at its command, have been able to prevent. It would indeed appear that there prevailed at this period too general a forgetfulness of those rights of ordinary compassion to which, as human beings, and as the original occupants of the soil, these defenceless and ignorant people were justly entitled. They were sacrificed in many instances to momentary caprice or anger, as if the life of a savage had been unworthy of the slightest consideration; and they sustained the most unjustifiable treatment in defending themselves against outrages which it was not to be expected that any race of men should submit to without resistance, or endure without imbibing a spirit of hatred and revenge.[104]

The report quoted Sorell's view that the 'spirit of hatred and revenge' among the Aborigines had not been directed simply at those responsible for particular acts against them but had generated 'a strong thirst for revenge against all white men'.

After advancing the 'indiscriminate vengeance' thesis, however, the report said it was impossible 'with perfect certainty' to say whether the events at Risdon Cove and elsewhere had continued to influence the native feelings towards the white population. All that was certain was that relations between the two had never been perfectly secure. It then gave examples of settlers who attempted to befriend Aborigines with offers of gifts, but whose friendship had been betrayed. Some stockmen, the committee reported, had provided natives with food and shelter in what appeared to be 'friendly intercourse' that continued over several days. But they had been repaid with violence and murder:

> even on their retirement from houses where, as above stated, they [Aborigines] had been kindly received and entertained, they have been known to put to death, with the utmost wantonness and inhumanity, stock and hut-keepers whom they fell in with in retired stations at a distance from protection, and who, there is every reason to believe, had never given them the slightest provocation.[105]

[104] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 208
[105] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 210

Behaviour of this kind baffled the committee so it offered what we would now regard as a psychological explanation, arguing the Aborigines shared 'a lurking spirit of cruelty and mischievous craft' and 'a wanton and savage spirit inherent in them, and impelling them to mischief and cruelty'.[106] The report then went on to argue, however, that the current hostilities could no longer be explained simply as revenge. The mischief that now most engaged the Aborigines, the committee argued, was the desire for European food and goods. This had overtaken revenge as the principal cause of their actions.

> They are not now acting the part of injured men, seeking to avenge the wrong they have sustained, but rather that of marauders stimulated by eagerness for plunder, and the desire for artificial luxuries, the use of which has now become familiar to them.[107]

It was this argument that Arthur's Executive Council eventually used in August 1830 when it took the decision to mount the Black Line to make a decisive military action to try to end the hostilities. The council said:

> the love of plunder has of late much increased among them, yet they are equally if not chiefly actuated by a love of murder.[108]

Now, there is no serious dispute among historians that part of the Aborigines' motivation was revenge. Some had been victims of violence by settlers and their response had been directed, as Broughton said, indiscriminately at the whole of the white population. Reynolds assembles some of the evidence for revenge in *Fate of a Free People*, including some comments from sympathetic colonists.[109] George Augustus Robinson, whom he relies upon most, claimed revenge was the Aborigines' principal motive. He wrote in his diary:

> they are actuated solely by revenge, revenge to the whites for the dire enormities that had been perpetrated upon their progenitors. They bear a deadly animosity to the white inhabitant on this account, and there is scarcely one among them but what has some monstrous cruelty to relate which had been committed upon some of their kindred or nation or people.[110]

[106] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 210
[107] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 218
[108] Minutes of the Executive Council, 27 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 259
[109] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp 31–2
[110] Robinson, diary, 14 December 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 553

Oyster Bay, central midlands and Hobart Town. Detail from map by J. Arrowsmith, London, 1832 (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Robinson then went on to repeat half a dozen anecdotes told him by the natives about cruelties and murders perpetrated by whites. Even though these anecdotes are couched in the same melodramatic hyperbole on display above, there is little doubt the Aborigines' believed stories of this kind and used them to justify their own attacks on the settlers and their servants. Whether these stories are typical, reliable or even true, is another matter, which is taken up in Chapter Eight. Here it should simply be recorded that, whether warranted or not, revenge was certainly an Aboriginal purpose. Acknowledging this, of course, does not concede anything to the orthodox interpre-

tation that the Aborigines were engaged in a patriotic war using guerilla tactics. Retaliation for abuse, even though the response might be indiscriminately targeted at white people in general, does not amount to warfare and does not imply any political or territorial motives.

Even though he acknowledged its existence, however, Broughton argued that revenge took a distant second place to the principal cause he identified for Aboriginal hostilities: the desire for plunder. The following section examines the evidence for this motive.

A TASTE OF CIVIL LIFE

Few historians today would accept that the behaviour of Aborigines or anyone else could be explained in terms of inherent spirits of 'cruelty' or 'savagery'. However, most would acknowledge that the spirit of mammon still remains a valid, indeed timeless, stimulus for black people, as much as it does for white. Even the orthodox historians of Tasmania agree that the vast majority of the hostile actions by the Aborigines involved the robbery of the colonists' material goods. However, they shrink from the Broughton committee's term 'plunder' and instead argue that this kind of robbery can be accommodated within their thesis about guerilla warfare. Reynolds, for example, acknowledges that the Aborigines prized a wide range of European commodities.

> The settlers found abundant evidence of Aboriginal adaptation of European material culture — large amounts of flour made into damper, teapots and tea, clothes and blankets neatly sewn with European needles, clay pipes and tobacco. By the time of the Black War even the more remote tribes were addicted to tobacco and tea.[111]

But he then goes on to argue that the reason for the acceleration of robbery by the blacks during the late 1820s was due to the demands of the guerilla war:

> European food was of critical importance to the war effort — it was ready to use, could be carried and stored, and would not spoil ... the most important reason for switching to European food was to relieve the Aborigines of the arduous food quest which, given the ever-present pressure of the European roving parties, was intensely dangerous.[112]

Sharon Morgan uses the same argument: 'the use of European food was an important tactic in guerilla warfare, since it allowed the Natives to spend more time attacking the enemy or to stay out of sight'.[113] Similarly, Brian Plomley says the Aboriginal theft of so many

[111] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 45
[112] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 47
[113] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 156

blankets and bed clothing was due to a 'new need' generated by the conditions of warfare:

> This need had been brought about by the constant harrying by the Roving Parties, by the stockmen and by the shepherds, which kept the Aborigines on the move, unable to have the warmth and shelter they were accustomed to, and needed for living. Having blankets and the like, the Aborigines could not only be warm but could abandon their camps at a moment's notice and still be warm wherever they made a halt, even if they had to do without fire because the smoke would attract pursuers to them.[114]

All of these comments are pure speculation. They all assume the existence of a guerilla war and attempt to interpret Aboriginal actions within the framework of that assumption. However, the empirical evidence is strongly against them. Take, for instance, Plomley's conjecture about how the Aborigines would have substituted blankets for campfires so as not to signal their position to their pursuers. The evidence of what they actually did is the opposite of Plomley's supposition about what they might have done. The period when the blacks were under the most pressure was during the Black Line of October and November 1830. Yet even when hounded by more than 2000 pursuers, they continued to light their fires. On 25 October, the former soldier Edward Atkyns Walpole was reconnoitring in advance of the line, south of Prosser's Bay on the south-east coast, looking for Aborigines who had been forced towards Forestier's Peninsula, when he saw a group of about fifty blacks. According to the *Hobart Town Courier*, 'he discovered the natives hunting, and watched them making their fires and forming their encampment'.[115] Shortly afterwards, another pursuit party was in the same region. The same newspaper reported: 'The party unexpectedly arrived at a spot where a large tribe of the blacks had recently encamped, the fires not having yet expired.' At the same time, near Pitt Water, the newspaper wrote: 'A small mob of about 7 were seen standing around a fire by two men who went through the hills.' [116] So, even though the natives were closely pressed, and even though it was not a cold time of the year and these were not cold locations — late spring, on the coast, at sea level — they still lit their fires, despite Plomley's theory that they wouldn't. Moreover, throughout 1830 and 1831, when George Augustus Robinson was trekking across the island to recruit tribal Aborigines for his 'Friendly Mission', he invariably first detected their

[114] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 23
[115] *Hobart Town Courier*, 6 November 1830, p 2
[116] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 November 1830, p 2

presence through the distant smoke of their fires, which none of them attempted to conceal.

The empirical evidence of the Aborigines' actions suggests a quite different set of objectives to those conjectured by the guerilla warfare theorists. For a start, the most common single action they took was to rob stock-keepers' huts and settlers' dwellings of their contents. As Table 4.1 shows, there were 323 incidents of this kind. Most of the assaults and murders of settlers and their convict servants took place during robberies. Had the Aborigines really been engaged in patriotic guerilla warfare, they would have been more concerned to destroy the colonists' means of livelihood and that way drive them from the land. They would have attacked the settlers' stock, crops and buildings. Yet such attacks accounted for only a fraction of the total. There were 32 cases of arson and 35 assaults on stock and crops. That is, there were ten times as many incidents of robbery than destruction of stock and crops. Robbery occurred ten times more often than arson.

Moreover, the evidence of what the Aborigines actually stole in their raids also suggests motives other than guerilla warfare. Plomley himself compiled data from all the reports about Aboriginal attacks to show exactly what they stole. Table 4.2 summarises this evidence.

TABLE 4.2 INCIDENTS OF ABORIGINAL THEFT FROM SETTLERS' DWELLINGS 1824–1831

	Stolen goods	No. incidents
Food	Flour	61
	Sugar	58
	Tea	38
	Food, general	36
	Potatoes	10
House wares	Blankets	59
	Bedding	42
	Clothing	32
	Knives	27

Source: N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803–1831* (1992). This is a compilation from Plomley's Table 4. The number of incidents is considerably less than those in Table 4.1 but includes all those cases where what was stolen was recorded in detail.

This data does not account for all the cases of robbery in Table 4.1 because the details of what was stolen were not recorded in every case. Nonetheless, this is the best data we have, or are likely to have. It plainly does not support the guerilla warfare thesis. Of the top three food items stolen, only one of them, flour, could in any remote sense have been of use in the 'war effort'. Refined sugar and tea have little nutritional value. They are addictive luxury foods. If they had been serious about waging war, the first thing the Aborigines would have stolen from the settlers was their weapons, perhaps to use themselves but more particularly to deprive their 'enemy' of their use.[117] It is true there were a small number of reports in 1830 and 1831 of Aborigines stealing English muskets and storing them in armouries, but there were not enough of them for Plomley to record in his tally. Of all household hardware that could be used as weapons, Table 4.2 shows only knives were stolen in any quantity. They showed little interest in axes or tomahawks. The overwhelming choice the Aborigines made was to steal blankets and bedding. To a people who for thousands of years had gone about and slept naked, even through winters in Tasmania's snow-covered high country, blankets and bedding could not plausibly be regarded as necessities. Like sugar and tea, they were European luxuries.

There was no question about the strong Aboriginal demand for these products. George Augustus Robinson used them as incentives to keep his own native guides attached to his party. In November 1830 he wrote of his guides: 'the whole of the natives are incessant in asking for bread and sugar, and are passionately fond of it.' And when he could not supply them: 'My natives appeared dissatisfied in being without flour and tea and sugar. I ... counselled the natives, but they appeared to consider nothing but having flour.' [118] The portrait of Aborigines captivated by British processed food and consumer goods was widely shared by settlers at the time. In fact, many settlers explained the hostilities entirely in these terms. Jorgen Jorgenson wrote:

> The fact is that from an over-anxiety to civilize them, and promote a friendly intercourse, the Government and the Colonists taught them to relish our luxuries. They were amply supplied with blankets, tea, sugar, bread and flour. Once accustomed to these luxuries they could not after-

[117] One observer noted that guns were of little use to the Aborigines themselves. 'A firelock in the hands of a savage man, though he may fully comprehend its management, we conceive, is but a harmless weapon. It will be almost impossible for him to obtain a supply of powder and shot, or to keep the former dry if he should get it, and his gun, exposed to all weathers, would soon become rusty and unserviceable.' *Hobart Town Courier*, 6 November 1830, p 2

[118] Robinson, 8 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 510, 521

> wards dispense with them, and hence numberless robberies were perpetrated; these were often resisted, and succeeded numerous murders. The half tame mobs were the first to commence, and they again instructed the wild tribes.[119]

Two witnesses to the 1830 committee of inquiry used the same explanation. James Brodie of Bothwell said he 'conceives plunder their primary object; they will have flour, sugar, and good blankets'. Roderic O'Connor, the Lake River landowner and surveyor, said: 'all they are now actuated by is a love of plunder; the chief thing they want is bread, and prefer getting a sack of flour by robbing a hut, to hunting for opossums.'[120] The diaries of George Augustus Robinson confirm these accounts. In discussing attacks by the Big River tribe in the Bothwell district he wrote in November 1831:

> Flour is their object, also tea, sugar and blankets. They cannot do without these; they have acquired the use of them from the whites. Most of the Big River tribe smoke tobacco.'[121]

Even Henry Melville, whose history of Van Diemen's Land protested about the injustices done to the Aborigines, explained the motives behind Aboriginal hostilities in the same way:

> Their savage state made them insensible to all that was endeavoured for their good; and the whole result of this, and other similar efforts, has been to give them such a taste of civil life, as to stimulate a desire of possessing themselves of sugar, blankets, and other articles in use with the settlers, that were previously unknown to them, and to procure which they have constantly committed cruel robberies.[122]

The earlier discussion of the guerilla warfare thesis was critical of the practice of historians who relied solely on the views of white settlers as explanations for Aboriginal motives. Here, by quoting the findings of the Broughton committee, and the observations of Jorgenson, Brodie, O'Connor, Robinson and Melville, this chapter obviously uses the same tactic in support of its own interpretation. However, the difference is that this is far from being the only kind of evidence provided. I am *also* offering evidence of Aboriginal decision-making in terms of the nature of their assaults (Table 4.1) and of Aboriginal preferences in the items they stole from white settlers

[119] Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, p 78
[120] Minutes of evidence before the Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, 23 February, 17 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 219, 227
[121] Robinson, 8 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 508
[122] Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, p 60 n. He was quoting from the 1832 edition of the *Van Diemen's Land Almanack*, one of his own publications.

(Table 4.2 and below), all of which confirm the settlers' observations. Moreover, I can provide some evidence from Aborigines themselves giving their own explanations of their actions. I will discuss the latter shortly but first let me point out why they resorted to the plunder of white goods rather than other, legal forms of acquisition.

The Aborigines, it is true, had other options to obtain these products without stealing them. They might have earned money to buy them. There were a small number of Tasmanian Aborigines who took this alternative. Some acted as trackers and guides to the police who searched for bushrangers and hostile blacks. After the conflict of the 1820s and 1830s had ended, some joined whaling and fishing crews and some became farmers.[123] For most, however, the hostilities intervened before enough time had passed for them to adopt the customs and work ethic required to join the colonial labour force. In the brief, twenty-year period of colonization, only a small number had assimilated into white society.

The other legal alternative was charity. They could be supplied by white benefactors, as had happened in November 1824 when the Oyster Bay Aborigines came in to Hobart Town. As Chapter Three recorded, Arthur initially hoped that by providing rations to these and other Aborigines, he would win their affection. Mendicant status, however, left them at the mercy of white generosity, whereas outlaw status left them in charge of their own fortunes.

There is some evidence, in fact, that they relished the latter status. In a despatch from Emu Bay in July 1830, Robinson recorded their pleasure in their deeds:

> At the time several of the most popular songs of the hostile Aborigines consisted in relations of the outrages committed by Blacks on the whites, in which they repeat in minute details their predatory proceedings, such as taking away firearms, tea, sugar, etc., and kneading flour into bread.[124]

[123] In 1830 Arthur granted the Tasmanian Aborigine named Black Bill, or William Ponsonby, 100 acres of land in reward for services to John Batman's roving party: Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, pp 159–60. An Aboriginal woman, Dolly Dalrymple who had been reared since childhood in the family of Jacob Mountgarrett, was granted land by Arthur in Perth township in 1831: Diana Wyllie, *Dolly Dalrymple*, Wylie, Childers, 2004, p 35. Two other Aborigines, John Crook and John Stewart, originally from Sydney, received grants of land in Tasmania: Robinson, *Friendly Mission*, p 474 n 277; William Lanne returned to Tasmania from Flinders Island and in the 1860s sailed with fishing and whaling ships: Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, pp 394–5. Plomley records other unnamed Aborigines involved in whaling who went abroad as far as New Zealand and Mauritius: *Friendly Mission*, pp 686 n 18, 801 n 5

[124] quoted in Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, p 78

When the Aborigines themselves described their attacks on white households, even those involving murder, they emphasized that their principal aims were the theft of processed food and consumer goods. In 1834, when Robinson visited the Westbury farm of Patrick McCasker, whose wife had been killed in an Aboriginal attack three years before, one of the native women of his Friendly Mission recalled she had been present at the incident:

> Jenny told me it was the Big River tribe that killed Mrs McCasker. Mountepeliater and his son went in first and one killed Mrs M whilst the other took the flour. They went back the same way to the northward and made up the flour into damper at night and afterwards went into their own country. She said they took plenty flour, sugar, tobacco &c. [125]

The police report at the time of this incident confirmed Jenny's account of events. It said the fifteen-man Aboriginal party who killed Mary McCasker carried off three hundredweight of flour, eighteen knives and forks, eight pairs of blankets, half a chest of tea, one hundredweight of sugar, twenty pounds of tobacco, two casks of butter weighing thirty pounds each, two muskets, one fowling piece and three caps of gunpowder.[126]

The reasons why Aboriginal thieves had little compunction about killing anyone they found in their way, like Mary McCasker, was that their own culture had no sanctions against the murder of anyone outside their immediate clan. Internecine warfare was rife in indigenous society and killing others was a common and familiar practice among Aboriginal males. Indeed, as recorded earlier, the stories the Tasmanian Aborigines told around their campfires often recorded their pleasure in the death and pain they could inflict on anyone outside their own group. They told Robinson they enjoyed killing. 'He has heard them boast with much pleasure of the murders they have committed on the whites.'[127] It is clear from the contemporary reports about Aboriginal killings of many white settlers that their murders were incidental accompaniments to robbery. The whites were unarmed and posed no deterrent to the Aborigines' main objective. They were killed simply because they could be.

Overall, then, the spread of white settlement in the 1820s was certainly a major cause of the increase in black violence, but not for the reasons the orthodox school proposes. Far from generating black resentment, the expansion of settlement instead gave the Aborigines

[125] Robinson, *Friendly Mission*, p 835
[126] Smith to Burnett, 31 January 1831, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 851
[127] Minutes of the Executive Council, 23 February 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 253, reporting an interview with Robinson by the council.

more opportunity and more temptation to engage in robbery and murder, two customs they had come to relish.

To clinch this argument, there is one final piece of evidence to present. This is the kind that the advocates of the patriotic war thesis have never been able to produce to support their own case: testimony from a tribal Aborigine explaining his actions. This testimony is, admittedly, a paraphrase by a white journalist, but otherwise is a direct expression of Aboriginal opinion. On 3 September 1830, the *Colonial Times* reported that one of the convict servants of Captain Patrick Wood, a farmer on the Clyde River near Bothwell, had clashed with a group of natives robbing his hut, some of whom he shot. He brought one of the survivors in to Hobart Town to claim the reward then on offer of five pounds. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur decided that the captive should be interrogated. The newspaper continued:

> His Excellency ordered one of the black Natives who are under the charge of Mr Robinson, of the New-town Road, to be sent for to act as interpreter, and by his assistance endeavoured to obtain some information from the prisoner, but we understand all that could be got from him was that the white man had destroyed several of his companions, and that he had most reason to complain; that when the tribe attacked the hut it was in order to obtain food, and such articles as the whites had introduced amongst them, and which now instead of being luxuries as formerly, had become necessities, which they could not any other way procure.[128]

THE 'BLACK WAR': A SUMMARY

To conclude, let me summarize the argument of this and the previous chapter. The hostilities of the Aborigines did not amount to either conventional or guerilla warfare. For its first three years, from 1824 to 1826, the 'war' was little more than the actions of a small group of black bushrangers led by two men, Musquito and Black Tom, neither of whom was a tribal Aborigine. The former was a native of Sydney who had no ethnic or cultural connection to the Tasmanian people or to any territory on the island; the latter was a Tasmanian Aborigine who had been reared since childhood in a middle-class white household in Hobart Town. Moreover, these actions began at a time when white farms and pastoral property had not yet seriously deprived the Aborigines of much land or barred them from passage over it.

For the entire period of the 'Black War' from 1824 to 1831, there is no evidence the Aborigines had any military, political or patriotic objectives. Nor did they have any military or other kind of organisa-

[128] *Colonial Times*, 3 September 1830, p 3. At the time, the editor of this newspaper was Henry Melville and, since this was not a report sent in by a regional correspondent, he was probably its author.

tion. They never engaged in anything that could be defined as warfare. Almost all their victims were unarmed settlers, stock-keepers and their families in isolated locations.

As far as we can tell from the ethnographic evidence, the Aborigines did not have the kind of attitude to the land that would lead them to wage sustained warfare in its defence. If they had had strong territorial instincts, the Aborigines would have displayed them in the first twenty years of British colonization when they would have been most affronted. In these two decades, however, the Aborigines made little attempt to resist the trespass of the intruders. Some bands willingly came in to the white settlement seeking food and household goods. The Aborigines were never starving or even seriously deprived of traditional food. In fact, the evidence shows that, at the height of the conflict, native game abounded throughout the island.

Instead, the motives for the outbreak of robbery and violence by tribal Aborigines from 1827 to 1831 lay in a combination of revenge and plunder. There were some who wanted to revenge themselves on those white colonists who had injured them or their kinfolk. This revenge took the form of indiscriminate violence against any whites they encountered. However, the principal reason for Aboriginal violence was their desire for British consumer goods, especially flour, sugar, tea, blankets and bedding. Excluded from the labour force and having no way except begging of legally acquiring what to them were highly desirable luxury products, tribal Aborigines chose to plunder them from the huts and homesteads of settlers instead, and to kill any whites they found in their way. The actions of the Aborigines were not noble: they never rose beyond robbery, assault and murder.

In short, the orthodox school of history's attempt to dignify this story does not work. For Henry Reynolds to call it the biggest internal threat Australia has ever faced, when it cost the lives of only 187 settlers in eight years, is to exalt these events far beyond their significance. His call for the Tasmanian Aborigines to be commemorated in Australian war memorials for their patriotic defence of their country is a theatrical political demand, all the more provocative since the great majority of the white victims of the Aborigines were unarmed and 10 per cent of them were white women and children. The 'Black War' in Van Diemen's Land was not a heroic tale. It was a tragedy the Aborigines adopted such senseless violence. Their principal victims were themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

Historical scholarship and the invention of massacre stories, 1815–1830

THIS chapter offers a close assessment of the quality of evidence deployed by members of the orthodox school of Aboriginal history in Van Diemen's Land. It focuses on several large-scale massacres of Aborigines, which these historians allege were committed by British colonists in the period 1826 to 1830, plus one earlier incident in 1815. It is largely a critique of the methodology of two of the writers this school endorses as its most scholarly and distinguished contributors.

Since it was published in 1981, Lyndall Ryan's *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* has been the principal work on its subject. It derives from her PhD thesis of 1975 and is still in print twenty years after it first appeared, making it one of the more successful books of Australian history.[1] Over this period, other historians have often cited Ryan as the leading authority on the conflict between blacks and whites in the colony. Henry Reynolds describes Ryan as one of the most 'respected and conscientious scholars' in the field and says her book is

[1] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981; 2nd edn. Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1996; The Aborigines in Tasmania, 1800–1974 and their problems with the Europeans, PhD thesis, School of Historical, Philosophical and Political Studies, Macquarie University, 1975

'by far the best and most scholarly work on the Tasmanian Aborigines in the twentieth century'.[2]

The evidence and citations examined below come from the second edition of Ryan's book, published in 1996, in which she had the opportunity to tidy up the mistakes that inevitably creep into a work of this scope. In the preface to the second edition, Ryan said she had done this. She had corrected some of the first edition's factual and typographical errors and updated the story of Tasmanian Aboriginal land rights to the 1990s. She also reassessed some of the language and concepts she used in the first edition and critically reviewed the major works of literature published since her own first appeared.[3] So the critique made here is not of a work of youthful enthusiasm in which some carelessness might be excused. Its author has had twenty years to reconsider her original claims and correct her errors.

This chapter also examines some of the evidence about Aboriginal massacres used by Lloyd Robson in *A History of Tasmania*, the award-winning, two-volume work that is now widely regarded as the most scholarly and the definitive history of the island.[4] In other words, this is an examination of the orthodox version of this history through the mature works of its strongest proponents.

Scholarly history distinguishes itself from popular works by providing references to its sources. It does this through the device of the footnote. Today, publishers tend to remove footnotes from the bottom of the page and place them at the end of the book, thereby transforming them into endnotes, but the principle is the same. The role of the footnote is to make historians publicly accountable. Footnotes verify that the historian has evidence for the claims he or she makes. In traditional history teaching, the distinction was once clear: 'the text persuades, the notes prove'.[5] The footnote's role is to permit a reader to check the author's sources, references, facts, quotations and generalisations. Footnotes allow readers to find the original source to determine whether a quotation has been accurately transcribed and whether it contains the information the author claims. To act in a properly scholarly fashion, authors should be able to support,

[2] Henry Reynolds, "From armband to blindfold", *The Australian's Review of Books*, March 2001, p 9; cover blurb for second edition of *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*

[3] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp xviii–xxxii

[4] Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Volume I,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983

[5] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p15; Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'Where have all the footnotes gone?' *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994, pp 127–8

through their footnotes, every factual claim they make. In particular, if a work of history makes a contentious claim, the author often gives it a footnote and uses that footnote's text to comment on the evidence about the controversy itself.

Most readers, of course, take historians' evidence on trust. They have neither the time nor the expertise to go back to the archives, or whatever other resource has been used, to check an author's claims for authenticity. However, footnotes always allow the potential for others, especially doubters or critics, to do this. So, even if the process of verification is rarely followed up, the footnote nonetheless functions as a means of keeping historians honest. Footnotes are one of the principal reasons why those who practise scholarly history can be trusted, and can trust one another, to tell the truth. Unfortunately, not all historians deserve this trust because some fudge their work by not doing the research they have claimed or, in some cases, by inventing sources or falsifying their content.[6] However, those who make claims they cannot substantiate usually get found out, sooner or later, by someone checking their footnotes.

An ideal work of history would provide a footnote for every claim it made. In most cases, however, this would mean one footnote per sentence, which would clog up and extend the length of the work. Publishers also believe this would decrease readability and increase their costs. So the practice has arisen in which many authors put one footnote at the end of a paragraph and then use it to cite several sources to cover all the claims made in that paragraph. This might suit readers and publishers but it makes the task of verifying authors' claims much more difficult. To check an assertion, you now have to look up all the sources cited for a whole paragraph to find the relevant one.

Anyway, this is the style of footnoting adopted by both Lyndall Ryan and Lloyd Robson. It is why, in what follows, that when I try to verify their claims, I have to discuss several sources at a time rather than only one. This makes the chapter rather heavy going, both to write and no doubt to read, but, given the importance of the subject, it is the only choice. Some of the accusations made by Ryan and Robson amount to outright mass murder by those under the command of the colonial authorities. If this were true, then the colonial

[6] The worst example in Anthony Grafton's history of the footnote was that of the Dominican monk Annius of Viterbo who in 1498 published twenty-four volumes of ancient history purportedly written by Babylonian and Egyptian priests, all with an elaborate network of cross references that supported each other, apparently proving that the royal families of northern Europe were descended from the ancient Trojans. All his sources, however, were later shown to be forgeries.

authorities themselves were guilty of criminal conduct and much of the orthodox case about the moral status of British imperialism in Tasmania would be confirmed. So a detailed exploration of the footnotes is unavoidable.

THE PITT WATER MASSACRE AND ABYSSINIAN DISPERSAL

Up to the end of 1826, the evidence available to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur suggested that Aboriginal assaults on settlers were largely the work of town blacks and tame mobs. As well as Musquito, Black Jack, Black Tom and the natives from Kangaroo Point, two more joined the list that year. In October, a party of Aborigines killed two stockmen and wounded a third near the Clyde River. They were led by 'a half-civilized black' from the settlement at Macquarie Harbour.[7] In December on Partridge Island, off South Bruny Island, two convict assigned servants were assaulted by a group of twelve natives led by Bruni Jack, also known as Boomer, an Aborigine who spoke English and who was well known to Bruny Island settlers.[8] Hence, when Arthur initially addressed the escalation of Aboriginal violence, he presumed that tame blacks were behind it. He declared in a government notice on 29 November 1826 that, despite the kindness shown to them by settlers and their servants, they had responded by committing 'treacherous and sanguinary acts':

> An impression however still remains that these Savages are stimulated to acts of Atrocity by one or more leaders who, from their previous Intercourse with Europeans, may have acquired sufficient intelligence to draw them into Crime and Danger. The capture of these Individuals therefore becomes an Object of the first Importance.[9]

To capture these leaders, Arthur sought to enlist the support of ordinary settlers. At this stage, he stopped short of declaring martial law but authorized settlers who were menaced by the natives in the form of 'attack, robbery or murder' to take up arms and, joining with the military, to drive them off by force, 'treating them as open Enemies'. Until this time, settlers had been constrained by British law in their dealings with the Aborigines. Like any British subject, an ordinary settler could only lawfully kill an Aborigine in self-defence or in immediate pursuit after a serious assault. So Arthur's call for settlers to

[7] Report of Aborigines Committee of 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia,* 4, p 211

[8] Statements by William Cox and Andrew Swanson, 6 December 1826, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 pp 815–26

[9] Government Notice, Colonial Secretary's Office, 29 November 1826, published in *Hobart Town Gazette*, 9 December 1826 p 1; also in *British Parliamentary Papers*, 4, pp 192–3

become directly involved was the most dramatic change in government policy towards the Aborigines since colonisation. Lyndall Ryan says white retaliation began at once. Arthur's actions, she writes:

> led to an immediate affray with forty Oyster Bay Aborigines at Pittwater in which fourteen Aborigines were killed and ten captured. Another group of Big River people were dispersed from the Abyssinia area and two were shot.[10]

The first of these two incidents, the affray at Pitt Water, was well known at the time, although not as many Aborigines were involved as Ryan claims. This was the capture of Black Tom and his nine companions. Given the alarm that his assaults had generated amongst settlers, his arrest was written up in detail in the local newspapers. However, there was no mention in the press, nor in any contemporary document that has made its way into the archives, that fourteen Aborigines were killed at the same time. Neither the leader of the captors, Chief District Constable Alexander Laing, nor Black Tom himself ever said, then or later, that there were Aborigines killed in this incident.[11]

Ryan provides a footnote with three sources to verify her information: Gordon to Colonial Secretary, 9 December 1826, in the Colonial Secretary's Office papers, Volume 1/331, File 7578; *Hobart Town Courier,* 15 November 1826; and *Colonial Times,* 1 December 1826. None of them, however, provide any confirmation at all. In 1826 James Gordon was Police Magistrate and Coroner for the Pitt Water district, in which position he wrote a number of letters to the Colonial Secretary. However, there is no document of his from 9 December 1826 in volume 1/331 of the file, as Ryan indicates. Nor is it in either volume 1/316 or volume 1/320, which also contain letters and reports by magistrates about Aboriginal affairs. Indeed, there is no document anywhere in the Archives Office of Tasmania written by Gordon either on this date or about this incident, except a note in January 1827 advising the Colonial Secretary that the natives arrested in December were still in jail, with no charges laid against them, and recommending they be supplied with rations and released.[12] The

[10] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 92

[11] Laing later wrote his memoirs, 'The Alexander Laing Story: District Police Constable, Pitt Water, Tasmania 1819–1838', AOT NS 116/1, which discusses the arrest on p 56, though with several obvious mistakes. Black Tom later became a member of George Augustus Robinson's 'Friendly Mission' and many conversations with him were recorded in Robinson's diaries.

[12] Gordon to Colonial Secretary, 5 January 1827, AOT CSO 8/109 pp 60–1. Gordon gave a good indication of how conciliatory the authorities were

reference Ryan cites from the *Hobart Town Courier* proved equally elusive. This is not surprising since this newspaper was not published on 15 November 1826. Its first edition did not appear until almost a year later, on 20 October 1827. There was a report of the incident in the *Hobart Town Gazette* on 16 December 1826 but, like the *Colonial Times,* it reported the capture of Black Tom and his band but did not mention any killings. The *Colonial Times*, incidentally, reported the capture on 15 December, not 1 December.

While the sources provided by Ryan lend no support to her claim that fourteen Aborigines were killed in this incident, there is one later account that has some likeness to it. Ryan does not cite it as evidence, but in his testimony before the 1830 Aboriginal affairs inquiry, Gilbert Robertson, former chief constable of the Richmond district, described an incident in which he claimed fourteen Aborigines were killed. Robertson told the committee:

> The Richmond police, three years ago, killed 14 of the Natives, who had got upon a hill, and threw stones down upon them; the police expended all their ammunition, and being afraid to run away, at length charged with the bayonet, and the natives fled.[13]

There is some resemblance between this account and Ryan's claim. 'Three years ago' would have been March 1827, which is near enough. Robertson does not indicate where this encounter took place but the Pitt Water location cited by Ryan was adjacent to the Richmond police district that Robertson mentions. However, while there are likenesses, there are also discrepancies between the two accounts. Ryan says forty Oyster Bay Aborigines took part in the fight but Robertson doesn't give any total. Ryan describes only one affray in December in which both the killings and capture took place, so she is at odds with Robertson, whose evidence made no mention of any capture of Aborigines at the time nor of the well-publicized arrest of the notorious Black Tom.

at this time. He said Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had in a conversation 'suggested the Propriety of releasing them as there is no charge against them of any outrage committed; with which I fully coincide'. And rather than be prosecuted for murder, he recommended that Black Tom should return to Hobart Town 'where I think he will find a Home with his old Mistress', that is, Mrs Thomas Birch, his white foster mother.

[13] Gilbert Robertson, minutes of evidence before the Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, 3 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 221; John West retold the story in 1852 in his *A History of Tasmania*, ed. A. G. L. Shaw, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1981, p 280, where he paraphrased Robertson's evidence without adding to it. West thought the incident took place in 1828.

Moreover, there is no contemporary evidence to corroborate Robertson's story. Thomas Lascelles was then police magistrate of Richmond but none of his papers in either *Historical Records of Australia,* Series III, on Van Diemen's Land,[14] or in the archives of the Colonial Secretary's Office, mention an attack of this kind. He would have been obliged to report such an incident, had it occurred, and he had nothing to hide about it. Indeed, given the encouragement provided by Arthur's notice of 29 November, both he and his police would have been commended for risking themselves in an action like this. None of the contemporary newspapers, which were very interested in publishing stories about conflict with the blacks, reported this incident. In other words, no one but Gilbert Robertson seems to have heard of it. As demonstrated below, Robertson was a notoriously unreliable witness, prone to exaggerating rumours about violence done to the blacks. It appears this was how Robertson's peers regarded his evidence in 1830. The final report of the Aborigines Committee did not take this claim seriously enough to mention it, even though the report accepted other hearsay evidence even further removed in time, such as the various accounts of what happened at Risdon Cove in 1804.

The second conflict described by Ryan in late 1826 is the incident in which a group of Big River Aborigines were 'dispersed' from the Abyssinia area and two were shot. Abyssinia was the high country between the River Clyde and the River Jordan, with Bothwell to its north and New Norfolk to its south. This time, Ryan recounts an event that was well documented and in which two Aborigines were certainly reported killed. As told by the settler Thomas Wells in a letter to Arthur on 26 November 1826, the incident occurred near his property Allenvale, on the Macquarie Plains, halfway between New Norfolk and Hamilton, to the immediate south of Abyssinia. A group of Aborigines approached four men out splitting shingles. The leader of the blacks 'could speak very good English', so was possibly Black Tom. The natives killed two of the men, speared one and beat up the fourth. They then menaced a nearby farmer but ran off when he produced a gun. They were 'closely pursued the same day' by the settlers, Wells wrote, and towards evening there was a confrontation between armed parties of blacks and whites. Two Aborigines were shot dead. After this, the Aborigines escaped, leaving twenty-four spears behind them.[15]

[14] Documents by and about Lascelles are in *Historical Records of Australia*, III, Vols II–VI

[15] Wells to Arthur, 26 November 1826, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 12–14. The same incident was reported by Michael Steel of Gretna, Macquarie Plains, in a letter 21 February 1827, in Gwyneth and Hume Dow, *Landfall in*

Ryan presents these killings as if they were part of a process of 'dispersing' the natives from Abyssinia, that is, of setting out to clear them from the whole district. But Wells's letter, the only source of information we have on this event, describes the killings as the outcome of a fatal assault initiated by Aborigines, followed by a hot pursuit and a struggle between two armed bands. This is not the meaning of 'dispersal'. Moreover, Ryan gets the causal sequence the wrong way around. She intimates these two killings took place in the aftermath of Arthur's notice of 29 November. In fact, they occurred on 22 November. Wells informed Arthur in a letter of 26 November. It is most likely that Wells's report was actually one of those that disturbed Arthur enough to take the decision to issue his notice.

Before finishing with the Abyssinian killings, it is worth underlining again the quality of Ryan's referencing here. Her book actually records the same incident twice, the first time on page 92, the second on page 117. In her first report, she cites the same sources for the events at Abyssinia as for the fourteen allegedly killed at Pitt Water — the letter from Gordon to the Colonial Secretary on 9 December 1826, the *Hobart Town Courier* of 15 November 1826 and the *Colonial Times* of 1 December 1826.[16] As noted earlier, the letter from Gordon does not exist and the *Hobart Town Courier* did not begin publication until October 1827. There was a *Colonial Times* published on 1 December but it does not mention any incident at Abyssinia. Only in her second discussion does Ryan accurately cite her source as the Wells document.[17] But in the same footnote to this second report, Ryan also cites once more the non-existent *Hobart Town Courier* of 25 November 1826 and the *Colonial Times* of 6 December 1826. There was no *Colonial Times* published on that date. The closest edition was on 8 December but, again, it does not discuss any conflict at Abyssinia.

Ironically, Ryan has missed the opportunity to add another two deaths of Aborigines at Abyssinia to her tally. Had she seen it, she would have found the *Hobart Town Gazette* of 2 December 1826 reported not only the killing of the two timber splitters near Allenvale, described above, but another incident five miles from Bothwell in which a stock-keeper was attacked in his hut. He locked his door and windows but the Aborigines set fire to his roof to drive him out. He fired on them and shot two, after which they retreated and he put out the fire.[18] The newspaper said this conflict took place 'last week',

Van Diemen's Land: The Steels' Quest for Greener Pastures, Footprint, Footscray, 1990, p 45

[16] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 92, p 100 n 13

[17] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 117, p 122 n 6.

[18] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 2 December 1826, p 3

which means it also pre-dated Arthur's 29 November proclamation. The timing and sequence of events suggest that the same Aborigines involved in the Allenvale assault were responsible.

Overall, then, instead of Ryan's assertion that Governor Arthur's 29 November proclamation led directly to the death of sixteen Aborigines, there is no good reason to believe that *any* natives were killed in its immediate aftermath. Her claim that fourteen died at Pitt Water is supported neither by the sources she cites nor by any other credible evidence at the time. Both the two shootings near Allenvale and the other two near Bothwell occurred the week before Arthur's notice was issued, so they could not have been a consequence of it.

NORTHERN VIGILANTES AND THE PORT DALRYMPLE MASSACRE

> West from Launceston, along the Meander River, some of the bloodiest skirmishes of the war were already taking place. In May 1827 the Port Dalrymple band of the North Midlands tribe visited Norfolk Plains (Longford). First they killed a kangaroo hunter at Western Lagoon in reprisal for shooting Aboriginal men. Then in July they burned down the house of a prominent settler because his stockmen had seized Aboriginal women. Finally in November they speared three more of this settler's stockmen and clubbed another three to death at Western Lagoon. In retaliation, stock-keepers at Norfolk Plains formed a vigilante group and in December massacred a number of Port Dalrymple Aborigines at the junction of Brumby Creek and the Lake River.[19]

This is the account of hostilities Ryan provides for the northern districts of Van Diemen's Land in 1827. It is true that this was a particularly bloody year in the north in terms of black versus white conflict. In fact, until then there had been only a handful of killings on either side in the whole of this region since colonization. The year 1827 really marked the beginning of violence in the northern settlements. Nonetheless, most of the above account is pure fiction. Very little of Ryan's narrative is supported either by the references she provides herself or by the sources used by other historians. In particular, none of her sources claim there was a vigilante group of stock-keepers formed on this occasion, nor any massacre of the Port Dalrymple Aborigines.

The sources Ryan provides for her narrative above are as follows: three letters to the Colonial Secretary from, respectively, Smith in May 1827, Mulgrave on 23 June 1827 and Dalrymple on 1 July 1827; the *Hobart Town Courier* of 28 July 1827; a page from the journals of the Land Commissioners from 1–6 February 1828; a report from Anstey to Arthur on 4 December 1827; and a copy of the garrison

[19] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 92

orders of the 40th Regiment on 29 November 1827.[20] There is very little in any of these documents, however, that supports her claims.

There is no letter about conflict with Aborigines from anyone named Smith written to the Colonial Secretary in May 1827 in volume 1/316, file 7578, of the Colonial Secretary's Office papers, where Ryan indicates. There are, however, two depositions from the superintendent of police at Launceston, Peter Mulgrave, on 26 June (not 23 June) and two more from him on 30 June about this subject.[21] There is a report from Captain Patrick Dalrymple of the 40th Regiment on 1 July 1827 in the volume Ryan indicates, but it was written to Captain John Montagu of the same regiment, not to the Colonial Secretary.[22] All five of these documents refer to the one incident at the Western Marshes (not Western Lagoon), fifty miles to the west of Launceston (south of Westbury and Deloraine on the Western or Meander River) on 23 and 24 June.

On the 23rd, a party of Aborigines attacked the assigned servant John Harling and his overseer William Knight, while they were out felling a tree. Knight was speared and then battered to death but Harling escaped and raised the alarm. The next day Corporal John Shiners of the 40th Regiment led a police constable and three stockmen in pursuit of the offenders. They found the native camp and that night rushed it, getting off three shots before the Aborigines disappeared. Next morning, they found no bodies but deduced that one native had been wounded because there was a trail of blood in the footprints of one man. Mulgrave took statements of evidence about these events from Harling and three of the men in the pursuit party, one of whom was named Henry Smith,[23] while Dalrymple reported on Shiners's role in the affair.

[20] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 100, n 14.

[21] Mulgrave to Colonial Secretary, 26 June 1827, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 15–24; 30 June 1827, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 28–37

[22] Dalrymple to Montagu, 1 July 1827, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 38–40

[23] This might be where Ryan got the name Smith for the non-existent May document. However, Henry Smith was an illiterate convict, who signed his statement with a mark, so he was unlikely to have been the author of a letter to the Colonial Secretary. There was a police magistrate named Malcolm Laing Smith at Norfolk Plains, who on 8 July 1828 reported an attack by Aborigines on the hut of Thomas Ritchie, in which they speared one of his stock-keepers, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 p 49. On 10 January 1831 magistrate Smith wrote a report, Murders and Depredations by Aborigines at Norfolk Plains over the previous five years. This report, which Ryan does not cite, is in AOT CSO 1/316/7578 pp 803–7. It does mention an incident in May 1827 but it does not support Ryan's version of events (see also footnote 31 below).

Ryan's next source is the *Hobart Town Courier* of 28 July 1827. This cannot be right because, as noted earlier, this paper did not begin publication until October that year. There was an edition of the *Hobart Town Gazette* on that date which had one story about the Aborigines. It said a group of fifty chased and wounded a shepherd at Saltpan Plain, near Tunbridge in the central midlands, and that a hut belonging to Captain Wood near the Clyde River in the Abyssinia district had been pillaged. Both these locations, however, are a long way from Launceston and Norfolk Plains and thus have no relevance to Ryan's account of conflict in the north.

The *Journals of the Land Commissioners*, which are Ryan's next source, were written between 1826 and 1828 by three men who were appointed to traverse Van Diemen's Land and survey and subdivide the colony. The page Ryan cites records details of one commissioner's visit to Norfolk Plains from 1 to 6 February 1828. It contains one mention of conflict between natives and colonists. This described how a settler named Urqhart, who was farming under the Western Tiers, had been pursued by the natives, 'escaping them most miraculously', and how one of his men had been wounded. Urqhart later returned to his hut protected by a party of soldiers. The diary entry does not say when these events occurred.[24] Two days later, further north, the diary records that 'mysterious Murders have also been committed in this recess [a piece of Crown Land], and have hitherto remain undetected.' There is no indication, however, when these murders occurred nor the race of either the perpetrators or the victims.[25] The rest of the commissioner's diary for February, when he travelled throughout the Norfolk Plains, makes no mention of Aborigines at all. He did observe that one 'native' named Saltmarsh now owned Reid's farm of 300 acres.[26] However, Mr Saltmarsh was not an Aboriginal pastoralist but a native-born white man, whose father arrived as a convict on the First Fleet.[27]

The report from Anstey to Arthur on 4 December 1827, which is Ryan's next reference, is a strange inclusion in her list of sources since it has nothing to do with Norfolk Plains or anywhere else in the north. Thomas Anstey was appointed police magistrate for the Oatlands district in March 1827.[28] His territory was the south midlands district. Anstey did write a letter to Governor Arthur on 4 December

[24] Anne McKay (ed.), *Journals of the Land Commissioners for Van Diemen's Land 1826–28*, University of Tasmania and Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1962, p 74
[25] *Journals of the Land Commissioners*, p 74
[26] *Journals of the Land Commissioners*, p 75
[27] Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Vol I*, pp 60-1
[28] *Historical Records of Australia*, III, V, p 609

1827 on the subject of the Aborigines. However, he described not bloody skirmishes or vigilante raids but how quiet things were:

> No outrage has been committed by them [Aborigines], in the Districts of Green Ponds, Bath or Methven, since the murder of Chief Constable Bennett, nearly two months ago; — nor do I believe that any of the Black Natives have been seen in either of the three districts since that event, although the contrary has been asserted by one or two Convicts.[29]

Ryan's final source is a page from the British Parliamentary Papers collection of documents about the military operations against the Aborigines. That page records the garrison orders of the 40th Regiment issued by the Brigade Major's Office in Hobart on 29 November 1827.[30] These orders state that because of 'several murders' by Aborigines of stock-keepers 'in different parts of the interior of the island', four officers and thirty soldiers of the regiment were to march north from Hobart. Six were to strengthen the existing detachment at Ross and the remainder were to go to Norfolk Plains. In addition, eleven men from the 40th Regiment stationed at Oyster Bay were to march north to St Paul's Plains to 'protect the country ... from the attacks of the Natives'. While these orders make it clear that the north of the colony was a scene of violence by Aborigines, there is nothing in them about any response by the settlers. As noted above, other members of the 40th Regiment were already in the north where they had seen some action in June that resulted in one native being wounded. Apart from this, however, there is nothing in the document Ryan cites to show that the regiment was more actively engaged than this.

In other words, of all Ryan's footnoted sources only one is connected to any of the events she describes in the north in 1827. The one incident that fits her sources was at the Western Marshes in June in which one stockman was killed and one Aborigine wounded. This hardly qualifies, however, as 'some of the bloodiest skirmishes of the war'. Her other details lack any support whatsoever in the sources she cites. None of them mention any kangaroo hunter being killed by Aborigines or him killing Aboriginal men.[31] There is nothing in any of her sources about stockmen seizing Aboriginal women. There is

[29] Anstey to Arthur, 4 December 1827, AOT CSO 1/320/7578, pp 3-4

[30] *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia,* 4, pp 193-4 (or pp 21-2 in the alternative pagination to which Ryan refers)

[31] While there was a report written in 1831 about a kangaroo hunter, John Smith, being killed at Norfolk Plains in May 1827, this is not a reference cited by Ryan and it made no mention of him shooting Aboriginal men: Report of Murders and Depredations by Aborigines at Norfolk Plains by Malcolm Laing Smith, 10 January 1831, AOT CSO 1/316/7578 pp 803–7

no mention of any events at Western Lagoon. None of her sources refer to any settlers forming a vigilante group or discuss any massacre of the Port Dalrymple Aborigines at Lake River or anywhere else. This is a remarkable catalogue of misrepresentation for one paragraph — indeed, it must set some kind of record in Australian historiography — and can hardly be explained away as an accident or a mistake.

This is not to say there was little conflict in the north in 1827, far from it. That year in the whole colony there were thirty-three whites killed or who went missing believed killed by Aborigines. No less than twenty-six of them were from districts within fifty miles of Launceston.[32] These figures are from a survey by Brian Plomley, by far the most empirically reliable of those historians of the conflict. Despite the number of whites he records killed in 1827, he does not confirm Ryan's claim that many Aborigines were also killed. In fact, Plomley's survey records the total number of Aboriginal casualties in the north in 1827 as one shot at the Western Marshes on 18 June, and 'some' natives wounded near Quamby Bluff on 24 June.[33] (However, on checking the sources Plomley provides for these events, I found they both referred to the one incident, the pursuit of the killers of William Knight, discussed earlier, where one native was shot and wounded.) In particular, Plomley did not find any evidence of a massacre of Port Dalrymple Aborigines at the junction of Brumby Creek and Lake River in December 1827, or anywhere else or at any other time. Moreover, despite the movement of the 40th Regiment to Norfolk Plains at the time, there is no contemporary record of any Aborigines being killed or wounded there in December by its soldiers or, indeed, by anyone else.

THE OYSTER BAY AND CAMPBELL TOWN MASSACRES

Lloyd Robson has long been a well-known historian of Australia. He was a member of the History Department at the University of Melbourne from 1964 until he retired in 1988. His books include an influential statistical study of the convicts transported to Australia and a similar treatment of the soldiers of the first AIF of World War One. His magnum opus was the two-volume *A History of Tasmania* (1983 and 1991), which won him major literary awards. The entry on Robson in the *Oxford Companion to Australian History* warmly commends him on the grounds that 'he did not allow his rigorous

[32] My calculation from the listings for 1827 in N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803–1831*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992, pp 62-6

[33] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 63. Plomley locates the second Western Marshes incident at Quamby Bluff, which is nearby.

methodology to overcome his sensitivity'. Instead, he is lauded for maintaining a 'moral passion' in his history writing, especially in his 'condemnation of frontier violence'.[34] This is all too true. Let me illustrate, with two examples from Robson's first volume on Tasmania, what happens when moral sensitivity prevails over historical methodology.

In 1830, the settler James Hobbs told the government inquiry into Aboriginal affairs of a mass killing of Aborigines fifteen years earlier. This is how Robson reports Hobbs's testimony:

> About 1815, said Hobbs, he saw 300 sheep killed by the Aborigines at Oyster Bay as a result of which twenty-two Aborigines were murdered the next day by a party of the 48th Regiment.[35]

Robson presents this as an eye-witness account, but what Hobbs actually said in his testimony was:

> It was reported about 15 years ago that the Natives killed 300 sheep at Oyster Bay, but did not eat any of them, and that 22 of the Natives were killed next day by part of the 48th Regiment.[36]

In other words, Hobbs was plainly recounting a story he had heard, not events he saw. It would have been difficult for him to observe anything that happened at Oyster Bay in 1815 because at the time he was living in India. Hobbs had been part of the Derwent River colony between 1804 and 1809 as both a settler and naval officer. He then went to India to make a career in commerce and did not return to Van Diemen's Land until 1822.[37]

If Hobbs's story were true, the mass killing would have been an illegal operation, perpetrated by government soldiers who were not in hot pursuit after an assault by blacks but who had a day to consider their response. It would have been a gross and murderous over-reaction to the killing of some sheep. One might have expected a historian concerned about the truth to seek some corroboration about retaliation and bloodshed on this scale. Robson, however, reports Hobbs's testimony and raises no questions about it.

The reason he chose this course is apparent to anyone who has gone through the archives for this period. For there is no corrobo-

[34] '(Leslie) Lloyd Robson', *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, eds. Graham Davison, John Hirst, Stuart Macintyre, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p 562

[35] Robson, *History of Tasmania, Vol I*, p 50

[36] James Hobbs, evidence to Aboriginal Affairs Committee, 9 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 222

[37] E. R. Pretyman, 'James Hobbs', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 1, A–H, p 442–3

rating evidence. No one but Hobbs has ever mentioned this event. No press report of such an event has ever been cited. The two principal printed sources of government information for 1815 are the *Historic Records of Australia*, Series III, Volume II, and the collection of governors' despatches and documents on Australia published in the *British Parliamentary Papers*. Neither of these sources records an incident of this kind in that year. This is not because those in authority were trying to hide or downplay the level of violence in the colony. On the contrary, a large proportion of Lieutenant-Governor Davey's despatches to his superiors in Sydney and London in 1815 dealt with violent conflict in the interior of Van Diemen's Land. But this was all about conflict between white bushrangers and settlers. Davey made no mention of mounting any action against the Aborigines. The 48th Regiment was stationed at the time in Hobart and there were no orders recorded about an excursion to so distant a region as Oyster Bay. Had any members of the regiment gone there, this would normally have attracted some published comment, if only about the expense involved, which the Lieutenant-Governor would have had to justify.

The only recorded incident that even vaguely resembles Hobbs's story at this time was an entry in Reverend Knopwood's diary of 8 November 1815 where he says the natives had killed 930 sheep belonging to a settler named Morgan by setting fire to his pasture land. However, this event took place at 'Scantlands Plains' (Scanlans Plains), near what later became the settlement of Oatlands, a long way from Oyster Bay. Knopwood does not mention any reprisals.[38]

The strongest reason for doubting Hobbs's story is that in 1815 there were not 300 sheep at Oyster Bay for the Aborigines to kill. There is good information available about the spread of land settlement in Van Diemen's Land. In 1815, farming and pastoralism were still clustered around the two principal settlements on the Derwent River and Pitt Water in the South, and Port Dalrymple and Norfolk Plains in the north. None of the central midlands had yet been occupied. There were no settlements at Oyster Bay or, indeed, at any place on the east coast of the island. The closest land grant to Oyster Bay in 1815 was at Brushy Plains (Runnymede), south of the Prosser River. The first settler to discover land suitable for pastures at Oyster Bay was George Meredith in April 1821 and the first white man

[38] Mary Nicholls (ed.) *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1803–1838*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977, entry for 8 November 1815, p 216

known to inhabit the district was William Talbot later that year.[39] The first official land grant at Oyster Bay was not made until 1823.[40] While it is possible there might have been some unrecorded, illegal squatting by graziers beyond the officially sanctioned settlements, this phenomenon was never as extensive in Tasmania as on the mainland. But it is virtually certain there was no illicit flock of sheep grazing as far away as Oyster Bay in 1815. A clandestine squatter would have had no convicts as assigned servants to shepherd them. Moreover, it is hardly likely that members of the 48th Regiment would have been despatched on an expedition to defend the interests of an illegal squatter in unsurveyed territory.

We may well ask why Lloyd Robson failed to point out any of these problems for Hobbs's story. There was adequate information about land settlement available when Robson prepared his book.[41] Indeed, he wrote a whole chapter on the subject. How could the author of the award-winning, definitive history of Tasmania have been ignorant of the timing of the spread of settlement? Either he was unaware there were no settlers at Oyster Bay in 1815, which reflects poorly on his scholarship, or he was aware but failed to mention it because he did not want to spoil Hobbs's massacre story, which reflects poorly on his integrity.

Another piece of 1830 testimony used by Robson in his history was a story told by Gilbert Robertson. The year before, Robertson had been leader of one of the roving parties that traversed the settled districts and their hinterlands, trying to capture marauding Aborigines. In his evidence to the Aboriginal Affairs Committee, Robertson reported an incident that he said occurred in 1828 under the Western Tiers, to the west of Campbell Town. After twenty-five or thirty natives had robbed a settler's hut, a party of constables and soldiers from the 40th Regiment pursued them, and perpetrated what appeared to be the greatest massacre of Aborigines in the Australian colonies to that time, with a total of seventy natives slaughtered. Lloyd Robson gave Robertson's evidence about this incident a major

[39] See entries for George Meredith and William Talbot, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 2, I–Z, 1788–1850, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967

[40] Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp 16–23, especially map 4, Location of Grants to 1816, and map 7, Location of Grants to 1823.

[41] Plomley, *Friendly Mission,* Map 1, Settlement in Tasmania 1804–18, p 40; Peter Scott, 'Land Settlement' in *Atlas of Tasmania*, ed. J. L. Davies, Department of Land and Surveys, Hobart, 1965, p 43; plus the *ADB* entries for Meredith and Talbot in footnote 39.

treatment. He reproduced an almost verbatim version of his testimony. Robson wrote:

> What Robertson charged was that great ravages were committed by a party of four or five police and some of the 40th Regiment sent out from Campbell Town against the Aborigines. These murderers, said Robertson, got the Aborigines between two perpendicular rocks where there was a sort of shelf formation, and killed some seventy by firing off all their ammunition and then dragging the women and children from crevices in the rocks and dashing out their brains, after which those who escaped the massacre watched from away off until the Europeans withdrew and then placed the bodies of the dead in hollow trees. With this party were men named Morley, Grant and Dugdale, said Robertson, and they destroyed an entire tribe.[42]

Now, Robson does not unconditionally endorse Robertson's evidence. Before he reproduces it, he says it raised a subject 'that led to later denials, and that illustrates the difficulty of getting some truth about the war, for if ever there was a case of the victors writing history this is it'. Robson also notes later that Dr Adam Turnbull disputed Robertson's story. Robson paraphrased Turnbull saying 'that all kinds of numbers had been mentioned in relation to murdered Aborigines, and the whole thing was ridiculous'. Robson finished: 'Whether or not that was the best word to describe murder, another witness agreed with the doctor, asserting that he had gone to the place of the so-called massacre and found no bodies at all'.[43]

No one could accuse Robson here of not telling both sides of this story. This is technically correct but, clearly, the weight he gives to one side is wholly disproportionate to the other. The claim that there was a massacre is given in full detail, down to the names of those allegedly responsible and even what happened to the bodies. The denial, however, is treated dismissively. The author's objective here is not to show that this is a disputed story. On the contrary, his rhetorical intent is to lead the reader to conclude there were some colonists who were so shameless they would not only lie about so serious a matter but would also attempt to trivialize the murder of Aborigines as 'ridiculous'.

However, most people who read with an open mind the full testimony of the two witnesses who denied this incident are likely to come to a very different conclusion. The other witness who agreed with the doctor was William Robertson, a merchant and farmer from Campbell Town, who gave evidence to the committee the next day. Unlike Gilbert Robertson, he was actually at the scene. He said he

[42] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol 1, p 217
[43] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol 1, p 217

went to the site after hearing a rumour that seventy natives had been killed the day before. He persuaded the soldiers to show him the gully where the killings took place:

> I went there the next day after the attack was said to have taken place with the party; they said they had killed seven of the Natives, but appeared disinclined to go into the gulley. I told the corporal (40th Regiment) that I would go into the gulley; we went, but found no bodies, and he then said, 'to tell you the truth, we did not kill any of them, we had been out a long time and had done nothing', and he said it in bravado. Dugdale and Morley were with the party but they said nothing; there were the bodies of three dogs laying near three small fires; there was plenty of room for the Natives to have escaped in every direction; there was a thick scrub on the north-eastside; this was at the very time there was a rumour that 70 Natives has been killed the day before at that place; I saw no blood in the gulley.

This is a very different version of this incident, yet even though Lloyd Robson mentions its existence, he has deceived his readers by omitting most of its content. Plainly, the evidence of someone who had gone to the site of an alleged massacre, but had seen neither bodies nor blood, and who had extracted a confession that the story had been invented, should have been reported by any historian who wanted to tell the whole truth about this incident. This is particularly so when it confirmed other evidence that Dr Turnbull had given the committee, the details of which Robson also omitted. Turnbull had said:

> Heard about two years ago that Mr Robertson's hut was robbed (not far from Campbell Town) by 25 or 30 natives; it was immediately afterwards reported that 100, 70, 40, 50 and then 17 of them had been killed; did not believe any of them had been killed; no bodies were found; believed the report was utterly ridiculous; the report was first partially believed, but afterwards utterly disbelieved.

Robson also failed to record that the Aboriginal Affairs Committee did not take Gilbert Robertson's evidence seriously enough to include any mention of it in their main report. This was despite the fact that the committee was willing to accept other atrocity stories based on hearsay, such as the high death count at Risdon Cove and the claim that the convict James Carrett forced an Aboriginal woman to wear the head of her murdered husband strung around her neck.[44] Plainly, the committee felt the rebuttals by William Robertson and Dr Turnbull decided the issue.

[44] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia, 4*, p 208

Subsequently, there have been only a small number of historians who have found the story of the Campbell Town massacre credible. This is the main reason it does not feature in all the historical accounts of the conflict in Tasmania and why, generally, it has not gone down as one of the worst in Australian history, which it otherwise would have been. Nonetheless, there are still some who have repeated Gilbert Robertson's claims without mentioning they were immediately disputed. This includes four of the popular authors on this subject: James Bonwick in *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1870),[45] Clive Turnbull in *Black War* (1948),[46] David Davies in *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1973),[47] and Bruce Elder in *Blood on the Wattle* (1998).[48] Authors like these who present only one side of this and similar incidents, or those like Lloyd Robson who hedge them with half-hearted qualifications, are sending a distinct signal: they have little interest in exploring the truth but a considerable interest in exploiting the politics of these stories.

THE DEATH TOLL OF THE ROVING PARTIES

In the first three months of 1828, there were twenty-seven separate assaults on British settlers by the Aborigines. They killed eleven white stockmen.[49] In April, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur responded with a policy to expel all Aborigines from the settled districts. 'I am at length convinced,' he said, 'of the absolute necessity of separating the Aborigines from the white inhabitants, and of removing the former entirely from the settled districts, until their habits shall become more civilized.'[50] In April 1828 he issued a general proclamation authorising the military to capture and remove Aborigines from the areas of settlement. He also ordered all magistrates and their deputies to conform to his directions for 'the retirement or expulsion of the Aborigines from the settled districts'. They were to 'resort to whatever means a severe and inevitable necessity may dictate and

[45] James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians, or The Black War in Van Diemen's Land*, Sampson, Low, Son and Marston, London, 1870, p 64

[46] Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, (1948), Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974, p 40 n12

[47] David Davies, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Shakespeare Head Press, Sydney, 1973, p 64. Davies mistakenly attributes the story of this incident to George Augustus Robinson.

[48] Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 1998, p 34

[49] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, pp 66–8

[50] Arthur to Huskisson, 17 April 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia, 4*, p 177

require'.[51] However, he emphasized that no civilians had the right to use force against the natives unless in self-defence or under the directions of the military or a magistrate.

Arthur's proclamation said he would set up a line of military posts along the borders of settlement to enforce the policy. There were already a total of eleven military stations throughout the settled districts whose main job was supervising the convicts. They were at Launceston, Oyster Bay, Brighton, Clyde, New Norfolk, Punt South Esk, St Paul's Plains, Isis, Norfolk Plains, Oatlands and Macquarie Harbour. Rather than establish any new posts, the orders to the military at the existing posts were to actively patrol throughout the districts where they were stationed.[52] The strategy, in practice, was to make the military presence visibly known. Instead of remaining stationary at their garrisons, these military posts were to demonstrate their mobility by sending armed and red-coated detachments on long, sweeping patrols. The sight of these soldiers would intimidate the Aborigines and keep them out of the settled districts.

The new policy, however, made little impact. Between May and the end of October 1828, there were another forty-one assaults in which fifteen settlers were killed. Among those killed in October were Esther Gough, her four-year-old daughter and her neighbour, Anne Geary, who all lived near the apparently well-garrisoned town of Oatlands. These assaults spread what the *Hobart Town Courier* called 'the greatest consternation and alarm'.[53]

On 1 November 1828 Arthur responded by declaring martial law in the settled districts.[54] He did not take this decision with any satisfaction. 'I cannot divest myself of the consideration that all aggression originated with the white inhabitants,' he had written in January 1828, 'and that therefore much ought to be endured in return before the blacks are treated as an open and accredited enemy by the government.'[55] But the alarm felt by the settlers led him to define them precisely this way. Although martial law represented the ultimate failure of the policy of conciliation, Arthur told his superiors in London that his aim was not to annihilate the Aborigines but to

[51] Arthur, Proclamation, 15 April 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 194–6

[52] Brigade major to officers on detachments, 21 April 1828; Brigade major to Captain Walpole, 30 September 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 196–8

[53] *Hobart Town Courier*, 25 October 1828, p 1

[54] Proclamation by Arthur, 1 November 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 183–4

[55] Arthur to Goderich, 10 January 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Australia*, 4, p 176

force them out of the settled districts. He had instructed his magistrates and military officers to resort to arms only as a last resort. But he acknowledged the ultimate intent behind his proclamation: 'Terror may have the effect which no proferred measures of conciliation have been capable of inducing.'[56]

The main tactic Arthur devised to implement this 'terror' was to establish bands of what were called 'roving parties' to traverse the settled districts and capture any Aborigines they could and to shoot any who resisted arrest. Between November 1828 and May 1829, six official roving parties were formed, each headed by a constable supported by between five and ten trusted convicts plus an Aboriginal tracker or guide. Three roving parties were headed by the chief district constable of Richmond, Gilbert Robertson, and three by the former convict, explorer and adventurer Jorgen Jorgenson. If the convicts performed satisfactorily for a twelve-month period, they received a ticket-of-leave. There was also a roving party established later in 1829 by the settler John Batman, which patrolled the territory between his property near Ben Lomond and Oyster Bay. Initially, all these parties were under the general command of Thomas Anstey, police magistrate for the Oatlands district.

The tactic of the roving party met with an early success when one group, led by Robertson and guided by the previously apprehended Black Tom, captured five Aborigines, including two chiefs of the Stoney Creek tribe, Umarrah and Jemmie, in November 1828.[57] According to Lyndall Ryan, however, the roving parties killed many more Aborigines than they captured. Here are the details she provides of the carnage they wreaked:

> Between November 1828 and November 1830 the roving parties captured about twenty Aborigines and killed about sixty.
>
> The settlers also began to exploit their knowledge of the Aborigines' seasonal patterns of movement. When a band of the Oyster Bay tribe visited Moulting Lagoon in January 1829, they found the settlers waiting for them. Ten were shot dead and three taken prisoner. When a band of Big River people reached the Eastern Marshes in March *en route* to the east coast, Gilbert Robertson's party was waiting and killed five and captured another.[58]

This death toll has now entered the international literature. In his book indicting Western imperialism for its slaughter of tribal people,

[56] Arthur to Murray, 4 November 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Australia*, 4, p 181

[57] Robertson to Arthur, 17 November 1828, AOT CSO 1/331/7578 pp 168–177. Umarrah's name was also spelt Eumarrah and Yumarra.

[58] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 102

Guardian journalist Mark Cocker says the 'roving parties were known to have killed sixty Aborigines and taken about another twenty alive'.[59] He cites Ryan as his authority. The Canberra military historian John Connor has perpetuated the same story. His book on Australian 'frontier wars', which is little more than a summary of the secondary sources of the orthodox school, also cites Ryan's claim that the roving parties killed sixty Aborigines.[60] However, just like Ryan's account of the conflict in the north of the colony in 1827, every claim in the above passage is fictitious. Her tally of killings by the roving parties is completely false. So is her story that Robertson's party killed five of them. It is true that Robertson's men did succeed in capturing one Aborigine in this period but this was not under the circumstances Ryan describes nor anywhere near the Eastern Marshes. Nor did any settlers lie in wait for Aborigines at Moulting Lagoon and kill ten of them.

Ryan backs her claim that sixty Aborigines were killed with a footnote that contains three references. The first is a letter from Governor Arthur to the Colonial Secretary on 27 May 1829. Arthur did write a letter on this date and it was about the roving parties. It is in the archive location where Ryan indicates: volume 1/317, file 7578, of the Colonial Secretary's Office papers, on pages 15–18. Its subject matter, however, is the number of men that should comprise Gilbert Robertson's parties, whether they should all be due for a ticket-of-leave as a result of their service, and about the rations that should be provided for them. It does not mention any Aborigines being killed, let alone sixty. Her second reference is a page of commentary by Brian Plomley in *Friendly Mission*, his edition of the journals of George Augustus Robinson. This page does discuss the actions of the roving parties and the information available about them, but about Aboriginal deaths it only has this to say: 'How many natives were killed in all these operations is hardly mentioned.'[61] Ryan's third reference is a very long footnote by Plomley from the same edition of Robinson's journals, dealing mainly with the personal background of the Sydney Aborigines brought to Van Diemen's Land to act as police guides. It does not mention any Aborigines killed by the roving parties but at one stage it does say that Batman's party captured eleven natives in September 1829.[62] In short, none of Ryan's footnotes support her assertion.

[59] Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1998, p 149
[60] John Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars 1788–1838*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 2002, p 145 n 48
[61] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 30
[62] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 472–4

Apart from Ryan, no other historian has ever claimed the roving parties killed sixty Aborigines, or anything like this number, at this time. It is revealing that the PhD thesis from which this claim derives is more circumspect. In 1975, Ryan's thesis summarized the situation this way:

> Between November 1828 and November 1830 the roving parties disposed of about sixty Aborigines in the settled districts either by capture or murder.[63]

Now, this is quite a different claim. It gives no precise number of those killed, and the total 'disposed of' is about sixty. In the thesis, there is no footnote to this sentence. However, in 1981, for its publication as a book and for a more public audience, Ryan inflated the total to eighty, of whom she was now confident that about sixty had been killed. She added the footnoted references discussed above, thus dressing up her conclusion as a finding based on scholarly research, when it was nothing of the kind.

The truth is that the roving parties were widely regarded at the time as ineffectual, either in capturing Aborigines or in removing them from the scene. The report of the Aborigines Committee of 1830 declared them 'worse than useless'.[64] Arthur himself confessed they 'had proved quite unavailing as a general security'. He said the Aborigines completely outwitted the roving parties:

> The total want of information as to the situation of the tribes at any particular time; the facility and rapidity with which they moved to some secret hiding place, after committing any atrocity, which they had only attempted when sure of success, rendered pursuit on such occasions in most instances fruitless, for the rugged and woody nature of the country in which they took refuge was sure to baffle any attempt to trace them in their course.[65]

He might have added three further reasons given by Jorgen Jorgenson:

1. Want of a plan for combined operations.
2. A total lack of discipline.

[63] Lyndall Ryan, The Aborigines in Tasmania, 1800–1974, and their problems with the Europeans, p 98
[64] Report of the Aborigines Committee 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Australia*, 4, p 217
[65] Memorandum by Arthur, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Australia*, 4, p 244

3. Inveterate laziness which induces the parties to proceed over the best ground they can find from one place to another, and the natives thus knowing their customary tracks can easily avoid them.[66]

It was this ineptitude and almost complete lack of results that by February 1830 led Arthur to resort to offering a bounty for the capture of Aborigines of five pounds an adult and two pounds a child.

Ryan's claim that Robertson's party killed five at the Eastern Marshes in March is yet another piece of invention. The diaries of the parties Robertson commanded from November 1828 until February 1830 are held by the Archives Office of Tasmania.[67] Nowhere do they mention any killings at Eastern Marshes or, indeed, anywhere else. The most intense period of their activity was from 1 January to 13 March 1829, when the diary gives a daily account of a sixty-five-day trek from Richmond up most of the east coast and return. The party did not have any violent confrontation with Aborigines at this time. In March, instead of lying in wait to shoot the blacks, the typical diary entries record the following:

5th: Rained all day spoiled our provisions, and put out our fire We remained at Kearney's bog in a miserable plight — Saw Number of Old Native Huts — but no fresh Traces

6th: ... saw no fresh trace of Natives

7th: ... heard nothing of the blacks

8th: Remained at Rofs all day Baking and Washing it being afternoon before we could get our Rations.[68]

The only Aborigine they came across was one old, unarmed man and his dog living on their own in the bush near George River in the north-east of the island. When he was brought to Hobart on 27 February, the *Hobart Town Courier* reported that he had been one of a party of six and that the other five had been 'shot in the pursuit'.[69] The roving party's diary, however, makes it clear this otherwise un-

[66] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.) *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1991, p 25, citing a letter by Jorgenson to Anstey, 29 July 1829

[67] Journal of the proceedings of a party employed under the direction of Gilbert Robertson, 1 January 1829–13 March 1829, AOT CSO 1/331/7578, pp 114–31; Journal of a party under the immediate orders of Gilbert Robertson, 2 February 1829–27 February 1829, AOT CSO 1/331/7578, pp 132–44; Memorandum for a journal of the proceedings of a party under my charge in pursuit of the Aborigines, 27 February 1829–13 February 1830, AOT CSO 1/331/7578, pp 79–92

[68] Robertson, Journal of the proceedings, 5–8 March 1829, p 130

[69] *Hobart Town Courier*, 7 March 1829, p 1

corroborated press report was false, for the old man was captured completely on his own.

> When we approached within thirty yards of the Fire a dog barked and we saw a black man dart off into the scrub and instantly gave chase ... we succeeded in catching him — We then went to see where his Fire was, but could see nothing to indicate that more than one had been there — he is an old man he had no spears and only one old dog.[70]

For all of 1829 and 1830, he was their sole captive.

For the most part, the journals portray a company with all the expertise of a platoon led by Sergeant Ernie Bilko. They got lost so often they suspected their Aboriginal guides, Black Tom and the captured chief Umarrah, were deliberately leading them astray. They mistimed their marches so badly that several times they ran out of rations and were forced to exist for days on damper and water. At one stage, Robertson himself was separated from the rest and was lost so long in the forest that the others gave him up and went home. From May until December 1829, Robertson's journals contain extended periods with no entries. This was not because the parties were out shooting blacks. Instead, his convict troops had become disenchanted with trekking through the bush and so they willingly accepted an invitation by Robertson to work for him, unauthorized, on his property 'Woodburn' near Richmond.[71]

By September 1829, the two main leaders of the roving parties, Robertson and Jorgenson, were at loggerheads. Each wrote reports ridiculing the other's knowledge of the Aborigines' whereabouts. They accused one another of doing nothing and of writing exaggerated reports about their pursuit of the natives.[72] There was a good deal of truth in this. In June 1829, the Aborigines attacked the huts of several settlers in the Pitt Water district. At Carlton, they killed four settlers and wounded a fifth. These events all took place within the district for which Robertson was responsible. Some settlers set out, unsuccessfully, in pursuit of the culprits but none of Robertson's three roving parties were among them. At the time, Robertson's journal recorded that he was on patrol in the unsettled areas, somewhere between the Eastern Marshes and Brushy Plains.[73] He later

[70] Robertson, Journal of the proceedings, 13 February 1829, p 126

[71] Robertson to Burnett, 18 January 1831, AOT CSO 1/331/7578, pp 154–7; Robertson to Gordon, 20 February 1830, AOT CSO 1/331/7578 pp 197–202; Gordon to Parramore, 20 February 1830, AOT CSO 1/331/7578, pp 203–4

[72] Jorgenson to Anstey, 7 September 1829, AOT CSO, 1/331/7578, pp 146–52. See also Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson*, pp 25–7

[73] Robertson, Memorandum for a journal, 24 May 1829, p 81

excused himself for not visiting Carlton or the other back settlements of Pitt Water where the murders occurred, because 'no parties had been raised in the Richmond district' at the time.[74] It was not surprising, then, that other settlers came to regard his efforts with disdain and saw him more interested in pursuing his own interests than in pursuing the natives. James Hobbs complained:

> Mr Gilbert Robertson has never exerted himself in pursuit of the Natives; he has done much mischief in not following them up; he has been more employed in looking for grants of land than the Natives.[75]

Apart from the original capture of Umarrah and his band, the closest that any of Robertson's parties came to genuine conflict with the Aborigines was on 14 November 1829 at Green Ponds. After some Aborigines had attacked a hut at nearby Constitution Hill, the local police and settlers, together with Robertson and some of his men, devised a plan to trap them. Robertson and four men sat in a hut, inviting attack, while the others hid themselves nearby. The natives duly appeared on a nearby hill but the concealed men charged too soon. 'All the natives escaped,' Robertson wrote in his journal, 'and no one could tell how, though they were in a manner surrounded by upwards of thirty people each one more anxious than another to capture or destroy them'.[76]

The only Aborigines reliably recorded killed by the roving parties were two men shot by John Batman's group in early September 1829. Batman reported to his commander, Thomas Anstey, that his party of three men and two black trackers had followed a group of sixty or seventy Aborigines on the east side of Ben Lomond. They came upon their camp and waited until night to rush them. The black camp contained forty dogs, who detected the intruders and gave the alarm. 'The natives arose from the ground and were in the act of running away into a thick scrub when I ordered the men to fire upon them.' That night, Batman's men captured a woman and a two-year-old boy. Next morning, they found an Aboriginal man badly wounded in the ankle and knee and another man wounded in the body. For ammunition, Batman's men had used buckshot, which at a distance would wound rather than kill. They saw traces of blood on the ground and were told by their captives they had wounded several

[74] Robertson, Memorandum for a journal, 14 August 1829, p 82
[75] James Hobbs, evidence to Aborigines' Committee, 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Australia*, 4, p 223
[76] Robertson, Memorandum for a journal, 14 November 1829, p 89

other men and two women who escaped.[77] They followed the tracks of the tribe all the next day but found no one, dead or alive. The following day they headed back to Batman's farm, taking the two wounded Aboriginal men, the woman and the child. The wounded men, however, could not walk. 'After trying every means in my power, for some time, found I could not get them on,' Batman reported. 'I was obliged therefore to shoot them.' [78]

Two weeks later, however, during a formal interview with Anstey and the police magistrate James Simpson, Batman changed his story about the two deaths. One of the Aborigines had died of his wounds on the track, he claimed, and the other had struck one of his men, Thomas York, who then killed him in self-defence.[79] It is fairly clear that this revised version was a concoction by Batman to spare himself the dishonour of having murdered unarmed prisoners in what was plainly cold blood. In a technical sense, the declaration of martial law and their commission as officers of the Crown gave Batman and his men the legal authority to shoot any Aborigines they came across in the settled districts. However, in a moral sense, this shooting had no justification at all. It is likely that the low opinion his supervising officers, Thomas Anstey and James Simpson, came to have of him originated in this incident and that Batman changed his story when he realized this.

Batman's reputation among the colonial authorities was diminished further by the lack of dedication he brought to his task. He eventually turned out to be as reluctant as the other roving party leaders. He had been offered the generous incentive of a 2000-acre land grant if he zealously undertook the role for twelve months.[80] In the first three weeks of September 1829 he certainly fulfilled this undertaking. As well as the rush on the tribe at Ben Lomond, he made a trek to the east coast where, between Break o'Day Plains and Oyster Bay, he captured another eleven Aborigines — four women, three boys and four small children — and brought them back to Campbell Town jail.[81] However, after the initial enthusiasm of these forays, Anstey reported that Batman had largely abandoned actions against the Aborigines. Batman blamed the government for the quality of its supplies

[77] Batman says the captured natives told him ten men were wounded but since Tasmanian natives could not count to ten this figure is too precise. For native numerical ability see the discussion in Chapter Eight, p 262

[78] Batman to Anstey, 7 September 1829, AOT CSO 1/320/7578 pp 142–5

[79] Statement on oath by Batman to Anstey and Simpson, 23 September 1829, AOT CSO 1/330/7578, pp 35–38

[80] Batman to Burnett, 8 July 1829, AOT CSO 1/321/7578, pp 88–9

[81] *Hobart Town Courier*, 26 September 1829, p 2; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 105 n 50

and the legal risk he ran if he shot any Aborigines outside the areas covered by martial law.[82] Like Robertson, he was soon regarded as pursuing his own interests rather than the colony's, and was suspected of employing the members of his roving party on his own farm.[83]

It was very unlikely that the lack of publicly recorded success of the roving parties masked a cover-up of their deeds. Given their incompetence in the bush and their preference for the comforts of town life, it is not surprising they had so little to show for their efforts. The fact that Batman reported his assault at Ben Lomond and his killing of the wounded men in such a matter-of-fact manner indicates the attitude the roving parties had to their task. It is most unlikely that any of the roving parties would have killed Aborigines and kept this information a secret. In fact, it would have been virtually impossible to prevent their convict members, who were offered a ticket-of-leave[84] for their service, from boasting of such exploits. They had no reason to conceal their actions and every reason to publicize them. In the prevailing atmosphere of anxiety among the settlers about Aboriginal atrocities, stories about their retaliations would have made the men of the roving parties popular heroes. If any of the roving party leaders had success stories to report they would have done so. The fact that they reported so little meant they had little to report.

In other words, the public record of their activities is most likely to be the accurate one. Instead of Lyndall Ryan's fictitious total of sixty Aborigines killed and twenty captured, native casualties at the hands of the roving parties were two killed, several wounded[85] and thirteen captured by Batman, plus six captured by Robertson. This hardly amounted to what Arthur initially said would be a campaign of 'terror'. Of the nineteen Aborigines captured, only three were adult male warriors. The rest were one old man, six women and nine children. This was not a haul to seriously deplete the ranks of the enemy.

[82] Batman to Anstey, 7 September 1829, AOT CSO 1/320/7578, pp 144; Anstey to Burnett, 4 May 1830, AOT CSO 1/320/7578, p 70

[83] Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson*, p 29; Robertson to Gordon, 20 February 1830, AOT CSO 1/331/7578, pp 197–204

[84] A ticket-of-leave was a certificate granting exemption from compulsory labour, allowing convicts employment of their choice: A. G. L. Shaw, *Convicts and the Colonies*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, p 73

[85] As well as those Batman shot and wounded, a roving party pursued a band of Aborigines near Blackman's River in March 1830 and fired upon them. They found no bodies but blood on the ground indicated some had been wounded. They also shot dead a dog. *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 March 1830, p 3

THE SHOOTINGS AT MOULTING LAGOON AND TOOMS LAKE

There is only one claim in Ryan's account of the aftermath to the November 1828 declaration of martial law that bears any relation to the truth. Even in this case, however, her version of events is very wide of the mark. She says that in January 1829 settlers at Moulting Lagoon lay in wait for the Oyster Bay Aborigines to make their seasonal visit. When they appeared, she says, the settlers shot dead ten of them and took three prisoners. She cites three newspaper reports and a letter to the Governor from James Simpson as her sources for this and related events in the same paragraph.[86] Simpson's letter is about Aborigines chasing a convict stockman at the Government farm at Campbell Town, where he was police magistrate, so is not relevant.[87] Of the three newspapers she cites, none of them mention any conflict with Aborigines at Moulting Lagoon. So, yet again, Ryan's references do not confirm the claims she makes in her text.

However, there was a report in one of the newspapers she cites, the *Launceston Advertiser* of 9 February 1829, that says a total of twenty Aborigines were killed and five captured in three separate incidents, one at Little Swan Port, the second at St Paul's River, and the third at the Eastern Marshes. The report of these events came from an unnamed correspondent at Great Swan Port. It said:

> Mr David Rayney shot a black man near Mr Lyne's on Monday last, Nine were killed and three taken near St Paul's River, ten days back, and about the same time ten were shot and two taken, near the Eastern Marshes.[88]

This report is the only one of Ryan's sources with any relevance to her claims about Aboriginal deaths. The 'Mr Lyne' it mentions would have been William Lyne, a settler at Little Swan Port on the east coast. In this case, the report was credible. The correspondent gave the name of the man responsible, the farm where the shooting took place, and the date. It was unlikely that someone would invent details as precise as this so close to the event.

The report's claim about the killing of ten and the capture of two Aborigines at the Eastern Marshes referred to an action by the 40th Regiment that took place not in January 1829 but in early December 1828. The same report from the same correspondent was published in both the *Launceston Advertiser* and the *Colonial Times* of Hobart in late

[86] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 102, p 113 n 4

[87] Simpson to Burnett, 17 February 1829, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 223. Ryan got the date and file of this letter right but wrongly cited it as Simpson to Arthur.

[88] *Launceston Advertiser*, 9 February 1829, p 2

January and early February,[89] but his story was several weeks out of date. A detailed account of this event and its background had already appeared in the *Hobart Town Courier* on 13 December 1828.

Since October 1828, Aborigines from the Oyster Bay district had left a trail of violence between the coast and the central midlands, robbing, killing and wounding settlers with impunity. In October they killed two women and a young girl at Big Lagoon, Oatlands.[90] Two weeks later they killed a stock-keeper on the Sandspit River run of Captain William Glover.[91] They also killed a small boy at Green Ponds and wounded eight other settlers and stockmen in the district.[92] This upsurge of violence was one of the main reasons for the declaration of martial law in November 1828. In the first week of December, the same Aborigines committed a series of robberies and murders in the east of the colony between Oatlands and Fingal. They were fought off several times, but nonetheless killed three convict stockmen at the Eastern Marshes and a shepherd at Fingal.[93] At first, small groups of armed shepherds and stockmen pursued them, but without success.

By 6 December, however, the military garrison at Oatlands had despatched a party of soldiers from the 40th Regiment to try to apprehend them. By 8 December, five more military parties, another from the 40th, two from the 57th and two from the 63rd Regiments, were in the field searching an area from Oatlands to the coast, and northward. On 9 December, the *Hobart Town Courier* reported one of the parties from the 40th Regiment had returned with two captives, a black woman and her boy. The newspaper said these troops had encountered the Aborigines at 'the Great Lake near the source of the Macquarie River', indicating what is now called Tooms Lake. 'Ten of the natives were killed on the spot and the rest fled.'[94] Tooms Lake

[89] *Colonial Times*, 30 January 1829, p 3

[90] Proceedings of an inquest on the bodies of Anne Geary and Alicia Gough, 11 October 1828, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 168; Anstey to Burnett, 21 December 1830, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 759

[91] Gordon to Burnett, 27 October 1828, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 181

[92] *Hobart Town Courier*, 25 October 1828, p 1 and 1 November 1828, p 2; Anstey to Burnett, 21 December 1830, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 766; Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, pp 72-3

[93] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 December 1828, p 2

[94] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 December 1828, p 2, carried a series of running reports on the events at various locations. It identified the site of the soldiers' assault as 'near the Great Lake at the source of the Macquarie River'. This most probably meant what is now known as Tooms Lake, about 35 kilometres east of Oatlands. In the 1820s and 1830s, it was not named on contemporary maps, hence the use of the generic term 'the Great Lake'. Tooms Lake is where the Macquarie River at the time was thought to rise,

is in rugged country that rises between the Eastern Marshes and Oyster Bay. The Oatlands correspondent gave a detailed inventory of the weapons and stolen goods recovered from this band:

> The following articles fell into the hands of the party on this occasion: — 29 waddies, 52 spears, 14 blankets, 28 knives, 6 blades of sheep shears, 2 razors, 1 fowling piece, about two pounds of gunpowder, a quantity of bullets and shot, about half a pound of tobacco, some pieces of cord of native manufacture made of kangaroo sinews. Eleven native dogs were destroyed; one has been brought here alive.[95]

This incident at Tooms Lake is not an event that appears in any of the orthodox historians' catalogue of massacre stories. Had they read the contemporary newspapers more thoroughly, they would have found, of all the tales of violence against the Aborigines, this was their best candidate for a multiple killing by the colonists. The story in the *Hobart Town Courier* appears credible. The party of the 40th Regiment comprised nine soldiers, two field constables and one volunteer guide, which was a sufficient force to kill ten Aborigines. In fact, the *Hobart Town Courier's* coverage of the whole sequence of events in early December 1828 is convincing. Its stories were written by several correspondents from different locations and, apart from the report of the 40th Regiment's attack itself, they all confirm one another. The correspondent from Oatlands, who reported the Tooms Lake killings, clearly had access to both the local military and the police. He provides insider details such as the number of troops involved, the names of their commanders, the routes they took and the inventory of the Aboriginal weapons they eventually captured. Even though he was not on the spot when the main action took place, there is no good reason to doubt anything he said.[96]

even though it later became clear that the creek from Tooms Lake to the Macquarie is a tributary, while the main stream actually rises further north near Lake Leake. None of this area had been surveyed at the time and neither the full course of the Macquarie nor Tooms Lake itself appear on contemporary maps: see map of Van Diemen's Land, by J. Arrowsmith, London, 15 February 1832. The writer obviously did not mean what was called Great Lake in the central highlands, since this was not where any of the regiments were searching and was too far distant to reach in the time available.

[95] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 December 1828, p 2

[96] For some reason, Brian Plomley neglects any mention of this incident in his survey of clashes between Aborigines and settlers before 1831. He lists the four stockmen killed between 1 and 9 December 1828, and cites the relevant reports from the *Hobart Town Courier*, but he omits the killing of the ten natives at Tooms Lake, which was recorded on the same page of the newspaper. Moreover, he cites the report by the Great Swan Port

It is most probable that the correspondent from Great Swan Port's story about the killing of ten and the capture of two Aborigines at the Eastern Marshes was referring to the same incident. He got the numbers right and the Eastern Marshes was where the troops of the 40th Regiment had begun their search. On the other hand, it is his claim about the killing of nine Aborigines at St Paul's River that is dubious. The information was provided by no other writer in any other newspaper. Only the correspondent from Great Swan Port reported it and he only got onto the story of these events some weeks after they occurred. Unlike the Oatlands correspondent, he appeared to be relying on local gossip rather than eyewitness reports. The shooting of nine natives at this time would have been a very newsworthy event, just like the one at Tooms Lake. There should be some other supporting evidence somewhere. The only mention of any action at St Paul's River in all the press stories and archive documents was one report from a correspondent at Tullochgorum on the Break o'Day Plains. After the Aborigines had killed the shepherd at William Talbot's property at Fingal, a party of local stockmen went after them. The correspondent reported:

> I went the day following in pursuit of the murdering tribe, and followed them over the tiers towards the source of the St Paul's, where we saw a few of them, and then all further pursuit proved fruitless. Had they been in an open place we should have got up to them, although they had the start of us by a quarter of a mile, but when we lost sight of them we could hardly know which way to run.[97]

Plainly, if this man had killed any of this tribe, or even got off a shot at them, he would have reported it with some pride. Apart from this, there is nothing relevant in the official records or in any private correspondence that has so far surfaced. Moreover, what information we do have is not supportive. By January 1829, there were still two government parties searching for Aborigines in the east of the colony. Gilbert Robertson's company, discussed earlier, passed east of the St Paul's River district between 24 and 27 January.[98] Apart from one old man and some distant smoke, they found no signs of Aboriginal presence anywhere. The second was a military troop from the 57th Regi-

correspondent about the killing of nine Aborigines at St Paul's River, but leaves out the ten shot at the Eastern Marshes, which, as quoted above, was included in the same sentence. Plomley obviously did not believe this story, but has left no indication why. Perhaps he was worried about the possible confusion mentioned in footnote 94 between 'the Great Lake', which is most probably Tooms Lake, and Great Lake in the central highlands: Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash,* pp 74–6.

[97] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 December 1828, p 2

[98] Robertson, Journal of the proceedings, 24–27 January 1829, pp 120–1

ment under Ensign Lockyer, accompanied by civilian guides. This troop was one of the six regimental parties that set out in search of the Aborigines on 7 December. It eventually returned to Oatlands in two groups on 10 and 11 January after an expedition up the east coast. They had gone north from Oatlands, across St Paul's River and then on to St Patrick's Head but 'without perceiving any Native fires, or the traces of the Natives anywhere in the direction followed'.[99] No unofficial reports of killings by this party were later leaked to the press.

Apart from the report by the Great Swan Port correspondent, who did not know the name of those responsible for the alleged killings at St Paul's River, nor even whether they were soldiers or civilians, there is nothing else to go on. Moreover, there were no corroborative details reported anywhere about the fate of the three captives who this correspondent said were taken at St Paul's River. No one saw them with Ensign Lockyer's party when it returned, nor was there any information about where they were housed or taken after their supposed capture.

In short, the Great Swan Port correspondent's report was clearly based on local rumour rather than any familiarity with the facts. The most likely explanation is that he heard two stories, both with the wrong location but with their other details roughly the same, which had both originated in the one event. He mistakenly thought he was hearing about two separate incidents.

It is possible, of course, that Ensign Lockyer's troop, which went through the district at about the right time, could have killed nine Aborigines without publicly reporting it. However, there would be no reason for them to keep their actions quiet, any more than their comrades from the 40th Regiment did. But unless some as yet unearthed document turns up to provide more information, this has to remain a bare possibility. Moreover, even if this report did eventually turn out to be true, this would not rescue Lyndall Ryan's version of events, which attributes the killings to settlers rather than the military, and locates the site not at St Paul's River but at Moulting Lagoon where no one at the time, not even the correspondent from Great Swan Port, reported any Aborigines being killed.

[99] *Hobart Town Courier*, 17 January 1829, p 1; *Colonial Times*, 30 January 1829, p 1; *Launceston Advertiser*, 9 February 1829, p 3. The report in the *Colonial Times* and *Launceston Advertiser* (same report) said Lockyer was with the 40th Regiment but the original story of his departure in the *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 December 1828, said he was with the 57th.

THE CREDIBILITY OF NEWSPAPER REPORTS

The citation of these reports raises questions about the use of newspaper stories as historical evidence. The orthodox historians of Aboriginal Australia have long accepted without question any story in a newspaper that says blacks were killed by whites. Few of these historians ever treat these reports critically, that is, they rarely ask whether there is any supporting evidence or whether there might be some agenda behind their telling. Historians should not need reminding that reports in the press are just as fallible as any other kind and can be subject to influences ranging from the overtly political to the trivial. For example, soon after it reported the killings at St Paul's River and the Eastern Marshes, the *Launceston Advertiser* was apologising to its readers for falsely reporting another story about the Aborigines:

> We have to contradict the statement in our last week's paper, respecting the blacks being seen near the cataract hills, the report being wholly without foundation, and its having originated from a drunken servant, in the employ of a gentleman on the opposite side of the river, in order to evade the punishment for leaving his master's farm without permission.[100]

In December 1828, a Launceston correspondent of the *Hobart Town Courier* gave a similar reason to be sceptical of uncorroborated reports:

> Yesterday a man came running to a house near town (about a mile and a half off) stating that he had been severely beaten by the black Natives, and that another man, his companion was killed by them. A party of soldiers and constables were sent out, and were out all night in search of them, but it proved altogether a false report. The party found the man (said to be killed) lying drunk. People bringing such reports ought certainly to be punished. It does much mischief.[101]

In November 1830, during the Black Line military campaign, a correspondent from Bothwell wrote to the *Hobart Town Courier* complaining about an earlier story in the *Colonial Times*.

> To dissipate the fears of persons travelling from Green Ponds to this place, we shall feel obliged if you will assure the public, that the letter from the Cross Marsh which appeared in the Colonial Times of the 6th instant is all twaddle. There are, it is true, *some* blacks in the rear of the line, and they are four in number — and no more. These four crept through the line, then much extended, near Lake Sorell, and they have been seen by different people in this and the neighbouring district. It is not true that they chased Mr Brodribb's shepherd *for miles*.[102]

[100] *Launceston Advertiser*, 23 February 1829, p 2
[101] *Hobart Town Courier*, 20 December 1828, p 2
[102] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 November 1830, p 2

The history of conflict between Aborigines and colonists has long been characterized by the absence of any sense that press reports need either corroboration from other sources or even a modicum of internal criticism of their credibility. Instead, if a report adds to the Aboriginal death toll, it fits the dominant orthodoxy and is thereby accepted, the assumption being that, because it fits the orthodoxy, it must be true.

This chapter has dwelt so long on the report from the Great Swan Port correspondent because it provides a useful case study of the criteria of credibility that historians should apply to newspaper stories. In some recent public debates over the Aboriginal death toll in Australia, I have been accused of demanding a legalistic standard of proof of killings. Because there were only a small number of coronial inquests into the killing of Aborigines in Australia in the nineteenth century, and even fewer trials of those thought responsible, the imposition of legal criteria of proof would virtually guarantee any death count would be small.[103]

On the contrary, the standard of proof required for the writing of history is not legalistic but journalistic. That is, for a claim of killing to be credible it needs either first-hand reports from eyewitnesses, second-hand reports from those with direct contact to the participants, or accounts by those who saw the bodies afterwards. These reports should be reasonably contemporary with events and provide specific details like names, dates, places and numbers. The informants should be credible witnesses. Anyone with an obvious agenda to mislead should be treated sceptically. In most cases, criteria of this kind would satisfy normal historical enquiry. In some cases, where there are contrary or contradictory accounts of the same event, the balance of probability of the evidence should decide things. In a small number of contentious cases, a more exhaustive survey of the forensic evidence would be needed. But even here, historians do not need proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

Obviously, though, if journalistic standards are to prevail, historians need to apply some critical standards to reports in newspapers. They should not accept stories like the one from the Great Swan Port correspondent — whose sources were plainly local gossip rather than first-hand accounts, and who confused two rumours about the one event as evidence of two separate incidents — at face value.

[103] Bob Gould, 'McGuinness, Windschuttle and Quadrant: The Revisionist attack on Australian history about British conquest and Aboriginal resistance', Gould's Book Arcade, Newtown, 11 November 2000, http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/Windschuttleblack.html

Unfortunately, as this chapter has demonstrated, standards of proof, accuracy and rigour are largely absent from the work of the current practitioners of Aboriginal history. In particular, the fact that Lyndall Ryan's work is devoid of credibility at so many places is a reflection not only of her own standards but also of those of the school of historiography of which she has long been an esteemed member. Not only have none of her colleagues publicly exposed her fabrications, they have continued to endorse her work.

As noted earlier, Henry Reynolds describes Ryan as a 'respected and conscientious' scholar. Yet it is hard to believe that Reynolds is so innocent that he has never found any of her citations dubious. In fact, he has read a number of the primary source documents she claims to have consulted and has also read some of those discussed in this chapter, which call her writings into question. Tellingly, in his own work on Van Diemen's Land he does not repeat her claim that the roving parties killed sixty Aborigines and captured twenty. Indeed, on this particular issue, he largely supports the case made in this chapter. In two separate passages he writes:

> Problems confronting the Europeans were exemplified by the experience of the roving parties which fruitlessly pursued the Aborigines for many months.[104]

> The problems of actually 'coming up with' an Aboriginal party were enormous. We know that the military patrols and the roving parties were rarely able to do so despite months of endeavour.[105]

For that matter, no other historian who has examined the primary sources, before or after Ryan, has supported her unsubstantiated and falsely referenced death toll for the roving parties. Yet when asked for an endorsement for the cover of the 1996 edition of Ryan's book, Reynolds chose to overlook all this. He had no hesitation in describing it as 'by far the best and most scholarly work on the Tasmanian Aborigines in the twentieth century'.

[104] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp 70–1
[105] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 78

CHAPTER SIX

The Black Line and the intentions of the colonial authorities, 1830–1831

THE Black Line is by far the most infamous event in Tasmanian history. Indeed, it ranks as one of the most infamous in the history of the British Empire. According to most accounts, this is because its intentions were so extreme but its outcome so inconsequential. It is commonly portrayed as an attempt to eliminate, by capture or slaughter, all the Aborigines from Tasmania, but is usually judged an expensive failure. In October 1830, the government formed a human chain of soldiers and civilian volunteers who moved across about half of the island towards the south-east where they hoped to trap the Aborigines on an isolated peninsula. Most of the blacks, however, evaded or slipped through the line and only two were actually captured.

In his book on Western imperialism's destruction of indigenous peoples, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold*, the *Guardian* journalist Mark Cocker compares the Black Line to the expeditions of the Spanish conquistadors in the Americas. Its two thousand soldiers, settlers and convicts, Cocker writes, 'was the largest force ever summoned to combat Australian Aborigines and equalled the total number of troops employed by Cortés to subdue Mexico, while Francisco Pizarro had

destroyed the Inca with a tenth of Arthur's men'.[1] Henry Reynolds, who describes the line as an early example of 'ethnic cleansing',[2] says an operation on such a scale was mounted because the British felt Aboriginal hostilities had put the very existence of their colony at stake. 'Writing from his camp at Sorell to justify the famous Black Line,' Reynolds observes, 'he [Arthur] argued that such was the insecurity of the settlers that he feared "a general decline in the prosperity" and the "eventual extirpation of the Colony".'[3] The anthropologist David Davies in *The Last of the Tasmanians* claims the Black Line devastated the Aborigines. Hiding from their pursuers, they were forced to make terrible choices. 'The aborigines were killed and maimed and left to die in the bush. No group could afford to stay long enough to help a wounded member ... they even had to put to death their children, in case their cries gave away the whereabouts of the rest of the party.'[4] The *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, edited by three of Australia's leading professors of history, Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre, describes the line as the climax of the Black War against the Aborigines: 'The battles culminated in the Black Line of 1829–30, a human chain stretching across the south-eastern corner of the island, designed to capture the remaining Tasmanians. It was a costly failure; only one man and a boy were caught.'[5] The author of what is widely regarded as the definitive history of Tasmania, Lloyd Robson, calls it a 'catastrophic failure'.[6]

The notoriety of the Black Line, however, is based largely on the myths perpetrated about it, not the historical reality. Almost all the assertions by the above authors are false. The human chain did not stretch across south-eastern Tasmania for more than a year, as the dates given by the *Oxford Companion* imply. The entire operation took seven weeks. There were not thousands of natives killed, as in Mexico and Peru. The Aboriginal death toll was three. There were no wounded Aborigines left by their companions to die and no black

[1] Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1998, p 150
[2] Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia's History*, Viking, Ringwood, 2001, p 76
[3] Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and the Land*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p 29
[4] David Davies, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Shakespeare Head Press, Sydney, 1973, pp 123, 126
[5] 'Black War', *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, ed. Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p 74
[6] Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Volume One*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p 220

babies killed by their parents. David Davies invented these fictions. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur did not believe the Aborigines threatened the existence of the colony. Reynolds altered the words in the statement he attributes to him. The line was not intended to capture or eliminate all the remaining Aborigines. Its aim was to drive two hostile tribes from the settled areas of the midlands and the south-east into uninhabited country. Five of the other seven tribes were specifically excluded from its ambit. And it was neither a catastrophic nor costly failure. Indeed, its principal objective was quickly realized. It so intimidated the Aborigines from the settled districts that, within a little over twelve months, they had all surrendered and allowed themselves to be shipped off to a Bass Strait island outpost.

Since 1828, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had been searching for a means to prevent Aborigines from committing violence in the districts where the colonists had established farms. As Chapter Five records, his initial policy was to employ the roving parties and military patrols to try to capture natives found in these areas, or to intimidate and drive them off. Even though the Aborigines Committee of 1830 declared the patrols 'worse than useless' and Arthur himself confessed they 'had proved quite unavailing as a general security',[7] he persevered with the system. In February 1830, Arthur adopted two new measures. He appointed a committee headed by the new Sydney Anglican Archdeacon, William Grant Broughton, to chair a committee to investigate the causes of the hostilities and advise him on policy. He also tried offering rewards of five pounds per adult and two pounds per child for Aborigines captured in the settled districts.

The occasional, single captive was subsequently brought in to Hobart by a settler and lodged in jail. In July, George Anstey captured four Aborigines who had just plundered one of his father's huts in the central midlands, while the settler Humphrey Howells captured 'some' hostile natives on the Shannon River.[8] But there were never more than a handful of these arrests [9] and they made little impact on the number of Aboriginal assaults. As the year progressed, the violence increased dramatically. In July 1830, in the south midlands and

[7] Report of the Aborigines Committee 1830, Memorandum by Arthur, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 217, 244

[8] N. J. B. Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1991, p 98

[9] When those arrested under this system were transported to Gun Carriage Island in March 1831, there were only three from jail in Hobart: N. J. B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, p 479

Abyssinia, six roving parties were in action but there were still ten assaults by native bands in these districts. In August there were forty separate assaults, the majority of them in the same two districts.[10]

Lloyd Robson says that the settlers gave as good as they got in this period. He claims that in the immediate prelude to the Black Line there was an onslaught by the colonists that led to twenty-four Aborigines being killed and thirty-two wounded.[11] This claim is characteristic of much of Robson's work in that there is no footnote to indicate his source or any other indication about how he arrived at these figures. The truth is the Aborigines suffered nothing like these losses. In all of 1830 up to the time the Black Line started there were only six incidents that had Aboriginal casualties, which amounted to two killed on the Shannon River, several others wounded, plus a series of skirmishes in the Bothwell district between 22 and 27 August in which 'several' Aborigines were reported killed.[12]

Until the series of incidents at Bothwell, the response of the colonial government was characterized by a restraint that plainly frustrated the settlers. Even though his 1828 declaration of martial law in the settled districts still remained in force, up to mid-August 1830 Arthur was still mainly concerned to prevent excesses by the convict servants of the white settlers, which he believed was one of the principal causes of the problem. He still wanted to show a conciliatory face to the natives. On 19 August he issued a notice saying:

> His Excellency earnestly requests that all settlers and others will strictly enjoin their servants cautiously to abstain from acts of aggression against these benighted beings, and that they will themselves personally endeavour to conciliate them wherever it may be practicable: and whenever the Aborigines appear without evincing a hostile feeling, that no attempt shall be made either to capture or restrain them, but, on the contrary, after being fed and kindly treated, that they shall be suffered to depart whenever they desire it.[13]

The next day Arthur issued another notice warning settlers that his offer of a reward for captured Aborigines was being misinterpreted. Rewards were only for Aborigines caught while committing aggressions on the inhabitants of the settled districts, not for settlers or convicts who went out to seize 'inoffensive Natives of the remote and

[10] *Colonial Times*, 16 July 1830, p 3; N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803-1831*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992 pp 90–2

[11] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol 1, p 219

[12] Table ten, Chapter Ten, has list of deaths; Plomley's survey, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, pp 83–94, confirms this picture.

[13] Government Notice, No. 160, 19 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 233

unsettled parts of the territory', just to claim the money. 'If, after the promulgation of this notice, any *wanton* attack or aggression against the Natives becomes known to the Government, the offenders will be immediately brought to justice and punished'.[14] At the time, these notices appeared to reflect both Arthur's own views on the subject and the pressure he was under from London to conciliate the issue.

However, the colonial reaction to them was more than Arthur had anticipated. Seven days later, obviously influenced by an adverse response from settlers, Arthur reversed his position. He had learned, he said in a third notice, that his two earlier missives had been misunderstood, especially by settlers at Oatlands and Bothwell, the districts that had suffered the greatest violence. 'It was not intended to relax in the most strenuous exertions to repel and to drive from the settled country those Natives who seize every occasion to perpetrate murders, and to plunder and destroy the property of the inhabitants.'[15]

The same day, Friday 27 August, Arthur sat for six hours with his Executive Council. Among the documents before them was a letter from the jury at the inquest into the killing of the settler James Hooper on 24 August. Hooper had suffered his third Aboriginal attack in three years and had finally been clubbed to death at his farm at Spring Hill, near Oatlands. The jury complained about the conciliatory tone of Arthur's notices of 19 and 20 August. The Executive Council also considered reports from magistrates in the Oatlands and Bothwell police districts. By 1830, the Council observed, Aboriginal attacks were no longer confined to remote huts of stock-keepers and sawyers: 'Now they have ventured to carry them into the heart of the settled districts'. One landowner and magistrate, Thomas Anstey, 'had expressed his firm opinion, that the Aborigines are now irreclaimable, and that the ensuing spring will be the most bloody that we have yet experienced, unless sufficient military protection should be afforded'. By the time the meeting finished, Arthur had resolved on a new strategy. He had chosen 'a decisive issue' to bring the hostilities of the Aborigines to an end.[16]

[14] Government Notice, No. 161, 20 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 233–4

[15] Government Notice, No. 166, 27 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 234

[16] Minutes of the Executive Council, 27 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 234–6. Hooper's death is further discussed in Report of robberies, outrages, murders and other aggressions, by Thomas Anstey, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 770 and *Colonial Times*, 27 August 1830, p 3. Lloyd Robson claims the three issues that finally turned Arthur's mind were the murder of 'Mary Danville' (actually Mary Daniels) and her five-month-old twins at Patrick Wood's property Dennistoun on the Clyde

On 9 September, Arthur announced a general mobilisation of the white population of the colony. He called upon every settler 'cheerfully to render his assistance' and to place himself under the direction of his district police magistrate. They were to comprise a volunteer force that would combine with a similar muster of the military to capture the hostile tribes or permanently expel them from the settled districts.[17] By 22 September the detailed plan of the Black Line had been drawn up. A single line of troops, settlers and convicts would be formed across the midlands. The line would then move towards the south and the east driving before it any Aborigines in its path. The lines would gradually tighten, forcing the Aborigines through East Bay Neck onto Forestier Peninsula and then through Eaglehawk Neck onto Tasman Peninsula.

The initial orders under which the force was raised, and the whole tactical plan for its movement, were aimed at removing or capturing two Aboriginal tribes, the Big River and Oyster Bay tribes. This was, Arthur said, because they were 'as the most sanguinary, being of the greatest consequence'.[18] The intention was to drive them out of the Hobart, Richmond, New Norfolk, Clyde and Oatlands police districts, that is, out of the southern midlands and south-east regions. Arthur explained his objectives quite clearly. Even though few historians quote them, his goals were to put the two tribes he was targeting onto a closed reserve where they could practice their traditional way of life but would not be able to harass white settlers:

> As a portion of the south-east quarter, containing many thousands of acres of most unprofitable soil for Europeans, is well suited for the purpose of savage life, abounding in game, I have entertained strongly the opinion that it might be practicable to drive the savages into that portion of the

River in June, the robbery of Surveyor William Sharland of muskets on 9 August and the 30 September attack on G. Scott 'when the enemy even ventured up the stairs and broke the doors open', *History of Tasmania*, Vol 1, p 218. The assault on Scott took place, however, a month after the Black Line decision was made. For the Daniels family murders see AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 521, 525, 760–1.

[17] Government Order No. 9, 9 September 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 236–8

[18] Government Order, No. 11, 22 September 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 238. As part of the tactical planning stage in September 1830, Arthur sought advice from police magistrates of the principal districts. Their responses are in AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 208–43. The magistrates confirmed that their aims were defined as: 'a plan of operations having for their object the capture of the Oyster Bay and Big River tribes of Natives', p 236

territory, and that there they might be retained, as it is connected only by a very narrow neck, which might be guarded.[19]

Because it didn't have the number of troops needed, the government intended to leave the tribes 'on the north' for what Arthur called 'after operations'.[20] By 'on the north' Arthur appears to be referring to the Aborigines frequenting both sides of the Tamar and the Ben Lomond region.[21] He specifically prohibited 'any wanton attack' against what he called 'the inoffensive tribes on the west and south-west districts of the colony, or against the tribes inhabiting the adjacent islands' and said anyone assaulting these Aborigines would be 'vigorously prosecuted'.[22] He was referring here to natives frequenting the north-west, west and south-west coasts, Robbins Island and Bruny Island. Arthur made no mention of those in the north-east, but since there was no white settlement in or near this area at the time, it was also outside his ambit. On the eve of the line Arthur did, it is true, extend the operation of martial law, which was previously confined to the settled districts, to the whole of the island. But overall, his intentions in 1830 were unambiguous: to move two of the offending tribes from the midland plains to the Forestier and Tasman peninsulas now, to remove two others later, and to leave five of them alone. Rather than extending across the whole of the island, the Black Line encompassed about one third of it, in the midlands and south-east.

Despite Henry Reynolds' use of the term, objectives of this kind did not amount to 'ethnic cleansing'. There was no intention to treat the Aborigines as Bosnians and Kosovars were treated in the 1990s, and to kill them because of their race or religion. Even those to be removed from the settled districts were targeted not because of their race but because of their violence. Other members of the same racial group deemed to be less hostile were not to be touched. Reynolds actually acknowledges the fact that Arthur's intentions were limited to the tribes of the midlands districts,[23] yet still wants his readers to

[19] Arthur to Murray, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 231

[20] Arthur, Memorandum, Sorell Camp, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 244

[21] In a letter to Arthur, 23 October 1830, Major Gray mentions forthcoming 'proceedings which your Excellency proposes to carry on to the northwards'. This was written at St Paul's after Gray had visited John Batman and appears to refer to the Ben Lomond tribe: AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 701

[22] Government Notice, No. 166, 27 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 234

[23] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?* p 76

think of the Black Line as a form of 'ethnic cleansing' and thus to compare the fate of the Aborigines to the worst of the atrocities in the Balkans in our own time.

THE COURSE AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE BLACK LINE

When assembled, Arthur's force comprised 2200 men, of whom 550 were troops, the rest civilian volunteers. They comprised three divisions, which were divided into smaller corps, all under the command of military officers. The Lieutenant-Governor himself was commander in the field. The men were to form a line, initially V-shaped, running from St Patrick's Head on the east coast down the South Esk River to Campbell Town, then north-west along the Macquarie, Lake and Meander rivers. They would also start with two flanking lines, one on the east coast and the other between the lakes of the central highlands. On 4 October some of the corps made preliminary movements, leaving Bothwell for the upper reaches of the Shannon River and Lake Echo. The other corps moved into position further north, forming the main line of advance.

On 7 October the line started south.[24] A human chain moved on foot across both plains and rugged country, like beaters on a hunt. Men blew bugles, fired muskets and called out their numbers so those out of sight would know where they were. In the first few days, the line was 120 miles wide, an average of one man every 100 yards. By 12 October it extended from the head of Oyster Bay west to Lake Sorell, then turned south down the Clyde River to Hamilton, then went east to the Jordan River. Behind it, a stationary line from Lake Sorell to Lake Echo watched for native escapees. The terrain made it inherently difficult to keep the line always in formation. There were reports that some detachments found the woods impenetrable and hills unclimbable and simply walked in single file along the main roads.[25] By 24 October the entire force had swept south-east and the line had contracted to thirty miles wide, from Prosser Bay to Sorell.

It was here, a few miles in front of the line, that the former soldier Edward Walpole discovered a group of forty to fifty Aborigines camped for the night. At daybreak he and a small party of troops rushed the camp. In the ensuing fight, they captured two Aborigines and shot two others. The rest flew into the thickets and escaped. The

[24] The information in this and the following paragraph comes from Arthur, Memorandum, Sorell Camp, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 245; and *Hobart Town Courier*, 6 November, 1830, p 2

[25] Henry Melville, *A History of Van Diemen's Land from the Year 1824 to 1835 Inclusive*, ed. George Mackaness, Horwitz-Grahame, Sydney, 1965, p 104 n

line held its position for the next week while the escapees made several attempts to break through at night. Finally, the corps from Lake Echo was brought down. This reinforcement allowed 400 men to be sent in to scour the country between the line and the isthmus of Forestier Peninsula. From 2 to 6 November they cut a swathe through the forest and thicket. But apart from some abandoned campsites, they found no trace of the Aborigines. By this time, the volunteers had been absent from their homes for so long that some began drifting off.[26] Arthur realized it would be difficult to keep the civilians in his force together much longer. On 20 November, when he wrote a long memorandum explaining his objectives and tactics, Arthur said his troops were still moving forward towards the isthmus, 'in full hopes of success'. A week later, however, with none of this success realized, he gave up hope of sighting any more natives, let alone capturing tribes of them. On 26 November, seven weeks after it had started out, Arthur ordered the line to disperse.[27]

The two Aborigines the line did capture said they were from the Big River and Oyster Bay tribes, who had by this time united. One of the captives was recognized as a man previously caught spearing horses at Emu Bay on the north coast; the other was a fifteen-year-old youth.[28] Besides the two men shot during Walpole's rush on their camp, the only other Aboriginal casualty connected with the line was one man killed on 18 October by William Gangell during an attack by eight natives on his farm near Sorell. In this attack — which took place behind, not in front of the line — Gangell and his young son were both wounded but they stabbed one of the Aborigines with a pitchfork. They later found his body nearby.[29] Apart from this, no one in the line came across any Aborigines who had been wounded and left to die by their companions, and no one found the remains of any babies killed by their parents. David Davies' provides no references for his claims about such events. There was no contemporary evidence or even another secondary source that recorded details of this kind. Davies invented them to dramatize his story. He not only lifted the title but also whole passages of text, extending over several

[26] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 November 1830, p 2

[27] Government Order No. 13, 26 November 1830; *Hobart Town Courier*, 27 November 1830, p 2

[28] Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, p 110; James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians or The Black War of Van Diemen's Land*, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1870, p 164

[29] A list of articles plundered etc, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 676; Gordon to Arthur, 19 October 1830, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 681; *Hobart Town Courier*, 20 November 1830, p 2. William Gangell later died from his wounds.

pages, from James Bonwick's nineteenth-century work *The Last of the Tasmanians*, without acknowledgement.[30] His account of the line is a composite of fiction and plagiarism.

Lyndall Ryan claims there were three other Aborigines killed in the midlands during October, partly as a result of the Black Line. She says a group of twenty Aborigines from the Ben Lomond, Great Swan Port and Stoney Creek clans, led by the Oyster Bay chief Mannalargenna, had gone to Blackmans River to fight the Big River tribe in a dispute over women. On their return to the east coast across the midlands plain, they avoided the Black Line itself but near the Launceston Road encountered a military party who shot three of them dead. In revenge, Ryan says, the Ben Lomond people followed their assailants and killed two as they slept by a campfire. The sources she footnotes for this story are two letters from Major William Gray to Arthur, written on 19 and 24 October.[31]

These letters, however, do not mention the chief Mannalargenna or any of the events Ryan describes. Instead, they are about a small group of Aborigines headed by a chief called Limogana who lodged for a short time at John Batman's house near Ben Lomond. Gray described how they initially seemed amenable to civilized life but then left and committed a series of robberies and assaults in the district, including the murder of a settler. In another letter on 1 November, Gray told how this band met a group of constables sent from Campbell Town to apprehend them. In the ensuing fight, two constables were wounded by spears and two Aborigines, one of whom was Limogana, were shot dead. This affray took place at Break o'Day Plains, on the South Esk River, in the north-east of the island, on 30 October, six days after Arthur's main procession had reached Sorell in the south.[32] So these two deaths cannot be attributed to the Black Line.

[30] For example, compare Davies, p 130-2, with Bonwick, p 177-80, where the two texts are almost identical.

[31] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edn. Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, pp 149, 159 n 4. Between 19 October and 1 November 1830, Gray wrote five letters to Arthur about these events. They are located at AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 684–701, 714–7.

[32] As well as Gray's reports, accounts of Limogana's band and its demise are in Simpson to Arthur, 30 October 1830, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 712–3; *Hobart Town Courier*, 16 October 1830, p 2 and 13 November 1830, p 2; Robinson, journal, 15 November 1830, in Plomley, *Friendly Mission* , pp 276–7; and J. E. Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits etc. of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn and Co, Hobart, 1875, p 102, where his name is spelt Limaganna.

Even though she fails to cite it, the original source of Ryan's story of the Launceston Road killings was the journal of George Augustus Robinson. On 1 November 1830 he recorded a discussion with five natives from the north-east coast who he was taking to join his Bass Strait community. They said that they had recently been to the central lakes district where they fought the local natives and killed three of them. Returning east, as they crossed the Launceston Road, white soldiers killed three of their own people. In retaliation, while the soldiers were asleep, they had killed two of them.[33] This part of the story, however, is hard to take seriously and seems merely the bragging of warriors. The killing of two soldiers would have been a major event, a shock to the colony that would have been certain to attract the attention of both the government and the newspapers. But there is no documentary record, either official or in the press,[34] about soldiers or Aborigines being killed at this location around this date — in marked contrast to the exploits of Limogana and his band and the wounding of two constables at Ben Lomond at the same time, which attracted six reports to the Lieutenant-Governor, several prominent newspaper stories, and was discussed by Arthur in a despatch to the Colonial Secretary in London.[35] Had the killings that Ryan records actually taken place, they would probably have received a similar level of documentation. Moreover, Ryan's assertion that Mannalargenna led the group, that they visited Blackmans River, that the fight was over women, and that it was members of the Ben Lomond tribe who killed the soldiers, is not information that comes from Robinson's journal. These are all Ryan's own embellishments to the story. As well as additions, though, she also makes omissions. Her version excludes the information that Robinson's Aborigines said

[33] Robinson, journal, 1 November 1830, in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 263. Ryan had cited this page for events in her previous paragraphs but not for her account of the deaths near the Launceston Road. The most charitable interpretation is that she has mistakenly put the wrong footnote on that account, but, even so, this would still not rescue the credibility of the story.
[34] There are reports summarizing the robberies, assaults and murders committed by Aborigines between 1824 and 1831 for the Campbell Town, Oatlands and Norfolk Plains police districts, where these killings could possibly have occurred, but there is nothing in them about such events. See AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 758–80, 803–7, 812–4. Nor does Plomley's survey, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, mention anything of this kind in October 1830. The only soldier *ever* publicly recorded killed by Aborigines in Tasmania was a private of the 63rd Regiment speared at Boomer Creek, Oyster Bay, on 8 September 1830. See Report of the Outrages Committed by the Aborigines at Great Swan Port, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 841.
[35] see footnotes 31 and 32, plus Arthur to Murray, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 230

they killed three of the lakes district natives. This is not because she shares the view that the whole story is merely bravado. Instead, such killings of members of their own race at this time would have portrayed the Aborigines as something less than dedicated patriots absorbed with their war with the white enemy, so Ryan has airbrushed them out.

To return to the Black Line, the most credible evidence puts its immediate outcome at two Aborigines captured and three killed. The Oyster Bay and Big River tribes were not driven onto the Tasman Peninsula. Indeed, it seems that many of them escaped it early in the piece. On 18 October, one group of volunteers at Lake Echo followed a party of forty-two Aborigines who had crossed the Shannon River and were heading north-west, beyond the Great Lake, where they lost them.[36] Behind the line, raids on settlers' farms continued. From 4 October to 26 November there were at least forty-two separate attacks on settlers' huts and homesteads, in which five settlers were killed and ten wounded.[37] At this time, white casualties outnumbered black by three to one.

All this would seem to confirm the long-standing judgement that Arthur's attempt to make a decisive military move against the Aborigines was not a success. Moreover, since it might have cost up to 35,000 pounds to outfit and feed its regular and volunteer troops, the exercise appears not just a failure but an expensive fiasco.[38] This is not only the opinion of Lloyd Robson and the editors of the *Oxford Companion*. It is also shared by Clive Turnbull, who denounces the 'stupidity' of the plan, saying: 'It was not to be supposed that the natives could be driven into a corner by an ill-assorted band of amateur beaters'; and by Brian Plomley who thought it 'strange that Arthur should have got involved in so senseless an undertaking'.[39]

Henry Reynolds also agrees that the line failed in its objectives. In his most recent work on the subject he writes: 'Whatever is said about the Black Line, the fact is that it failed. It did not effect the removal of the tribes from central Tasmania, nor did it bring an end

[36] *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2

[37] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, pp 94–6

[38] The figure of 35,000 pounds comes from Henry Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, p 103, and has been repeated by orthodox historians ever since. As Melville himself observed, there was no official costing. Melville probably made it as high as was credible in order to discredit Arthur. Writing in 1875, J. E. Calder put the figure at 30,000 pounds: *The Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Appendix p ii

[39] Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines* (1948), Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974, p 123; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 32

to conflict.'[40] However, in his 1995 book on Tasmania, *Fate of a Free People*, Reynolds says the line did make the Aborigines realize they were outnumbered and outgunned. 'It almost certainly persuaded the survivors of the war to consider a negotiated settlement.' [41] Reynolds claims they subsequently made a verbal treaty with the Lieutenant-Governor's agent, George Augustus Robinson, to surrender and move to an island in Bass Strait, in return for ownership of that island and self-determination, both of which are still owing to their descendants. Chapter Seven discusses the reasons Reynolds adopts this position and assesses the credibility of his account of the verbal treaty.

The major dissenter from the orthodox position on the Black Line is Lyndall Ryan. She says that it achieved its objectives of clearing Aborigines from the settled districts and of demoralising them to the extent they allowed themselves to be captured by Robinson and transported to his island community. Moreover, she disagrees with Reynolds about the existence of a verbal treaty. She does not believe the colonial government had the authority to make a treaty of the kind Reynolds envisages, verbal or otherwise.[42]

This is one issue where Ryan is right. The aftermath of the Black Line demonstrated that it achieved almost all that Arthur hoped. After the line disbanded at the end of November, there was a sudden lull in hostilities. There were only four attacks on white settlers, the lowest monthly tally in three years.[43] The line had succeeded in driving most of the Aborigines out of the settled districts. Very few of them ever returned. In the north of the island, where Robinson was trekking through the bush trying to capture Aborigines for his proposed settlement in Bass Strait, the reputation of the line ensured his success. On 1 November, while the line was halted in the field between Prosser Bay and Sorell, Robinson came across a group of seven Aborigines at Anson River, near the north-east coast. He used the threat of the line to persuade them to go with him. He said he would protect them from the soldiers:

> I then described to them the nature and formation of the line by tracing it on the ground with a stick, and further informed them that the mighty enemy who were at that time engaged in capturing their countrymen to the southward would shortly appear in formidable array in front of their own territory.[44]

[40] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?* p 76
[41] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995, p 51
[42] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edition, pp xxviii, 112
[43] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 96
[44] Robinson, report to Arthur, February 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 438 n 44

On 15 November, Robinson found another six Aborigines waiting to surrender to him on the north-east coast, opposite Swan Island. They were five men and a woman, the remainder of the band from Batman's house who had been in the shooting affray on the South Esk River on 30 October.[45] They, too, had been intimidated by the Black Line. Robinson wrote:

> Luggernemenener [the woman] informed me that she and the five young men had seen the soldiers, and had been inside the Line and had run away again, coming out in the morning. Described the soldiers as extending for a long way and that they kept firing off muskets. Said plenty of *parkutetenner* horsemen, plenty of soldiers, plenty of big fires on the hills.[46]

So, even though they could slip through its ranks with relative ease, the Black Line still had a profound effect on the Aborigines. The sight and sound of soldiers, horsemen, muskets and fires extending to the horizons, all targeted directly at themselves, clearly overawed them. They had no way of knowing the line was a costly, one-off event, unlikely to be repeated. Within twelve months, most of the Aborigines who had been harassing the settled districts had capitulated. In August 1831, Robinson captured seven of them at Noland Bay on the north coast. On 31 December 1831, west of Lake Echo in the central highlands, he found the last of those from the settled districts, the remnants of the Big River and Oyster Bay tribes, a mere twenty-six people. Robinson persuaded them to come into Hobart and in January 1832 they were shipped off to Bass Strait. Arthur could finally revoke the martial law that had been in force since 1828. Although it took another five years to remove all but one family of blacks still living in the bush, Aboriginal assaults after November 1830 were only a fraction of their previous level.[47]

One settler who agreed that the line was a victory rather than a defeat, precisely because it ensured the success of Robinson's conciliatory mission, was Jorgen Jorgenson, the leader of one of the roving parties. In his manuscript for a proposed history of the conflict he wrote:

> The marvellous facility with which the colony got eventually rid of the blacks was entirely owing to Sir George Arthur's *levy en masse*. The success afterwards of Mr. G. A. Robinson was *solely* attributable to the formation of the Line; it showed the Aborigines our strength and energy. But for that demonstration Mr. Robinson could not have allured the Blacks to follow him.[48]

[45] Robinson, diary, 15 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 276
[46] Robinson, diary, 15 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 277
[47] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, pp 96–100
[48] Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines*, p 99 [his emphasis]

In short, it was the show of strength of this one great move across the island that finally demonstrated the settlers' power and their willingness to use it. The Black Line might have had a negligible body count, but it was anything but a senseless and ignominious failure. It was the decisive action that ended black violence.

Moreover, this success throws the whole question of Aboriginal hostilities into a different light. As Chapter Three recorded, between 1823 and 1827 black violence was largely confined to bushranging activities by the assimilated blacks, Musquito, Black Tom and their offsiders. From 1827 until the end of 1830, the robbery and murder of whites became a more widespread form of behaviour among tribal Aborigines. While their main motive was to acquire British goods, the ease with which they found they could do this, and the very few repercussions they suffered, were obviously factors that prompted them to continue, in fact, to increase these actions. Arthur's main response in 1828, which was to appoint the ineffectual roving parties and to increase military patrols around the settled districts, clearly did nothing to dissuade the Aborigines from their newly adopted behaviour. They discovered that, after raiding a white household, they could easily elude any parties sent in pursuit of them. Arthur's reluctance to mount a more determined police and military response to the growth in Aboriginal assaults, should therefore be seen as part of the process that led to their increase. Hence, the concern the colonial authorities felt for the fate of the Aborigines, their reluctance to have Aboriginal blood on their hands, the *leniency* they initially adopted — in short, their humanitarianism — was itself a factor that fostered the growth of Aboriginal violence. It was not until the formation of the Black Line that the Aborigines fully confronted the military power of the colonists. Once they recognized this for what it was, their violence quickly ended and they gratefully sought refuge with Robinson.

PANIC, HYSTERIA AND PARANOIA?

Henry Reynolds claims Arthur was forced to take such drastic action as a general mobilisation of the white population because he felt the survival of the colony itself was at stake. Until the Black Line, the Aborigines had much the better of the guerilla war, Reynolds argues, and there was a state of panic among the settlers. This private panic, he writes, was also reflected in official circles. As noted at the start of this chapter, Reynolds claims that, while Arthur was supervising the line from his camp at Sorell, he expressed a fear the Aborigines would achieve the 'eventual extirpation of the Colony'.[49] Sharon Morgan says the whole colony was in a state of 'hysteria' and 'paranoia' about

[49] Reynolds, *Frontier*, p 29

the blacks. Reynolds and Morgan both quote a settler at a Hobart public meeting in September 1830 who predicted the natives 'would come and drive us from this very Court room and compel us to take refuge in the ships'. Morgan repeats Reynolds's claim that Arthur feared the 'eventual extirpation of the Colony'.[50]

It is true that a number of observers reported great concern at the time among the settlers. The Aborigines Committee in March 1830 noted that 'a sentiment of alarm pervades the minds of the settlers throughout the Island, and that the total ruin of every establishment is but too certainly to be apprehended'.[51] However, these comments are all highly selective and do not record the views of those settlers who thought otherwise. At the same public meeting cited by Reynolds and Morgan, another speaker, whose views both omit to mention, mocked the suggestion that the settlers could be driven from the colony. Newspaper editor Robert Lathrop Murray told the meeting:

> I differ entirely with Dr Ross, on the subject of the alarm he feels as to the natives driving us from this room to the shipping. No doubt that they are enabled to commit many atrocities, most frequently by the exercise of that cunning by which all savages are distinguished: but to talk of six dozen of miserable creatures, and never was a larger body seen assembled than 72, driving us from this room, is of course a joke.[52]

Moreover, the claim that the Lieutenant-Governor, or anyone else in authority, was worried about the survival of the colony is untrue. In order to portray Arthur as a man pacing his marquee at Sorell, expecting to be engulfed by Aboriginal assailants, Reynolds had to actually alter the words he used. Morgan subsequently repeated Reynolds's bogus version of what he said. What Arthur actually wrote from his camp was that he feared not 'the extirpation of the Colony' but 'the extirpation of the Aboriginal race'. He said:

> It was evident that nothing but capturing and forcibly detaining these unfortunate savages, until they, or at least their children, should be raised from their original rude barbarism to a more domestic state, could now arrest a long term of rapine and bloodshed, already commenced, a great

[50] Reynolds, *Frontier*, p 29; Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p 149. This Hobart meeting is discussed in detail in Chapter Nine, pp 342–9

[51] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 214

[52] *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 3. Murray's comments were directed at his newspaper rival, Dr James Ross, the publisher of the *Hobart Town Gazette* and *Hobart Town Courier*.

> decline in the prosperity of the colony, and the eventual extirpation of the aboriginal race itself.[53]

In other words, Arthur was concerned about the survival not of the colony but of the Aborigines. Even in the midst of military operations against them, Arthur was apprehensive about their continued existence as a race of people and worried that, if the sporadic hostilities continued at their current rate, retaliation by the settlers would eventually wipe them out. Arthur's statement shows he had written off their current generation as implacable opponents but he hoped that, somehow in the future, a different set of relations could emerge. This, in fact, had been Arthur's line all along. There was nothing in his decision to form the Black Line that differed from the sentiments he expressed in September 1829 when he wrote to London requesting an additional regiment for the colony:

> It is not that there is anything actually alarming in our condition, but it is painful and distressing to the last degree to continue in this state of hostility without the conviction that the most prudent measures are pursued, having for their end the protection of the community, with every possible regard to humanity towards ignorant savages, who appear to be influenced by the most revengeful feelings.[54]

Why would he think like this? Why did every statement Arthur made about Aboriginal violence talk about not only his responsibility to protect the colony but also his duty to have 'every possible regard to humanity towards ignorant savages'. Even at the end of his proclamation in October 1830 announcing the Black Line and extending martial law across the island, Arthur concluded with the same sentiment.

> But I do, nevertheless, hereby strictly order, enjoin and command, that the actual use of arms be in no case resorted to, by firing against any of the Natives or otherwise, if they can by other measures be captured; that bloodshed be invariably checked as much as possible; and that any tribes or individuals captured, or voluntarily surrendering themselves up, be treated with the utmost care and humanity.[55]

Most orthodox historians think that comments like these are mere hypocritical cant. They represented the impossible task of reconciling

[53] Arthur, Memorandum, Sorell Camp, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 244. Morgan has simply quoted Reynolds' version of the text from his book, *Frontier*, without herself checking the original for authenticity.
[54] Arthur to Murray, 12 September 1829, *Historical Records of Australia*, I, XV, pp 447–8
[55] Proclamation, 1 October 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 243

Christian morality with the rapacity of imperialism. If this were true, however, the language of the colonial authorities would have been quite different. There would have been little to inhibit them from describing the Aborigines as subhuman beings who, if troublesome, should be shot like animals. To understand why Arthur never once expressed any attitude of this kind, and to see why he and every other governor of the Australian colonies would have been shocked by such a proposition, we need to see them not through the comic-book morality of present-day interest-group politics, but as creatures of their own time. They were men born in the late eighteenth century who inherited a set of attitudes that had already evolved out of three centuries of contact between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the new worlds. The long history of British imperialism had left them with an outlook quite different to the one-dimensional caricature drawn by Reynolds, Morgan and other members of the orthodox school.

THE LEGITIMIZATION OF COLONIAL RULE

The British colonies in Australia were founded under the rule of British law. Their establishment was also in accord with international law, as it functioned in the late eighteenth century. By this time, Europe had abandoned the idea that the Catholic Pope had the legal right to dispose of overseas territory, as he had originally done in the Americas. Protestant and Catholic Europe agreed that the way for a state to establish an overseas colony was through one of the following means: it could purchase or lease the right to establish a settlement from the indigenous inhabitants; it could persuade these inhabitants to voluntarily submit themselves to European rule; or it could act unilaterally and declare possession by right of first discovery and effective occupation.

After 1776, when the British lost the right to exile their convicts to the North American colonies, they first sought alternative sites on the coast of Africa. They initially proposed to purchase or lease land from the local inhabitants at the mouth of the Gambia River. They later considered an establishment at Madagascar 'by purchase from the Natives', plus payment of an annual rent. They also contemplated the Das Voltas Bay region of south-west Africa after being assured the indigenous people would make land available for a fee. In 1790, when another proposal for a settlement on Nootka Sound in north-west North America was in the air, the British government's instructions to the captain of the expedition said:

> You are to do your utmost to maintain a friendly intercourse with the Natives; and if you find any person or number of persons among them

> who appear to have any right of Sovereignty over the Territory which you shall fix upon for the Settlement, You are to endeavour to purchase their consent to the formation of the Settlement, and a Grant of land for that purpose, by the presents with which you are furnished.[56]

In their eventual decision to occupy New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, the British were aware that earlier visits to the Australian coastline by James Cook and other navigators had indicated that there were no people there who had the kind of sovereignty over territory the British needed to conduct negotiations. When the first colonists arrived in 1788, they found the same problem. The nomadic hunter-gatherer Aboriginal society did not have a political or religious framework with which they could deal. There were no chiefs, no alliances, no military forces, no priests and no apparent permanent inhabitants of the territory. In the face of a political void and the absence of any authority from whom to purchase or lease territory, the British fell back onto the third of the means of legitimising a colony discussed above: the declaration of possession by right of first discovery and effective occupation. In our own time, this has been seen by Aboriginal activists and their supporters as an overt act of dispossession, illegal in any period of history. However, the British of the late eighteenth century were acting within what they saw as their rights.

The principal fact that legitimized their colonization was that the land was not cultivated and was thus open to annexation. Nomadic hunter-gathers did not cultivate the land and hence did not possess it. In our own time, such a claim is usually regarded as a self-serving rationalization derived from an ignorance of Aboriginal culture, but at the time it carried legal conviction. There were many things then that were withdrawn from commerce because of the difficulty of legally possessing them. The ambient air was the main one, as it is today, but most of the water that people used for drinking, washing and navigating was in the same category, as were wild animals. Only when a wild animal was caught did it become the property of its captor. Similarly, uncultivated land remained the common property of all mankind. Mere occupancy did not confer property rights; land had to be used. The first person to use it, which at the time meant some kind of agricultural cultivation, became its owner.

This was just as true in Britain as in the New World of the Americas. Forests and wilderness were not subject to ownership by anyone. The Crown held such land within its realm but no one held property title over it. The legal point was a variant of the Roman Law argu-

[56] Cited by Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p 188

ment known as *res nullius* — 'empty things' remained the common property of all mankind — but it fitted nicely with the burgeoning commercial temperament of the English from the 1620s onwards.[57] It was in accord with Locke's famous argument in his *Second Treatise on Government* that a man only acquired property rights when 'he hath mixed his *Labour* with; and joined to it something that is his own'.[58] So when British eyes of the eighteenth century looked on the natives of Australia, they saw nomads who hunted but who had no agricultural base, and who therefore did not possess the country they inhabited. In contrast, the British colonists took up the land and 'improved' it — a term persistently employed by the first settlers. By 'improving' the land, the colonists thereby saw themselves as acquiring right of possession. They were not dispossessing the natives. Instead, colonisation offered the indigenous people the gift of civilization, bringing them all the techniques for living developed by the Old World.

A British declaration of sovereignty over a territory meant that all individuals within it, native and colonist, were subject to English law. Consequently, the instructions given by the Colonial Secretary in London to the various colonial governors required them not only to subject the Aborigines to the rule of law but to guarantee them its protection as well. As subjects of His Majesty, the Aborigines had to obey his law or suffer his punishment, but the same was true for anyone who sought to harm *them*. The instructions given to the first colonial officials required them to conciliate the natives but they paid as much attention to curbing violence by white settlers against them and punishing any offenders on this score. This was done not out of a sense of sympathy or kindliness but because the colonial governments had a legal foundation to which everyone, those in authority and those subject to it, were liable. It was this rule of law that made every British colony in its own eyes, and in truth, a domain of civilization.

This concern with legitimacy went along with a similar concern for the moral reputation of British colonialism discussed in Chapter Two. The Spanish 'Black Legend' provided a model of how a colonial power was not to act. The enlightened Protestantism of the British would be contrasted with the cruelty and tyranny of Catholic Spain not only in the New World of the Americas, but wherever the Union Jack was planted. In Australia, the British treatment of indigenous peoples would once more, they expected, demonstrate the superiority and virtue of their kind of colonialism.

[57] Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, 1500–1800*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, p 76–7
[58] John Locke, 'Of Property', *Second Treatise of Government*, paragraph 27 in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, Mentor, New York, 1965, p 329

ATTITUDES OF THE AUTHORITIES IN VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur arrived in Van Diemen's Land in May 1824 after eight years service as army commandant and superintendent of the small British settlement of Belize on the Bay of Honduras on the eastern seaboard of the Yucatan Peninsula. Britain was the dominant power in the Caribbean islands at the time but British Honduras was a mainland outpost surrounded by Spanish Central America. Arthur brought with him all the intellectual traditions of the virtuous British colonizer and all the British antipathy to the reputation of Spanish rule in the Americas.

Arthur had grown up during the Evangelical revival within the Church of England. The Evangelical faction was prominent in campaigns of social reform at home but they put most of their efforts into ending the slave trade. They believed that God had made all the peoples of the world 'of one blood' and that all members of the human race, both savage and civilized, were equal in the eyes of God. In 1807 the Evangelicals achieved a major victory with the abolition of the transportation of slaves. By 1833 they had succeeded in making the ownership of slaves illegal throughout the British Empire. As Chapter Nine records in more detail, Evangelicalism was the leading religious and social movement within the Australian colonies. Arthur had been appointed to Van Diemen's Land by Earl Bathurst, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, a Tory who was sympathetic to William Wilberforce and the Evangelicals.[59]

Arthur's appointment was influenced by the reputation he gained as an administrator prepared to act on these ideals. When he first arrived in the Caribbean he declared himself 'a perfect Wilberforce as to slavery'.[60] He bore out this principle as superintendent of Belize. In 1820 he was engaged in a prolonged dispute with local settlers over what he saw as their excessive punishment of slaves. The following year he issued a proclamation freeing those slaves who were descendants of American Indians brought to Belize from the Mosquito Coast in the 1780s. He threatened to send some of their owners to England for trial. His action provoked an eight-year legal contest that eventually preserved the Indians' freedom. Arthur wrote in 1822 to Lord Bathurst: 'If I have exceeded my authority, I rest my excuse on the great necessity of doing justice to the Indian.'[61]

[59] 'Henry Bathurst, Third Earl Bathurst', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 1, A–H, 1788–1850, p 67

[60] A. G. L. Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart 1784–1854*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1980, p 17

[61] Shaw, *Sir George Arthur*, pp 50–3. In *A History of Tasmania*, Vol I, p 137, Lloyd Robson gives a confused version of this case, thinking it was

In holding such views, Arthur was in accord not just with current sentiment in London but with the official policy towards indigenous people to which all his predecessors had been committed since the first settlement in Van Diemen's Land. The instructions the Colonial Office gave David Collins in February 1803 were:

> You are to endeavour by every means in your power to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their goodwill, enjoining all persons under your Government to live in amity and kindness with them; and if any person shall exercise any acts of violence against them, or shall wantonly give them any interruption in the exercise of their several occupations, you are to cause such offender to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence.[62]

These were familiar words. They were a verbatim copy of the instructions given to Governor Arthur Phillip when he was forming the First Fleet.[63] They were transmitted intact to all subsequent Governors and Lieutenant-Governors in the Australian colonies for the next two decades. When William Paterson was appointed to head the second Van Diemen's Land settlement at Port Dalrymple in 1804, his orders contained the same sentence.[64] It is worth emphasising that the instructions not only required colonial officials to seek the goodwill of the natives but they also paid as much attention to curbing violence against them and punishing any offenders on this score. In January 1805, Lieutenant-Governor David Collins issued a general order confirming the legal status of the natives:

> He has received it in command from His Majesty to place the Native Inhabitants of whatever place, he should settle at, in the King's Peace, and to afford their Persons and Property the Protection of the British Laws. It cannot then be doubted that the immediate Inhabitants of this Colony are equally entitled to the same Protection. Wherever Englishmen are settled, though there should be no regular Courts of Justice established in the Place, yet the Laws of England are there equally in force.[65]

connected with Arthur's conflict with Lieutenant-Colonel Bradley. The dispute with Bradley, however, had nothing to do with Indians and was about Bradley's attempt to usurp the position of senior military commander; see Shaw pp 45–9.

[62] Hobart to Collins, 7 February 1803, *Historical Records of Australia*, I, IV, p 12

[63] Governor Phillip's Second Commission, *Historical Records of Australia*, I, I, pp 13–14

[64] Instructions to Lieutenant-Governor Paterson, 1 June 1804, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 590

[65] General Orders, Hobart Town, 7 January 1805, *Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 529

Sentiments of the same kind were impressed upon all colonial governors until self-government in the 1850s. Each of the governors, in turn, felt it their duty to publicly remind their settlers and convicts that the natives enjoyed the protection of the law. In 1810 Collins declared:

> any person whomsoever who shall offer violence to a native, or who shall in cool blood murder, or cause any of them to be murdered, shall, on proof being made of the same, be dealt with and proceeded against as if such violence had been offered, or murder committed on, a civilized person.[66]

Similarly, in 1813, Collins's successor as Lieutenant-Governor, Thomas Davey, issued a proclamation about reports that settlers had stolen Aboriginal children:

> Had not the Lieutenant-Governor the most positive and distinct proofs of such barbarous crimes having been committed, he could not have believed that a British subject would so ignominiously have stained the honour of his country and of himself; but the facts are too clear, and it therefore becomes the indispensable and bounden duty of the Lieutenant-Governor thus publicly to express his utter indignation and abhorrence thereof.[67]

The next Lieutenant-Governor, William Sorell, in 1819 issued a special general order expressing his determination to penalize anyone mistreating the natives:

> To bring to condign punishment anyone who shall be open to proof of having destroyed or maltreated any of the native people (not strictly in self defence) will be the duty and is the determination of the Lieutenant-Governor, supported by the Magistracy, and by the assistance of all just and well-disposed settlers.[68]

Within a month of his arrival in May 1824 to succeed Sorell, Arthur issued his own proclamation along the same lines:

> The Natives of this island being under the protection of the same laws which protect the settlers, every violation of those laws in the persons or property of the Natives shall be visited with the same punishment as though committed on the person or property of any settler. His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor therefore declares his determination thus publicly, that if after the promulgation of this proclamation, any person or

[66] cited by Bonwick, *Last of the Tasmanians*, p 40; also in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 26. See my Chapter Two, notes 69 and 70, for the source.
[67] quoted in Report of the Aborigines Committee, 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers*, 4, p 208
[68] Government and General Orders, 13 March 1819, full text in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 42–3

> persons shall be charged with firing at, killing, or committing any act of outrage or aggression on the native people, they shall be prosecuted for the same before the Supreme Court.[69]

To see these comments in their historical context, we need to realize that none of the early governors of the Australian colonies were politicians trying to woo a constituency by striking poses of moral rectitude or of statesmanship. Nor did they need to mollify the clergy or any other moral interest group. The colonies were not democracies and the governors were not responsible to an electorate. Their masters were in the Colonial Office in London. The Lieutenant-Governors of Van Diemen's Land were primarily administrators rather than politicians and they had little reason to be over-concerned about how well their public pronouncements were received locally. When they proclaimed a government order they expected it to be obeyed.

So declarations like those published here involved more than a ritual cutting and pasting from one inaugural speech to the next. The governors took them seriously enough to make references back to them later when they made important statements about law and order in the colonies. For instance, in April 1828, when he established a series of military posts on the borders of the settled districts to prevent Aboriginal incursions, Arthur began by reminding the settlers of David Collins's 1810 proclamation that promised punishment for unlawful violence against the natives. For good measure, he also quoted his own words of May 1824 saying anyone who illegally offended the Aborigines would be punished as if they had done the same to a white settler.[70]

There are some historians who have claimed that such sentiments were mere hypocrisy, worthy words that lacked substance because no action was ever taken by the authorities to back them up. Henry Melville made this assertion in his history in 1835: 'not one single individual was ever brought to a Court of Justice, for offences committed against these harmless creatures'.[71] Lyndall Ryan repeated it in 1981: 'No European was ever charged, let alone committed for trial, for assaulting or killing an Aboriginal.'[72] Sharon Morgan concurred in 1992: 'Not one European was ever charged with murdering an Abo-

[69] Proclamation, 25 June 1824, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 191

[70] Arthur, Proclamation, 15 April 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 194

[71] Melville, *History of Van Diemen's Land*, p 59

[72] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 88

riginal, let alone convicted.'[73] Despite their confident tone and their mutual confirmation, these statements are untrue.

As Brian Plomley pointed out as long ago as 1966, the very first case before the Supreme Court of Van Diemen's Land in May 1824 was against William Tibbs, a convict charged with the manslaughter of an Aborigine. Tibbs was found guilty and sentenced to three years secondary transportation.[74] In November 1824, another convict was charged with 'indescribable brutality' to some native women and given twenty-five lashes.[75] These were both, however, relatively minor penalties at the time and make it appear that verdicts against Europeans for assaults on Aborigines were not severely punished. It is possible this is true but the problem in deciding the issue is that, as yet, no one has yet completed a full study of charges laid and convictions gained in the period. There was no official publication of the cases before the early courts but many cases were reported in detail in the local newspapers, which have largely survived. Until they are thoroughly reviewed, we will not know how many other offenders against Aborigines were brought before the courts or how they were tried and punished.[76] Nonetheless, the sentiments of the colony's legal officers in the 1820s were unambiguous. The barrister Joseph Gellibrand said that when he and the master of the Supreme Court, Joseph Hone, had each held the position of colonial Attorney-General between 1824 and 1828, there was no doubt of their intention to prosecute such charges:

[73] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 151

[74] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 43, n 42. Plomley claims the sentence was later reversed and Tibbs was discharged. However, Plomley offers no source for this claim and the Macquarie University/University of Tasmania project to recover and record early cases of the Tasmanian superior courts does not record any reversal or discharge: see the project's website www.law.mq.edu.au/sctas/html/r_v_tibbs__1824.htm. The dead man in this case was an assimilated Aborigine named John Jackson.

[75] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 28; Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart*, p 128

[76] As I write, there is a project under way by the Division of Law at Macquarie University and the School of History and Classics at the University of Tasmania to record early cases of the Tasmanian superior courts and publish them on the Internet: Decisions of the Nineteenth Century Tasmanian Superior Courts at www.law.mq.edu.au/sctas/ Unfortunately, this project too often reproduces the ideology and methodology of orthodox historians. Compare the commentary of 'Government Notices Concerning Aborigines' with the actual notice of 27 February 1830 reproduced on the website. The site also takes seriously a wild rumour about a massacre of 60 Aborigines reported in *Colonial Times* 6 July 1827. In reality, the incident concerned produced one wounded Aborigine (see *Fabrication, Vol 1,* p 140).

> At that period, a very strong feeling existed in respect to the atrocities that had been committed upon the blacks, and I take upon myself to assert, without fear of contradiction, that if any man who had killed a black native, had been brought here under such a charge, that the Attorney-General would have brought him before the Chief Justice for murder, and that the Judge would have directed the jury to find him guilty.[77]

As discussed further in Chapter Eight, there were settlers, including the chief agent of the Van Diemen's Land Company, Edward Curr, who felt bound to bring such charges against their servants. The whole issue became highly contentious after martial law was declared in November 1828. The practice of Ryan and Morgan of merely re-cycling the same inaccurate secondary source does not help resolve it.

Whatever the extent of their actions, there is no doubt that the colonial authorities genuinely believed that their responsibility was to curb any violence that settlers or convicts might commit against the Aborigines. They thought the colonial situation held considerable potential for conflict between ordinary settlers and the natives and it was their responsibility to keep it in check. This was especially so in a penal colony where many of the convicts were hardened criminals and many of the free settlers were themselves ex-convicts and impulsive men. The authorities' greatest fear was that Aboriginal violence would provoke a reaction among the settlers that would get out of hand. When Arthur's Executive Council discussed the proclamation of martial law in 1828, the protection of the Aborigines from a backlash of this kind was high in its priorities:

> Great and well-founded alarm generally prevails, and unless the measure recommended be adopted, the Council apprehend that the settlers, finding themselves unprotected by the law and the government, will be driven to take the remedy into their own hands. The case will then become one of a war of private persons, the duration of which it is impossible to conjecture, but the end of which will in all probability be the annihilation of the aboriginal tribes. A war of this kind, confined as it would be to casual and petty encounters, whatever may be its result, must necessarily be attended with a great destruction of human life. On the other hand, if the Government interposes promptly and vigorously, it may reasonably be hoped that by the combined operation of the troops and armed settlers, under the guidance of their officers and intelligent magistrates, peace and tranquillity may be restored, with comparatively little effusion of blood.[78]

As their messages over the first three decades emphasized, the governors thought the origin of the hostilities between black and white

[77] *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 3

[78] Minutes of the Executive Council, 31 October 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 183

on the island lay with the colonists themselves and that, as a consequence, they should go as far as possible to absolve the Aborigines from blame. In 1828, Arthur wrote to London: 'I cannot divest myself of the consideration that all aggression originated with the white inhabitants, and that therefore much ought to be endured in return before the blacks are treated as an open and accredited enemy by the government.'[79] In April 1830 he again expressed his view that the colonizers were primarily responsible:

> That the lawless convicts who have, from time to time, absconded, together with the distant stock-keepers in the interior, and the sealers employed in remote parts of the coast, have, from the earliest period, acted with great inhumanity towards the black Natives, particularly in seizing their women, there can be no doubt, and these outrages have, it is evident, first excited, what they were naturally calculated to produce in the minds of savages, the strongest feelings of hatred and revenge.[80]

At the same time, however, Arthur acknowledged that the policy of conciliation that he favoured had not worked:

> The kindness and humanity which they have always experienced from the free settlers has not tended to civilize them in any degree, nor has it induced them to forbear from the most wanton and unprovoked acts of barbarity, when a fair opportunity presented itself of indulging their disposition to maim or destroy the white inhabitants.[81]

Arthur could see no way clear of this dilemma so he continued with two apparently contrary policies. On the one hand, he persisted with the conciliatory approach he had been trying, on and off, since he took charge of the colony. In 1829 he expanded the rationing station he had established on Bruny Island and appointed George Augustus Robinson to manage it. When Robinson proposed a mission to go to the Aborigines of the south and south-west coasts and attempt to conciliate them, Arthur agreed to fund it. Robinson set out on his Friendly Mission in January 1830. Arthur also tried to persuade the lower orders to adopt a conciliatory approach to the blacks. Five days before the Black Line began its march, he published a government notice in the local press announcing a conditional pardon for John Benfield, a convict shepherd who, while unarmed, encountered three Aborigines at Whitefoord Hills and, by giving

[79] Arthur to Goderich, 10 January 1828, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 176
[80] Arthur to Murray, 15 April 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 187
[81] Arthur to Murray, 15 April 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 187

them bread and blankets, persuaded them to voluntarily surrender themselves to the local military:

> His Excellency has directed the circumstances under which it took place, to be made public, in the hope that it may stimulate other prisoners to act with equal humanity and forbearance to any of these unfortunate people who may happen to fall in their way.[82]

At the same time, Arthur persisted with the policy of employing force that he had been trying, with little success, since 1828. In February 1830 he offered rewards for captured Aborigines and increased the tempo of the roving parties.

As violence grew throughout 1830 and neither of his two policies seemed to be bringing any tangible result, there was another factor weighing on Arthur's mind. This was the attitude of his superiors in the Colonial Office in London. As well as despatches reporting on conditions in the colony and justifying the actions he had taken, Arthur was required to forward to the Secretary of State all the proclamations and orders he gave to the colonists. So the public statements he made in the colony were all read in England. In practice, because it usually took several months for a reply to arrive from London to a despatch from Hobart, Arthur had a relatively free hand. The Secretary of State was obliged to approve whatever decision he took and was limited to expressing either enthusiasm or reservation. Nonetheless, Arthur's own statements about his reluctance to deploy force against the Aborigines, and his orders to his officers to do so with as much humanity and as little bloodshed as possible, were all in accord with political feeling at home in Britain. Invariably, over the whole period from 1824 until mid-1830, the Secretary of State's responses were echoes of the sentiments expressed in Arthur's despatches.

This is why his decision to mount the tactic and to undergo the expense of the Black Line should be seen as a considerable gamble. Arthur was an army officer turned colonial administrator. His administrative career extended, chronologically, from British Honduras to Van Diemen's Land, then to Upper Canada and Bombay. By 1846, when Governor of Bombay, he was in line to become Governor-General of India, but ill health forced his return to England.[83] He was the son of a Plymouth tradesman who eventually rose to a knighthood and baronetcy. He was an ambitious man, 'promotion being my idol', but until middle age his prospects were never secure and his career always depended on how his actions were perceived in Lon-

[82] Government notice, no 193, 2 October 1830, *Hobart Town Courier*, 16 October 1830, p 1

[83] Shaw, *Sir George Arthur*, pp 267–70

don.[84] So his decision to form the Black Line was taken at great personal risk. Had it turned into a bloodbath, it is probable Arthur's reputation would have been destroyed and his career finished. The best indicator of this is the undisguised apprehension in the response by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir George Murray, when he learned of the plan. Although he knew it was already too late to influence what happened in the field, on 5 November 1830 Murray wrote to Arthur expressing his deepest concern:

> The great decrease which has of late years taken place in the amount of the Aboriginal population, render it not unreasonable to apprehend that the whole race of these people may, at no distant period, become extinct. But with whatever feelings such an event may be looked forward to by those of the settlers who have been sufferers by the collisions which have taken place, it is impossible not to contemplate such a result of our occupation of the island as one very difficult to be reconciled with feelings of humanity, or even with principles of justice and sound policy; and the adoption of any line of conduct, having for its avowed, or for its secret object, the extinction of the Native race, could not fail to leave an indelible stain upon the character of the British Government.[85]

The fact that Arthur shared this view is clear from every thought he expressed during his career in Van Diemen's Land. The orthodox school of historians' assertion that he was administering what Lyndall Ryan calls 'a conscious policy of genocide' or what Lloyd Robson sarcastically labels 'an impressive example of extermination' runs counter to all the evidence about the intentions of those in authority. Indeed, it pretends most of this evidence does not exist. While Arthur was certainly prepared to meet violence with military force, the extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines was a prospect that left both him and Murray filled with despair, both for what it would do to their own reputations as well as to the reputation of their country. Of all the orthodox historians, only Henry Reynolds has so far conceded this, and his is a very late concession, coming after twenty years of praising the counter claims of his colleagues. In August 2001 he published a book whose title, *An Indelible Stain?*, he took from Murray's November 1830 despatch to Arthur. In it, Reynolds acknowledges: 'There is no available evidence at all to suggest that it was the intention of the colonial government to effect the extinction of the Tasmanians.'[86]

[84] Shaw, *Sir George Arthur*, Chapters 1–3, 10; A. G. L. Shaw, 'Sir George Arthur', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol I 1788–1850, A–H, pp 32–8
[85] Murray to Arthur, 5 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 228
[86] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?* p 85

In short, Arthur did not mount the Black Line to exterminate the Aborigines but rather to make a decisive move that would bring the violence to an end. He had two objectives: to impose law and order under his authority and to save the Aborigines from the consequences of their own actions.

At the risk of trying readers' patience, let me underline once more what the evidence itself establishes about his intentions. In November 1830, writing from his camp at Sorell, Arthur argued his decision was the only way left to *preserve* the Aborigines from the extinction they would otherwise face if the settlers began to seriously retaliate to their assaults and murders:

> Experience has shown that any attempt to conciliate and reform the original inhabitants, while totally cut off from all but hostile intercourse with the white residents, and while living in habits so utterly incompatible with the interests and customs of civilized man, would be vain and hopeless; and it was evident that nothing but capturing and forcibly detaining these unfortunate savages, until they or at least their children, should be raised from their original rude barbarism to a more domestic state, could now arrest a long term of rapine and bloodshed, already commenced, a great decline in the prosperity of the colony, and the eventual extirpation of the aboriginal race itself.[87]

WAS THE BLACK WAR REALLY A WAR?

If it was not genocide then was it war? Chapters Three and Four argued that the British had no good reason to regard Aboriginal hostilities as genuine warfare, nor did they accord the Aborigines the status of warriors. However, the colonists did not feel the same about what they were doing themselves. The term Black War, of course, comes from the settlers' side of the frontier but was probably coined long after the violence had ended.[88] But there are other indicators that confirm the British were clearly waging war. The proclamation of martial law in November 1828 was a de facto declaration of war. At the same time, the government established military posts to protect the settled districts and mounted patrols of both soldiers and civilians in an effort to keep marauding Aborigines out of them. Those in London who read the Lieutenant-Governor's despatches regarded him as engaging in military operations. In September 1831, when the British Parliament ordered a collection of the papers on the subject to be printed, it entitled them: 'Copies of Correspondence between

[87] Arthur, Memorandum, Sorell Camp, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 244

[88] The term was used by John West in 1851–2 in *The History of Tasmania*, p 286. This is the earliest usage I have observed. The term 'Black Line', however, was widely used in 1830.

Lieutenant-Governor Arthur and His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, on the Subject of the Military Operations lately carried on against the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land'.[89]

The strongest case that the colonial government was waging war was the Black Line itself. Arthur chose this as his decisive action to end the hostilities. The concept of a 'decisive action' is one of the oldest in Western military history. As the American classical scholar Victor Davis Hanson has argued in his book *The Western Way of War* the notion was invented by the ancient Greeks and, ever since, has been one of the defining features of the military strategy of Europe and its offspring. The military historian John Keegan calls it 'the central act of Western warfare'.[90] Tired of drawn out, small-scale conflicts with their enemies to the east, the Greek cities assembled hoplite troops into a tight formation to challenge their rivals. The troops were civilian farmers prepared to fight to the death in one great battle on which they waged all. If they won, their enemy would be totally defeated and its forces dispersed. The victors could then go back to their farms to enjoy a long period of peace. For the next two thousand years, Western military commanders sought out decisive battles of this kind to bring hostilities to an end. Although hardly on the scale of other decisive actions, Arthur's Black Line fits the formula in several ways. It was a considerable personal gamble and it achieved all of the strategy's traditional objectives.

In other words, the British certainly took military action against the Aborigines, from the declaration of martial law in November 1828 until the dispersal of the Black Line at the end of November 1830, even though the Aborigines did not wage war themselves. That is, though one side waged war, there was not a state of *warfare* between the two parties.

This might sound paradoxical but, historically, it has been a common phenomenon. It fits the pattern that John Keegan records in his history of warfare since the Stone Age. Before 1500 AD, the history of both Europe and Asia had been affected for a thousand years by a permanent tension by the haves of the fertile ploughed lands and the have-nots of soils too thin, cold or dry to be broken for cultiva-

[89] *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 173–258. It is worth observing that the mere publication of these documents is yet one more argument against the genocide thesis of the orthodox school. What government that was really engaged in a campaign to exterminate the natives would publish its most revealing papers about it?

[90] John Keegan, 'Introduction' to Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1989, p xii

tion.[91] For most of this time, the horsemen of the Asian steppes were engaged in skirmishing and pillaging on the edges of the cultivated world, while the armies of the European, Chinese and Indian cultivators sought to engage them in battles, that is, to make war on them. Only at relatively brief intervals, when the horsemen produced a few great warriors like Genghis Khan and Tamburlaine, who organized their fellow tribesmen into armies that could fight organized battles of their own, did they win military victories. When these conditions were met, there was genuine warfare on both sides.

In Van Diemen's Land, however, there was nothing that resembled a contest of the latter kind. There were not two military forces confronting one another between 1824 and 1831. A military force deployed to quell actions that never rose above the level of criminal behaviour was not engaged in warfare. Hence, even though the British used military tactics and methods themselves, the lack of reciprocation by the Aborigines meant the two were not linked by anything that deserved the title warfare. In short, the Black War is a misnomer and the orthodox school of Aboriginal history is mistaken. There was no frontier warfare in Van Diemen's Land.

[91] John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, Hutchinson, London, 1993, pp 74–5, 188–9

CHAPTER SEVEN

Black Robinson and the origins of Aboriginal internment, 1829–1847

IN 1984, two years after she had submitted the manuscript of her biography of George Augustus Robinson to her publisher, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, author Vivienne Rae-Ellis was told that the Institute was breaking its contract to publish the book. This came as quite a shock because the publisher had contributed financially to the project and had accepted the manuscript when she originally presented it in 1982. Moreover, the Institute's imprint, Aboriginal Studies Press, had only recently brought out a new edition of Rae-Ellis's very successful biography of the 'last Tasmanian', the Aboriginal woman Truganini.[1] The decision to reject her biography of Robinson was not made because of its merits. Indeed, the book soon found a much more prestigious outlet in the form of Australia's leading academic publisher, Melbourne University Press, which produced its own edition in 1988.[2] Instead, the broken contract and the six-year delay in publication had much more to do with politics. The author had the temerity to break with the orthodox interpretation of her subject.

[1] Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Trucanini: Queen or Traitor*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1981

[2] Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988

One indicator of how Rae-Ellis has offended the orthodoxy is the denunciation of her work by Lyndall Ryan. In the introduction to the 1996 edition of her book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Ryan accuses the Robinson biography of failing the most basic tests of acceptability. 'Rae-Ellis fails to understand the magnitude of the conflict that existed between the settlers and the Aborigines over land ownership,' Ryan writes, 'and fails to understand Robinson's commitment to "save" the Aborigines from extermination by the settlers.' Even worse, Rae-Ellis did not believe that the present-day community of Tasmanian Aborigines had legitimate claims to compensation for the dispossession of their forebears. According to Ryan, this meant she was 'engaging in the politics of denial' and was an 'apologist for the past'.[3] In the same piece, Ryan reserved even more vitriol for Rae-Ellis's biography of Truganini, which claimed the Aboriginal woman had betrayed her people in favour of her then lover, Robinson. Mustering the most acerbic jargon in her repertoire, Ryan labelled this book a ' "captivity narrative" model of colonial discourse'. She added: 'This simplistic model ignores the complexities of the colonial structures of power as they were played out in race, class and gender relations in the nineteenth century. Even more astonishing,' Ryan went on, 'the second edition of the book was published by Aboriginal Studies Press in Canberra in 1981.'[4] In short, for Rae-Ellis's offence of not toeing the orthodox line, readers should regard her as a reactionary, and publishers should be warned off her work.

Rae-Ellis's biography, *Black Robinson*, affronts almost all of the received views about her subject, especially that portrayed by Henry Reynolds in his 1998 book, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*. The latter book is a history of those humanitarians and missionaries in Australia who have taken up the Aboriginal cause and tried to influence Aboriginal policy. Reynolds traces the biographies of eight of these people but Robinson gets the first and most prominent treatment. Although Reynolds admits in passing that Robinson was a flawed character who was ineffectual as a native protector, he still salutes him as 'the best-known humanitarian in the Australian colonies', who was the prophetic negotiator of a treaty with the Tasmanians and a champion of Aboriginal land rights. Robinson's remarkable foresight, Reynolds writes, was eventually implemented in the Australian High Court's Wik decision about native title in 1996.[5]

[3] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edn., Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p xxvi.
[4] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p xxv
[5] Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp 47–8, 60

In contrast, Rae-Ellis finds it hard to discover any redeeming features in the man at all. She portrays him as 'a liar and a cheat, a man of little honour',[6] the first person to proclaim himself a friend of the Aborigines but, in reality, the founder of a long tradition of those who have made a lot of money out of the Aboriginal predicament while watching their charges die before their eyes. Rather than being a visionary reformer, the fabrications Robinson concocted about his success in improving the condition of the Aborigines influenced British colonial policy towards indigenous people for the next one hundred years and beyond, with the most tragic results for those on the receiving end.

Robinson not only earned a good living out of all this in the colonies but, in fact, became a very rich man, spending his retirement partly at his mansion at Bath in England and partly, with a new, young wife, on a five-year grand tour of the art galleries, opera houses and hotels of the Continent.[7] In what follows, this chapter relies upon Rae-Ellis for the details of Robinson's early life and his initial years as a builder in Van Diemen's Land. However, my analysis of his principal role as conciliator and captor of Aborigines is based on my own review of his reports and daily diary, which, to my mind, portray an even bleaker portrait than that of his biographer.

Robinson was born in 1791 in a slum in the East End of London. His father, a building worker, died early in his life and, after his mother's remarriage, he left home, aged eleven, to fend for himself as a bricklayer. Like his fictional counterpart, David Copperfield, he was also fortunate to find a patron. He benefited from the Evangelical movement's mission to the poor, in which the Church of England arranged for wealthy gentlemen to act as financial supporters and moral guides of young artisans. Robinson's patron and mentor was Thomas Northover of Islington, with whom he corresponded for much of his adult life. In 1814, aged twenty-two, Robinson married Maria Amelia Evans of Islington and settled in the same locale. By 1823 the couple had produced five children.[8]

That year, however, any similarity between Robinson and Dickens's character ended. He was forced to flee England. He was involved in an, as yet, unexplained financial scandal. A letter he later

[6] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 82

[7] When they married, he was sixty-two, she twenty-four. Robinson was ten years older than his English father-in-law, the landscape artist James Baker Pyne. The couple travelled through Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium and Spain before taking an apartment in the Champs Elysees in Paris: Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 256–7

[8] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 4–7. Robinson corresponded with Northover until the latter's death in 1846.

wrote to Northover indicated it may have had some connection with the Evangelical organisation, the Church Missionary Society, but whatever it was, it caused Robinson to immediately leave his wife and children with his brother in Hoxton, and take a ship to Leith in Scotland. From there he booked a passage to Poyais on the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua. However, just before the vessel sailed, he learned that emigrants to the settlement there were being swindled, so he exchanged his ticket for a steerage berth on the *Triton*, bound for Australia. He wrote to his wife, urging her to join him. Twelve days later, however, she had not turned up and so, with no one bidding him farewell, he set sail on the five-month-long voyage to Van Diemen's Land.[9]

Arriving in Hobart Town in January 1824, he made a living as a bricklayer and house builder. After many letters to persuade his wife and children to join him, they finally arrived in April 1826. As well as the building trades, in the following three years Robinson was involved in community work, serving on committees of the Van Diemen's Land Mechanics Institute, the Wesleyan Missionary Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Auxiliary Bible Society and the Seamen's Friend and Bethel Union Society. These activities made him an identity in the Evangelical circles of Hobart Town's established church.[10]

THE MORTALITY ON BRUNY ISLAND

In November 1828, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur introduced martial law in an effort to curb Aboriginal violence against colonists in the settled districts. At the same time, he tried a policy of conciliation towards those natives who appeared peaceful. A group of about fifty of them lived part of the year on Bruny Island, south of Hobart. After the settler William Davis established his property, Murrayfield, on the island in 1824, they started coming in for handouts.[11] In 1828 Arthur arranged for a military man and some convicts to mount a depot from which they could be regularly supplied with blankets and rations. The soldier reported that the experiment was appreciated by the Aborigi-

[9] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 7–8

[10] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 14–17

[11] Kathy Duncombe, *Excursion: North Bruny Island*, Irene Schaffer, Hobart, 1996, p 13. The government-funded Indigenous Land Council recently purchased the Murrayfield property. However, despite claims by Aborigines and journalists (*Australian*, 5 June 2002, p 11), Murrayfield did not include Robinson's 500-acre original property at Missionary Bay (Lelli Bay), which was on the opposite, western side of North Bruny. Murrayfield is on Trumpeter Bay. Robinson's site later became the property of Archibald Johnstone and was called Heatherlie.

nes, so Arthur decided to make it permanent. On 7 March 1829, he advertised in the *Hobart Town Gazette* for:

> A steady person of good character, who can be well recommended, who will take an interest in effecting an intercourse with this important race, and reside on Brune Island taking charge of the provisions supplied for the use of the natives of that place.

The salary was fifty pounds a year. Rae-Ellis argues that Robinson was attracted to the position for three reasons. First, he needed the money to provide for his family of eight. He had not proven an especially successful builder, there was a slump in the trade at the time, and he had mounting debts to pay. The year before, he had to resort to renting out one of the five rooms of his Elizabeth Street home.[12] Second, although he had till then shown no interest in the local Aborigines, his involvement with religious and charitable causes in Hobart Town made him feel he could be successful in the position. Third, he was attracted by the opportunity to get away from town and explore the new land. He applied for the position but queried whether fifty pounds was enough. Arthur was impressed by Robinson's pledge to instruct the Aborigines in the 'acts of civilisation' and to teach them the Christian religion but told him that, since there were thirteen other applicants, none of whom had queried the salary, it would not be increased. The salary was accompanied by a land grant of 500 acres (202 hectares) to house the person appointed. Robinson accepted the position as it was and, leaving his family behind, departed for Bruny Island by whaleboat at the end of the month.[13]

Robinson was thirty-eight years old at the time. He had gone prematurely bald and had already adopted the wig of auburn hair that he wore for the rest of his life. Among the Aborigines on Bruny Island was a particularly beautiful native girl, about seventeen years of age, called Truganini. She was only four feet three inches tall (129 cm) but she made an immediate impression on him. He initially found her living with a group of convict woodcutters at Birch's Bay across the channel. However, she and her female friends then began visiting the island's seasonal whaling camp, selling themselves for provisions to the eighty or ninety convicts and free men at Adventure Bay.[14]

[12] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 14

[13] N. J. B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journal and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834,* Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, pp 49–58

[14] Robinson, diary, 3-4 April, 12 August, 1829, *Friendly Mission*, pp 55, 71–2. Truganini's height was measured on Flinders Island in 1837 when she was twenty-five.

South-east Van Diemen's Land, including Bruny Island. Robinson's original mission to the Aborigines was on North Bruny at Missionary Bay (Lelli Bay) close to where Snake Island is depicted here. Detail from map by J. Arrowsmith, London, 1832 (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

The whalers passed on to the girls venereal diseases and other European illnesses, including the common cold. Truganini and two of her girlfriends were seriously ill for a time but recovered. However, over the next six months, twenty-two other Aborigines, about half of those on the island, died from these diseases. By January 1830, only one adult male and sixteen women and children survived.[15]

Robinson spent sixteen weeks on the island, handing out rations to the blacks, supervising the convict labourers who cleared part of his land grant at Missionary Bay, and overseeing the construction of a

---

[15] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 21, 30–1; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 76–7

cottage for himself. During this time, he devised the plan that was to guide the rest of his career in Australia. The colony was desperate for a solution to the depredations that Aborigines were increasingly inflicting on settlers. As 1829 wore on, it was clear that Arthur's proclamation of martial law and his establishment of roving parties to drive natives from the settled areas were having little impact. One of the unsuccessful roving party leaders, Gilbert Robertson, recommended to Arthur in June that year that a policy to remove the Aborigines by conciliation and friendly persuasion might be more effective than a military approach. Robinson learnt of this recommendation and, in one of his reports to the Lieutenant-Governor, made a similar suggestion of his own. He proposed to undertake an expedition across the south and south-west of the colony to make contact with and conciliate the native tribes in these regions, and to bring them in to the settlement he was establishing. At the beginning of June, Robinson wrote to Arthur:

> An expedition to all the Aboriginal tribes extending from the Huon River to Port Davey would, I think, be attended with beneficial results ... It is only by such an undertaking that your Excellency's humane intentions to the aborigines can possibly be made known. As many as thought proper could return with the expedition, and if otherwise disposed they would know that an asylum was provided for them at Bruné Island whenever they thought proper to return.[16]

Robinson also realized that, since none of the colonists spoke any of the several native languages on the island, this would be a valuable skill in any approach to conciliation. During his sixteen weeks on Bruny, he picked up a vocabulary of 150 words from the locals and from their relatives and friends from the Port Davey tribe who visited them. He announced to the press that he had begun compiling an Aboriginal alphabet and dictionary.[17]

He also learnt, as discussed in Chapter Four, that despite displaying a great deal of affability and good humour during their visits, the Port Davey Aborigines were themselves responsible for some of the bloodiest assaults made on settlers that year. But he could see from the welcome given them by Truganini and her female friends, which the Port Davey blacks fully reciprocated, that she provided him with a way to reach into their society and befriend them. When Robinson made his proposal to undertake his expedition, he informed no one of the crimes he knew they had committed. He maintained this secrecy even after December 1829 when he found new evidence that twelve Port Davey blacks were responsible for a robbery and murder at New

[16] quoted by Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 62–3
[17] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 26

Norfolk.[18] Although he acknowledged they had killed the man in question, he scoffed at local rumours that members of the same band were responsible for other assaults on settlers. He wrote to the colonial secretary: 'These reports are perfectly groundless, and the authors of them deserve to be severely punished.'[19] His strategy was that, unlike anyone else with a plan of conciliation, he had the Bruny Island women to persuade the south-west natives to come with him. The last thing he wanted to spoil the approval and funding of his plan was moral concern over the probity of dealing with black murderers. So, instead of informing the authorities, he kept the information of their atrocities to himself.

Although Robinson's mission was approved in June, he took another seven months to get the expedition organized, much of which he spent at home in Hobart. Because of the high death rate and the prostitution of the women, he eventually persuaded Arthur that the Bruny Island settlement was not viable. Arthur asked him to find a more suitable site. Robinson, however, was allowed to purchase the Bruny Island property for a token sum. He brought the handful of Aboriginal survivors not required for his expedition into town and accommodated them in a building attached to his own house.

By the end of 1829, the nine months he had worked for the Aborigines had transformed Robinson's life. He gained a government job, a regular salary and a more secure position than his precarious occupation as building tradesman had permitted. He later wrote several letters, mollifying his wife about his long absences, where he argued the Aboriginal service left him much better off financially than he would have been otherwise.[20] As well as his own house in town, he was in possession of a substantial Bruny Island property, complete with cottage, which he subsequently leased out at a good rent. The government paid him another twelve pounds a year for the Aborigines occupying the building at his home. As leader of the government's effort to conciliate the hostile natives, he was no longer an artisan of dubious origins but a man of stature in colonial society.

For the Aborigines, however, the same period had been a catastrophe. Of the total of more than fifty Bruny Islanders who were there when Robinson arrived to civilize them,[21] only seventeen individuals were left alive.

[18] see Chapter Four, pp 113–4

[19] Robinson to Burnett, 23 December 1829, in Tasmanian Aborigines, Robinson's Reports etc, ML A612

[20] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 23

[21] The original size of the tribe was unknown but it comprised about twenty families: Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 77

THE FIRST EXPEDITION OF THE 'FRIENDLY MISSION'

Robinson eventually left Hobart on 27 January 1830 with a party comprising his teenage son Charles, fifteen convicts and thirteen Aborigines, including Truganini and her female friends as well as two of the guides from Gilbert Robertson's roving party, Umarrah (Eumarrah) and Black Tom.[22] They travelled by whaleboat and schooner to Recherche Bay, where Robinson divided his party into two. Nine convicts and his son took the boats by sea while he and the Aborigines plus six convicts proceeded to walk across country to Port Davey.[23] For the next four and a half months, he was out of touch with colonial society, except for one week at the penal settlement on Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour. He became the first white man to walk not only to Port Davey but also up the whole of the west coast to Cape Grim. It was a remarkable feat of endurance and willpower.

However, it made very little impact on relations between Aborigines and colonists. On 16 March 1830, the native women of Robinson's party made contact with the twenty-six members of the Port Davey tribe at Kelly Basin (now Payne Bay).[24] For the next three and a half weeks, Robinson remained in communication with them, sometimes spending the night at their campfires, at other times being kept at a distance by the natives who remained wary of his intentions. Although he assured them of the good wishes of the Lieutenant-Governor, he failed to persuade any of them to come with him back to the colonial settlement. This was the sole contact he made with any Aborigines on either the south or the west coast between the start of his expedition in January and his arrival at the Van Diemen's Land Company's property, Woolnorth, at Cape Grim in mid-June. During his great journey, he had come across a few Aboriginal campsites and had seen two west coast groups at a distance, one at Sandy Cape, the other at Mount Cameron West,[25] but had succeeded in conciliating none of them.

While staying as a guest at Woolnorth, he took the opportunity to explore nearby Robbins Island. On this visit he met the English sealers and their Aboriginal women who, as discussed in Chapter Eight, he interviewed about the Cape Grim killings two and a half years earlier. He also met the native youth Peevay, who was working with

[22] A full list of the changing composition of Robinson's party on his first expedition is in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 240–1

[23] Robinson did not say so in his diary but from his account it appears he went by the old Aboriginal trail, which begins at Cockle Creek in Recherche Bay and is still used by bushwalkers today.

[24] Robinson, diary, 18 March–9 April 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 132–48

[25] Robinson, diary, 1 and 12 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 166–7, 172–4

the sealers. Peevay gave Robinson a guided tour of the island, during which he introduced him to his brother, Pendowtewer, and an Aboriginal woman named Narrucker.[26] The latter two were the first genuinely tribal Aborigines that Robinson had met since Port Davey. All three of them, Peevay, his brother and the woman, agreed to join the other Aborigines in Robinson's party.

On 12 July 1830, Robinson and his entourage arrived at Circular Head on the north coast, the headquarters of the Van Diemen's Land Company, where he picked up the first mail he had received since departing Hobart. He learnt, for the first time, of the death of his infant son only two days after he had left home. He also learnt that in February, as the crisis over Aboriginal violence mounted, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had introduced a bounty of five pounds for each native adult and two pounds for each child brought captive by any colonist into any of the main settlements. Robinson acted immediately to take advantage of this offer. On 14 July, he wrote in his diary: 'Having been informed of the proclamation offering reward for the apprehension of the aborigines, I this day despatched my boat to Robbins Island in quest of the aborigines there.'[27]

While Robinson remained at Circular Head dining with the gentlemen attached to the company, his convict coxswain, Alexander McKay, went back to fulfil his orders. McKay had no success in finding any Aborigines at Robbins Island but, on the way back, came across a group of natives on the coast that included a man he knew named Nicermenic, who was originally from the Robbins Island tribe but for some time had been an occasional employee of the Van Diemen's Land Company and a hanger-on at Circular Head.[28] The coxswain offered to take him back by boat to that settlement and, with a gift of trousers and a blanket, persuaded one of the tribal Aborigines, named Linenerrinneker, to join him.

A week later, Robinson set off again with three convicts and eight natives, including those who had joined him at Robbins Island and Circular Head. When he reached Emu Bay, where the coastal schooner, the *Friendship*, had berthed, Robinson put aboard four of his Aboriginal followers, Pendowtewer, Narrucker, Nicermenic and Linenerrinneker. They were to be shipped via Launceston, to Hobart, where Robinson expected to claim twenty pounds for their capture.[29]

It is obvious from this little sequence of events that Robinson was now acting not in any spirit of conciliation but simply as a bounty

[26] Robinson, diary, 1 July 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 184, also diary 30 June 1830, p233 n 117
[27] Robinson, diary, 14 July 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 187
[28] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 234 n 131
[29] Robinson, diary, 4 August 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 191–2

hunter engaged in tricking Aborigines to join him under any pretence that would work. None of those he sent off to Hobart were hostile natives who had been captured during any campaign of aggression or belligerence. At the time, the Robbins Island tribe was known to be largely peaceable and amenable to the white men's presence. Both Peevay and Nicermenic had experience as employees of white sealers and the Van Diemen's Land Company. The other two had joined Robinson's party because they were relatives or friends of theirs. Of the four sent to Hobart, the only one against whom any aspersions had been cast was Nicermenic, who Robinson later claimed had once committed 'outrages upon the Company's people'.[30] But this seems unlikely since he returned voluntarily to the Circular Head community and, for the few days he was there under Robinson's tutelage, was apparently accepted into it without being accused of any previous offences. By transforming the four unsuspecting members of his touring party into captives with a bounty on their heads, Robinson was acting deceitfully, both towards them and to the government from whom he sought the reward.

However, three of the four never made it beyond Launceston. When the *Friendship* arrived there, colonial authorities ordered the ship to take them back to Circular Head and release them. Only Nicermenic was forwarded on to Hobart. The reason for this intervention was the government's refusal to countenance the type of bounty hunting in which Robinson was engaged. On 20 August, two weeks after Robinson shipped off his four captives, Arthur issued a public statement about practices of this kind. In an obvious allusion to Robinson's actions, Arthur said he had learned, to his regret, that his offer of a bounty 'appears in some recent instances to have been misapprehended'. Rewards were only for Aborigines caught while committing aggressions on the inhabitants of the settled districts, not for settlers who went out to seize 'inoffensive Natives of the remote and unsettled parts of the territory', just to claim the money.[31]

When he learnt that his captives had been released, Robinson was livid. He vented his fury in his diary where he castigated the colonial government for not doing as he wished:

> It is quite evident they know nothing of what they are about. The government have engaged me to enquire into the state of the aboriginal population of this country, and this I have effected with considerable peril and privations. I have become acquainted with the habits, manners, language, country and political relationship of each nation and am the only

[30] quoted by Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 234 n 313

[31] Government Notice, No. 161, 20 August 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 233–4

> person that can judge of what is best to be done, but without consulting me those wiseacres at their parlour fireside at Hobart Town know, forsooth, because they have heard it from the lips of those who never speak truth and who know as much of the aborigines of Van Diemen's Land as the authorities in London.[32]

This was more than just a case of a bruised ego. Robinson was grossly inflating his achievements to his own diary. When he wrote this in September 1830, he had been working in Aboriginal affairs for only eighteen months. Rather than knowing the habits and manners of 'each nation' in the colony, the only Aborigines he had conversed with were those at Bruny Island, the twenty-six at Port Davey and a handful at Robbins Island and Circular Head. It is true that he had questioned closely those he had met and had recorded in his diary their responses and his observations of them. By this time, he probably had a more intelligent and anthropological interest in them than anyone else in the colony. But there were other colonists like the roving party leader Gilbert Robertson and the chaplain Robert Knopwood, who had spoken with more Aborigines than had Robinson, and had accommodated them for various periods in their own households. Both were better acquainted with those, such as the Oyster Bay tribe, who posed more of a problem for black and white relations than any that Robinson had come across in his travels.

In the same passage of his diary, Robinson recorded what was to become the moral justification of his own efforts. Rather than seeking to earn bounty money by capturing the Robbins Island and Circular Head Aborigines, he claimed that he was actually saving their lives:

> It was the greatest act of humanity to have provided for these poor aborigines. They were but few in number and to send them back was to subject them to the twofold dangers of being either shot by the sealers or by a stockkeeper or shepherd of the Company, or slain by some hostile aborigines.[33]

In other words, he claimed the colony had become too hostile a place for these Aborigines. Preserving them meant putting them in the care of a person like himself, who was both knowledgeable about them and humanitarian in intent. Even though there was little basis for such a claim — the Aborigines concerned had by then been living among and working with sealers and shepherds, unharmed, for some time — this notion became not only the rationalisation for the rest of Robinson's career but also the model for all those who have followed him ever since.

[32] Robinson, diary, 5 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 209
[33] Robinson, diary, 5 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 209

The Aborigines still living in the bush, however, remained unaware that this was their fate. At this stage, they resisted every attempt by Robinson to meet with them and discuss their future. In mid-September, he left Emu Bay headed for George Town, the former capital of the northern colony at the mouth of the Tamar. In the ensuing two weeks, he failed to make contact with any tribal natives, although he did come across one party of eight men he thought were planning to attack him. However, like most of the other blacks he had encountered so far on his expedition, when he approached them they ran off, ignoring his calls for them to stop.[34] When he reached George Town on 1 October, marking the end of the first major stage of his expedition, Robinson was disappointed to find there was no message for him from the government, no applause for his feat in leading his party more than half-way round the island, and no recognition for his efforts at conciliating the natives:

> Went into town to see if there was any letter or instructions for me, but found not a single letter. Indeed, the people in this place appeared to take little interest in the affairs of the colony, they knew nothing of me or my pursuits, and I found not a person that offered me a glass of cold water.[35]

THE MAKING OF BLACK ROBINSON

Part of the reason for their indifference was that, in Robinson's absence, policy towards the Aborigines had changed. Conciliation had not brought any results and the government was now preparing to mount the Black Line to sweep through the south-east of the colony. When Robinson made his next stop at Launceston, the local commandant, Edward Abbott, said 'he had no instructions for me and that there was nothing more for me to do'.[36] Abbott tried to place the Aborigines in Robinson's party in jail for their own protection. However, Robinson learnt that Arthur had just come north to supervise the organization of the line. He immediately acquired transport and went down to the settlement of Ross and put his case to the Lieutenant-Governor. He claimed there was a large body of up to 700 Aborigines in the uninhabited north-east of the island and offered to help capture them. Arthur agreed, urging him to bring in the Aborigines 'by gentle means' if possible. Robinson returned to Launceston with instructions to the commandant to furnish him with supplies, a boat and convicts to supplement his Aboriginal entourage.[37]

[34] Robinson, diary, 20 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 215–6
[35] Robinson, diary, 1 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 222
[36] Robinson, diary, 2 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 224
[37] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 242–4; Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 62–3

Robinson and his party then walked from Launceston to the north-eastern tip of the island, while his whaleboat followed them by sea. On 1 November, they came across a group of Aborigines at Anson River, just south of Eddystone Point. Instead of 700, there were only seven of them.[38] Nonetheless, Robinson was overjoyed because, at last, he was able to persuade them to come with him. As Chapter Six recorded, he used the threat of the Black Line to persuade this group. He 'informed them that the mighty enemy who were at that time engaged in capturing their countrymen to the southward would shortly appear in formidable array in front of their own territory'.[39] Robinson assured them that if they came with him he would protect them from the soldiers. These were the first genuine captives he had taken on his entire eighteen-month expedition. However, he still had to secure them and to prevent them changing their minds and running away. So he met his whaleboat on the coast and shipped his captives and their numerous dogs off to the small outcrop called Swan Island, about four and a half miles (seven kilometres) off the coast.

On 15 November, Robinson found another six Aborigines waiting opposite Swan Island to voluntarily surrender to him. He had not found this group himself and had done nothing to persuade or negotiate with them. They had heard about both the Black Line and his own party through native word-of-mouth. They, too, were intimidated enough to seek his protection. He took them by boat to the island as well.[40] There they subsisted on a combination of colonial rations and the mutton birds, geese and penguins nesting on the island.[41]

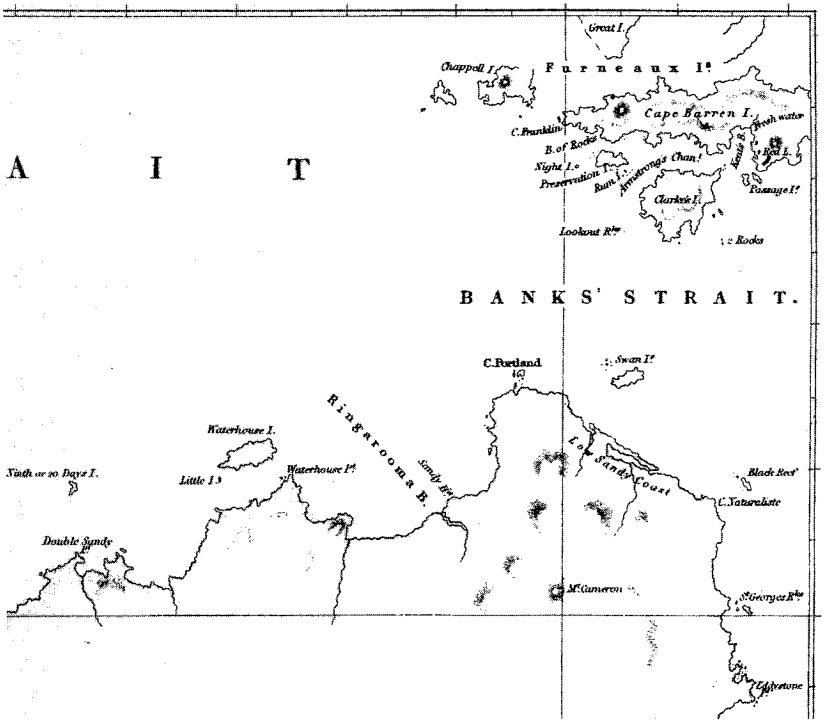
So began the process by which Robinson came to be celebrated by the orthodox school of historiography as a great humanitarian. Rather than conciliation, however, it was more a matter of persuading terrified blacks to get into his boat and landing them on the island, with the aim of claiming the bounty on their heads as his reward. In the following weeks, his whaleboat visited several islands in the nearby Furneaux group, which were inhabited by English sealers and their Aboriginal mistresses. Using his authority as a government agent, he managed to get three of these women to accompany him to Swan

[38] Robinson, diary, 1 November 1830, 2 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 261-2, 264

[39] Robinson, report to Arthur, February 1831, in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 438 n 44

[40] Robinson, diary, 15 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 274–7

[41] The island crawled with tiger snakes and rats: 'Saw several large yellow and black snakes; the island is infested with snakes, which feed on birds. Plenty of rats upon Swan Island, and pelicans frequent the island.' Robinson, diary, 4 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 267



North-east Van Diemen's Land and Furneaux Islands. Detail from map by J. Arrowsmith, London, 1832 (Mitchell Library). Gun Carriage Island is not depicted on this map but is just off the northern-most point of Cape Barren Island.

Island as well. He later sent the coxswain of his boat, James Parish, to retrieve more women from the sealers. Parish returned on 11 December with six women. After a visit to Penguin Island (Forsyth Island), on 19 December, Parish brought back another five.[42]

On 14 December, Robinson had written to Commandant Abbott at Launceston that he was holding thirty-three natives on Swan Island.[43] Even though the colony's Executive Council and later historians have accepted this claim as true,[44] it was an exaggeration. Excluding the seven who belonged to his own party, the evidence of Robinson's own diaries shows that by this date he had only landed

[42] Robinson, diary, 11 December 1830, 19 December 1830 *Friendly Mission*, pp 290–1, 294–5

[43] Robinson to Abbott, 14 December 1830, quoted Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 442, n 75

[44] Minutes of the Executive Council 23 February 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 252. The council thought the total was 34; Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 66; Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 150

twenty-two Aborigines there: thirteen from Van Diemen's Land and nine sealers' women from the Furneaux islands. Even with the additional five sealers' women who arrived on 19 December, the total number of his captives on Swan Island was only ever twenty-seven.[45] Nonetheless, this meagre haul was enough to make Robinson's fame and fortune.

When he returned to Hobart in January 1831, his despatches to Arthur, in which he claimed a great success, had been publicized and had made him a celebrity. Although it was the threat of the Black Line that had actually caused this outcome, the fact that this great military effort had netted only two captives made Robinson's total, overstated as it was, look impressive.

In fact, Arthur himself used Robinson's very modest success to avoid total public disillusionment and throw at least some positive light on the great effort that had gone into the Black Line. In his public notice on 26 November when he announced the disbanding of the campaign, Arthur admitted that the expedition 'had not been attended with the full success which was anticipated'. However, he could at least add that he had 'the satisfaction of announcing on this occasion that a body of natives have been captured without bloodshed on the northern coast where there exists every prospect of the remainder of that tribe being secured'. He went on to declare future policy would be to deposit all captured Aborigines on an island from where they could not escape.[46] Hence Robinson, the man who eight weeks earlier had been all but ignored in Launceston when he emerged from the bush after his apparently futile pilgrimage around the colony, helped salvage his Lieutenant-Governor's reputation among the colonists and restored at least a little credibility to Arthur's Aboriginal policy. In return, the government threw its weight behind him.

He was applauded in the government newspaper, the *Hobart Town Gazette*, for having 'accomplished in a great measure the objectives of his mission, and that in so doing he has manifested the most daring intrepidity, persevering zeal, and strenuous exertion'.[47] He was invited to Government House where he was generously rewarded. Arthur gave him 2560 acres of land (1036 hectares), the largest grant permissible, and increased his salary from fifty to two hundred and fifty pounds a year, back-dated to his original appointment in 1829,

[45] Plomley compiles a full list of those captured between 1 November and 19 December 1830 in *Friendly Mission*, pp 478–9

[46] Government Order No 13, 26 November 1830, published *Hobart Town Courier*, 27 November 1830, p 2

[47] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 19 February 1831, p 41

plus a gratuity of one hundred pounds.[48] Arthur also discussed future Aboriginal policy with him and accepted his recommendations about what to do with the Aborigines then on Swan Island. All Robinson's hopes had therefore been fulfilled. His expedition had made him a wealthy man and he had become an important adviser to the government on Aboriginal policy — all for capturing a mere thirteen wild blacks and removing fourteen women from the Furneaux sealers.

Robinson was celebrated by the colonial authorities and the wealthier settlers. Shortly after the artist Benjamin Duterrau arrived in Hobart in 1832, he began the sketches and etchings of Robinson and his Aboriginal party that eventuated in Tasmania's most famous oil painting, *The Conciliation* (1840).[49] However, Robinson was anything but universally acclaimed. Some of the former convict servants on his expedition began to denigrate his efforts. In particular, Alexander McKay, when he gained a ticket-of-leave and left Robinson to join the Van Diemen's Land Company, became a vocal critic, much to his former employer's chagrin. Outside the governing circle, The Conciliator soon earned the name 'Black Robinson' and a reputation to match. Even one of his admirers, the surveyor James Calder, who later dedicated a book to him, said there were many in the colony who derided him:

> though he was never known to take part in any dishonourable act, still the current of popular dislike ran so strongly against him, on both sides of the island, that he was almost universally denounced as an impostor, and no terms, however vulgar, were too vulgar if only applied to him. The Government, too, while it affected to applaud him in print, and even to reward his services, was not a sincere encourager of his, and its petty subordinates, with many of whom he had necessary transactions, taking their cue from above, seemed to vie with each other to impede, distress and

[48] Robinson, diary, 3 February 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 317; Arthur to Murray, 4 April 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 251; *Hobart Town Gazette*, 19 February 1831, p 41. As a point of comparison, at the time the annual salary of a clergyman, which was then a position of high social standing, was two hundred pounds a year: N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1987, p 721. Later that year, John Batman valued the land Robinson was granted at ten shillings an acre, a total worth of 1280 pounds, Robinson, diary, 20 September 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 429.

[49] Held by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart. Stephen Scheding, *The National Picture*, Vintage, Sydney, 2002, argues *The Conciliation* was itself only a sketch by Duterrau for an even grander work, *The National Picture*, which has supposedly been lost since the nineteenth century.

annoy him, from no other motives, I believe, than those that sprang from an illaudable sentiment of jealousy.[50]

THE RATIONALE FOR ABORIGINAL INTERNMENT

When he launched the Black Line in 1830, Arthur's anticipated solution to the Aboriginal problem was to remove them from the settled districts and confine them to the Tasman Peninsula, where they could continue to practise their traditional hunter-gatherer way of life. This had not always been his preference. He had previously favoured their integration into colonial society. In May 1829, after Robinson had written to those settlers who were employing natives in the Hobart district to advise them to send their employees to the Bruny Island mission, Arthur had rejected this proposal: 'I do not see the occasion for their parting with such natives as they have in their employ; provided they use them well it is just what I would wish.'[51]

By February 1831, however, Arthur had changed his views. He had abandoned any hope of Aboriginal assimilation and also given away the notion of confining them to some part of Van Diemen's Land. Instead, he accepted the majority recommendation of his Aborigines Committee to deport those currently on Swan Island to Robinson's preferred location, Gun Carriage Island (Vansittart Island) in the Furneaux group. Any other natives that Robinson would secure in the future would be shipped to Gun Carriage Island too.[52]

At the time, the Furneaux were uninhabited except for about thirty sealers and their native wives on various islands. Robinson wanted to remove them all, men and women, from the vicinity. In March 1831, Robinson transported all his captives from Swan Island to Gun Carriage Island. He also shipped there the nine remaining Bruny Island blacks who had till then been housed at his own home in Hobart Town, plus three from the Hobart jail. In addition, the colonial authorities at Port Dalrymple sent about another fourteen natives, mainly women and children, who had been rounded up from among other sealers and settlers in the north.[53] The new settlement began with a population of fifty-one Aborigines. By June, however, the location had proved inhospitable and Arthur accepted Robinson's recommendation that the Aborigines be moved once again, this time

[50] J. E. Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits &c., of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn and Co, Hobart Town, 1875, p 73

[51] quoted by Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 102 n 32

[52] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 4 February 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, pp 248–50

[53] Plomley has a list of all those in these various categories, *Friendly Mission*, pp 478–9

to Flinders Island (then called Great Island), the largest in the Furneaux. The settlement there was established at The Lagoons on the south-west coast and received its first consignment of Aborigines in November 1831. However, this site, too, proved unsuitable so, in February 1833, it moved again, fifteen miles north to Pea Jacket Point (renamed Settlement Point), which subsequently became their permanent Flinders Island home.

Arthur went along with the concept of a sanctuary because he wanted a solution to Aboriginal hostility, but Robinson's motive was to preserve his career in Aboriginal affairs. In particular, he had earmarked for himself the position of superintendent of the Aboriginal settlement. On Flinders Island, he would not simply be the manager of a ration station, as he had been on Bruny, but the commandant of all the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land. It is the fact that he wanted this position, and the kind of views he expressed towards those in his charge, that has led to his reputation as the great humanitarian. There is no doubt that Robinson lamented the tragedy that was engulfing the Aborigines. In November 1830, as he was preparing to load his second shipment of natives onto the boat for Swan Island, one member of his own Aboriginal party learnt that her brother had recently been killed. Everyone was affected badly by the news, including Robinson:

> This information was the occasion of general lamentation and there was not one aborigine but wept bitterly. My feelings was overcome. I could not suppress them: the involuntary lachryme burst forth and I sorrowed for them. Poor unbefriended and hapless people! I imagined myself an aborigine. I looked upon them as brethren not, as they have been maligned, savages. No, they are my brethren by creation.[54]

But it is also true that he used their fate largely for his own purposes. He argued often, in both his diary to himself and his despatches to the government, that he was needed to save the Aborigines from destruction at the hands of the settlers, especially from the depredations of the lowest orders of the colony, the convicts and sealers. The violence that threatened to engulf the Aborigines meant they needed both a sanctuary and a protector in the form of himself. This was not only a matter of saving their lives but also of redeeming the colony itself from its wickedness:

> The children have witnessed the massacre of their parents and their relations carried away into captivity by these merciless invaders, their country has been taken from them and the kangaroo, their chief subsistence, has been slaughtered wholesale for the sake of paltry lucre. Can we wonder then at the hatred they bear to the white inhabitants? This enmity is not

[54] Robinson, diary, 15 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 276

> the effect of a moment. Like a fire burning underground, it has burst forth. This flame of aboriginal resentment can and ought only to be extinguished by British benevolence. We should fly to their relief. We should make some atonement for the misery we have entailed upon the original proprietors of this land.[55]

Robinson's compensation for adopting this role not only involved substantial rewards in terms of wealth and career, but also a considerable enhancement of his ego. He was by no means averse to congratulating himself for his compassion. After his first capture of wild Aborigines at Anson River, he wrote:

> As we walked along the fresh natives sang a song. This assemblage of natives, what would be to some a most appalling sight, was to me truly delightful. To see fourteen blacks following me a stranger whither they knew not, no guns, no tying of hands, no shooting of men; and to think that I was the means of saving the lives of these unprotected natives, that some of them ere long might be made possessors of the gospel of peace, and that they should be *induced* to leave their country and their friends and go with me through the forest, afforded me much satisfaction.[56]

Of the transfer to Swan Island, he wrote:

> They all seemed filled with joy. The sensation I felt was great. I had the satisfaction to know that I was their deliverer, and that I had preserved their lives and had delivered their women from captivity.[57]

No one should doubt the religious sentiments that Robinson expressed in the above quotations. But amidst all his talk of atonement, redemption and satisfaction there was one issue upon which his conscience did not dwell. This was the role of his recently captured Aborigines in the killing of white settlers. He believed that some of the thirteen Aborigines he had just taken to Swan Island were responsible for recent atrocities in the north of the colony. The members of the group he took on 1 November told him they had killed two soldiers on the Launceston Road.[58] One of those he took on 15 November, a man named Tillarbunner, was a member of a group known to be responsible for several robberies and the murder of a settler in the Ben Lomond district in the previous month.[59]

In August 1831, while Robinson pursued more natives in the bush, the Aborigines in his party brought in a group of seven natives at

[55] Robinson, diary, 20 August 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 202–3
[56] Robinson, diary, 1 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 262
[57] Robinson, diary, 15 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 276–7
[58] Robinson, diary, 1 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 263. For reasons I gave in Chapter Six, however, this story was probably mere bravado, although Robinson was not to know this at the time.
[59] See the discussion of Major Gray's letters, notes 31, 32, Chapter Six

Noland Bay on the north coast. Robinson had been tracking this band for about five days. He had found an abandoned hut they had built and in it were the remains of a Common Prayer Book, which he identified as having been stolen during a series of recent attacks on white settlers on the East Arm of the Tamar River.[60] These attacks had been particularly bloody affairs. In her husband's absence, Mrs Cunningham, the wife of a settler, and her child had been speared, in the mother's case fatally. A month later, the same band had speared to death a male settler named Fitzgerald in the same vicinity. A pursuit party had been organized but was unsuccessful. Arthur gave instructions that Robinson was to be informed so that he might go after the killers.[61] Robinson was well aware of these events, and had recorded them in his diary at the time, right down to the details of how Mrs Cunningham was murdered:

> They came to the cottage and threw some spears at the woman when she was in the yard, two of which stuck in her. She run and screamed. The black run after her, pulled her down by the hair and jabbed a spear into her body several times. She died of her wounds.[62]

However, when he came face to face with the six men and one woman responsible for this, Robinson saw them not as murderers but as potential recruits to swell the numbers of his Flinders Island community. They were the first natives he had taken in nine months and they helped boost his then flagging reputation as Aboriginal captor, a consideration far more important to him than the question of justice for the dead white woman. They were from the Stoney Creek or Port Dalrymple band and among them was Umarrah, Robinson's former guide during the west coast stage of his expedition, who had since gone bush again. Robinson knew they were guilty of the earlier atrocities:

> These are the people that murdered the people on the banks of the Tamar and who have committed the outrages on the inland settlement. This is a well known fact and as further proof Kubmanner, who belonged to them, was identified by Fitzgerald [one of the murdered settlers] by having a fractured jaw.[63]

They still had Mrs Cunningham's dog, which they had stolen the day of her murder.[64] During the two weeks this group remained with him before he deposited them on Waterhouse Island, off the north

[60] Robinson, diary, 22 August 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 410
[61] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 455, n 155
[62] Robinson, diary, 14 April 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 341
[63] Robinson, diary, 30 August 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 416
[64] Robinson, diary, 8 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 422

coast, Robinson learnt that it was actually Umarrah who had pursued Mrs Cunningham, dragged her down by her hair and stabbed her to death. Yet he concealed this from the colonial authorities. On 11 October, when he wrote a report to the Colonial Secretary about his captives, he referred to this man as 'a very ferocious character', giving him his tribal name of Moulteherlargener, but not hinting that the same person had long been well known to the colonial authorities, not only as one of his own trusted natives but also as former guide to the roving party of Gilbert Robertson. Robinson continued the same deception of mentioning Umarrah only by his tribal name in his reports until 1832.[65] Brian Plomley, who discusses these developments in footnotes to Robinson's diary, comments: 'Presumably Robinson did this so as to avoid interference from the Government if they should realise that the man who murdered Mrs Cunningham was with his party.'[66]

Those who still see Robinson as a 'great humanitarian' would no doubt argue that we have to judge his behaviour in context. For a start, there were others in colonial authority who adopted a similar line. After 1828, the Attorney-General, Algernon Montagu, on a number of occasions chose not to prosecute Aborigines whom local coroners and constables had accused of murdering whites. Instead, once the Bass Strait settlement had been established, he recommended Aboriginal suspects of this kind be shipped there. The Attorney-General took decisions of this kind even in cases such as the murders of Captain Thomas and James Parker in September 1831 when the culprits identified by the coroner were held in custody.[67] However, the reason for this was not due to any non-legal conciliatory policy but because all the evidence against them had come from native witnesses and it was not possible in the Van Diemen's Land courts to use their testimony. Cases of this kind would have failed in court under the prevailing rules of evidence.

Secondly, Robinson's supporters might argue we need to recognize that, rather than apprehending individual wrongdoers, his objective was to end all Aboriginal hostilities and so he was right to look to the longer-term outcome. If he arrested all those individuals he knew were guilty of murder and handed them over to the constabulary, he would have lost the trust of the natives in general and thus thwarted the whole objective of a conciliatory rather than a military solution.

[65] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 585, n95. 'Umarrah' was not the man's tribal name. 'Umarrah' was a corruption of 'Hugh Murray', a settler in whose household he once lived.
[66] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 577, n 6
[67] Robinson, diary, 3 October 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 431; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 476, n 280

He was compelled to take an amoral view of individual killings in order to ensure the success of his greater goal.

The problem with this argument is that it only works one way. For Robinson was anything but amoral when it came to the killing of Aborigines by white settlers. As recorded above, he denounced them in the most rhetorical prose at his command. These comments were by no means confined to his private journals. They filled his despatches to the colonial authorities. Ever since his decision in 1829 to keep quiet about the atrocities committed by the Port Davey band, he had concealed the names of native murderers, yet over the same period he had publicized the names of those whites he believed had done the same. His diaries contained many stories about their wanton cruelty and blasé murders of both male and female Aborigines. The extent and credibility of these reports are examined in the following chapter, but here it is worth recording that he had a remarkable double standard about the killing of human beings: the murder of blacks by whites was to be publicized and condemned but the murder of whites by blacks was to be concealed for his own purposes. Rather than humanitarianism, a universal sentiment, this was a clear case of racially biased, selective morality.

The reason is not hard to fathom. Robinson's objective all along had been to round up Aborigines so that he could be employed in the position of their guardian or protector. But ever since his days on Bruny Island when he conceived this ambition, he had personal knowledge of Aborigines who were guilty of the murder of his fellow settlers. So he persuaded himself that, collectively, the Aborigines were the victims of a far greater injustice. Otherwise, he would have been morally obliged to turn a number of them in. By magnifying the degree of violence done to the Aborigines by the colonists, he salved his own conscience at the time and created a reputation for himself as a great humanitarian for all those who have subsequently followed his example.

FEAR, FORCE AND CAPTURE AT GUNPOINT

Between 1831 and 1834, Robinson continued to undertake expeditions into the bush to capture bands of Aborigines. Umarrah accompanied him on these missions until he died from dysentery at Launceston in March 1832.[68] On 31 December 1831 Robinson had his biggest success when he met the remnants of the Big River and

[68] Robinson, diary, 24 March 1832, *Friendly Mission*, p 594. Lloyd Robson wrongly records Umarrah's death and funeral taking place at The Lagoons on Flinders Island: *A History of Tasmania, Volume One*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p 245

Oyster Bay tribes west of Lake Echo in the central highlands. The two tribes had banded together but now amounted to only twenty-six persons. Robinson promised them the Lieutenant-Governor would feed and house them and protect them from soldiers who wanted to shoot them. They followed him back to Hobart. In a theatrical display to impress the town, on 7 January 1832 he walked the tribe and its one hundred dogs down Elizabeth Street and around to Government House where they were welcomed to the strains of a brass band.[69] They camped at Robinson's house near the corner of Elizabeth and Warwick Streets where, James Calder recalled, 'thousands of us saw them all a few days afterwards'.[70] Ten days later they were led aboard the *Tamar* and shipped off to Bass Strait.

Arthur's Aborigines Committee awarded Robinson a bonus of one hundred pounds for bringing in this group, plus an advance of three hundred pounds on his next expedition to bring in all the west coast natives, a mission that would net him one thousand pounds when completed. On conclusion of this exercise, he was to be appointed superintendent of the Aboriginal establishment at Flinders Island.[71] It took him three expeditions from April 1832 to December 1834 in the north-west and around Macquarie Harbour before he declared the project finished. In this period he rounded up a variety of wild and tame blacks and shipped them off to Flinders Island. By this time he had abandoned any pretence at conciliation and, when it was required, his men surrounded Aboriginal bands and captured them at gunpoint.

Henry Reynolds, however, wants to deny this. 'The Friendly Mission itself was not accompanied by force,' he states in *Fate of a Free People*. The sole evidence he provides for this assertion is a lecture Robinson himself gave in Sydney in 1838 where he said: 'he made no use of compulsion, it was done with their own free consent'.[72] It is true that this is what the colonial authorities believed was Robinson's method. In 1831, Arthur explained it to London as follows:

> Mr Robinson will undertake another mission to the hostile tribes upon the plan he has so successfully adopted, viz. approaching them unarmed in company with a few friendly natives, explaining to them in their own language the amicable intentions of the Government, and offering food and clothing, and protection from injury, on condition of their being

[69] *Hobart Town Courier*, 14 January 1832, p 2

[70] Calder, *Native Tribes of Tasmania*, p 62. *Hobart Town Courier*, 14 January 1832, p 2, has a full description of the procession into Hobart, part of which is reproduced by Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 573–4.

[71] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 588–9

[72] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995, p 133

peaceful and inoffensive, or of their going to the Aboriginal Establishment.[73]

Reynolds, however, should have been better informed than this. Robinson's own diaries tell quite a different story. In May 1833, at Low Rocky Point south of Macquarie Harbour, Robinson found a group of wild Aborigines who, he said 'were unwilling to go with me to the settlement':

> I told the natives we must proceed. The strangers looked dejected and was preparing to run away. One man was sharpening his spear. I now ordered the two white men and my sons to uncover their fusees [muskets], and to file off on each side. The friendly natives did the same with their spears, so that the strangers was in our centre. The wild aborigines now gave up all further thought of going away.[74]

In June 1833, Robinson was bringing in a group of captives when one man walked some distance ahead of the main party. Robinson wrote:

> Some of my people said he would go away. I was not apprehensive of his doing so, but deemed it prudent to send after him as an example to the rest to let them know they were not at liberty to do as they chose. Mannalargena and a white man and another I sent, and when he saw them coming he stopped. When we came to him he refused to get up or accompany us. I told the white man to uncover his fusee, for I could not be trifled. My son Charles then persuaded him and they got him along.[75]

He engaged in a similar display of force in July 1833 when one man from a group of captives absconded. Robinson described his own response:

> I now determined to adopt every precaution to prevent the rest from following this man's example. I ordered the white men to uncover their fusees, and my son who had a pistol without a cock also exhibited it, and I ordered my natives to keep close to the natives. The white men each had to look after the black men.[76]

Robinson deposited the captives he took from the Pieman River and Point Hibbs areas on the west coast at the penal station at Macquarie Harbour where they were to be held before being shipped to Bass Strait. While they waited in the convict prison, within a space of only eleven days, nine of the eleven Pieman River natives and five of

[73] Arthur to Murray, 4 April 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 251
[74] Robinson, diary, 21 May 1833, *Friendly Mission*, pp 725–6. A fusee was a light musket or firelock.
[75] Robinson, diary, 18 June 1833, *Friendly Mission*, p 743
[76] Robinson, diary, 13 July 1833, *Friendly Mission*, p 754

the sixteen from Point Hibbs died from infectious disease.[77] When the brig *Tamar* arrived for its next native cargo, its captain brought the news that thirteen of those on Flinders Island, some of them recently taken from the west coast, had also died from disease.[78]

Overall, these three expeditions captured about thirty Aborigines in 1832, sixty-six in 1833 (of whom sixteen died before they left the west coast) and twenty in 1834. In one final expedition in the second half of 1834, Robinson's son, George Junior, captured another eight Aborigines on 28 December at Western Bluff in the north-west.[79] This was the last group to be taken by the 'Friendly Mission'. Together with the thirteen he captured in November 1830, the four (out of seven) he eventually landed on Waterhouse Island in September 1831 and the twenty-six from Big River in January 1832, the total number of tribal Aborigines Robinson actually removed from Van Diemen's Land during his career was 151. Only one native family of six eluded him and remained in the bush until 1842 before surrendering.

The figures provided here for captives in the 1830s are my calculations from Robinson's diaries. Some of the captives, about sixteen who I have accredited to Robinson, were actually taken by Anthony Cottrell in 1833 in expeditions under Robinson's authority but in which he was not present. One cannot give absolutely precise figures for those captured in this period because some died from disease and some absconded in the time between their initial capture and their delivery to the Bass Strait settlements. However, this does not excuse Lyndall Ryan's claim that Robinson actually captured a total of 300 Aborigines.[80] This is yet another example of how unreliable her work is on the statistics of these events. Neither the evidence of the diaries nor a comparison with the lists of those who arrived at Flinders Island justifies a total anywhere near this high. In Appendix 3 of her book, where Ryan provides a list of names of those at Flinders Island, she could only come up with 143 Aborigines, and they included a number of former town blacks, Orphan School children and sealers' women. In his history of the Flinders Island settlement, *Weep in Silence*, Brian Plomley lists 105 Aborigines that Robinson captured and sent to Flinders Island between March 1832 and January 1836.

[77] Robinson, diary, 25 July–4 August, 11 August 1833, *Friendly Mission*, pp 770–6, 780

[78] Robinson, diary, 27 August 1833, *Friendly Mission*, p 785

[79] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 925–6

[80] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 183

This accords fairly closely with my tally of 108 for the same period, even though there are some discrepancies between our lists.[81]

Anyway, Robinson's rewards for these efforts were substantial. The colony accepted him at his own estimate as the man who eliminated Aboriginal hostilities. The press campaigned to raise a public subscription for him. As a result, Jorgen Jorgenson recorded, the grateful settlers contributed gifts, in both land and money, worth eight thousand pounds.[82] Even if, like many of Jorgenson's stories, this was an exaggeration, even half that amount would have been a huge sum at the time. As well as his salary, the government paid Robinson the seven hundred pounds owed under its contract and added a pension of two hundred pounds a year for life. His sons who had accompanied him at different times were also rewarded. George Junior was granted one thousand acres (400 hectares) of land, and his teenage son Charles 500 acres.[83] Robinson spent most of the period from August 1834 to September 1835 at home in Hobart, on full pay, supervising the construction of his new, ten-room mansion.

In February 1831, when he had promoted himself as the man with the solution to the colony's Aboriginal problem, Robinson told the Executive Council that he thought there were about seven hundred wild blacks still in Van Diemen's Land. He said that on his previous expedition around the island he had gained the confidence of most of the hostile chiefs and could bring them in to captivity within a timeframe of three years.[84] Only the last part of this assurance was true. There was nothing like seven hundred left in the bush and, at the time, he had actually made contact with only a handful of Aboriginal bands.

In the event, his additional three years work brought the gross total deposited at Flinders Island in the 1830s to about two hundred. It is hard to be more precise since a roll call of inmates was not kept in the early days.[85] While, as indicated above, some 151 of them had been

[81] Plomley, *Weep In Silence*, Appendix I: D, pp 876–7. Plomley's list includes some but not all of those who died at Hunter Island in 1832 and Macquarie Harbour in 1833 before they could be shipped to Flinders Island. I have excluded these dead from my count but I do include some other unnamed surviving captives, even though the diaries do not make it clear whether they ever arrived at the Bass Strait settlement.

[82] cited by James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians or The Black War of Van Diemen's Land,* Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1870, p 239

[83] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 103

[84] Minutes of the Executive Council, 23 February 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 252

[85] Commandant's return, September 1836, cited by Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 275–6, n 16

captured either by Robinson or members of his party, most of the rest were tame blacks, previously employed on white farms and households, hangers-on around the main towns subsisting on white handouts, including those who lived at Robinson's house in Hobart while he was away on his first expedition, a number of sealers' women, plus the Aboriginal members of Robinson's own 'Friendly Mission'. Some were Aboriginal children brought up in colonial households or at the Boys' Orphan School in Hobart. There were about fifty Aborigines in these latter categories. Even if this figure is not absolutely precise, it is still clear that the size of the Aboriginal population at the time, and thus the scale of the Aboriginal problem for the colonists, had always been significantly smaller than the inflated picture portrayed by Robinson.

THE ZEST FOR LIFE ON FLINDERS ISLAND

When members of the orthodox school of historians have examined the settlement that was finally established on Flinders Island to house the Tasmanian Aborigines, most have come to the same conclusion. They have described it as a terrible place where the blacks lost the will to live. Called Wybalenna ('black men's houses') and located at Settlement Point on the west coast of the island, the community was quickly consumed by tragedy. Between 1831 and 1847, some 132 Aborigines died there, mostly from common cold, influenza, pneumonia and tuberculosis. Their demise has given their historians an opportunity to display their literary skills. Drawing on a figure of speech from the sixteenth century, Lyndall Ryan described Wybalenna as 'the "charnel house" that had incarcerated them since 1833'.[86] Other authors have adopted a more familiar metaphor from the twentieth century. Clive Turnbull called it a 'concentration camp' where the Aborigines 'ceased to breed, and pined away', dying from 'deficiency diseases [and] broken hearts'. It was on a par, Turnbull said, with Norfolk Island, Devil's Island and Alcatraz. [87] Robert Hughes used the same metaphor. Flinders Island was 'a benign concentration camp' where 'little by little, they wasted away and their ghosts drifted out over the water'.[88] Cassandra Pybus wrote about its

[86] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 203

[87] Clive Turnbull, 'Tasmania: The Ultimate Solution', in F. S. Stevens, *Racism, The Australian Experience, Vol 2 Black versus White*, ANZ Book Company, Sydney, 1972, p 230, 231; Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, (1948) Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974, p 224

[88] Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987, p 423

Commandant Robinson being 'trapped amid the despair and disintegration of a people whose plight was the result of his actions'.[89] The American anthropologist. Jared Diamond, has claimed the inmates were starved to death: 'the jail diet caused malnutrition, which combined with illness to make the natives die'.[90] In 1987, when Brian Plomley published his history of the Flinders Island community, he entitled it *Weep in Silence*.

During the life of the settlement, about two hundred Aborigines were deposited there. The total population was never as high as this, however, because of the death rate. Since deaths outpaced new arrivals and the small number of births, the population in the 1830s usually hovered between 120 and 140 Aborigines. By the time it closed in 1847, the numbers had declined quite drastically. Lyndall Ryan describes the scene as the remainder were shipped back to Van Diemen's Land to a new asylum south of Hobart:

> Only forty seven made that journey to Oyster Cove — fifteen men, twenty two women and ten children. Their average age was forty two. Most suffered from chronic chest complaints, four had become enormously fat, one was blind, another was senile, while another suffered from acute arthritis. ... There was not one expression of sorrow or regret as they packed themselves, their dogs, and their few possessions into the ship on that blustery day in October. They thought they were returning to their own country and escaping the deaths that had made their lives at Wybalenna so miserable.[91]

So it must have come as quite a shock to these authors in 1995 when they opened the pages of the new book by their leading light, Henry Reynolds, to find he completely disagreed with them about Wybalenna. Not only that, but here he was, in *Fate of a Free People*, criticising them in stinging terms for their politics and their attitude:

> The Tasmanians have not been well served by historians and other writers who have pitied them, but who at the same time have patronized and belittled them.[92]

Reynolds argued that, rather than being a depressed and dying community, the Aborigines at Flinders Island were marked by their 'dynamism'. Other historians, he accused, 'overlook the adaptability and resourcefulness of the community, the continuing zest for life, the political passion'.[93] The only other author to have given Wybalenna such an upbeat report card was George Augustus Robinson

[89] Cassandra Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, Minerva, Melbourne, 1991, p 135
[90] Jared Diamond, 'In Black and White', *Natural History*, 10, 1988, p 10
[91] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 203
[92] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 189
[93] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 189

himself, who in 1837 wrote a long report that described the great success he had achieved in lifting the Tasmanians up to a state of civilization. This report brought Robinson fame and recognition all over the British Empire and became probably the single most influential document on Aboriginal policy ever written. Since then, however, there has also been a school of Robinson criticism, beginning with a heavily sarcastic review of Wybalenna's achievements in James Bonwick's 1870 book, *The Last of the Tasmanians*. In the twentieth century, this critique largely prevailed and, among authors who have discussed the issue, Robinson's self-assessment has long been regarded as suspect. In particular, Vivienne Rae-Ellis's 1988 biography did a lot to discredit the 1837 report. Was Reynolds, then, attempting to restore Robinson's reputation?

In part, he was. Earlier authors had emphasized that the various commandants of the settlement, both before and after Robinson's tenure in the position from 1835–9, had both cheated and neglected the Aborigines. Clive Turnbull claimed those in charge pilfered and sold off Aboriginal rations while imposing a mind-dulling religious regime. 'The monotony was occasionally relieved,' he wrote, 'when, in religious anger at their moral offences, the "catechist" flogged the girls.'[94] In contrast, Reynolds argues that, on most measures of colonial welfare, the Aborigines on Flinders Island were well provided for. He also finds that, rather than being bored out of their minds, their psychological condition was admirable.

Dismissing those who claimed the island was a place where the authorities attempted de facto genocide, Reynolds points out that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur's policy was that the exiled Aborigines were to be well fed and cared for. Quoting letters to both the Colonial Office in London and to the commandants of the island, Reynolds says that Arthur made it clear he was 'willing to make almost any prudent sacrifice that may tend to compensate for the injuries inflicted on them'. Arthur had 'no wish more sincerely at heart than that every care should be afforded those unfortunate people'. If there was any hold-up in their supplies, he told Robinson to contact him directly since the Aborigines 'were not to want for anything'.[95] By 1836, when it became apparent that the Aborigines were not reproducing themselves and that the present generation might well be the last, the colonial authorities 'became gravely concerned about their fate'. Reynolds writes: 'No one wanted that burden on their conscience or their career, particularly not in a period of ascendant humanitarianism.' At a meeting with Robinson that year, Arthur

[94] Turnbull, 'Tasmania: The Ultimate Solution', pp 230–1
[95] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 175

'begged and entreated him' to 'use every endeavour to prevent the race from becoming extinct'.[96]

Reynolds said Arthur's sentiments were matched by his actions. 'It seems,' Reynolds writes, 'that the Aborigines were better provided for than Tasmania's other welfare recipients.' While the colony's orphans cost the government 7d per day, infirm and destitute paupers 8d, convicts 10d, and paupers in hospital 1s, the Aborigines on Flinders received a total of between 1s 3d and 1s 5d a day worth of welfare.[97] In 1837, there were no fewer than seventy convicts employed to provide for the island's 140 Aborigines. The convicts were engaged in trades such as baker, shoemaker, brickmaker, bricklayer, carpenter, pitsawyer, butcher, plasterer, gardener and ploughman. The huts to accommodate the Aborigines were of good quality and made of brick, with glass windows and brass door handles. In 1852, the historian John West said the quality of their domestic appliances and furnishings were better than that available to an English cottager or an Irish peasant. Reynolds summarized their condition:

> It seems likely that Wybalenna was by far the best equipped, most heavily funded and lavishly staffed of all colonial institutions for Aborigines, although given the dire poverty of some of the missions, that may not be saying much. Robinson believed that the settlement should have the best of everything. In a letter to the Commissariat Office in 1833 dealing with the purchase of four bullocks, he remarked that it was 'obvious that the Bullocks selected for the Aboriginal establishment should be the very best that can be procured'.[98]

The main reason for the dismal reputation of Flinders Island was its death rate. The diseases its inhabitants contracted have often been attributed to the Flinders Island climate, which most orthodox historians routinely describe as wet, cold and windswept. In his nineteenth-century history, James Bonwick suggested this was specifically why the site was chosen. He described the scene as he imagined it must have appeared to the first Aborigines who disembarked from the *Charlotte* onto the island:

> The winds were violent and cold; the rain and sleet were penetrating and miserable. With their health suffering from chills, rheumatism and consumption diminished their numbers, and thus added force to their forebodings that they were taken there *to die*.[99]

[96] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 188
[97] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 175
[98] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 176
[99] Bonwick, *Last of the Tasmanians*, p 247 (his emphasis)

In the twentieth century, Clive Turnbull repeated this passage verbatim.[100] This is yet one more example of how these authors have no compunction about sacrificing truth for drama. According to Bonwick, the chilly scene described here purportedly took place on 25 January 1832, which, both he and Turnbull should have realized, would have been a warm midsummer's day. In fact, Bonwick had the wrong date, but correcting it still does not the restore the bogus wintry setting he concocted. The removal actually took place on 10 November 1831.[101] Anyone who cares to check with the Australian Bureau of Meteorology will find that the temperature that day would probably have reached a pleasant 18.5 degrees Celsius (65 F). Since November begins the island's five months of drier weather, it probably wasn't raining at the time either. The truth is that Flinders Island enjoys a temperate, maritime climate, much like that of a southern Mediterranean port. The Aboriginal settlement was much warmer and drier than most of Van Diemen's Land itself. Being on the coast at sea level, Wybalenna escaped the very cold winters that affected the central midlands and highlands of the main colony. In summer, the island's average maximum temperature is 21.5 degrees Celsius (70.7 F); in winter, the average minimum is 6.5 degrees Celsius (43.7 F), noticeably warmer than Hobart's 4.9 degrees Celsius (40.8 F). Its rainfall of 759 mm per year is the same as that of Launceston and only two-thirds that of Sydney or Brisbane.[102] Flinders Island tourism authorities today boast they get more sunny days per year than Queensland's Gold Coast.[103] Compared to the Tasmanian west coast, where the Roaring Forties relentlessly unload 2500 mm of rain per year, the natives from those parts must have found the weather on Flinders Island like a balmy holiday resort.

Reynolds completely rejects the case put by Bonwick, Turnbull and their ilk. He does not accept the island was chosen to exacerbate the natives' illnesses and argues that, while the Flinders Island death toll was high, it was not unusually so among indigenous people on their initial exposure to European diseases. In fact, he shows it was actually slightly less than the mortality rates of other Aboriginal missions in South Australia and Queensland later in the century. Reynolds comments:

> Appalling as the loss of life at Wybalenna was, it was not atypical of the situation during the first generation of Aboriginal reserves and missions. The big difference was that on mainland Australia there were much larger

[100] Turnbull, *Black War*, p 145
[101] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, p 37
[102] www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages/tables/cw_099005.shtml
[103] www.focusonflinders.com.au

populations from which to draw new members to maintain their numbers.[104]

The deaths on Flinders Island, Reynolds argues, cannot be attributed to medical neglect. There was a surgeon resident at the settlement the entire time it was maintained. Although medical practice at the time had no answer to the Aborigines' susceptibility to disease, there was a clear intention by the authorities to prevent their deaths, had that been possible. 'The inmates had more ready access to a doctor than almost anyone else in rural Tasmania,' Reynolds notes, 'and certainly more than the poor of Hobart and Launceston.'[105]

The Aborigines were treated far better than the white convicts at the settlement. Officials entertained senior Aborigines in their houses, Reynolds writes, but never entertained convicts. The punitive regime to which any convict insubordination was subjected never extended to the Aborigines. The movements of the convicts were strictly controlled but the Aborigines came and went at will. The convicts did almost all the work at the settlement, employed for ten hours a day, six days a week. The Aborigines did very little and performed only those tasks, such as hunting, which they enjoyed. The Aborigines also received more provisions and clothing than the convicts. Figures for 1838 showed they were given twenty pounds worth of these goods per head, compared to fifteen pounds per head for convicts.[106]

These differences were reflected in the Aborigines' sense of self-importance. They regarded themselves as superior to the convicts and thought the administrators were there simply to provide for them. When Henry Nickolls, the Commandant from 1834–5, tried to develop a work ethic among the natives by introducing them to gardening, he found 'they evinced a determined hostility to anything like work'. Nickolls said the blacks were convinced that: 'King will keep them, white men work, not they.' He was forced to offer extra rations in return for any labour he wanted them to perform but this did not always work. In 1840, the Aborigines even refused to help put out some bushfires that threatened the settlement.

Reynolds uses these and other examples to argue that the Aborigines believed that both the settlement and the island belonged to them. This extended to the white people's stores, which the natives regarded as their own. They did not like to see the convicts get anything from the stores because they felt they were theirs, as part of a debt the government owed them for having taken their country.[107]

[104] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 186
[105] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 187
[106] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp 180–3
[107] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp 160–2

With attitudes like this, Reynolds argues the Flinders Island settlement was alive with the Aborigines' sense of their political rights and their place in the world.

THE NON-EXISTENCE OF AN ABORIGINAL TREATY

> The Aborigines defended their ancient homelands with bushcraft and guerilla tactics, but realized there was only one solution — a treaty guaranteeing peace in return for recompense and a limited exile. George Robinson's 'Friendly Mission' was successful *because* the Aborigines had this clear political objective. Not prisoners on Flinders Island but 'a free people', the negotiators kept their promises though the colonial government did not.
>
> — Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*[108]

Part of Reynolds's aim in restoring the reputation of Wybalenna is to restore that of Robinson as well. If the Flinders Island settlement really had been the equivalent of a genocidal, twentieth-century concentration camp, then, as its head from 1835 to 1839, Robinson would have been an antipodean precursor of the commandant of Auschwitz. This would have obviously disqualified him from the roles Reynolds wanted him to play elsewhere in his narratives. Reynolds wants us to take Robinson seriously, both as a great humanitarian and, especially, as a spokesman for Aboriginal dispossession and land rights. So he defends his reputation and that of his institution.

The objectives of *Fate of a Free People*, though, are less to rehabilitate Robinson than to make a case for Aboriginal land rights in Tasmania. Reynolds argues that, to persuade the tribal Aborigines to follow him to Bass Strait, Robinson made a verbal treaty with them. This treaty has never been honoured, he says, but our own generation should make the effort to do so by ceding land rights to the descendants of the original inhabitants. The problem, he acknowledges, is that no version of this treaty was ever written down. Of necessity, he says, it was made verbally since that was in accord with Aboriginal tribal customs:

> Had the Tasmanians demanded something on paper they would almost certainly have been given it. But their own diplomacy was conducted entirely by word of mouth; their agreements were verbal ones which were nevertheless binding.[109]

[108] cover blurb of the 1995 Penguin Books edition of *Fate of a Free People*. His emphasis.
[109] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 199

Reynolds admits no text of any such treaty has survived in any form. He can find nothing in Robinson's diaries, letters or reports that acknowledges he made such a treaty. None of the discussions with the Aborigines that Robinson recorded in his diaries at the point of capture ever mentioned a treaty. In the thousands of pages of Robinson's voluminous papers, there is no discussion of anything resembling a treaty he might have made. Nonetheless, Reynolds asserts that there *must* have been a treaty of some kind or else the Aborigines would not have abandoned their guerilla war to follow Robinson.

The sole document Reynolds produces in support of his argument is a petition to Queen Victoria written in 1847. It complained about the management of the former commandant on Flinders Island, Dr Henry Jeanneret, and was written a few months before the settlement was closed down and relocated to Oyster Cove. In its preamble, the petition mentions 'an agreement which we have not lost from our minds', which was made between the Aborigines, Robinson and Arthur. It says the Aborigines were not taken prisoners but 'freely gave up our country to Colonel Arthur' as part of the agreement. Unfortunately for Reynolds's case, the petition did not specify what the agreement actually said. Nonetheless, he is in no doubt this sole phrase represents Aboriginal memory of the verbal treaty made between Robinson, acting as Arthur's agent, and those tribal Aborigines who agreed to give up their hostilities and follow him.

Reynolds admits there has been a long dispute over whether the 1847 petition was written by the remaining Aborigines or by some of the whites who sympathized with their plight. While Brian Plomley believed the instigator of the petition was the catechist Robert Clark, and that parts of it could not have been produced by the blacks,[110] Reynolds argues that its principal author was Walter George Arthur, the most articulate of the Flinders Island Aborigines. Even if this were true, however, it would not support Reynolds's case. Walter George Arthur was not a tribal Aborigine who might have made such an agreement. He had been brought up among whites. He grew up among the lower classes of Launceston and spent part of his childhood at the Boys Orphan School at Hobart where he learnt to read and write. As a youth, he was for a time a protégé of Lady Jane Franklin, the wife of the governor who succeeded Arthur.[111] He was not captured in the bush and was never party to, nor could have had any direct knowledge of, any agreement Robinson might have used to entice tribal Aborigines to follow him. When the first Aborigines

[110] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 148–9
[111] Robson, *History of Tasmania,* Vol I, p 533

were being captured by Robinson and sent to Bass Strait, Walter George Arthur was an eleven-year-old child living in Launceston. When most of the remaining tribal Aborigines were being brought in from the wild, he was a thirteen and fourteen-year-old still at Orphan School in Hobart. In short, if Walter George Arthur wrote it, the petition upon which Reynolds places so much of the weight of his argument is irrelevant.

In his more general case for a treaty, Reynolds claims the Aborigines regarded Robinson as the ostensible agent of the government. 'The Aborigines had every reason to believe that Robinson spoke for the government and that his promises would be honoured.'[112] He argues that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur was himself predisposed towards a treaty and, in the 1830s, wrote several letters to the Colonial Office in London urging such a policy. 'On the first occupation of Tasmania,' Reynolds quotes Arthur as writing, it was 'a great oversight that a treaty was not, at that time, made with the natives and such compensation given to the chiefs as they would have deemed a fair equivalent for what they surrendered.'[113] Even though this policy was never formally fulfilled, Reynolds nonetheless argues that the Crown entered into a fiduciary relationship with the Tasmanians and owed them care and protection. This extended to the government preserving 'native title' on their behalf. Reynolds is not sure whether this native title was preserved in the main colony or was transferred to Flinders Island, but it must have been one or the other. He writes:

> There is abundant evidence that both Governor Arthur and George Robinson offered inducements to the Aborigines to accept the offer of conciliation, and that these included protection from violence and provision of food, clothing and shelter. And there was more to the offer than that. Either the government did promise, at the very least, regular return visits to ancient homelands, in which case native title wasn't extinguished. Or the Aboriginal interest *was* extinguished, in which case Flinders Island and the smaller islands of the group associated with Wybalenna were set aside as a reserve, as a new homeland, by way of compensation.

None of this, however, is anything but political wishful thinking. It is completely unsupported by the historical record. As argued throughout this chapter, the evidence we have about Robinson's methods of 'conciliation' fails to support such a scenario. Robinson did not conciliate the natives. His methods were either deception (such as tricking the natives from Robbins Island and Circular Head to get aboard the ship for Launceston), fear (threatening his first east

[112] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 196
[113] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 122

coast captives that soldiers from the Black Line were coming to shoot them; relentlessly pursuing the remnants of the Big River tribe who knew he had the might of the colony behind him), or force (lining up Aborigines between armed men and ordering them to follow him, as he did on the west coast in 1833).

As for Arthur's views about the advisability of a treaty, Reynolds's version of what he actually said on the matter is deceptively selective. Reynolds says Arthur did consider a treaty in Van Diemen's Land and cites an 1831 document to show this. According to Reynolds, Arthur reluctantly took Robinson's advice that the Aborigines, on their part, would not conform to it and he doubted that the white colonial 'riff-raff' would either. 'Arthur's problem,' Reynolds claims, 'was not whether a treaty was appropriate, but whether either side would conform to it.'[114] However, Reynolds omits to give his readers the full text of these comments, which provide a quite different perspective. They were contained in a despatch sent on 4 April 1831 to the Colonial Secretary in London, Sir George Murray, in which Arthur said:

> With reference to the experience we have already had of the instability of these savages, and attaching much importance to Mr Robinson's opinion, that the chiefs have but little influence over their tribes, and that he does not think they could deter them from the commission of fresh atrocities, or that any dependence could be placed in the observance of any treaty, even if they could be induced to enter into it, I rather incline to coincide with the other members of the [Executive] Council, that they should be drawn by every mild excitement to resort to the Aboriginal Establishment at Gun Carriage Island.[115]

In other words, the concept of an Aboriginal sanctuary in Bass Strait was supported by the government not *as part* of a treaty but *in lieu* of one. Arthur did not consider the Aborigines as a body of people who preserved any sovereignty and with whom an agreement could be made. He did not believe there was any political coherence among the Aboriginal people at all: 'the chiefs have but little influence over their tribes'. Hence there was no possibility of either making a treaty with the Aborigines or of expecting any of them to be bound by it. This letter shows Arthur clearly *rejecting* the prospect of a treaty. Moreover, the fact that Robinson himself had been party to the discussion on this subject means he would have been under no illusion that he had the authority to offer a verbal treaty to the Aborigines. And the idea that he might have done so against his Lieuten-

[114] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 156
[115] Arthur to Murray, 4 April 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 251

ant-Governor's wishes is a fantasy for which there is no evidence of any kind.

Nor was there any idea among the colonial authorities that the shipping of the Aborigines to Flinders Island was only a temporary move. In fact, the documents of the colonial Executive Council specifically ruled this out. The only reason contemplated for any of the natives to return to Van Diemen's Land was to help recruit more of their fellows to their new, permanent home. In February 1831, when they decided upon the Bass Strait option, the members of the Executive Council spelt out what they expected to happen:

> Mr Robinson is of opinion that if the Natives were placed on an island in Basses Strait they would not feel themselves imprisoned here, or pine away in consequence of the restraint, nor would they wish to return to the main land, or regret their inability to hunt and roam about in the manner they had previously done on this island. They would be enabled to fish, dance, sing, and throw spears, and amuse themselves in their usual way, and he feels confident they would accompany him to the Main and again return to the island, and endeavour to induce others to accompany them to the establishment.[116]

In short, neither of Reynolds's options for Aboriginal land rights, on either the main island of Tasmania or on Flinders Island, is at all credible. This has not, however, prevented *Fate of a Free People* from being a very influential book. By March 2001, it had convinced the Labor government of Tasmanian Premier Jim Bacon to introduce the Aboriginal Lands Bill to hand about 51,000 hectares of land (126,000 acres), or about one per cent of the state, to groups representing Aborigines. The Bill, however, failed to pass the state's upper house. In September that year, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Legal Service announced that, as a result of the Bill's rejection, it would launch action in the Supreme Court to gain land to the equivalent of half the state. The Aboriginal Legal Service's spokesman, Ricky Maynard, said the claim was based on a treaty made in 1831 between Aborigines and the colonial government. The Hobart *Mercury* reported:

> Mr Maynard's legal challenge would be centred on a verbal promise to Aborigines by George Augustus Robinson, an employee of Governor Arthur, during the so-called Black Wars.
>
> Mr Maynard said Robinson promised the Crown would provide Aborigines with land for their use, referred to in journals as 'a country', if Aborigines agreed to leave mainland Tasmania and relocate to Flinders Island.

[116] Minutes of the Executive Council, Van Diemen's Land, 4 February 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 253

> 'We have gone through George Augustus Robinson's journals and Governor Arthur's letters — the evidence is clear,' Mr Maynard said.
>
> He said 'the country' referred to was roughly half the size of Tasmania. The Aborigines relocated, but the Crown did not fulfil its promise.
>
> 'We are tired of being conned,' Mr Maynard said.[117]

The only people being conned, however, are those who take these assertions seriously. There is nothing in either Robinson's diary or Arthur's letters to support such claims. They are simply a repetition of the fanciful interpretation of Robinson's and Arthur's motives made in *Fate of a Free People*. This is an interpretation that Reynolds himself, despite producing a 250-page book on the subject, could not support with one piece of tangible evidence. As shown here, Arthur's letter of 4 April 1831, written at the same time as the policy for the removal of the Aborigines to Bass Strait was finalized, specifically denies both the existence of, and the intention to make, any kind of treaty with the Tasmanian Aborigines.

FLINDERS ISLAND AND ABORIGINAL POLICY

> The report was so permeated with the mellifluous language of the Christian philanthropist and so full of the optimistic visions of the precocity of intellect and moral capacity of Mr Robinson's charges, that Lord Glenelg was caught by the prevalent glamour and, believing he had discovered another Las Casas, accepted the writer's assurance that humanity, religion, and justice demanded that the experiment which had been so successful in his hands should be extended to the numerous tribes on the main continent.
>
> — Henry Gyles Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, 1904[118]

The Flinders Island settlement has an important place in the history of race relations in Australia not because of land rights but for its impact on subsequent policy about Aboriginal welfare. Its concept of physically separating Aboriginal people from British colonists, in order to 'civilize' them, provided a model that was followed by both colonial and state governments for the next one hundred and fifty years. Indeed, in some remote parts of Australia, it is still practised today. In 1895, when he wrote the Queensland report that later became the model for Aboriginal reserves throughout Australia, Archibald Meston began with a virtual hymn of praise to 'one brave

[117] Anne Barbeliuk, 'Aborigines set to claim half the state', *Mercury*, Hobart, 7 September 2001

[118] Henry Gyles Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria, Vol I*, Longmans Green and Co, London, 1904, pp 223–4

man', George Augustus Robinson, and the protectorates he established at Flinders Island and Port Phillip on the mainland.[119] In 1970, when the historian Charles Rowley looked back on the long history of Aboriginal policy, he compared Robinson's experiment with the then most infamous Aboriginal reserve in Queensland. 'There is a direct line of tradition,' Rowley wrote, 'from Gun Carriage Island to Palm Island.'[120]

Flinders Island gave birth to the official policy of Aboriginal separatism. It was designed to replace the original unplanned, laissez-faire route to assimilation, which, in Van Diemen's Land, had begun in the first two decades of colonisation when small groups of Aborigines drifted into the main centres at Hobart, Launceston and Circular Head to survive off handouts and casual employment. Instead, Aborigines were to be subject to a government plan. All of them, even those like Walter George Arthur who were more articulate and better educated than some of the colonists themselves, became subject to this program of government amelioration, whether they agreed or not. The objectives of the policy were to gradually wean the Aborigines from a hunter-gather lifestyle to agricultural pursuits. They were to be taught literacy, numeracy and the Christian religion and, although isolated from civilized society, they were nonetheless expected to become civilized themselves. This was all to be accomplished among an assortment of quite different Aboriginal people, brought together from several different locations, speaking different languages, representing tribes that were often traditional enemies.

In Van Diemen's Land, the rationale for the separation of the two races was to prevent violence. In Robinson's mind, the main point was less to save whites from the Aborigines and more to preserve the blacks from the murderous intentions of the whites, especially those of the colonial lower orders. This became the principal validation of his own efforts at rounding them up. In December 1835, as he watched the natives from the former Big River tribe reaping corn at Wybalenna, Robinson ruminated that, despite the rate at which they were succumbing to disease, the experiment had been more than worth it:

> When I reflected that but a few years since those men were the cause of so much terror in the settled districts and were now so peaceable employed, I see great cause for thankfulness that I have been the hon-

[119] Archibald Meston, *Queensland Aboriginals: Proposed System for their Improvement and Preservation*, Brisbane, Government Printer, 1895, pp 5–8

[120] C. D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice – Volume I*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970, p 48

> oured instrument in removing them from the main territory. The sad mortality which has happened among them since their removal is a cause for regret but after all it is the will of providence, and better they died here where they are kindly treated than shot at and inhumanly destroyed by the depraved portion of the white community.[121]

More than anything else, this notion that Aborigines, surrounded by a sea of white violence, could only be safe in an isolated sanctuary, has been Robinson's principal legacy to race relations in this country. At the time, he persuaded his Lieutenant-Governor to have much the same opinion. Although Arthur, unlike Robinson, still saw the Aborigines as responsible for the consequences of their own actions, he reasoned that, even if they did 'pine away' in Bass Strait:

> it is better that they should meet with their death in that way, whilst every act of kindness is manifested towards them, than that they should fall a sacrifice to the inevitable consequences of their continued acts of outrage upon the white inhabitants.[122]

How then, should history assess this experiment? Does the relentless procession of deaths vindicate the traditional view that Flinders was an isle of despair, or is Reynolds right to claim that, for most of its existence, it was a vital community, where the Aborigines were well supplied with provisions and eager to pursue their political rights?

Vivienne Rae-Ellis's biography of Robinson takes the opposite view to Reynolds. She argues that the living conditions at Wybalenna were appalling and that the attempts to civilize the natives were a failure. She says that very little of what Robinson wrote about the settlement can be trusted:

> From the moment Robinson took up his appointment on Flinders Island his official reports, correspondence and private journal entries became deliberately misleading if not downright dishonest. Within weeks he demonstrated clearly the sly manipulation of the system that enabled him not only to survive but to conquer a situation that would have defeated an honest man. His journal entries offered 'proof', should he be called upon later to provide it, of exemplary activity on the island. But that activity was a figment of his imagination.[123]

However, Rae-Ellis also admits that the Lieutenant-Governor himself did not rely entirely upon Robinson's own assessments. In March 1836, five months after Robinson has taken up his post as head of the settlement, Arthur commissioned Major Thomas Ryan,

[121] Robinson, diary, 7 December 1835, *Weep in Silence*, pp 314–5
[122] Arthur to Murray, 4 April 1831, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 251
[123] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 113

Commandant of Launceston, to visit Wybalenna during Robinson's absence and report to him on its condition. Ryan spent nine days on the island, observing living conditions and attending church services and school classes. His report was generally favourable. He thought the Aborigines enjoyed church services, especially hymn singing, that they had gained some religious sensibility, and that they were attentive in class and anxious to learn their letters.

Rae-Ellis dismisses Ryan's observations, claiming he had been 'hoodwinked' by an elaborate charade organized by Robinson and his chief supporter on the island, the catechist Robert Clark. The Aborigines had been bribed with plum pudding to attend church and Ryan had only heard a few passages recited by rote that the Aborigines had been taught to perform before visitors. Moreover, Ryan had met Robinson previously at Launceston, had been impressed by him, and was predisposed to view his administration favourably.[124]

However, on Rae-Ellis's own evidence, it is hard to believe Ryan was duped about their living conditions. The natives' wattle and daub housing that had been erected three years earlier was in a state of disintegration, Ryan said, with rain pouring in through holes in the roofs. He was also critical of Robinson's failure to issue enough blankets to the Aborigines and rectified this himself by opening the stores and dispensing one hundred new blankets. He accused the authorities of not supplying enough fresh food to the Aborigines, and of restricting too much of their diet to salt provisions. He listened to complaints by the resident surgeon, James Allen, and, as a result, later secured permission to erect a small hospital and employ a nurse. He also recommended an independent inspection of the settlement be made twice a year to keep the commandant and his staff on their toes.[125] Clearly, this was not the approach of someone easily hoodwinked.

Arthur responded to Ryan's report, and to a compatible report from Robinson on the same issues, by immediately approving a substantial funding boost for the settlement. He approved the reconstruction of the buildings, plus construction of a number of new ones, and provided seventeen additional convict artisans to do the job. He also approved an augmented supply of fresh meat. Three hundred additional sheep and ten cows were sent to the island.[126]

Rae-Ellis chastises Robinson for not acting immediately to construct the new buildings. He was only stirred into action towards the end of 1837, she writes, when he heard that the Lieutenant-Governor who succeeded Arthur, Sir John Franklin, wanted to pay a visit to the

[124] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 115–7
[125] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 116–9
[126] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 119

settlement.[127] Nonetheless, by January 1838, when Sir John and his wife Lady Jane Franklin made their visit, new brick buildings had been constructed and were occupied by the Aborigines, new houses had been built for the officers, and new stores and new quarters provided for the convicts. The vice-regal visit was brief but highly successful. The new Lieutenant-Governor and his wife were housed overnight in Robinson's own quarters, they met the Aborigines and saw a performance of native dances. The next day they were entertained at a dinner for eighteen, where all the food was provided from island sources. The vegetables, they were told, had been cultivated by the natives themselves on the gardens adjacent to their housing. The only thing Franklin was unhappy about was the quality of the water supply. As a result he approved funding and ordered the construction of a series of rainwater tanks.[128]

It is clear from Rae-Ellis's own evidence that the traditional portrait of the Flinders Island settlement as a run-down, neglected shanty town cannot be sustained. Henry Reynolds is right to say it was well resourced and well provisioned and that the two Lieutenant-Governors who presided over Robinson's tenure as commandant were prepared, if anything, to *over*-endow it. After Franklin's visit in 1838, the settlement had a ratio of sixty-five whites to eighty-six blacks. Only nine of the whites were soldiers employed to keep order among the convicts. The other fifty-six were there to provide services, especially food, clothing, housing and health care, to the Aborigines.[129] In terms of physical resources, the truth would seem to be that, in the early years, the critics were right to point to its physical deficiencies but, from 1836 onwards, the colonial government went out of its way to create a well-funded, model community.

Robinson spent early 1837 writing his annual report on the preceding year's activities at the settlement. Answering a series of questions given him by Arthur, Robinson gave his usual verbosity free rein and produced 109 ledger-sized pages describing every detail of the island's administration and of the educational attainments, health and employment of the Aborigines. He sent the report to Sir John Franklin in Hobart where it confirmed all the impressions he and his wife had gained on their visit. Franklin was so impressed by what he read that he immediately forwarded it to London.[130] Before long,

[127] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 138
[128] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 141-2
[129] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 135
[130] The report, entitled 'Periodical Report' and dated 24 June 1837 is held by the Mitchell Library, Sydney, in the manuscripts collection at A7044, pp 218–327. A summary is in Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 698–700. Franklin's despatch of 3 August 1837 is in *Weep in Silence*, pp 700–1

Robinson became famous throughout the British Empire. 'Robinson's report was an overwhelming success,' Rae-Ellis remarks. 'Every official who read it was filled with admiration for the man who had, in so little time, succeeded in civilising and Christianising a people recently brought in from the wilds.'[131] In Britain, the Aborigines Protection Society, an Evangelical association formed in the wake of the successful campaign to abolish slavery in the Empire, took up Robinson's argument that, by isolating native peoples in protectorates, they could be preserved from white violence and civilized at the same time. The British Colonial Secretary, Lord Glenelg, was persuaded by his claims as well. In an era of Evangelical humanitarianism, the idea that there was a way to successfully accommodate the indigenous peoples of the newly expanding British Empire was eagerly seized upon. Glenelg replied to Sir John Franklin:

> I have perused this document with much interest. The statement which it contains appears to me not only to reflect just credit on Mr Robinson but to be calculated to be highly useful in suggesting plans for the civilization and improvement of the natives in those parts adjacent to British settlements.[132]

Neither Glenelg nor the Evangelical reformers questioned the veracity of Robinson's account. After all, the viceroy of Van Diemen's Land and his wife had seen the program in action for themselves. In August 1837, acting on advice from both Arthur and Franklin, Glenelg sent instructions to his Treasury to establish a post of Chief Protector of Aborigines, to locate the first protectorate at Port Phillip (Melbourne) in southern New South Wales, and to offer the job to Robinson at a salary of five hundred pounds a year.[133]

Yet Robinson's claims to have civilized and Christianized the Tasmanian Aborigines were largely fraudulent. This is Vivienne Rae-Ellis's conclusion and, on the evidence of Robinson's private diaries, which reveal there were enormous discrepancies between what he reported officially and what he thought himself, one can only agree. Rae-Ellis might have wrongly condemned the physical conditions on Flinders Island but, on the Aborigines' lack of progress towards civilization, her case is compelling.

One of the centrepieces of Robinson's 1837 report was his claim to have introduced a market system to the Aborigines. They were given

[131] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 123

[132] Glenelg to Franklin, 8 January 1838, *Historical Records of Victoria, Volume 2a, The Aborigines of Port Phillip 1835–1839*, (ed. Michael Cannon) Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1982, p 36

[133] Stephen to Spearman, 30 August 1837, *Historical Records of Victoria, Vol 2a,* pp 28-9

their food but they had to buy everything else with money they earned either from work at the settlement or from hunting. According to the report, the men were employed at tasks such as shepherding, road making, tailoring and even police and office work; the women gathered thatch, processed food such as mutton birds, knitted garments and sewed dresses. All of these activities earned wages, which Robinson duly recorded as well.[134] He produced a ledger that recorded every transaction made by the Aborigines on market day, including their purchases of items as small as soap, clay pipes, tobacco and items of clothing. The officers on the island, however, knew the ledger was an elaborate deception. The storekeeper, Loftus Dickinson, refused to sign the market accounts for fear of incriminating himself and threatened to resign if Robinson forced him to.[135] The surgeon, James Allen, was auditor for the first year but became so upset by the deceit that by April 1838 he too refused to sign the books. By this time, he and the other officers, including the storekeeper, were refusing on principle to even attend the market,[136] leaving Robinson and his sole supporter, the catechist Robert Clark, to prepare the accounts between them.

The education of the Aborigines was another area in which Robinson established a detailed system of documentation to record their progress. Both afternoon and night classes were conducted and, initially, other officers were required to assist in examining the abilities of the mainly adult students. Robinson's reports recorded details such as the following examination results from March 1837:

> *Cleopatra:* Perfect in the alphabet; repeats the Lord's Prayer.
>
> *Queen Adelaide:* Imperfect in her letters
>
> *Daphne:* Repeated the Lord's Prayer; perfect in her letters; attempts to read in lessons she has been taught ...
>
> *Lucy:* A peaceable, industrious woman, a good wife; not so apt as some others; attends school regularly ...
>
> *Bessy:* Repeats the Lord's Prayer; perfect in her letters, perfect in numerals to ten; attempted to read ...[137]

By June 1837, however, Dickinson was refusing to participate in these examinations too and so the task reverted again to Clark and some of the Aborigines themselves.[138] By September that year the

[134] Robinson, Periodical report, 24 June 1837, *Weep in Silence*, pp 698-9
[135] Robinson, diary, 27 July 1837, *Weep in Silence*, p 466
[136] Robinson, diary, 17 April 1838, *Weep in Silence*, p 552
[137] examples are from Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, p 685
[138] Robinson, diary, 19 June 1837, *Weep in Silence*, p 452

new surgeon, Dr Matthew Walsh, also refused to endorse the examination results: 'upon his honour he would not for that would be an interminable thing'. Walsh immediately became a trenchant critic of the education standards of the Aborigines. 'The doctor,' Robinson recorded, 'on several occasions found fault with the subject and manner of instruction.' Walsh said a child of five would know as much as the women who had attended classes at Wybalenna for the previous five years.[139]

While his official reports said one thing, with forty-four pages of encouraging examination results presented in his celebrated 1837 report, Robinson admitted privately that his efforts to educate the Aborigines were a failure. He could not compel attendance at classes. His diary records some of the natives absenting themselves for weeks at a time, either while hunting or simply socialising with other Aborigines at their favourite spots around the island. By August 1837, Robinson had given up any attempt to make them literate: 'reading being considered by me superfluous'.[140] In 1838, the newly appointed clergyman, Thomas Dove, was surprised to find the Aborigines did not speak English and instead communicated in a patois of native dialect and sealers' jargon.[141] While there is independent evidence from Dove that some of the natives could read words of one syllable and could recognize the letters of the alphabet,[142] the only really literate Aborigines at the settlement were the two who had come from the Boys Orphan School in Hobart, and perhaps two others who had also grown up among whites.[143]

ROBINSON'S FABRICATIONS EXPOSED

In February 1839, Robinson left Flinders Island to take up his new position as Chief Protector at Port Phillip. He left his son, George Junior, as acting commandant until the government appointed a replacement. Robinson departed in the middle of a new influenza epidemic that rapidly claimed another eight Aboriginal lives.

The personal relationships among the English officers on this isolated outpost had long been wracked by personal enmity and private feuds and, with Robinson gone, the catechist Robert Clark wrote to the Lieutenant-Governor to blame his enemy, the surgeon Matthew Walsh, for the influenza deaths. Four weeks after Robinson's depar-

[139] Robinson, diary, 14 November 1837, *Weep in Silence*, p 496
[140] Robinson, diary, 1 August 1837, *Weep in Silence*, p 467
[141] Dove to Robinson, 10 July 1838, *Weep in Silence*, pp 744–5
[142] Two statements by Thomas Dove, 22–23 February 1838, cited by Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, p 724
[143] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, p 990

ture, Sir John Franklin appointed a board of inquiry ostensibly to investigate the influenza outbreak but also to report on the general condition of the Aborigines and the administration of the settlement. The three-man board, comprising the colonial surgeon Dr Robert Officer, the assistant surgeon William Seccombe, and the Launceston port officer Matthew Friend, travelled to Flinders Island and on 25 March 1839 conducted their inquiry.

The board confirmed what Robinson had so far confessed only in his diaries. There was no evidence the Aborigines had made any progress towards civilization or been educated in any way. On this issue, the inquiry was scathing: 'The schools do not appear to have been productive of any lasting benefit.' When Clark presented twenty Aborigines who he claimed had made 'scholastic improvement', the board was not impressed. It reported their 'acquirements was confined to an imperfect knowledge of the English alphabet and a few monosyllabic words' and one of them had learnt these at the Orphan school.[144] Most Aborigines could not speak English. At a divine service attended by the board members, Clark addressed them in a 'broken dialect' and one Aboriginal man, 'with great apparent animation', stood on a pew and addressed the board in his 'native tongue'.[145]

The Aborigines had made no progress in religious knowledge. Even George Junior admitted 'he did not believe that any of the Aborigines, male or female, have any correct knowledge of religion or that their conduct is in any degree influenced by religious motives'. The surgeon Walsh agreed.[146]

The board also declared it 'was disappointed to find that as little progress had been made in physical training as in their religious and scholastic attainments.'[147] Sir John Franklin still remembered the dinner he had been served during his visit to the settlement in January 1838 and made a particular request to the board to investigate the native gardens, whose vegetables, he had been told, were cultivated solely by the Aborigines. The inquiry discovered the story was a sham:

> The Board found that it was not known by the name of the *Native* but was designated the *Government Garden,* that it has always been worked by a Convict Gardener assisted by other Convicts, and that with the exception of a little occasional *Weeding,* the Aborigines have never performed

[144] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, in G. A. Robinson, Correspondence and Other Papers, Jan–April 1839, ML A7071, A 7072, CY Reel 553, p 10
[145] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, p 11
[146] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, p 12
[147] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, p 12

any labour in it whatever. The Convict labourer was removed some time ago and the Garden is now neglected and unproductive.[148]

Robinson's claims that the Aborigines had earned wages by making roads and cutting grass for thatching were also dismissed by the board. 'Even this sort of occasional jobbing seemed to have ceased for a long time back, and the amount of the labour referred to is less than trifling when spread over a period of years.'[149] The inquiry also uncovered a fraud in the management of the store. Rations were issued to every Aborigine on the island each day. However, more than half of the Aborigines were absent hunting for weeks together at a time when they did not receive their allocation. The board said that, on average, one quarter of the natives were continually absent from the settlement. The provisions that were nominally issued to them were not to be found and there was no record of where they had gone.

Their investigation was hindered by the fact that Robinson Senior had taken all of the settlement's records with him when he left for Port Phillip. Nonetheless, the board recommended that the catechist Robert Clark, who doubled as storekeeper, should be dismissed for incompetency. Since no public works, including the rainwater tanks that the Lieutenant-Governor had funded the year before, had been constructed, it recommended that Robinson Junior's position as superintendent of works be abolished immediately.[150] For the time being, though, the latter was to remain as acting commandant until his replacement arrived in April.

When the board members first arrived at the island, its officers told them the natives were unhappy and that they wanted to get away from a place where there was 'too much sickness'. The inquiry began, however, by rejecting this claim because it found the Aborigines 'appeared without exception happy and contented and their general demeanour belied these expressions of discontent'.[151] Nonetheless, by the end of the report, the board came to admit that the future was bleak and that Flinders Island was not a long-term solution of any kind. 'The preservation of these people as a race,' it stated, 'appears to be altogether hopeless.'[152]

Despite its damning contents, the inquiry's findings were never released. Sir John Franklin sent a copy to Robinson in Port Phillip asking for a response. Robinson denied all wrongdoing and blamed

[148] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, p 13
[149] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, pp 13–14
[150] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, pp 20–2, 25–7, 31
[151] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, p 8
[152] Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, p 25

Clark, Dove and Walsh for any failings. He told Franklin that he had enough documentary evidence to vindicate himself, including testimonials from former officers, while the board of inquiry had drawn its conclusions from mere hearsay.[153] Faced with this determined stance, and embarrassed about his own earlier endorsement of all that Robinson had done, Franklin decided not to prosecute the matter further. He also decided not to inform London. He filed away the board of inquiry's report and did nothing to unseat Robinson from his position as Protector of Aborigines at Port Phillip. The fact that Robinson's record on Flinders Island, on which so much later policy came to be based, was a falsified piece of fiction, was never made public.

In effect, the board of inquiry's report overturned all the claims that had been received so well by the Colonial Office in England. It showed that the experiment of providing a sanctuary for the natives was a failure in its own terms. It had done nothing to modernize, Europeanize or civilize the Aborigines. The only ones who showed any adaptation to British ways were those who had been introduced to colonial culture as children.

Separating the natives from the settlers did not even preserve them from the ravages of the respiratory diseases to which few ever built up a resistance. The mere visit of a supply ship to their island sanctuary, as occurred in February 1839, could unleash a new bout of influenza that carried off a substantial proportion of the population in just a few days. Flinders Island was not a concentration camp, it is true, but its death rate was comparable to one.

Ironically, in terms of the survival of the indigenous blood line, it was the laissez-faire approach, not the government program, that actually succeeded. Most of those Tasmanians who today identify themselves as Aborigines claim some descent from women who had children by the sealers of Bass Strait. The relationships between these indigenous women and their seafaring men were denounced at the time, and have been reprimanded by historians ever since, as depraved and violent affairs that were an affront to correct thinking everywhere.[154] Yet these women and their offspring were the survivors. For some reason, they escaped the onslaught of European diseases and produced enough children to perpetuate a line of descendants. For the remainder of the nineteenth-century, and well into the twentieth-century, they constituted a closely-knit community on the

[153] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, pp 173–5

[154] Anne McMahon, 'Tasmanian Aboriginal Women as Slaves', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 23, 2, June 1976, pp 44–9

Furneaux Islands, identifying themselves as a unique group of people known as 'straitsmen' or 'islanders'.[155]

In contrast, the other Aborigines who remained supported by the government on Flinders Island until 1847, despite being bestowed with all the largesse and good intentions of the colonial authorities, produced no surviving offspring at all.

[155] Whether this community preserved Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal identity, however, is another matter, which is discussed in the Epilogue, pp 432-4

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cape Grim and the credibility of The Conciliator, 1828–1834

> Indeed all reliable evidence of which there is plenty extant, shows that what they suffered from the whites has been most grieviously exaggerated, and by no one so much, but in general statements only, as by Mr Robinson himself; for he gives not the smallest proof of it, except in the instance of the sealers, and hardly once names the bushrangers. But he adduces abundant examples of murders by the blacks — the 'poor helpless, forlorn, oppressed blacks,' as he calls the one race, and the 'merciless white' the other — expressions he so often uses, without the least proof of their applicability to either race, that one sickens of their repetition.
>
> — James Calder, *The Native Tribes of Tasmania* (1875)[1]

IN Tasmania today, what really happened at Cape Grim in 1828 is still a topic of deeply felt contention. On the one side are those academic historians and Aboriginal activists who believe that four convict stockmen employed by the Van Diemen's Land Company shot dead thirty Aborigines at the site and threw their bodies from the cliff sardonically named Mount Victory. They are also highly critical of the company and its chief agent, Edward Curr, who they believe knew about but covered up the crime of his assigned servants. One

[1] J. E. Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c, of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn and Co, Hobart, 1875, p 25

thesis written in the Department of History at the University of Tasmania accused Curr of being 'representative of the most extreme settler opinion'. The incident occurred because of Curr's 'open advocacy of extermination'.[2] Although the thesis remains unpublished, Lloyd Robson drew heavily on it for his account of relations between Aborigines and settlers in the 1820s in Volume One of his award-winning *History of Tasmania*.[3] With this kind of academic support, the descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines in recent years have laid claim to land at Cape Grim as a site of 'Aboriginal genocide'.[4]

On the other side are the current managers of the company itself, which is still in existence after 175 years, plus a group of local historians who are highly sceptical of the story. Cassandra Pybus records that when she approached the company managers to research her 1991 book, *Community of Thieves*, they denied there was any massacre at all. The company said the incident not only did not happen in the way the orthodox historians claim, but could not have happened that way.[5] Some local authors who have published their own versions of the story also take the company's side.[6] Pybus says that most locals are still defensive about claims there was a massacre. 'That kind of talk does not go down well in the heritage-conscious north-west, where Edward Curr is the hero of a dedicated band of local historians. They are proud of his pioneer tenacity and they will take his word any day.'[7]

To try to unravel these competing claims, let us look at all the evidence that has so far come to light about the incident.

Cape Grim did not enter Australian historical consciousness until 1966. Until then, none of the nineteenth- or twentieth-century books on either Tasmanian history generally, or relations between

[2] Bronwyn Desailly, The Mechanics of Genocide: Colonial Policies and Attitudes towards the Tasmanian Aborigines 1824–1836, Master of Arts thesis, University of Tasmania, 1977, pp 187–8

[3] Lloyd Robson, *History of Tasmania, Volume One*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, pp 210–20

[4] Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council, *Land Rights in Tasmania,* Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Hobart, 1986, cited by Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edn., Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, pp 275, 284, 295–6

[5] Cassandra Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, Minerva, Melbourne, 1991, pp 89–90

[6] Kerry Pink and Annette Ebdon, *Beyond the Ramparts: A Bicentennial History of Circular Head, Tasmania*, Mercury-Walch, Hobart, 1988; Kerry Pink, 'The Woolnorth "Massacre"', *Circular Head History Journal*, 2, 4, November 1986; Pauline Buckby, *Around Circular Head*, Denbar Publishers, Stanley, 1984; K. R. von Stieglitz, *A Short History of Circular Head and its Pioneers*, Circular Head Historical Society, Smithton, 1952

[7] Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, p 90

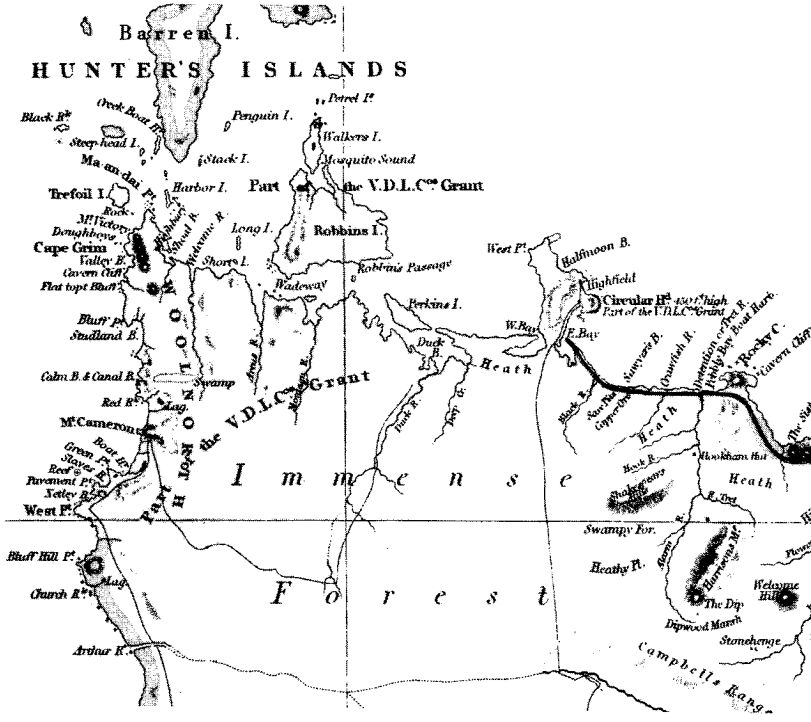
colonists and Aborigines in particular, had mentioned it. It is not discussed by any of the following authors: Henry Melville in *A History of Van Diemen's Land* (1835), John West in *The History of Tasmania* (1852), James Bonwick in *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1870), James Calder in *The Native Tribes of Tasmania* (1875), James Fenton in *A History of Tasmania* (1884), H. Ling Roth in *The Aborigines of Tasmania* (1899), James Backhouse Walker in *Early Tasmania* (1914), or Clive Turnbull in *Black War* (1948). Even Jorgen Jorgenson, the convict explorer and adventurer who visited the site both before and after the event occurred, failed to discuss it in the memoirs he wrote a decade later about the conflict between settlers and Aborigines.[8] This omission was not due to any coyness on Jorgenson's part about violence towards Aborigines, because his memoirs are peppered with any incidents of this kind he could recall. He had obviously never heard of it. The incident, then, is a relatively recent discovery.

It took place on the north-western corner of the island on the property named Woolnorth, on which Cape Grim is located.[9] This property was owned by the Van Diemen's Land Company, which had been formed in London in 1825 under a Royal Charter and given the right to select 250,000 acres of previously unsettled land in the north of Tasmania to produce fine wool for British woollen mills. In 1958 the Tasmanian historian A. L. Meston, who had been researching the company since the 1930s, published a monograph on its activities from its founding up to 1842. He included a section on the company's relations with the Aborigines where he wrote that its early development was marked by a series of incidents between the company's convict servants and the local Aborigines. Meston was the first historian to note the event at Cape Grim when he discussed a despatch by Edward Curr to his directors in London, written on 28 February 1828. Curr recorded a number of assaults by the local natives on company stockmen at Woolnorth. In the first attack at the beginning of August 1827, one of his convict servants, Thomas John, had been wounded in the thigh. There were two versions of how many Aborigines were killed in this initial incident. One convict, Charles Chamberlain, later said 'several' died; a group of native women said it was only one, a tribal chief.[10]

[8] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.) *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1991

[9] The cape was named for the appearance of its black basalt cliffs by George Bass and Matthew Flinders during their 1798–9 circumnavigation of Tasmania.

[10] Robinson, diary, 14 June 1830, 21 June 1830, in N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus*



North-west Tasmania, including some of the land grants made to the Van Diemen's Land Company. Detail from map by, J. Arrowsmith, London, 1832 (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

In another assault by the natives on 31 December 1827, they drove 118 ewes into the sea and killed them. This was followed by a third Aboriginal attack, which Meston described as a 'battle'. At the time of this third conflict there were four convict stockmen living in a hut at Cape Grim where they were agisting sheep. Curr had not himself been at Woolnorth during any of these events. He said in his despatch of 28 February 1828 that members of the company supply ship *Fanny* had informed him of the third assault:

> The shepherds fell in with a strong party of natives who after a long fight left six of their number dead on the field including their chief besides several severely wounded. I have no doubt that this will have the effect of intimidating them, and oblige them to keep aloof.[11]

Robinson 1829–1834, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, pp 175, 181

[11] Curr to directors, Despatch no 11, 28 February 1828, AOT VDL Company papers 5/1, p 4

Meston went on to discuss other reports by Curr the following year in which company men were attacked, speared and left for dead but who escaped with their lives. He thus recorded the killing of six Aborigines at Cape Grim as but one incident in a series of violent clashes between blacks and whites that left casualties on both sides.[12]

In 1966, Brian Plomley published the first edition of his transcripts of the diaries written by George Augustus Robinson during his 'Friendly Mission' to the Tasmanian Aborigines between 1829 and 1834. This huge 1000-page tome, for which the editor and his assistants painstakingly transcribed Robinson's barely decipherable handwriting, was a monumental effort that changed perspectives on the 'Black War' in Tasmania.[13] For the first time, thanks to Robinson's diary entries, historians could gain some idea of the Aborigines' side of the story. They also got a radically different account of the third clash at Woolnorth in February 1828. Rather than six Aborigines killed, Robinson put the total at thirty. Moreover, they were not killed in the act of assaulting the Van Diemen's Land Company employees. Instead, they were themselves the victims of a surprise attack by white stockmen. Some of those killed were women. It was not a battle but a bloodbath. The incident soon became known as the Cape Grim Massacre, one of the worst in Australian history.

Since then, Robinson's account of this incident has been reproduced several times in books by the orthodox school of Tasmanian history. It is not easy, however, to discover from these secondary sources precisely what happened. Most agree with Meston that there were three incidents in a chain of events. In the first, the local Aborigines had come to collect muttonbirds from nearby islands. They found four shepherds, their hut and a flock of sheep, which the Van Diemen's Land Company had established at the location. The shepherds tried to entice some of the native women into their hut. Their menfolk objected and, in the resulting skirmish, a shepherd was speared and a native shot. In retaliation, some weeks later the Aborigines drove a mob of breeding sheep into the sea where they then speared and clubbed them to death.

In the third incident, historians of the orthodox school differ about what actually occurred, as well as where and when it took place. Lloyd Robson says it occurred 'south of Cape Grim' at a place called Mount Victory near the islands called the Doughboys. Stockmen of the Van Diemen's Land Company 'took by surprise a whole tribe, which had come for a supply of mutton birds at the Doughboys,

[12] A. L. Meston, *The Van Diemen's Land Company 1825–1842*, Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, 1958, pp 51–2

[13] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*

massacred thirty of them, then threw them off a cliff 200 feet high.'[14] Henry Reynolds, however, says the Aborigines were killed at the bottom of the cliff, not at the top. 'Four shepherds trapped a group of men, women and children at the edge of the sea and were able to fire down on them from above'.[15] D. J. Mulvaney agrees the Aborigines were at the bottom of the cliff but so too, he says, were the stockmen. He claims the four shepherds rushed in with guns firing at the blacks as they sat around their fire.[16] Lyndall Ryan, however, largely concurs with Robson's account that they died at the top of the cliff, saying 'four shepherds took the Pennemukeer people by surprise while muttonbirding, massacred thirty, and flung them over that same sixty-metre-high cliff, now called Victory Hill.'[17] The entry in the *Oxford Companion to Australian History* says that 'at least thirty' Aborigines were killed in 1827 but gives a different name to the location. 'The victims were pushed by shepherds from a steep rocky cliff, later named Suicide Cove, where they fell and perished.'[18] Brian Plomley agrees the death toll was thirty but gives two different dates for the incident: January 1828 and February 1828.[19] Cassandra Pybus says that thirty were killed in 1827 and 'their bodies were thrown over the cliffs onto the rocks'. She says the massacre site was later strangely renamed Suicide Cove.[20]

Part of the reason for this conflicting information is because most of these historians are themselves relying on secondary accounts and have not checked the original sources. Lloyd Robson, for example, did not even bother to consult a map. The Doughboys are not to the south of Cape Grim but are directly adjacent to it. Mount Victory is a hill whose sea cliffs form part of the cape itself. The *Oxford Companion*'s version of events is obviously borrowed directly from Cassandra Pybus's earlier account because it reproduces the name she wrongly gave for the site, Suicide Cove (actually Suicide Bay), mistakenly presuming that this was the name of the cliff. The *Oxford Companion* also follows Pybus in wrongly dating the incident in 1827.

[14] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol I, p 225
[15] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1995, p 80
[16] D. J. Mulvaney, *Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606–1985*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, p 50
[17] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp 135–7
[18] Graeme Davison, John Hirst, Stuart Macintyre (eds.) *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p 109
[19] N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803–1831,* Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992, pp 16, 28
[20] Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, p 88–9

Moreover, it is hard to believe that any of the academic historians who have written about it with such confidence have ever bothered to visit the site. An inspection would have saved them from several descriptive blunders. The anthropologist D. J. Mulvaney is the only author to reproduce a photograph but his account still contains a number of errors. He does not mention there are two cliffs at the site, one facing west to the sea, the other facing south to Suicide Bay. Robinson described them both quite accurately:

> On the one side was a perpendicular cliff of not less than two hundred feet in altitude and the base washed with the sea; the other side was a rapid declivity.[21]

Robinson claimed the bodies were thrown over the cliff facing the sea. The photograph in Mulvaney's book is of the other side, the 'rapid declivity' to Suicide Bay, which is where *he* thinks the bodies were thrown from.[22]

Other confusions derive from Robinson's diaries themselves, which give different versions of what is supposed to have occurred. Most of the orthodox historians who use Robinson as their informant do not tell their readers how he came by the information. They treat him as a primary source and do not reveal that he was not a contemporary to the event but someone who picked up his information from three different sources some two and a half years later.

After Curr's despatch of 28 February, in which he reported six Aborigines had been killed 'after a long fight', the next document to discuss the incident was written in November 1829 by Alexander Goldie, the Van Diemen's Land Company's agricultural superintendent. Goldie had written to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur a long indictment of Curr in which he said that, since the Woolnorth property had been established, there had been several engagements with Aborigines and 'there have been a great many natives shot by the Company's servants'. He went on to describe one incident at which he was not present himself but which clearly referred to the killings at Cape Grim:

> On one occasion a good many were shot (I never heard exactly the number) and although Mr Curr knew it yet he never that I am aware took any notice of it although in the Commission of the Peace [a magistrate], and at that time there was no proclamation against the natives, nor were they

[21] Robinson, diary, 24 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 183

[22] Mulvaney, *Encounters in Place*, includes its photograph on p 51. Mulvaney makes other errors in his description of the site. He thinks a large cave Robinson described is at the bottom of the declivity in his photograph, whereas it is actually on the other, southern side of Suicide Bay (see middle photograph of plate). For other mistakes by Mulvaney see footnote 30.

> (the natives) at the time they were attacked at all disturbing the Company flocks, although a short while before they had destroyed a considerable number of sheep.[23]

The acrimony between Goldie and Curr had arisen over an incident at the company's property at Emu Bay in August 1829, in which Richard Sweetling, a seventeen-year-old convict under Goldie's supervision, had killed an Aboriginal woman. As the magistrate for the region as well as chief executive of the company, Curr had informed Goldie he would have to charge him as an accessory to murder. Goldie had written to Arthur in an attempt to exonerate himself, as well as to have an independent magistrate decide on the matter. His strategy was to inform Arthur that Curr should not preside on the issue because he was himself implicated in other killings of Aborigines by his men.[24]

Arthur responded by making a number of inquiries of the two parties. Before Robinson departed on his expedition, Arthur also asked him to obtain all possible details about what had happened at Cape Grim.[25] Hence, when Robinson and his party of Aborigines and convict servants stopped over at Woolnorth station in June 1830, he regarded his inquiries as being of an official nature. Even though Robinson didn't make his assignment immediately known, Arthur's request led him to closely question the company's servants.

Robinson arrived on 14 June and two days later he walked around the property with the station overseer, Joseph Fossey. They went to 'a mountain which they call Mount Victory from a rencontre they had with the natives'. Fossey told him that when the Aborigines were shot, the Woolnorth workforce comprised only four shepherds: Charles Chamberlain, William Gunshannon, John Weavis and Richard Nicholson, all convicts working as assigned servants. That night Robinson interrogated Charles Chamberlain:

> 'How many natives do you suppose there was killed?' — 'Thirty'. 'There appears to be some difference respecting the numbers.' — 'Yes, it was so. We was afraid and thought at the time the Governor would hear of it and we should get into trouble, but thirty was about the number.' 'What did you do with the bodies?' — 'We threw them down the rocks where they had thrown the sheep.' 'Was there any more females shot?' — 'No, the women all laid down; they were most of them men.' 'How many was there in your party?' — 'There was four of us.' 'What had they done to

[23] Goldie to Arthur, 18 November 1829, AOT CSO 1/326/7578, p 117

[24] A full and reliable discussion of the conflict between Goldie and Curr has been written by Geoff Lennox, 'The Van Diemen's Land Company and the Tasmanian Aborigines: a reappraisal', *Papers and Proceedings of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, December 1990, pp 165–208

[25] Arthur to Hay, 20 November 1830, AOT GO 33/7, p 839

you? — 'They had some time before that attacked us in a hut and had speared one man in the thigh. Several blacks was shot on that occasion. Subsequently thirty sheep had been driven over the rocks.'[26]

A week later, after a visit to Robbins Island a few miles east of Woolnorth, Robinson spent two nights at a camp of four sealers opposite the island. Five Aboriginal women and one male Aborigine accompanied the sealers. On the second night, while Robinson waited for his boat to arrive, the sealer's women 'made up a fire and danced and sung until it was time to depart'. During this time, the women told him about the events at Cape Grim:

> The aboriginal females said that the Company's shepherds had got the native women into their hut and wanted to take liberties with them, that the men resented it and speared one man in the thigh; that they then shot one man dead, supposed the chief; that subsequently some natives killed some of the Company's sheep and drove them off the rocks, and sometime after they took by surprise a whole tribe which had come for a supply of mutton birds at the Doughboys, massacred thirty of them and threw them off a cliff two hundred feet in altitude. Since the destruction of those people the natives call the white people at Cape Grim NOW.HUM.MOE, devil, and when they hear the report of a gun they say the NOW.HUM.MOE have shot another tribe of natives.[27]

Robinson then returned to Woolnorth. Three days later, on 24 June, he once more went to Cape Grim to visit the site of the massacre. This time he went with one of his own party, Alexander McKay, and a person he identified only as 'my informant'. This was probably not Joseph Fossey this time. Given the detail he provided and the fact that Robinson says he was 'one of the murderers', it was most likely Charles Chamberlain again. They arrived at a point of land opposite the Doughboys. Robinson later wrote in his diary his most detailed version of the killings:

> On the occasion of the massacre a tribe of natives, consisting principally of women and children, had come to the islands. Providence had favoured them with fine weather, for it is only in fine weather that they can get to the islands as a heavy sea rolls in between them. They swim across, leaving their children at the rocks in the care of the elderly people. They had prepared their supply of birds, had tied them with grass, had towed them on shore, and the whole tribe was seated round their fires partaking of their hard-earned fare, when down rushed the band of fierce barbarians thirsting for the blood of these unprotected and unoffending people. They fled, leaving their provision. Some rushed into the sea, others scrambled round the cliff and what remained the monsters put to death. Those poor creatures who had sought shelter in the cleft of the rock they forced to

[26] Robinson, diary 16 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 175
[27] Robinson, diary 21 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 181–2

> the brink of an awful precipice, massacred them all and threw their bodies down the precipice, many of them perhaps but slightly wounded. Whilst I stood gazing on this bloody cliff, methought I heard the shrieks of the mothers, the cries of the children and the agony of the husband who saw his wife, his children torn forever from his fond embrace. I was shewed a point of rock where an old man who was endeavouring to conceal himself, was shot through the head by one of the murderers — who mentioned these circumstances as deeds of heroism. I went to the foot of the cliff where the bodies had been thrown down and saw several human bones, some of which I brought with me, and a piece of the bloody cliff. As the tide was flowing I hastened from this Golgotha. Returned past Mount Victory.[28]

Robinson's third source of information about the incident was William Gunshannon, another of the four shepherds at Woolnorth, whom he interviewed on 10 August at the Van Diemen's Land Company's station in the Hampshire Hills, inland from Emu Bay:

> Interrogated Gunchannon [sic] respecting the massacre at Cape Grim. The indifference of this man was quite astonishing. He acknowledged to having been one of the four men who massacred the natives. I asked him how many they killed. He said he could not tell whether any were killed, but they saw traces of blood afterwards. 'How long was it after killing the sheep that the circumstance occurred' — 'Six weeks.' 'Were there any women among them?' — 'Yes, there was both men and women.' Finding this man was not willing to disclose, I told him that I had full information on the subject, both from blacks and whites, and it was of little consequence his keeping it back; he might prevaricate but I knew; Chamberlain, an accessory, had told me there was thirty killed. I severely reprehended him and assured him I was not certain he would not be cited to Hobart Town for the murder. He seemed to glory in the act and said he would shoot them whenever he met them.[29]

Robinson's investigation, then, amounted to two visits to the site and four interviews: two with Chamberlain, one with the sealers' women, and one with the recalcitrant Gunshannon. The evidence he found portrayed a reasonably consistent scenario. The incident took place six weeks after the Aborigines drove the flock of sheep into the sea, that is, in the second week of February 1828. The Aborigines, many of them women, had returned from muttonbirding at the Doughboys. They were sitting on the rocks at the foot of the 'rapid declivity', now called Suicide Bay, cooking and eating the birds they had gathered. The stockmen suddenly appeared, brandishing weapons. Some Aborigines fled into the sea, others around the adjacent cliff face. Some Aborigines were shot in Suicide Bay. Others were

[28] Robinson, diary 24 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 183
[29] Robinson, diary 10 August 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 196

forced up to the top of Mount Victory (not 'Victory Hill') and either killed or wounded there. Their bodies were thrown over the cliff to the rocks below. Two and a half years later, Robinson could still find human bones at the base of the cliff. The death toll was thirty.

LOGISTICAL PROBLEMS OF THE RECEIVED VERSION

This story, when told in print, seems plausible enough. However, anyone who visits the site will struggle to find it credible. If the Aborigines were sitting on the rocks of the bay opposite the Doughboys, the stockmen could not have surprised them. The declivity immediately above them is very steep and is impossible to climb down manually. The stockmen would have had to come down to the seashore by the only accessible slope, which is about halfway around the bay.[30] This would have made them visible to the Aborigines below for at least five minutes. Even this route is quite steep and, for part of the way, can only be climbed down by grasping tufts of button grass, which meant the stockmen would have had to shoulder their arms for part of their descent. In other words, the Aborigines would have seen them coming and would have had time to escape by swimming to the other side of the bay or out to sea (those who had been to the Doughboys were obviously powerful swimmers) or by going around the rocks at the base of the cliff.

Robinson wrote that those Aborigines 'who had sought shelter in the cleft of the rock' were 'forced to the brink of an awful precipice'. He did not indicate where this cleft in the rock was located but an inspection of the site indicates the only pieces of topography deserving the name 'cleft' are on the sea side of the bay, down near the water line. However, it is hard to understand how the stockmen could have got these Aborigines up to the cliff top. The ascent is even more difficult than the descent. Again, for part of the way, both hands and feet are needed. The stockmen would have had to shoulder their arms again, making it very difficult for them to control their captives. When they reached the top of Mount Victory, they would have found no natural barriers to confine the Aborigines, apart from the cliff to the west and the declivity to the south. On the north and east of Mount Victory, the land is open and gently sloping, described

[30] D. J. Mulvaney thinks it is possible to descend to the bay from the cliff top 'along a steep path' (*Encounters in Place*, p 50). Anyone who has been there could have told him there is no path from either the western-facing or southern-facing cliff top. Both are sheer drops. The path today is still where Robinson said it was in 1830, 'about two hundred yards from this cliff', that is, further around the bay: Robinson, diary 24 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 183

by Robinson as 'grassy hills'.[31] So, once again, many of the Aboriginal captives would have had the chance to escape. In fact, the whole story about taking the Aborigines to the top of the cliff to throw them off simply does not ring true. Why would the stockmen bother to do this? They would have known that, logistically, it was an impossible exercise without most of their captives escaping. If they really were trying to kill them all, they would have done it where they allegedly found them, down near the waterline at the edge of the bay.

THE LIMITATIONS OF EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY MUSKETS

The four white captors had four guns between them. They were single shot, flintlock muskets that took anything from thirty to sixty seconds to reload. The Aborigines were well aware of the guns' limitations. Even Henry Reynolds has admitted that by the late 1820s, when they began to be issued to convicts in remote locations as defence against Aboriginal attack, guns had lost their 'aura of magic'. The Aborigines knew that, once they had been fired and before they could be re-loaded, they had plenty of time to either attack or flee. Even a child had time during reloading to run beyond the effective range of these guns of about eighty yards.[32]

By the early 1820s, the Aborigines realized that, once a gun had been fired, they had time to attack its owner. The Campbell Town pastoralist John Leake wrote to his brother in 1824 telling him of the exploits of Musquito's mob:

> They now know a gun will not go off a second time unless charged again – and will rush in with their spears upon a single man if he has once fired.[33]

A police magistrate described one Aboriginal attack in 1825:

> One of the hostile Aborigines tribes, headed by Thomas Birch, alias Black Tom, attacked the hut of Robert Jones in Four Square Gallows, daring Jones to fire at them, threatening to put his wife into the bloody river. The man having no other assistance at the time would not fire, for fear that when his piece was discharged the Blacks would rush upon him, his wife and his children.[34]

[31] Robinson, diary 16 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 175

[32] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp 71–2. See also Donald Featherstone, *Weapons and Equipment of the Victorian Soldier*, Blandford Press, Poole, 1978, pp 11–16

[33] Susan M. Kemp, 'John Leake 1780–1865: early settler in Tasmania', thesis (1969) held by Archives Office of Tasmania, pp 17–18

[34] Thomas Anstey, Report of robberies, outrages, murders and other aggressions committed by the Aboriginal tribes etc, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 762

This is a consideration that applies not only to Cape Grim but also to any claim about the massacre of large numbers of Aborigines before the 1860s when repeating rifles came into widespread use. In any single engagement, each armed man was only able to fire once on his opponents before they escaped. 'Four men,' Reynolds correctly observes, 'would only manage four shots at best.'[35] So the most likely number of Aborigines killed by gunshot would be about the same as the number of armed men arrayed against them. This assumes that the armed men were good shots, which was often not the case since they were not militarily trained and their muskets were notoriously inaccurate. 'Fired in the Australian bush,' David Denholm has observed about the standard issue musket of the era, 'even if an Aborigine at 50 yards stood still long enough, Brown Bess might hit him twice from three shots.'[36] Even on the most favourable ground, the claim that four stockmen could kill thirty Aborigines with single shot muskets is inherently implausible. Given the extraordinarily difficult terrain of Suicide Bay, the claim is beyond belief.

THE CREDIBILITY OF THE ABORIGINAL WITNESSES

Yet both Chamberlain and the sealers' women gave Robinson the same total of thirty killed. For the orthodox historians' case, this amounts to independent corroboration, which is evidence of the strongest kind. However, as well as logistical problems with the story, there are also doubts about Robinson's informants. The historians who have cited the evidence of the Aboriginal women at the sealers' camp have usually assumed they were either eyewitnesses to the event or at least members of the tribe who suffered the massacre. However, this is not so. In his diary entry of 20 June, the day before he recorded his discussion with the sealers' women, Robinson discussed their backgrounds. Of the six Aboriginal women, he wrote, 'one woman was a native of this part and the other five were eastern women and had been living with white men several years'.[37] If they were 'eastern women' they were originally from the tribes on the north-east or east coasts of Tasmania, and if they had been with the sealers for several years, they were no longer tribal Aborigines. So these five would not have been with the north-western Aboriginal band at Cape Grim in February 1828. Rather than the six witnesses claimed by the orthodox school, only one of these women was even a possible candidate. The others could only have known of the event

[35] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 80
[36] David Denholm, *The Colonial Australians*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1979, pp 36
[37] Robinson, diary 20 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 179

as hearsay. Even this would not have been reliable, since eastern Aborigines spoke a quite different language to the west coast tribes.

Cassandra Pybus claims that on the night he heard the story from these natives, Robinson actually had two informants from the Cape Grim tribe, the west coast woman plus an Aboriginal male youth, named Pevay, who, she says, was also from Cape Grim. She writes: 'they repeated the story of the massacre, explaining that the murderous tension arose over women'.[38] These claims, however, are her own embellishments to the tale. Robinson's diary entry, quoted above, records his only informants as the 'aboriginal females', and does not mention Pevay in this context. Anyway, this youth (also known as Peevay and Tunnerminnerwait), who later became a permanent member of Robinson's travelling party, was not one of the Cape Grim natives but from the quite distinct Robbins Island tribe, and so would have had no direct knowledge of the encounter either.[39] All that Robinson recorded about the sole western woman was that she was 'a native of this part', a phrase which, since it was recorded at a spot directly opposite Robbins Island, probably meant she was from that tribe too.

There is another good reason to doubt the story Robinson recorded from the Aboriginal women. His claim that they told him thirty Aborigines were killed runs counter to everything else he says about the ability of Tasmanian Aborigines to count. Their arithmetical aptitude was one of the ethnographic details Robinson made a point of recording in his diary. Throughout the island, he found the highest the Tasmanian natives could count was to four, except on Robbins Island, where it was to seven.[40] So, instead of the sealers' women providing a strong case — eyewitness accounts by six people of a massacre of thirty Aborigines — Robinson's diary entry of their allegations turns out to be a suspect piece of evidence itself. Only one of the women was even a potential witness and, since she herself could not count to thirty, Robinson was obviously inventing her facts for her.

THE CREDIBILITY OF THE WHITE WITNESSES

The evidence of the convict Chamberlain was also suspect. As part of the account of the incident he provided to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur in May 1831, Edward Curr said he knew of Chamberlain's allegations:

[38] Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, p 90
[39] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 983, 987. For the distinction between the Robbins Island tribe and the Cape Grim tribe, see pp 178–9, 971, 973–4
[40] Robinson, *Friendly Mission*, p 445, n 98

> Mr Robinson told me that one of the men, Charles Chamberlain by name, had told him the number killed was thirty. I afterwards asked Mr Joseph Fossey, the mens superintendent, if he could have said so, and Mr Fossey told me he had, but that it was merely done for the purpose of playing upon Mr Robinson's credulity and I am confident that was the case.[41]

This statement by Curr obviously has to be read in the light of the fact that he was an interested party, concerned to play down the incident. But there are two reasons to give it some credibility. First, as noted above, when he was interviewed, Chamberlain was not aware Robinson was investigating the killings on Arthur's behalf or that there might be any recriminations for an event that now seemed long behind him. Robinson only revealed his concern about the killings to Gunshannon on 10 August. So Chamberlain had no reason to be self-protective about his role in the affair and nothing to inhibit him from blowing up the affair to impress the visitor.

Second, Chamberlain was a convict with a serious criminal record both in England and Tasmania. Aged twenty-two, he had been sentenced in Norfolk in 1825 to fourteen years transportation. He arrived in Hobart in October 1826. In April 1829 he absconded and was given twenty-five lashes. In October 1832 he was given fifty lashes for an assault on a middle-aged man with a heavy hand spike. He was removed from the Van Diemen's Land Company's workforce and taken to Launceston where he was frequently flogged for other offences. He was sentenced to hard labour in chain gangs and in 1835 had a further seven years added to his sentence for theft.[42] In other words, he was a persistent law-breaker and not a witness of reliable character whose views should be accepted without some corroboration.

There are two other pieces of testimony about this case that also deserve questioning. The claim by the agricultural superintendent, Alexander Goldie, that 'a good many' natives were shot was made, as noted above, as part of his campaign to have Curr relieved of his position as magistrate for the north-west region. While Goldie was a more reliable character than Chamberlain, he was not at Woolnorth when the Cape Grim killings occurred and did not know exactly how many had died nor the circumstances of their deaths.

The second questionable testimony is that of Robinson himself. He was clearly putting words into the mouths of the Aboriginal women

[41] Curr to Colonial Secretary, 18 May 1831, AOT VDL Company papers 23/4, p 306

[42] Charles Chamberlain, Chapman (2), AOT CON 31/6; Kerry Pink, 'The Woolnorth "Massacre"', p 18 n 9; see also Geoff Lennox, 'The Van Diemen's Land Company and the Tasmanian Aborigines', p 202 n 25

at the sealers' camp. However, by far the least credible of his diary entries are those where he records his own experience of the massacre site. When he inspected Suicide Bay on 24 June, he wrote: 'I went to the foot of the cliff where the bodies had been thrown down and saw several human bones, some of which I brought with me, and a piece of the bloody cliff. As the tide was flowing I hastened from this Golgotha.' This visit was two and a half years after the bodies had allegedly been thrown from the cliff. It is this claim, more than any other, that makes local historians scoff at his version of the story.

As Robinson himself notes, he had to hurry from the rocks when the tide came in. In fact, the tide submerges these rocks for more than half the day. This is the west coast of Tasmania, swept by the winds of the Roaring Forties, which, in bad weather, produce some of the wildest seas in the world. At high tide, the rocks at the foot of the cliff at Cape Grim are constantly pounded by heavy seas. Waves of ten metres high can emerge from the sea during big storms. There is no conceivable way that human bones, let alone bloodstains, could have survived on these rocks from February 1828 to June 1830 for Robinson to collect. As one of those local historians so disparaged by Cassandra Pybus, the Burnie journalist Kerry Pink, has put it:

> Any person familiar with the exposed Cape Grim coastline and Suicide Bay, lashed by gale-force westerlies and huge seas, must speculate whether Robinson, two and a half years after the killings, found human bones and bloodstains on the cliffs. The skeletons of whales stranded on this coastline disappear within months.[43]

EDWARD CURR'S VERSIONS OF THE KILLINGS

The version of events that the locals endorse is that provided by Edward Curr. He wrote four accounts of the killings, but gave two different tallies of the death toll. The first account was his despatch of 28 February 1828, noted earlier, in which he said six Aborigines were killed. The second was written on 7 October 1830 to his directors in London to rebut accusations made by Alexander Goldie when he resigned from the service of the Van Diemen's Land Company. Goldie had attacked Curr's personal and public attitude towards the Aborigines in an attempt to undermine his position. Curr replied, justifying his lack of action over the Cape Grim killings. He said that following the killing of the 118 sheep on 31 December:

> The natives afterwards kept quiet until the 10th February when a very large party were assembled on the Hill at the foot of which the hut stands. There our men saw them and the account they gave me of the transaction was that they considered the natives were coming to attack them again

[43] Kerry Pink, 'The Woolnorth "Massacre"', p 17

> and they marched out to meet them, and in the fight which ensued they killed six of the natives one of whom was a woman. This was the manner in which the story was first related to me: nothing was said about the natives being a party of people who were returning from the Islands with birds & fish, nor do I now believe that was the case but I think it probable they were going there. But suppose that were the real fact and that the natives were only going to or returning from the Islands with birds & fish, how was I to establish the fact? Who was there to prove it except the parties implicated? ... Now I have no doubt whatever that our men were fully impressed with the idea that the natives were there only for the purpose of surrounding and attacking them, and with that idea it would be madness for them to wait until the natives shewed their designs by making it too late for one man to escape. I considered these things at the time for I had thought of investigating the case, but I saw first that there was a strong presumption that our men were right, second if wrong it was impossible to convict them, and thirdly that the mere enquiry would induce every man to leave Cape Grim.[44]

Now, while this is obviously a self-serving justification for inaction, unworthy of a man who held the position of magistrate, it is also a far more credible account of what happened than anything provided by Robinson. Four men with muskets, who met the Aborigines on the open grassland and comparatively level terrain of Mount Victory (the hill on which the hut stood), could plausibly shoot six of them. This version suffers none of the logistical improbabilities of Robinson's story about the shootings taking place on the rocks at the waterline of Suicide Bay. If the stockmen did throw any bodies over the cliff, this was the most plausible location from which to do it. By approaching the stockmen's hut, the Aborigines demonstrated they were not on some innocent excursion. Had the blacks meant them no harm and were really at Cape Grim simply to collect muttonbirds, they would have given the hut a wide berth. Given the conflict the stockmen had already experienced, plus the vulnerability they must have felt alone at this remote location, when they saw the party of Aborigines arrive and found themselves outnumbered, the fact that they shot first rather than allow themselves to be surrounded and attacked, is a credible explanation of their motives.

Curr's third description was given in a letter to Archdeacon Broughton's committee of inquiry in 1830. Answering a series of questions put by the committee on 2 April, Curr wrote:

> At Woolnorth, the North West angle of this island, the natives are a very powerful and fine race of men. In December 1827, the Company had some sheep there which the Natives attacked, and driving them into the

[44] Curr to directors, Despatch no. 150, 7 October 1830, AOT VDL Company papers 5/3, pp 104–5

> bend of a steep cliff over-hanging the sea, they speared and waddied 118. A short time after this, some days or perhaps a week or two, they approached the hut where the men four in number were living, who being well armed attacked the Natives and shot several of them. The Natives attacked the men on another occasion that season, but whether before or after the above occurrence I do not now remember.[45]

Curr's fourth account was written in response to an inquiry made by Lieutenant-Governor Arthur after he had received information from Robinson. In May 1831 Curr had been at Jericho where he met Arthur who questioned him about the incident. In reply, Curr wrote:

> His Excellency having mentioned to me at Jericho on the 14th instant that Mr G. A. Robinson had officially reported that 30 Aboriginal Natives had been killed some years since by the Company's people at Woolnorth and having observed that if the statement were untrue it ought to be contradicted, I beg to state for his Excellency's information that I believe it to be untrue. I know the occurrence to which the story refers and I have no doubt that some Natives were killed on the occasion, my impression is that the real number was three. All the persons living at Woolnorth at the time were concerned in the transaction which precluded information being called for from any disinterested party, but as the case was represented to me by the men themselves at the time they had no alternative but to act as they did.[46]

Curr then went on to argue that Chamberlain's claim that thirty were killed was meant to play on Robinson's credulity, as recorded above. This letter was written from Launceston on 18 May. It is possible that, because he was away from his office at Circular Head on the north coast and did not have the opportunity to check his previous despatches, Curr did not accurately recollect his earlier figure that the Cape Grim death toll was six. It is more likely, though, that he wanted to persuade Arthur that the incident was a much less bloody affair than Robinson claimed and so deliberately reduced the death toll. Overall, considering Curr's four statements about the matter, his initial, unguarded report to his directors that six were killed is the most credible.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ABORIGINAL CONFLICT

The historian who has previously written the most thorough account of the Cape Grim killings and their aftermath is Geoff Lennox, a researcher and adviser to the Tasmanian government's Department of

[45] Curr to Aborigines Committee, 2 April 1830, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 364-5

[46] Curr to Colonial Secretary, 18 May 1831, AOT VDL Company papers 23/4 p 306

Parks, Wildlife and Heritage. Lennox is a far more reliable historian than the academics of the orthodox school. However, he gives the figure of thirty killed at Cape Grim more credibility than it deserves. He accepts the evidence of the Aboriginal women at the sealers' camp as authentic rather than a concoction by Robinson. This is because he apparently overlooked what Robinson inadvertently said about their background, and did not see they could not have been eyewitnesses. However, Lennox still finds enough doubts about the story to eventually conclude 'we do not know precisely how many Aborigines were killed'. Nonetheless, he argues that even if Curr's version of events is accepted, and only six were shot, 'there were obviously sufficient Aborigines killed to justify the label of "massacre".'[47] Lennox hinges this last part of his argument on the fact that there were women among the Aborigines at Cape Grim. Both Chamberlain and Gunshannon said native women were in the party and even Curr said in October 1830 that one woman was killed. 'The simple point of this,' Lennox writes, 'is that it refutes the idea of an attack being mounted by the Aborigines: women were not included in such activities.'[48]

This is not, however, true. In fact, the north-west of Tasmania was the home of one of the island's best-known female warriors, Walyer the Aboriginal amazon. In our own feminist age she has acquired a legendary status[49] but she was a real woman, who eventually ended up being captured and taken by Robinson to the Bass Strait islands. In 1830 Robinson had recounted a story he heard from sealers. Walyer was head of the Emu Bay Aborigines and would stand on a hill, giving orders to her tribesmen when to attack, abusing the whites and daring them to come out and be speared.[50] She was feared by her own people and was said to have stabbed a woman who would not obey her. She was also said to have massacred both whites and other Aborigines.[51] It is uncertain how many of her exploits were real or mythical. At one stage she was a willing concubine to some of the Bass Strait sealers so the claim that she was one of the 'heroes of the

[47] Lennox, 'The Van Diemen's Land Company and the Tasmanian Aborigines' pp 173–4

[48] Lennox, 'The Van Diemen's Land Company and the Tasmanian Aborigines', p 172

[49] Walyer was one of the 'great initiators and fierce fighters' among Aboriginal women: Patsy Cameron and Vicki Matson-Green, 'Pallawah Women: Their Historical Contribution to our Survival', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 41, 2, June 1994 pp 65–70

[50] Robinson, diary 21 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 182

[51] Robinson, diary 5 December, 16 December, 19 December 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 287, 292, 296–7

resistance' is something of an exaggeration.[52] Nonetheless, there is enough in the stories other Aborigines told about her and her compatriots to question the notion that Aboriginal women always shrunk from violence. This idea originated with the evidence before the 1830 inquiry into Aboriginal affairs when it was used to argue that the Aborigines at Risdon Cove in 1804, among whom there were women, were a hunting party rather than a war party.[53] Though plausible in this case, the point should not be stretched to cover all Aboriginal women in Tasmanian history.

There were also several cases of the killing of whites at remote huts and homesteads in which Aboriginal women participated. They were either sent in first as decoys or watched from nearby while their menfolk conducted the assault.[54] In one case in 1831 on the Tamar River, an Aboriginal woman named Kubmanner goaded members of her tribe into killing a white woman.[55] So, even though there were women among the Aborigines at Cape Grim, and even if their ultimate purpose had been to go to the Doughboys for muttonbirds, this cannot be taken, of itself, to mean they had only peaceful intentions towards the stockmen there.

Overall, the explanations that Curr gave in February 1828 and October 1830 are by far the most credible. The killings at Cape Grim took place on 10 February 1828. They occurred not on the seashore of Suicide Bay but on top of the hill called Mount Victory. Curr called it a 'long fight' between his shepherds and the Aborigines that left six of the latter dead on the field and several wounded. We will never know for certain exactly what happened or who made the first move, but the most plausible motive of the stockmen was self-preservation. Given their previous experience of violent conflict with the natives, they understandably felt threatened when they found themselves outnumbered by the approach of a large party. Under the circumstances, marching out with arms to meet them was a legitimate tactic. These are not conditions that justify the term 'massacre', which implies malicious intent, general carnage and slaughter of the inno-

[52] This phrase is used by Julia Clark in *The Aboriginal People of Tasmania*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 1983, p 46; for Walyer and the sealers see Robinson, diary 19 December 1830, 25 December 1830, 30 December 1830, report February 1831, diary 16 June 1832, *Friendly Mission*, pp 296–7, 301, 304, 442 n 80, 615

[53] Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, Vol 4, p 209

[54] for example: Robinson, diary 17 November 1831, 19 November 1831, 14 December 1831, 16 January 1834, *Friendly Mission*, pp 522, 523–4, 551–2, 835

[55] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 455 n 155

cent. Cape Grim cannot seriously be regarded as a massacre site. In particular, it is unwarranted hyperbole for historians and political activists to label a place where six people died as a site of 'Aboriginal genocide'.

To put the event into perspective, we might consider how this incident would have been regarded if the roles had been reversed. If four isolated Aborigines, who had previously been assaulted and their stock animals killed, had been confronted on an open field by a much larger group of armed and hostile whites, and if the blacks had killed six of them, the orthodox school would either call it justified self-defence or a victorious battle. They would never contemplate labelling it a massacre. Indeed, in universities today, many historians and their publishers now forbid the use of 'massacre' to describe any mass killing of whites by indigenous people. While whites may still be said to massacre indigenes, in cases where indigenes kill whites, authors are now only permitted to say that they made 'successful raids' or scored 'battle victories'.[56]

THE UNOFFICIAL SIDE OF THE FRONTIER

The publication in 1966 of Brian Plomley's edition of Robinson's personal diaries was a greatly anticipated event in Tasmanian historiography. Extracts from Robinson's government reports and letters had long been published by earlier historians but the diaries held a more exciting potential. They promised to provide a new perspective that none of the official records could offer. During the five years he crossed and re-crossed the colony, Robinson took the opportunity to interrogate the Aborigines in his own party, and those he met along the way, about their beliefs, customs and culture and about their ex-

[56] In the United States, books produced by university presses are no longer allowed to apply the term 'massacre' to such actions by indigenous peoples. According to *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing* (Indiana University Press, 1996) by Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-Free Language of the Association of American University Presses, 'massacre' is a 'highly offensive' term when it is used 'to refer to a successful American Indian raid or battle victory against white colonizers and invaders' (pp 53–4). The Guidelines derive from a 1992 declaration adopted by the Board of Directors of the Association of American University Presses: 'Books that are on the cutting edge of scholarship should also be at the forefront in recognizing how language encodes prejudice. They should also be agents for change and the redress of past mistakes.' Australian university presses are sure to dutifully toe the line of such cutting-edge advice. This is yet another example of authoritarian academic speech codes that seek to redefine political opinions they oppose as expressions hurtful to some interest group and which therefore must be censored.

periences of contact with the white colonists. On his journeys, he also came across remote outstations where he met stock-keepers and shepherds of the convict lower orders, with whom he often conversed. Robinson wrote up his diary almost every day so he provided as close to a verbatim record of the opinions of both Aborigines and convict stockmen as it was possible to get. Since both groups were largely illiterate, there were very few other documents from the period that preserved their words intact. In short, Robinson's diaries promised to give us a vision of that side of the frontier that would otherwise have remained hidden from history.

This was all predicated, of course, on the belief that his informants told Robinson the truth and that he, in turn, reported them faithfully. As Chapter Seven has argued, however, far from being a disinterested observer, Robinson was one of the major players in the attempt to devise and implement colonial policy towards the Aborigines. He was also one of the major beneficiaries of the policy that eventually did emerge. At times, his diary entries served as preparatory notes and draft versions of reports and letters he later wrote to serve his own purposes. In particular, as Chapter Seven demonstrated, part of Robinson's strategy was to exaggerate stories about atrocities against the Aborigines, while at the same time hiding their violence towards the colonists. So historians who use the diaries as evidence need to take a critical attitude towards them, reading them for internal consistency and plausibility and double-checking their factual claims wherever possible.

This is not, however, how Lloyd Robson and Lyndall Ryan treat the diary entries. In their major works on Tasmanian history, both authors use them uncritically as direct primary sources. They paraphrase Robinson, they sometimes repeat his words verbatim, and they frequently present condensed versions of his claims without any other commentary. They almost always treat what Robinson said as accurate and credible. They do not apply any tests of veracity, such as whether his claims might be supported or disputed by other documentary evidence. Whatever he said, they report as the truth. Here is one example from Ryan:

> Between June 1827 and September 1830 the North people fell in number from two hundred to sixty. One stockkeeper shot nineteen people with a swivel gun charged with nails; another shot a group of Aborigines while offering them food; another ripped open the stomach of an Aboriginal while offering him a piece of bread at the end of a knife; others offered them poisoned flour. A party of soldiers from the 40th Regiment killed ten at the Western Marshes.[57]

[57] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 139

Except for the detail about the numbers of 'North people', all this information comes from atrocities recorded in Robinson's diaries between 8 August and 25 September 1830.[58] Lloyd Robson repeats the stories about the swivel gun, the poisoned flour, the ripped-open stomach and the killings by the 40th Regiment.[59] Let us examine the claims in this passage.

For a start, there was no such entity in Aboriginal society as 'the North people'. This was a category invented in the nineteenth century by white observers in an attempt to make sense of the tribal divisions among the natives.[60] There was never any good evidence from Aborigines themselves that they were members of such a tribe, which Ryan claims includes the people of the Tamar and Meander River districts and the Western Marshes. Apart from casual sightings by settlers from a distance, there was no census or any other kind of head count ever taken of Aborigines from this region. There was no evidence, either from Robinson or anyone else, that their numbers were ever two hundred or that they declined to sixty. Ryan has made up these figures. Moreover, in none of his diary entries did Robinson provide a date for any of the atrocities Ryan cites in this passage, so not even he says when they supposedly occurred. Ryan's time-scale of June 1827–September 1830 is, again, her own invention.

THE SWIVEL GUN MASSACRE

Like the events at Cape Grim, the story about the stock-keeper killing nineteen Aborigines with a swivel gun loaded with nails is today part of the international literature on genocide.[61] It was told to Robinson by Henry Hellyer, a surveyor employed by the Van Diemen's Land Company. The sole reference in the diaries to this incident was as follows: 'Informed me of a stockkeeper called Paddy Heagon at the Retreat who had shot nineteen of the western natives with a swivel gun charged with nails.'[62] Robinson heard the story while camped near St Valentine's Peak, inland from the company's Hampshire Hills property. 'The Retreat' was the name of a ten-mile

[58] Robinson, diary, 8 August 1830, 12 August 1830, 13 September 1830, 25 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 196, 197–8, 210, p 219

[59] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol I, pp 226, 229

[60] 'Of the tribal organisation of the aborigines practically nothing is known, and the limits of tribal divisions cannot be laid down with any approach to certainty': James Backhouse Walker, 'Some Notes on the Tribal Divisions of the Aborigines of Tasmania', in James Backhouse Walker, *Early Tasmania: Papers read before the Royal Society of Tasmania during the years 1888 to 1899*, Government Printer, Hobart, 1950, pp 267–78, 269

[61] Jared Diamond, 'In Black and White', *Natural History*, 10, 1988, p 8

[62] Robinson, diary, 12 August 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 197-8

stretch of country between Westbury and the ford on the Western or Meander River. About three miles from Westbury, the company rented a large tract of land from the government to graze sheep.[63] However, unlike the other conflicts with the Aborigines at the time, this incident does not figure in any of the Van Diemen's Land Company records. It is uncertain who Paddy Heagon was. He was not recorded as an assigned convict or a free employee of the company.[64] This alone should have raised some doubts about the tale in the mind of any historian repeating it. However, the most dubious detail in the story is that of the swivel gun.

A swivel gun was a small naval cannon, which typically fired a half-pound ball (0.2 kilograms) or the same weight in small pieces of lead shot. It was called a swivel gun because it was secured on a mount that allowed it to be tilted up and down and to the right or left. It was normally mounted in either the bow or stern of a small ship or large rowing boat.[65] The obvious question about the story Robinson claimed he heard was how a stock-keeper like Heagon would have got hold of one. At the time, most stock-keepers in the colony were convicts. Their employers armed them only reluctantly and only if their location was isolated enough to put their lives at risk. While this meant remote stock-keepers were often given muskets, it would have been very unlikely for a settler to provide a convict with an expensive, much more cumbersome and less manoeuvrable swivel gun. It was primarily a naval weapon and, although it was possible to remove it from a boat and bolt it to a tree stump or other fixed position for firing, it was not a weapon that anyone would seriously consider for use in the field.[66]

[63] *Hobart Town Almanack for 1830*, James Ross, Hobart, 1830, p 53

[64] In his biographical list of settlers and convicts in 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 1021-47, Brian Plomley could not find any information about anyone named Heagon or Hagon. Nor, apart from references to the story Robinson heard, does he appear in the index of any other contemporary work.

[65] William Greener, *The Science of Gunnery, as Applied to the Use and Construction of Fire Arms*, London, 1846; W. Greener, *The Gun and Its Development*, London, 1910

[66] Robinson himself was not ignorant of what a swivel gun was. In his diary in 1834 he recorded some of the reminiscences of Thomas Reiby of Paterson's Plains about his days in the 'Feejee Islands'. During a fight between sandalwood traders and natives, Reiby recalled, two ship's captains fitted out their small boats with 'swivel guns in their bows loaded with broken iron', which they fired on the Fijians: Robinson, diary, 15 January 1834, *Friendly Mission*, p 835. Knowing it was a maritime weapon, Robinson could not have been unaware of the incongruity of a swivel gun being located on an inland sheep run.

The central north of Van Diemen's Land, including Launceston and Westbury. Detail from map by J. Arrowsmith, London, 1832 (Mitchell Library)

Moreover, it would have been very unusual for a settler or anyone else outside the military forces to actually procure a swivel gun. The only private citizen in any of the Australian colonies likely to have owned one was a whaling captain. It was an old weapon from the sixteenth century that had become outmoded by the nineteenth century until adapted to fire harpoons into whales.[67] It is, however, hard to believe that a whaling captain would have given one to a settler or stock-keeper to fire at Aborigines. In short, nothing about this story makes any sense. Without further investigation, no historian should ever have taken it at face value.

RIPPED BELLIES AND POISONED FLOUR

Ryan's two accounts of a group of Aborigines being killed when offered food derive from two separate stories told by Robinson, but Ryan has mixed up the details. According to the diaries, a native

---

[67] Greener, *The Science of Gunnery;* Greener, *The Gun and Its Development*; 'Swivel Guns and Swivel Gun Harpoons', www.whalecraft.net

group was offered bread by a man named Thomas of the Van Diemen's Land Company, but they were not shot. Robinson says one was 'ripped up'.[68] The other incident in which an Aborigine 'was ripped up his belly' did not involve any offers of food. A lone stockman was attacked in his hut by a group of Aborigines and was defending himself.[69] The first of these incidents is credible. The attacker was probably Thomas John,[70] a convict employed by the Van Diemen's Land Company, who had been wounded by Aborigines at Cape Grim in the first assault in August 1827. Robinson said the information was given to him by Samuel Reeves, one of the company's superintendents, while he was visiting its headquarters at Circular Head. The story has no inconsistencies and there is no good reason to doubt the informant. The second incident is also plausible.

The assertion that stock-keepers offered Aborigines poisoned flour is quite a different matter. Like Ryan, Lloyd Robson has no doubt this occurred. 'Another method of killing the people of Van Diemen's Land,' Robson writes, 'was to poison them.' For both authors, this claim derives solely from Robinson's report of a conversation with another superintendent of the Van Diemen's Land Company, George Robson. However, the diary entry does not say quite what they claim. Here it is in full:

> In the course of conversation Mr Robson said that he had proposed to the shepherds at Surrey Hills to give them some poison to use for the destruction of the hyaena [Tasmanian tiger]. The men said that they did not require it then but if Mr R would let them have some in the summer they would find a use for it. He asked them why they should find a use for it in the summer more than now. They said, 'Oh, Sir, we will poison the natives' dogs'. Mr R took it away with him, their object, he said, being to poison the natives by putting it in their flour &c. No doubt hundreds have been destroyed in this way.[71]

In other words, there was no poisoned flour actually offered to the natives, as Ryan and Robson claim, only a suspicion the poison might be used for that purpose. This passage is not only indicative of these authors' manipulation of their sources but also of Robinson's compulsive exaggeration of the violence done to the Aborigines. 'No doubt hundreds have been destroyed this way,' he speculated on the basis of nothing more than one man's interpretation of what was, at most, an ambiguous statement of what his convict shepherds might do, not anything they actually had done.

[68] Robinson, diary, 13 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 210
[69] Robinson, diary, 25 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 219
[70] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 239 n 165
[71] Robinson, diary, 8 August 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 196

THE MASSACRES AT THE WESTERN MARSHES

Ryan's claim about the 40th Regiment killing ten Aborigines at the Western Marshes is based on a series of stories recounted to Robinson by a man named Punch, an ex-convict stockman he met in September 1830 at the run of Captain Malcolm Laing Smith in the Western Marshes. This region lay between the Western (Meander) River and the Western Tiers. Its only town at the time was Westbury, founded in 1828, with Deloraine planned but not yet settled.[72] Punch, who lived with a half-caste Aboriginal woman by whom he had two children, accompanied Robinson for a day and a night, guiding him through the district and giving him a potted history of Aboriginal–settler conflict. Robinson regarded him as a valuable informant:

> He entertained me with relating his history. He knew of every slaughter of the natives that had occurred at the Western Marshes since it was first settled.

The diary records two passages of atrocities in the Western Marshes, as recalled by Punch. In the first passage, Punch claimed a man named Lyons and some others once drove 'a tribe of natives' into a small lagoon at Middle Plains on the Western Marshes and shot several. They then drove the rest to the foot of Ritchie's Sugarloaf and shot the remainder except for an old man and a woman who begged for mercy. At the Long Swamp, someone named either 'Murray or Murphy and two others' also shot 'several' Aborigines.[73]

However, neither of these incidents figures in the archival record, and Punch appears to be the sole repository of knowledge about them. Ryan, Robson and Reynolds all repeat these tales as if there was no doubt about their reliability.[74] Indeed, after recounting the Long Swamp killings, Robson indignantly informs his readers: 'There is no evidence that any such monsters were punished.'[75] However, both stories were questionable. In his edition of Robinson's diaries, which all three historians use as their source, Brian Plomley says he could not find anyone named Lyons at the Western Marshes at the time, nor could he identify either a Murray or a Murphy in the district either.[76] The strongest reason to doubt the first of these two tales was the number of Aborigines involved. For reasons given in the previous section about the limitations of the muskets of the day, the idea

[72] Robinson, diary, 9 April 1832, *Friendly Mission*, 6 April 1832, pp 596, 687 n 23, 24

[73] Robinson, diary, 24 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 218

[74] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 141; Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol I, p 227, Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 79

[75] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol I, p 227

[76] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 1035, 1038

that a handful of whites could force a whole 'tribe' or band, that is, anything from ten to fifty people, into a lagoon and shoot them at will cannot be taken seriously. It is even harder to believe the remainder would remain passive enough to be driven to another location where they could be killed too. The Long Swamp story is less unbelievable but only because of its almost complete lack of detail.

The second passage of atrocities told by Punch was much longer. Both Ryan and Robson repeat its details in their narratives. Robinson's diary recorded:

> Numerous massacres have been committed here among the unprotected natives. Gibson's stockkeeper, like all other stockkeepers, has massacred the natives. On one occasion he ripped up a man's belly with his knife. He says the blacks came to his hut. He was alone and, not knowing they was there, he went out and the blacks got between him and his hut (query: how could the natives approach the hut without the shepherd's dog barking?) [This was Robinson's query.] He could not get back for his gun. A native threw a spear at him, missed and came towards him. He took out a long knife he had in a case by his side and ripped up his belly and ran away. Another native threw a spear at him and missed. He then run to Stocker's and at night, seeing their fires, they went out and shot nine of the natives. Punch said that when the half-caste women lived with Cubbitt she assisted in killing natives; and that on one occasion a party of the 40th killed nine or ten — one of the soldiers told Punch never to kill the poor natives for ever since he has done he has been unhappy. Also said that Knight, the stockkeeper who was afterwards killed by the natives near Simpsons Plains, deserved it; it was a judgement upon him, as he used to kill the natives for sport.[77]

This is quite a series of charges. It recalls the killing of at least twenty Aborigines and says that, as well as Gibson's stock-keeper, all the stockmen on the Western Marshes had massacred the natives, in some cases simply for sport. It says the 40th Regiment was involved in a major incident and names the stock-keeper Knight of Simpsons Plains, who was killed in retribution. There is enough detail here to follow up in the more formal historical records, which is something that neither Ryan nor Robson bothered to do. In particular, the story about the action by the 40th Regiment should have left some documentary trace.

If you pursue these claims in the archives you find that, apart from one incident, the killing of William Knight by Aborigines in 1827, there is no record of any of them. Moreover, the most dramatic of all the above stories above reveals how unreliable a witness Punch was. His tale about how Gibson's stock-keeper went out with someone

[77] Robinson, diary, 25 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 219

from Stocker's hut, found an Aboriginal campsite at night, and shot nine of its occupants, is inherently implausible. Anyone who has read primary source accounts of what happened during real attempts to rush camps at night will find the story unbelievable. Even Henry Reynolds warns his readers about the difficulties involved:

> It was a method attempted many times, but the chances of failure were high. The frontiersman needed to approach a camp without being heard either by the Aborigines or their dogs and get close enough to fire. During night attacks the gunpowder often became damp from the dew and wouldn't ignite. The best chance of success was with a small party but this had limited firepower. Four men would only manage four shots at best, at obscure targets. The chance of reloading in the dark and shooting again were minimal.[78]

The one record we do have of a white raid on a black camp in the Western Marshes confirms Reynolds's account in almost every detail. The day after William Knight was killed in June 1827, Corporal John Shiners of the 40th Regiment led a local police constable and three stockmen from Gibson's property to recover the body and pursue the offenders. An hour before sunset they saw the smoke of the native camp near Laycock's Falls and hid nearby in a hollow tree until between seven and eight o'clock that evening. They crept to within thirty or forty yards of the camp and then rushed towards the fires. They could only get off three shots — one of the guns misfired — before the Aborigines 'immediately disappeared amongst some scrub and ferns'. Next morning, they found no bodies but deduced that one native had been wounded because there was a trail of blood in the footprints of one man.[79] Punch's claim that, under the same conditions, two or three convict stock-keepers could shoot dead nine Aborigines would persuade only the credulous.

Another reason to doubt these atrocities lies in the documentary record that we do have about conflict between Aborigines and settlers in the Western Marshes. In the five years from 1827 to 1831, Punch's employer, Malcolm Laing Smith, who was the police magistrate for the region, made a total of seventeen reports about Aborigines in his jurisdiction. In 1827, he reported that four stockmen, including Knight, had been killed in separate incidents, but after that there were no white deaths. Between 1828 and 1831 he reported another thirteen incidents, mainly of robbery. In three of these cases stockmen were assaulted or severely injured by Aborigines. Included in the

[78] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 80

[79] Depositions by Corporal John Shiners and Constable Thomas Williams, 30 June 1827, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 31–3, 34–6

robberies were incidents at Gibson's and his own run in the Western Marshes.[80]

However, his reports verified very few shootings of Aborigines by whites. In one of the assaults on stockmen at Whitefoord Hills, north of Deloraine, the badly injured man, George King, said he fired on his attackers and thought he shot two. He stabbed another with a stiletto. But when a rescue party arrived at the scene soon after, they found blood on the ground 'but we could see nothing of them dead or alive'.[81] In late June 1827, Thomas Baker, the overseer of Thomas Ritchie's run at the Western Marshes found himself surrounded by what he thought amounted to 'two hundred black native people'. He escaped after killing one of those who pursued him.[82]

If Punch is to be believed, this must mean that, instead of dutifully recording all clashes between whites and blacks, Laing Smith and others in authority must have concealed the great majority of them. This would have been a difficult task because, according to Punch, every stock-keeper in the district had massacres to his credit. The Western Marshes must have been saturated in Aboriginal blood. Of all these murders, however, not a word leaked out and ex-convict Punch remained sole keeper of the dark truth. This is not a credible scenario. It was far more likely that the paucity of documentary records about conflict in the Western Marshes was itself evidence there was very little to report.

Indeed, the documentation we have of injuries to colonists would appear to confirm this. While 1827 was obviously a bad year, with four stockmen killed, the fact that only three were wounded over the succeeding four years indicates that, at a time when other districts experienced a marked increase in hostilities, the Western Marshes was one of the least violent regions of the colony. If a larger number of

[80] Malcolm Laing Smith, Reports of the murders and depredations committed by the Aborigines in the Police District of Norfolk Plains etc, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 803–7

[81] Phillips to Laing Smith, 21 April 1830, indecipherable to Laing Smith, 26 April 1830, bound with Laing Smith to Burnett, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 489–500

[82] Deposition from Henry Smith, Mulgrave to Colonial Secretary, 26 June 1827, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 24. Brian Plomley's 1992 survey of clashes between Aborigines and settlers listed another Aboriginal assault on Ritchie's property in November 1828 about which Plomley made the notation 'more killed' (*Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 73). This was in the column where he normally recorded the killing of Aborigines, so it seems to be saying that yet more blacks were killed in this incident. However, if you check the original police record it actually says 'mare killed', or in full: 'a valuable mare killed at the above mentioned stock hut': Laing Smith, Reports of the murders etc, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 805

white stockmen had been killed or wounded by Aborigines, then a higher reciprocal Aboriginal death toll would be more plausible. But in the absence of the former, historians should have been much more sceptical of uncorroborated tales about 'numerous massacres' of the 'unprotected natives'.

THE KILLINGS BY THE 40TH REGIMENT

Punch's account of the 40th Regiment killing nine or ten men in the district, especially his comment about one of the soldiers regretting it afterwards, had, on the face of it, a ring of truth. However, the way that troops were deployed in the Western Marshes at the time should have raised questions in the diarist's mind.

Robinson himself observed and recorded how troops were stationed in outlying districts like this. There was a small garrison built at Westbury in 1828 but, beyond this, the ranks were broken up into ones and twos and distributed among the settlers, with the soldiers boarding at and guarding the more substantial local properties. When Robinson arrived in the district on 24 September 1830, Punch took him to Captain William Moriarty's farm. Captain Moriarty had gone to Launceston, leaving his young wife and child at home with the two soldiers who were stationed there.[83] In 1827, only one soldier, Corporal Shiners, had been available in his district to pursue William Knight's killers. Instead of another soldier, he took with him Police Constable Thomas Williams and three local stockmen. This was all that 'a party of the 40th Regiment' amounted to in this district at the time. The impression given by Punch's story, that there was a sizeable troop of soldiers in the district who might have had the numbers to shoot ten Aborigines, is quite misleading.

As Chapter Five recorded, ten Aborigines *were* killed in 1828 near Tooms Lake by soldiers of the 40th Regiment in pursuit of the killers of four stockmen in the Oatlands district in the east of the colony. But this party had quite a different composition to any that could be

[83] Robinson, diary, 24 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 218. Henry Reynolds denies that troops were stationed in ones and twos, arguing that 'various detachments could not be broken up into small enough units to be used throughout their areas of operation because that would allow private soldiers to escape the scrutiny of their officers': *Fate of a Free People*, pp 101-4. The fact is, however, this is what actually happened throughout most of the north of the colony, in the territory on both sides of the Tamar. To the east of Launceston, soldiers were stationed at all the out-station huts: Robinson, diary, 14 April 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 341. At Norfolk Plains in 1831, two soldiers assigned to the farm of David Lambe and Major Thomas Bell were attacked by a party of Aborigines: *Hobart Town Courier*, 26 March 1831, p 2

raised in the Western Marshes. It comprised nine soldiers, two field police constables and one volunteer, a formidable enough force to make credible a death toll of this size.[84] In fact, Punch's story more than likely had no local origin at all but derived from this same incident at Tooms Lake, a military exploit that no doubt did the rounds of frontier yarns in most districts of the colony for years afterwards.

In short, the shocking history Robinson heard of massacres in the Western Marshes turns out to be questionable in almost every detail. We might be able to understand Punch's motives, being a man living at an isolated outpost trying to both entertain and impress a visitor who was obviously eager for stories of this kind. However, when academic historians like Ryan and Robson glibly repeat the same material as if it were undeniable truth, their abandonment of any critical standard is inexcusable.

DEATH OF QUAMBY THE RESISTANCE LEADER

Before finishing with the level of detail needed to properly dissect claims of this kind, let us consider another example of how academic historians have used Robinson's diaries. This is his story of the death of the Aboriginal leader, Quamby. Like the story of the swivel gun, this was a tale Robinson said he heard from the Van Diemen's Land Company surveyor, Henry Hellyer. Robinson wrote: 'A native named Quamby had disputed the land occupied by the whites and that he had successfully driven them off, but he was afterwards killed with the others.'[85] Ryan and Robson both repeat the tale. According to Ryan: 'In July [1830] the Pallitore disputed territory occupied by stockkeepers and successfully drove them off. A short time later their leader, Quamby, was shot.'[86] Robson says much the same: 'An Aborigine named Quamby disputed the land occupied by the Europeans and repelled them though afterwards he was killed. This area became lethal to the Aborigines.' [87]

On the edge of the Western Tiers, to the south of Deloraine, there is a striking basalt peak known as Quamby Bluff. Legend today has it that it was named after the heroic Aboriginal resistance fighter, Quamby. Unfortunately for the legend, there was no such person. Robinson got the story wrong. This does not, however, excuse the academic historians who have followed him, because they must have known there were serious doubts about the version they chose to tell. The first record of the use of the term 'quamby' appeared in the

[84] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 December 1828, p 2
[85] Robinson, diary, 12 August 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 198
[86] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 141
[87] Robson, *History of Tasmania*, Vol I, p 226

Hobart Town Courier on 14 March 1829. According to the newspaper, the name derived from an early incident near the bluff:

> The hill is said to have obtained its name from the circumstance of a black native who was found near it by a party of men in quest of kangaroos in the early periods of the colony, when other food could not be obtained. The native being called upon to stop, and one of the party presenting his firelock at him, is said to have fallen on his knees, calling out Quamby! quamby! That is in the native language, mercy, mercy or spare me, spare me.[88]

In other words, 'quamby' was not the name of a man but an expression of the language. This version of the story, which predates Robinson's diary entry by more than a year, was then taken up and published in the *Hobart Town Almanack* for 1830.[89] From there, it made its way into James Bonwick's 1870 history, *The Last of the Tasmanians*. Bonwick wrote:

> Quamby's Bluff, an eastern spur of the great central highlands of the island, curling up with its crest as if torn by violence from the Tier, was so called from a poor hunted creature there falling upon his knees, and shrieking out: "Quamby, Quamby — mercy, mercy."[90]

The fact that Robinson's version was highly questionable was something both Ryan and Robson were well aware of when they wrote their own accounts. In a footnote to Robinson's diary, at the point where he tells this tale, his editor Brian Plomley points out that Bonwick had a very different account in his book.[91] He then repeated verbatim the passage from Bonwick quoted above. On seeing this, both historians should have dropped the story altogether. But because it suited their political line to portray a native resistance fighter valiantly struggling against incursions onto his land, they went ahead and simply pretended the Bonwick version did not exist.

It is worth adding that none of these sources, not even Robinson, supports Ryan's claim that a man named Quamby was leader of the Pallitore group or that any of the events happened in July 1830. These are her own original contributions to the myth.

[88] *Hobart Town Courier*, 14 March 1829, p 1
[89] *Hobart Town Almanack for the Year 1830*, James Ross, Hobart, 1830, p 53
[90] James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son and Marston, London, 1870, p 62
[91] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 236 n 145

THE BLACK PERSPECTIVE ON FRONTIER VIOLENCE

> There is scarcely one among them but what has some monstrous cruelty to relate which had been committed upon some of their kindred or nation or people.
>
> — George Augustus Robinson, diary, 14 December 1831[92]

If the stock-keepers who spoke to Robinson were so unreliable, what about the stories he heard from the Aborigines? When his diaries were published, Tasmanian historians believed that Robinson's extensive notes about what the Aborigines had told him would open up a new, previously unheard Aboriginal perspective on the frontier. While they have subsequently mined the diaries for anecdotes, so far none have tried to summarize the total picture they portray. This chapter attempts to provide such an overview.

At the end of this chapter is Table Eight, which lists every story of white violence against Aborigines contained in Robinson's diaries from 1829 to 1839, including those told by both white and black informants. Where information was provided by Aborigines it is identified as such, so it is possible to see just what Robinson learnt from them. In each case, the location in the diaries is identified and the report is assessed in terms of degrees of plausibility. In the table, every case where an Aboriginal eyewitness claimed to have seen one of his compatriots killed is accepted as plausible, unless there is other good evidence to doubt it.

Despite the expectations of historians, the diaries actually record only a small number of incidents of violent conflict reported by the natives themselves. Table Eight lists twenty such accounts, both plausible and implausible, out of more than two thousand printed pages of the two published editions of the diaries, *Friendly Mission* (1829–34) and *Weep In Silence* (1834–9). If you take those reports by Aborigines which Table Eight assesses as plausible and count how many killings are to be found within them, the death toll amounts to thirty-three.[93] Plainly, this is not a portrait of a hidden frontier dripping with blood. This is also underlined by the fact that more than half the incidents recalled by the Aborigines were also reported on the white side of the frontier either in official documents, journals or the local press. The black perspective about the scale of violence, in other words, was not radically different from the white.

[92] Robinson, diary, 14 December 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 553

[93] For the reasons given earlier in this chapter, this tally records six killed at Cape Grim in 1828 rather than the thirty Robinson claimed the sealers' women told him near Robbins Island.

THE HAND IN THE TRAP

One of the difficulties in producing an accurate tally from the diaries is that Aboriginal witnesses, just like their white counterparts, did not always tell the truth. For instance, Robinson's Aboriginal informants claimed that in October 1830 on the Launceston Road three of their number were killed by soldiers, of whom they killed two in return.[94] For reasons discussed in Chapter Six, this was plainly a story the Aborigines invented.

Another example was a diary entry made on Flinders Island in December 1835. Robinson recorded a conversation with the former Oyster Bay chief, Tongerlongerter, about how his forearm came to be amputated. Henry Reynolds accepts at face value what the diary recorded. He reproduces this entry verbatim as an example of another merciless attack by white colonists:

> He said he was with his tribe in the neighbourhood of the Den Hill and that there was men cutting wood. The men were frightened and run away. At night they come back with plenty of white men (it was moonlight), and they looked and saw our fires. Then they shot at us, shot my arm, killed two men and three women. The women they beat on the head and killed them. They then burnt them in the fire.[95]

However, Tongerlongerter had earlier given other people a quite different version of events. According to the Quaker cleric George Washington Walker, who visited Flinders Island in July 1832, the Aborigines told him the arm was lost when caught in a rat trap set by a white colonist.[96]

This version had more than verbal support. When the event took place in April 1830, the macabre nature of the story ensured it was publicized in two Hobart newspapers. A stock-keeper at Little Swan Port on Oyster Bay had placed not a rat trap but a much larger animal trap in his food store when he left home. When he returned he found the door open and his stock disturbed. A trail of blood led him to a spot where 'the instrument was found with the hand still fixed in its iron grasp'. To escape, the trapped thief had wrenched his arm out,

[94] Robinson, diary, 1 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 263

[95] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 81. Original is in Robinson, diary, 19 December 1835, in N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Settlement*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1987, p 325

[96] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 325, 627 n 4. Reynolds tells this story as if there were no doubts about it, even though the editor's annotation called it into question. While Plomley doubts that a rat trap could have done so much damage, the two contemporary newspaper reports (next footnote) called the device a 'large vermin trap' and a 'man trap'. It was probably the size of a trap used today for foxes and feral dogs.

leaving his hand behind.[97] At the time, there was no positive identification that Tongerlongerter was the one, but he was the only Oyster Bay Aborigine ever recorded afterwards with an amputated arm. When the group of twenty-six Big River and Oyster Bay Aborigines were brought into Hobart by Robinson in January 1832, Tongerlongerter was among them. The *Hobart Town Courier* specifically identified him: 'One of the men has lost his arm, being the same who about 2 years ago was caught in the rat trap that happened to be set in the flour cask in Mr Adey's stock-keepers hut.'[98]

James Bonwick later claimed a 'Government official' had told him about 'a certain chief' on Flinders Island who had lost his hand this way.[99] Robinson is the only one who claims the arm was lost by gunshot,[100] whereas all the other independent sources each tell the same story about it being lost in the trap. Even Brian Plomley who, in his 1966 edition of Robinson's diaries accepts Tongerlongerter's story as told to Robinson, admits in his 1971 supplement to the diaries that, after the man had died, 'the postmortem findings seem more in accord with the lacerations caused by tearing a hand from a mantrap, than from a gunshot wound. Robinson was not often deceived by the natives, but perhaps he was in this instance.'[101]

In cases like this where there are genuine doubts about an Aboriginal informant's veracity, Table Eight ranks the source as implausible.

THE DEATH TOLL FROM ROBINSON'S DIARIES

When it comes to assessing the total number of deaths that Robinson recorded from both black and white informants, the historians of the orthodox school do not produce a head count but fall back on rhetoric and unsupported generalisations. The worst offender is, again, Lyndall Ryan who is actually a far greater amplifier of violence than Robinson ever dared to be. At one point she writes:

> Even if only half the stories Robinson heard were true, then it is possible to account for seven hundred shot. This is about three-quarters of the Aboriginal population in the settled districts.[102]

[97] *Hobart Town Courier*, 1 May 1830, p 2, *Colonial Times*, 30 April 1830, p 2.
[98] *Hobart Town Courier*, 14 January 1832, p 2; For Tongerlongerter as one of the captives, see Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 572
[99] Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, p 111
[100] He also reported the story earlier in his diary, 3 July 1832, *Friendly Mission*, pp 625-6
[101] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission, A Supplement*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1971, p 15
[102] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 175

This claim is completely baseless. It gives the appearance of deriving from an assessment of how many killings Robinson recorded in his diaries. But Ryan has plainly not undertaken the task she pretends to have done. The diaries' stories about Aboriginal deaths amount to nothing like the seven hundred she asserts, let alone the fourteen hundred she implies.

The figures are not difficult to calculate. The diaries' editor, Brian Plomley, has provided a comprehensive index, which any researcher can use to check how many stories about killings they contain. In *Friendly Mission*, the index entry, *Aborigines, Tasmanian: white abuse of natives: killing and mutilation of natives*, has references to incidents described on sixty separate pages.[103] In my own review of the diaries, I found another seven references to killings that the indexer missed. This does not mean, though, that there are sixty-seven separate incidents discussed in the diaries. There are some incidents that are recorded at more than one place, including one that is discussed on eight different pages and gets a separate index reference each time.[104] In *Weep in Silence*, there is no index to such incidents but only one passage about killings of Aborigines by whites.[105] Overall, the diaries contain a total of fifty-three separate stories told by either black or white informants about Aborigines being killed by colonists.

To calculate the total number of Aborigines killed in these fifty-three separate incidents requires some estimation. In most cases, Robinson recorded the exact number he said he was told. In others, though, he only recorded that 'several' were killed, and in some cases he recorded a killing but did not indicate a quantity. If, wherever he recorded 'several' or 'plenty' or left the number unspecified, we allocate an average death toll of five, we can obtain a reasonably reliable sum. Instead of the fourteen hundred implied by Ryan, even if *all* Robinson's stories were true, the highest total of Aborigines killed by whites would be 188. However, within this total we need to distinguish between those reports that were credible and those that were not.

Some of these killings were well-known at the time. They were not only told verbally in the colony but were also reported in the press and contemporary government documents. Others, however, as

[103] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 1060

[104] This was Robinson's complaint about the killing of four Aborigines by Alexander McKay, a former member of his Friendly Mission party. McKay became a rival of Robinson in the business of 'conciliating' Aborigines. The killings in which McKay was involved (actually, of three natives rather than four) became an obsession for Robinson: see *Friendly Mission*, pp 565, 583, 588, 603, 607, 685–6, 691, 695

[105] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 325, 627 n 4

even Robinson himself acknowledged, were much less reliable. Some of the stories told by the Aborigines were so lacking in detail that they do not constitute information that anyone could trust. For example, the diary of 13 September 1830 records: 'At night conversed with the natives on the subject of cruelty towards the aborigines. Informed me a female aborigine was kept by a stockkeeper for about a month, after which she was taken out and shot.'[106] There is no other information given about this incident: no date, no location, no tribe, no names of victim or culprit or informant, not even the claim that the informant knew the woman concerned. It is not possible to treat a report with as little detail as this as a credible record of a killing. Moreover, some stories of this kind resemble others told elsewhere in the diary that are more specific and so to record the former would probably be double-counting. In Table Eight, stories like this are listed as implausible.

Another major source was stories told to Robinson by the settlers and stock-keepers he met on his travels. Some of these also had so little detail they were in the same category as the above; others were plainly examples of bravado or tales told for their shock effect. For example, on 29 March 1832, the diary recorded: 'A gentleman the other day who was in company with Captain Moriarty said that he has heard it was a practice with the stockkeepers to get the men into the huts and cut off their penis and testicles with a knife, when they would run a few yards and fall down dead.'[107] This tale is nothing but an unspecific, third-hand rumour, again with no names, no dates, no locations or any other detail to seriously count as historical evidence. Moreover, it is a highly implausible story because, as Chapter Ten shows, Aborigines so easily evaded capture that it would have been virtually impossible for stock-keepers to get them into their huts to do this to them. This report tells us of the low opinion some of the gentlemen colonists had of convict stockmen but provides nothing reliable about what actually happened to the blacks. Similarly, on 14 April 1831, Robinson recorded: 'Williams the pilot told Captain Jackson that the sealers have been known to burn their women alive.'[108] Again, there are no names, dates or locations to what was merely third-hand hearsay.

In Table Eight, each of Robinson's fifty-three incidents is ranked in terms of plausibility. As noted above, in most cases where an Aborigine reported a killing to which he claimed to have been an eyewitness, it is accepted as plausible, as long as there was no good evidence

[106] Robinson, diary, 13 September 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 210
[107] Robinson, diary, 29 March 1832, *Friendly Mission*, p 595
[108] Robinson, diary, 14 April 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 342

against it and even if there was nothing else to corroborate it. In other words, if the table is biased it is towards a higher rather than a lower tally. A number of the incidents indexed by Plomley were cases where Aborigines were wounded or maimed, not killed, so they have not been counted as plausible accounts of deaths. For instance, in July 1831 the Aboriginal eyewitness, Woorrady, recounted a story about blacks being shot at many years earlier. Although he said one man was wounded in the arm, he did not actually say anyone was killed, so this anecdote is labelled 'implausible', even though there is no reason to doubt the man was actually wounded.[109] In other cases where some deaths did occur, but where I have argued elsewhere that Robinson's figures were inflated, the lower figure is accepted as plausible — such as at Cape Grim where he claimed thirty but I argue for six. Taking these adjustments into account, Table Eight records the total number of plausible killings of Aborigines reported in Robinson's diaries by both colonists and Aborigines themselves as fifty.

This is, of course, a much lower figure than we have been led to believe. Even if it could be shown that I have missed some incidents or that others deserve more credibility than I have given them, the total picture would not change very much. No one is going to discover the hundreds of additional killings required to match the orthodox legend of a blood-soaked frontier. The fact is, no matter who performs the tally, the diaries will be found to provide a record of only a small number of violent deaths. In other words, far from substantiating Robinson's conclusion that tales of 'monstrous cruelty' could be told by every Tasmanian Aborigine, his own writings do nothing of the kind. Instead, they support the opinion presented at the start of this chapter by his contemporary, James Calder, who said that Robinson had 'grieviously exaggerated' the issue and 'he gives not the smallest proof of it'.

[109] Robinson, diary, 7 July 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 373

TABLE EIGHT: ABORIGINAL KILLINGS BY COLONISTS RECORDED BY G. A. ROBINSON, 1829-1839

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Source*	*Reliability*	*Reference*
N/a*	Recherche Bay	1	Soldier	Conflict over kangaroo hunt	Eye witness	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 84, 713, 807
N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	Man had trophies of ears and noses of those slain	Second hand	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 88
N/a	Cape Grim	1	VDL Company stockmen	Tried to get native women into their hut. Native men objected.	Second hand	Plausible (Aborig.)** 'Several' claimed by Chamberlain p 175 implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 181
February 1828	Cape Grim	30 (6)	VDL Company stockmen	See Chapter 8	Participants	Thirty implausible but six plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* pp 175, 183, 196
August 1829	Emu Bay	1	Alexander Goldie and VDL Co stockmen	Unprovoked attack on a native woman	Second hand	Highly Plausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 192, 235, 603
c 1827	Eddystone Point	Several	Edward Mansell, Jack Williams, John Riddle, Thomas Tucker	Retaliation by sealers for natives killing four others	Eye-witness and second hand	Plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* pp 192-3, 249, 403, 437 n 16
N/a	"The Retreat", Westbury	19	Paddy Heagon, stockman	Shot them with a swivel gun	Second hand	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 197-8

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Source*	*Reliability*	*Reference*
N/a	Western Marshes (Quamby Bluff)	1	N/a	Native leader resisted whites but later killed	Second hand	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 198
N/a	Epping Forest	1	VDL Co stockmen	During native attack, stockmen shot a woman	Second hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 202
c 1820	Mount Cameron West	2	Sealers	Raided tribe to abduct women and shot men who resisted	Second hand and eye-witness	Plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* pp 185, 202, 203–4
N/a	N/a	1	Stock-keeper	Kept her for a month and then shot her	Second hand	Highly Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 210
N/a	N/a	1	Thomas John of VDL Co	Enticed native with damper and then stabbed him	Second hand	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* p 210
N/a	N/a	1	N/a	Skull found near stockyard	Supposition	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 217
N/a	Western Marshes	3	Stock-keeper	N/a	Second hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 217
N/a	Middle Plains and Ritchie's Sugarloaf	'a tribe'	Lyons and others	Drove tribe into lagoon and shot several, went to R's Sugarloaf and shot the rest	Second hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 218
N/a	Long Swamp, Western Marshes	Several	Murray or Murphy and others	N/a	Second hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 218

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Source*	*Reliability*	*Reference*
N/a	Western Marshes	10	Gibson's stock-keeper	Retaliation for attack on him	Second hand	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 219
N/a	Western Marshes	9 or 10	Party of 40th Regiment	N/a	Second hand	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 219
N/a	Kents Group Is	1	Bob Gambell, sealer	N/a	Third hand	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* p 246
c. 1830	Piper River	1	'white men'	N/a	Third hand	Implausible, (see *FM* p 436 n 9)	*Friendly Mission* pp 246, 436
N/a	Piper River	Several	N/a	Bones on banks of river	Supposition	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 248
N/a	Woody Island	1	James Everitt, sealer	Native woman would not get mutton-birds for him	Second hand	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 249, 279
October 1830	Launceston Road	3	Soldiers	Killed while returning from intertribal war at central lakes area	Participants	Implausible – see Ch. 6 (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 263
October 1830	Break o'Day Plains	2	Special constables	Killed while resisting arrest for murder	Second hand	Highly Plausible – see Ch. 6	*Friendly Mission* pp 276, 284, 285
N/a	Bruny Island	1	Soldiers	N/a	Second hand	Plausible (Aborig.) although location was Bothwell: Plomley, *Clash* p 76	*Friendly Mission* pp 285, 439, 506
N/a	Woody Island	1	James Everitt, sealer	N/a	Third hand	Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 301

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Source*	*Reliability*	*Reference*
N/a	North east coast	N/a	N/a	Truganini found plenty of bones in the bush	Supposition	Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 301
N/a	Bruny Island	1	'a white man', Meredith's people	N/a	Second hand	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 311, 314
N/a	Oyster Bay	1	Mr Wade's man	Saw him in bush and shot him	Participant	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* p 320
N/a	George Town	Unspecified number	Muster of white men	Came on them at night after they visited Mr Kneale's farm	Second hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 342
N/a	N/a	N/a	Sealers	Burnt women alive	Third hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 342
N/a	N/a	1	Two stockkeepers	Tied up woman by heels and left her to perish	Eyewitness and second hand	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 344, 346
N/a	N/a	1	Stockkeeper	Gave loaded gun to black who shot himself in mouth with it	Third hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 346
N/a	Huon River	Unspecified	'white people'	'shot the natives'	Eyewitness	Plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 373
Early years of colony	Near Hobart	2	'white men who landed in a boat'	'shot two blacks dead'	Eyewitness	Plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 375, 465 n 202
N/a	N/a	1	Doctor's servant	Brought back arm of man he had shot	Third hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 428

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Source*	*Reliability*	*Reference*
N/a	East of Campbell Town	2	'some white men'	Attack by armed whites on the native road	Eye-witness	Plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 484
N/a	Eastern Marshes	'plenty'	'the white men'	N/a	Second hand	Highly Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 493
N/a	N/a	N/a	'white people'	Attacking natives at night at their camps	Third hand	Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 501
N/a	Near Bothwell	17	Stock-keepers	Killed seven then followed rest to lagoon and killed ten more	Second hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 503
N/a	Shannon River	3	Mr Howell's men	N/a	Eye-witness	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* p 506
c. 1830	South of Bashan Plains	2	Party of white people	After blacks murdered three settlers, pursuit party shot into native camp	Eye-witness	Highly Plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 522
N/a	N/a	7	Various white men	Various tales of atrocities told at camp	Eye-witness and second hand	Plausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 553
Late 1831	St Mary's Plains, near Hampshire Hills	4 (3)	Alexander McKay and two VDL Co men	Shot natives during attempt to capture group	Second hand, third hand	Plausible 3 killed, Plomley *FM* p 686 n 18	*Friendly Mission* pp 565, 583, 588, 603, 607, 685–6, 691, 695

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Source*	*Reliability*	*Reference*
N/a	N/a	1	Stock-keepers	Shot a woman in a cherry tree	Third hand	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 595
N/a	N/a	2 or 3	Stock-keepers	Their practice to shoot women	Third hand	Highly implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 595
N/a	N/a	N/a	Stock-keepers	Cut off penis and testicles of natives	Third hand	Highly Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 595
N/a	Pieman River	1	White men	Shot woman in the head	Second hand	Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 646
N/a	Port Davey	1	Soldier	N/a	Second hand	Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 742
N/a	Along west coast	Numerous	White men	N/a	Second hand	Highly Implausible (Aborig.)	*Friendly Mission* p 788
N/a	Nile River, near Ben Lomond	1	Man passing Glover's farm	Shot black and buried him in tree	Second hand	Implausible	*Friendly Mission* p 833
April 1830	Little Swan Port	6	Raid on native camp by white settlers	Wood cutters frightened by natives. Returned and raided camp.	Eye-witness	Implausible. Tongerlongerter invented the story (Aborig.)	*Weep in Silence* pp 325, 627 n 4
18 August 1834	Hamilton	1	Shepherd	Natives attacked shepherd and one shot	Second hand	Highly Plausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 925–6

Where number of killings is 'several' 'many' or 'a tribe', the figure of 5 has been allocated.

* N/a = not available
** Aborig. = At least one of the informants was an Aborigine

TABLE EIGHT: TOTALS

Total number of separate incidents: 53
Maximum number of killings claimed: 188
Total number of plausible killings reported by all informants: 50
Total number of plausible killings reported by Aboriginal informants: 33

Sources: N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834,* Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966; N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement, with the Flinders Island Journal of George Augustus Robinson 1835–1839,* Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1987

Postscript: There may very well be incidents in Robinson's diaries that I have missed or some I have assessed as implausible that warrant greater credibility. If the table contains mistakes or can be shown to be wrong I will adjust it. I will post it, together with the other tables from this book, on my website www.sydneyline.com. If any reader finds incidents I have overlooked, I will add them to the website table. If anyone provides me with evidence that the interpretations I have made here are mistaken, I will change the outcome. I can be contacted through the email address on the website.

CHAPTER NINE

Settler opinion and the extirpation thesis, 1830–1831

> Nothing is heard of at Launceston but extirpating the original inhabitants. Cowardly beings! I question the bravery of those persons engaged in the crusade against the natives. What can be more revolting to humanity than to see persons going forth in battle array against that people whose land we have usurped and upon whom we have heaped every kind of misery. God deliver them.
>
> — George Augustus Robinson, October 1830[1]

WHEN George Augustus Robinson arrived in Launceston in October 1830 at the end of the first journey of his 'Friendly Mission', he found the town abuzz with preparations for the Black Line. The local military was preparing to move south and the civilian population was readying its able-bodied men to join them. As well as writing the above comments to his wife, he wrote in his diary:

> Enquired [of three sealers] of what was doing in Launceston. Said nothing was heard or thought of than shooting the natives ... great preparations to go against the blacks; with few exceptions they are extirpationers.[2]

[1] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.) *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, p 435 n 6

The belief that the settlers of Van Diemen's Land wanted to exterminate the Aborigines has persisted to this day, except that it has been expanded from Launceston to the entire colony and from October 1830 to the whole of the period of the 'Black War'. Some members of the orthodox school of history have recently admitted that the government itself, under pressure from England, did not want to go down this path. In 2001, Henry Reynolds acknowledged: 'There is no available evidence at all to suggest that it was the intention of the colonial government to effect the extinction of the Tasmanians.'[3] However, Reynolds and his colleagues argue that the settlers of the colony were of a different mind. Those in favour of extermination included the colony's most influential private citizens. In 1991 Brian Plomley said this sentiment underlay the whole process of colonization:

> The invaders clearly intended to have their own way, that is, to clear the natives from the country they thought of as their own; and they were willing to kill natives, even wantonly, to achieve this end.[4]

Plomley claims that the government inquiry into Aboriginal affairs in 1830, while admonishing the convicts and the natives, 'was taken up largely in whitewashing the settlers and the government'. Yet those settlers who gave evidence, he writes, 'were extirpationists almost to a man'.[5]

According to Plomley, one of the worst offenders was Edward Curr, the chief agent of the largest landowner in the colony, the Van Diemen's Land Company. 'Curr, with the Company's commercial interests at heart, looked solely to the Company's profits; he was an extirpationer.'[6] Sharon Morgan claims the settlers had no moral qualms about killing Aborigines. Their actions were rationalized by historic notions of 'white supremacy':

> The long history of British imperialism affected race relations in Van Diemen's Land. Settlers arrived in the colony with deeply ingrained prejudices against native peoples. Englishness implied superiority; the Natives were an irrelevance.[7]

[2] Robinson, diary, *Friendly Mission*, 2 and 4 October 1830, pp 224, 243
[3] Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia's History*, Viking, Ringwood, 2001, p 85
[4] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1991, p 24
[5] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 98
[6] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 433 n 2
[7] Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p 143

Morgan's chapter on relations between settlers and natives is entitled 'A "Sadistic Frenzy": European-Aboriginal Contact'. She writes:

> 'Trouble' from the Natives was taken as a good excuse to commit atrocities against them. Mass hysteria seemed to lend justification to the murder of Aborigines. It was, to the colonists, a case of 'us or them'.[8]

EVANGELICALISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT HUMANISM

On the face of it, a demand from some settlers for the extermination of the Aborigines would not have been surprising. By 1830, some did feel that the violence had reached an 'us or them' stage. That year was by far the worst for Aboriginal assaults on settlers and their servants. Between January and mid-March, when the government inquiry was sitting, there were no fewer than fifty-three separate incidents of either violence, robbery or harassment — one every second day — in which a total of nine whites were killed and twelve wounded.[9] There was little doubt that the Clyde River farmer John Sherwin spoke for many settlers when he told the inquiry:

> I consider the lives and property of every white inhabitant in the Colony are endangered, and that it is consequently not safe to reside in the Interior.[10]

On the other hand, a demand to exterminate the Aborigines would not only have meant denying them the status of human beings protected by His Majesty's laws, but would also have gone against the predominant religious and philosophical beliefs of the time, both at home and abroad. For contrary to the caricature presented by Sharon Morgan, the prevailing ideas about race relations were anything but antagonistic to the natives. The Australian colonies were founded during the great Evangelical revival within the Church of England in the late eighteenth century.[11] Evangelicalism was politically conservative, to the extent that it wanted to preserve the existing social hierarchy, but many of its expressions were socially radical. 'It was a warm, practical, humanitarian movement,' one of its historians, Stuart

[8] Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, p 153
[9] N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Setter Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803–1831*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992, pp 84-8
[10] Minutes of the Committee for the care and treatment of the captured Aborigines, 23 February 1830, AOT CBE/1, p 6
[11] 'Evangelical' was the name of a faction within the church, so the term should get a capital letter, even though not all authors adopt this convention. Their main theological and political opponents were in the High Church or Orthodox Party, although many High Church supporters emulated the Evangelicals in philanthropic endeavour and often worked closely with them.

Piggin, has written, 'which focused on commitment to the world with Word and Spirit to energize that commitment.'[12] Its major worldly success had been the abolition of the British trade and transport of slaves in 1807, through the efforts of its leading light, William Wilberforce. In the 1820s, as Van Diemen's Land wrestled with its growing Aboriginal problem, the Evangelical movement was demanding the complete abolition of slavery in the British Empire, an objective it finally achieved in 1833.

In its attitude to the indigenous people of the world, Evangelicalism was consistent with secular English and Scottish Enlightenment thought, which supported the unity of mankind and the belief that all human beings had a common origin. In Australia, as in the United States of America, the Enlightenment's belief in human equality was held not in opposition to Christianity but, rather, was a principle disseminated through the churches themselves and through their campaigns for social reform. One of the icons of the Evangelical anti-slavery movement was a picture of a black slave with the slogan 'Am I not a man and a brother'.[13] One of the principal reasons why all the governors of the Australian colonies from 1788 onwards were instructed to treat the Aborigines as fully human beings was this concurrence of Evangelicalism and Enlightenment thought. Among the founders of both New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, there was an even greater concentration of Evangelical influence than found at home in England. These colonies were positive attractions to Evangelicals who, as Stuart Piggin has shown, saw in them an opportunity to make a commitment to the world in three main areas:

> The vision of a reclaimed criminal class, a converted Aboriginal race, and the islands of the South Seas evangelised from an Australian base was large, even grand.[14]

In Van Diemen's Land itself, Evangelicalism remained an important religious and social force throughout the 1820s and 1830s. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur himself was, according to his biographer, 'a devout and convinced evangelical' who had already, in his previous administration, given a practical demonstration of his beliefs when he

[12] Stuart Piggin, *Evangelical Christianity in Australia: Spirit, Word and World*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p viii

[13] John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp 148–53

[14] Piggin, *Evangelical Christianity in Australia*, p viii; see also Elizabeth Windschuttle, *Taste and Science: The Women of the Macleay Family 1790–1850*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney, 1988, pp 73–8

set free the Indian slaves of British Honduras.[15] Arthur had been appointed to Van Diemen's Land by Earl Bathurst, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, a Tory who was sympathetic to William Wilberforce and the Evangelicals.[16] Shortly before the Sydney Archdeacon William Grant Broughton undertook to chair the government inquiry into Aboriginal affairs in Hobart, he had announced an Evangelical-inspired policy for the paternal care for the lower orders of the colony, especially its convicts and Aborigines, and a revival of missionary activities among the natives.[17]

George Augustus Robinson had been a beneficiary of Evangelical philanthropy as a youth in England and, in his early years in Hobart, he became involved in organizations in the same movement, including the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Auxiliary Bible Society and the Seamen's Friend and Bethel Union Society.[18] One of the main reasons why Arthur gave Robinson the original job of superintending the Aborigines on Bruny Island in 1829 was his promise to take the Gospel to them, in the best Evangelical missionary tradition. As Chapter Seven noted, Robinson often expressed the prevailing Evangelical/Enlightenment attitude that all men were created equal:

> I looked upon them as brethren not, as they have been maligned, savages. No, they are my brethren by creation. God has made of one blood all nations of people and I am not ashamed to call them brothers and would to God I could call them brethren by redemption.[19]

It was not only those who took the Aborigines' side who thought this way. In a letter to Arthur in December 1827, in which he advocated arming convict stock-keepers to keep the blacks out of the settled districts, the landowner Roderic O'Connor expressed similar sentiments:

> Religion, and the light thrown upon Europeans by the exercise of true Christianity, that immortal Code which teaches us, "To do unto others as we wish should be done to us," the discussion and final abolition of the

[15] A. G. L. Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart, 1784–1854*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980, pp 22, 50-3

[16] 'Henry Bathurst, Third Earl Bathurst', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 1, A–H, 1788–1850, p 67

[17] G. P. Shaw, *Patriarch and Patriot: William Grant Broughton 1788–1853*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1978, pp 23, 41–3

[18] See Chapter Seven, pp 201-2. When Robinson conducted religious services for his Aboriginal party, he usually raised the Bethel flag: diary, 3 April 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 335

[19] Robinson, diary, 15 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 276

> Slave Trade has taught us to look on all Mankind as "Friends and Brothers".[20]

Nonetheless, as Robinson's statement above indicates, not everyone shared these views and there were others who maligned the Aborigines as 'savages'. In his recent examination of the influence of the Enlightenment in the early Australian colonies, John Gascoigne argues there was a tension at the time between the respectable classes and the lower orders on this subject:

> Such admonitions to accept Aborigines as fellow human beings were often prompted by an attempt to overcome a popular, untheoretical racism which equated indigenous peoples with the monkey or animal kingdom. In the first half of the nineteenth century such visceral, unscientific racism was, to some degree, kept in check by elite opinion, whether a Christian or an Enlightenment-based anthropology which generally emphasised the unity of humankind.[21]

Few of the orthodox historians of Van Diemen's Land, however, recognize distinctions of this kind. They do not use religious beliefs, or any contest about them, in their explanations of human behaviour. Nor do they attribute to religion any causal influence. Indeed, like Brian Plomley's opinion of Archdeacon Broughton's inquiry, they usually dismiss religious sentiment as so much humbug or a whitewash for much harsher attitudes.

As with their attitude to Aboriginal culture, these historians make no attempt to think themselves into the minds of their subjects. Instead, they attribute to them completely anachronistic views derived from twentieth-century European and American ideologies about race. Sharon Morgan, for instance, derives her notion of 'white supremacy' not from British or Australian history but from an American study comparing race relations in the USA and South Africa.[22] Had any of these authors tried to understand the mentality of the British Empire in the early nineteenth century, they might have realized the moral dilemma the colony faced. They might have seen that, if the settlers had been the exterminators they portray, they

[20] O'Connor to Arthur, 11 December 1827, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 69–70

[21] Gascoigne, *Enlightenment and Origins of European Australia*, p 152

[22] The book she cites as the main theoretical guide to her chapter is George M. Fredrickson's *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1981. Her footnotes and bibliography mistakenly list the author as 'Frederickson'. Fredrickson is director of Stanford University's Research Institute for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity, and is best known as a writer about 'black liberation' movements and the politics of race in the USA.

would have had to disavow the ascendant spirit of the age. They would have had to either consciously reject the dominant assumptions of their political and religious authorities, or else have been reluctantly driven to this position by force of circumstance. Either way, they would not have made such a decision lightly, and it is most unlikely they would have all come to the same conclusion about annihilating the blacks. Let us look at the evidence of what they actually did believe.

THE ORTHODOX VERSION OF SETTLER OPINION

In 2001, Henry Reynolds produced a list of twelve statements from prominent settlers and newspapers of the colony discussing the extermination of the Aborigines. Reynolds said of them:

> What is certainly true is that prominent settlers felt no compunction about publicly expressing their genocidal desires and intentions and apparently had no concern about courting public disapproval or social ostracism by advocating extermination. They clearly felt no need to guard or modify their language.[23]

However, when the original sources of the statements he cites are examined, some of them turn out to be not quite as genocidal as Reynolds claims. It is true that, in all of the twelve statements Reynolds cites — eight from settlers and four from newspapers — various grammatical forms of the words 'exterminate' or 'extirpate' do appear, except one from the editor of the *Colonial Times*, who instead talks of the Aborigines being 'hunted down' and 'destroyed'. As Reynolds presents them, most do seem to advocate extermination. However, anyone who looks up their full text will find few of them actually say this. Reynolds has edited all the statements so that many of them convey a different message than they did when they were made.

Reynolds claims one of those who added his voice to this 'brutal clamour' was Edward Curr. In his 1987 book, *Frontier*, Reynolds reports this as follows:

> Sharpened frontier conflict called forth increased demands for extermination. They became common, for perhaps the first time, in Tasmania between 1828 and 1830. Edward Curr, the manager of the Van Diemen's Land Company, argued that Aboriginal hostility was so serious that the colonists would either have to abandon the island 'or they must undertake a war of extermination'.[24]

[23] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, pp 71-2

[24] Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p 55

In his more recent work, *An Indelible Stain?*, Reynolds fleshes out Curr's opinion with more quotations from a letter he wrote to the Aborigines Committee in April 1830. Here is his partly edited and partly paraphrased version of what Curr supposedly said (the ellipsis and square brackets all come from Reynolds):

> 'If they [the settlers] do not abandon the Island [and will not] submit to see the white inhabitants murdered one after another ... they must undertake a war of extirpation on principles of which many will be disposed to question ...'
>
> He believed the matter would end 'as all such matters have ended in other parts of the world, by the extermination of the weaker race', although he shuddered at the idea of 'butchering the poor natives in the mass'; it was 'dreadful to contemplate the necessity of exterminating the aboriginal tribes'.[25]

Anyone who reads the original letter, however, will find that Reynolds's version of what it says is quite different from the points Curr was actually making. When he spoke of 'extermination' he was canvassing a possibility of what might happen, not advocating it. Without going into every single way that Reynolds's editing has distorted what Curr said in this letter,[26] let me quote the full passage from which Reynolds has extracted the final phrase 'dreadful to contemplate the necessity of exterminating the aboriginal tribes'. Curr actually wrote:

> These opinions I am sure will shock the feelings of the committee: it is a dreadful thing to contemplate the necessity of exterminating the aboriginal tribes. But I am far from *advising* such a proceeding. All that I can say is that I think it will come to that. My own hands however shall be guilt-

[25] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 53. The location Reynolds provides made this letter difficult to find. Reynolds does not give the original letter's date, he gives the wrong file prefix for its archival location, and indicates only one of the five pages from which he has compiled his edited version of what Curr said. Reynolds says the letter is to be found in the Colonial Secretary's In Letters, COL/1/323, p 373. However, there is no prefix COL used by the Archives Office of Tasmania. The letter was not addressed to the Colonial Secretary but to the Aborigines Committee, via Charles Arthur, the Lieutenant-Governor's aide de camp. The actual location of the letter is the Colonial Secretary's Office file CSO 1/323/7578 pp 359–78, and the passages Reynolds quotes are taken from pp 373–7

[26] For instance, where Reynolds quotes: 'they must undertake a war of extirpation on principles of which many will be disposed to question ...', Curr originally wrote: 'they must undertake a war of extirpation on principles of which many will be disposed to question the justice'. (p 376)

> less of blood, and I shall discountenance it as far as my authority extends, except under circumstances of aggression or in self defence.[27]

In other words, Reynolds's claim that Curr joined the clamour for extermination is a complete misrepresentation of his position, made plausible only by editing out a crucial part of his statement. Rather than advocating such a view, Curr was uttering a pessimistic prediction about the likely outcome if the Aborigines continued their attacks. In the territory where he had authority, he was affirming that he would try to *prevent* any attempt at extermination. He was taking much the same position as the colonial governors, whose views were discussed in Chapter Six. They believed that continued Aboriginal assaults would eventually provoke their white victims into an even more violent reaction. The responsibility of those in authority was to develop means to prevent this from happening. By raising the prospect of extermination in his letter, Curr was underlining his case and trying to impress upon the Aborigines Committee the urgency of the need for an effective policy to prevent Aboriginal assaults, whose ultimate victims would only be themselves. By selective editing and omission, Reynolds has seriously distorted the views Curr actually held.

The same is true of other evidence Reynolds cites to demonstrate that the settlers advocated extermination. He introduces the subject by claiming that debate about genocide extended over seven years:

> During the period of intense frontier conflict between 1826 and 1833, the Tasmanian settlers publicly discussed the matter of genocide. They used the words 'exterminate' or 'extirpate', the latter literally meaning to destroy by uprooting or tearing out.[28]

As well as the opinions of Curr, Reynolds cites seven other statements by settlers as evidence for this case. The originals show, however, that only two of them actually saw extermination or extirpation as a serious option. These were the statements by the Big River farmer George Espie, and the solicitor-general, Alfred Stephen.[29] Espie told the Aborigines Committee of 1830: 'I think that their continued atrocities have arrived at such a crisis that no other remedy appeared to me but their speedy capture or extermination.'[30] Stephen told a public meeting in Hobart:

[27] Curr to Charles Arthur, 28 April 1830, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 377–8. His emphasis.
[28] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 52
[29] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, pp 52, 55–6
[30] The statement Reynolds attributes to George Espie was actually made by one of his brothers, unnamed: Minutes of the Aborigines Committee, 23 February 1830, AOT CBE /1, pp 6-7; George Espie's own evidence, which

> you are bound upon every principle of justice and humanity, to protect this particular class of individuals [that is, convict stockmen in remote regions], and if you cannot do so without extermination, then I say boldly and broadly, exterminate![31]

Four of the other settlers quoted by Reynolds — William Barnes, Temple Pearson, George Frankland and Joseph Gellibrand — all made it clear that they raised the question only to show what a horrible prospect it was. Of the first of these four, Reynolds writes:

> William Barnes, a justice of the peace, landowner and brewer wrote to Governor Arthur in March 1830 expressing his alarm about continuing Aboriginal hostility. If acts of mutual vengeance did not cease, he remarked, 'then the dreadful alternative only remains of a general extermination by some means or other.'[32]

Yet the original version of Barnes's statement reveals that, of all the settlers in the colony at the time, he was one of the most sympathetic to the Aborigines' position. He believed they had suffered a great injustice and were the victims of 'the barbarous hostility and treachery with which they had been treated by the lower orders of settlers and the convict servants in the interior parts of the island for many years prior to 1823 and 1824'. Native hostilities, he said, had been 'provoked by the massacres of hundreds of their people by the Stock Keepers in the outstations'. He was dismayed by what he regarded as the cavalier attitude the lower orders had towards killing Aborigines, but felt the natives were capable of discrimination and could recognize that 'the Governor, the public officers and respectable people are their friends'.[33] He was pessimistic about the future, however, and could only foresee retaliation from both sides continuing until the Aborigines were exterminated. As Reynolds at least has the decency to record, to Barnes this was a 'dreadful alternative'. To present Barnes alongside Espie as one of those who seriously advocated the prospect of extermination as a solution to the Aboriginal problem is to put him in the opposite camp to that which he belonged.

does not mention extermination, was in the published version of the minutes of the same date: *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 219. For brevity's sake, this chapter refers to the brother's statement as that of George Espie.

[31] Stephen's speech was reported by the *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 3, where he emphasized he was speaking as a private citizen, not as a member of the government.

[32] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 52

[33] Barnes to Aborigines Committee, 16 March 1830, AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 299, 302

Reynolds makes a similar misrepresentation of the opinions of another settler, Dr Temple Pearson of Douglas Park, near Campbell Town, whom he quotes saying:

> Total extermination, however severe the measure, I much fear will be the only means left to the Government to protect the Whites.[34]

Dr Pearson was a retired hospital surgeon and was not an articulate man. The letter he wrote to the Aborigines Committee in June 1830 was neither well thought out nor clearly expressed. His comments were in response to questions put to him by the committee about whether the Aborigines were aware the government and the settlers wanted to treat them kindly and to live with them on amicable terms, and what measures should be taken to inform them of this and to protect the lives and property of settlers. Pearson said he was sure the Aborigines did not know of the government's good intentions and then suggested how to inform them. He advocated learning their language and then negotiating with them or, as he called it, making an 'explaination' to them. He said that if this failed he feared total extermination would be the outcome. The text from which Reynolds quotes actually read as follows:

> Total extermination, however severe the measure, I much fear will be the only means left to Government to protect the Whites, without some explaination can be effective, which I do not think could be done but by persons of their own colour, if a White person goes in search of them for that purpose, if he is armed they will shun him, if unarmed they will to a certainty Murder him, but from my reflection on the subject I confess I have little faith in accomplishing it, much less in their adhering to any terms that might be agreed upon. Their capture I think possible by well selected parties as above stated in answer to Question 9th.[35]

Despite their clumsiness, these were not the words of someone making a positive advocacy of extermination. Rather, Pearson was making a pessimistic prediction about the consequences if other measures, such as negotiation, failed. The policy Pearson actually supported to end the hostilities was to capture the Aborigines. His views cannot plausibly be claimed as evidence of an explicit demand for extermination.

Two of the remaining statements from George Frankland and Joseph Gellibrand were not presented by Reynolds as examples of his thesis but as counter examples that expressed more civilized views. Frankland, the surveyor-general, was addressing the scientific-cultural

[34] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 53 quoting a letter of June 1830

[35] Pearson to Aborigines Committee, 12 June 1830, AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 381–2

Van Diemen's Land Society, which he called upon to ameliorate the condition of the Aborigines to save them from extirpation.[36] Gellibrand, the former attorney-general and barrister, was opposing the proposal to mount the Black Line of 1830 and pointing out to its supporters the potential outcome. He said: 'How dreadful is it to contemplate that we are about to enter upon a war of extermination.'[37]

Finally, Reynolds offers the views of George Augustus Robinson himself and the letter he wrote to his wife in October 1830 about all the talk in Launceston of 'extirpating the original inhabitants'.[38] Robinson spent three days in Launceston, from October 2 to 4. Brief though the visit was, he met and conversed with a good cross-section of Launceston society. As he rowed up the River Tamar on 2 October, he met and spoke to three sealers, Robert Drew, David Kelly and 'Ned'. At the cataract at Launceston, he came across the local brewer and landholder William Barnes, the ship's captain Oliver Swan and the government commissary George Hull.[39] Later that day he had meetings with three members of the colonial authority: the commandant of Launceston, Major Edward Abbott, the police magistrate, William Lyttleton, and an officer of the 57th Regiment, Captain Vance Donaldson, who was in charge of the northern forces of the Black Line. In the town itself, Robinson also met two civilians, Reverend Dr William Browne, the chaplain of St John's Church of England, and George Whitcomb, a clerk in the Customs Department. He attended church with Reverend Browne on Sunday October 3.[40]

Of the eight people Robinson met in Launceston, at least five were critical of the policy of mounting the Black Line and expressed their sympathy for the Aborigines. Dr Browne offered prayers for them at his Sunday service. Whitcomb, who became a close friend of Robinson and provided a sanctuary for Aborigines in Launceston, expressed his support for conciliation. As noted above, the brewer William Barnes was one of the most outspoken settlers in his criticism of violence against Aborigines. Robinson commended the commissary for his views: 'Mr Hull is a humane man and wishes well to the cause of humanity.'[41] Even Captain Donaldson, the man heading the

[36] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?* p 54. The speech was recorded in the *Hobart Town Courier*, 23 January 1830, p 4

[37] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 55. The original speech was recorded in the *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 3

[38] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 54

[39] Robinson, diary, 2 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 224

[40] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 242–3

[41] Robinson, diary, 2 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 224

military preparations, 'deplored the proceedings against the blacks'.[42] Moreover, the three sealers, who told Robinson that nothing was heard of in Launceston but shooting the blacks, expressed their own reservations, saying that those who advocated this 'did not know what they was about'.[43] In other words, Robinson's own observation that 'nothing is heard of at Launceston but extirpating the original inhabitants' was an exaggeration. There was clearly a strong sentiment of this kind at the time, but it was far from being universal. Robinson's main informants about local opinion, Browne and Whitcomb, may well have felt they were in a minority but the very existence of their own views, and the others like them, shows it would have been more accurate to say that the settlers of Launceston were deeply divided over the issue.

Overall, of the eight settler opinions Reynolds offers in support of the extirpation thesis, only two of them, those of Espie and Stephen, unambiguously count in his favour. Reynolds is perfectly well aware that he has not represented the full range of views on the subject. That is why, in a recapitulation some twenty pages later, he acknowledges that not all the settlers he discusses were actually advocating extermination. However, in attempting to cover himself against criticism, he compounds the offence with another distortion. He writes:

> During the 1820s it was, as illustrated above, clearly quite common for the settlers to discuss the extermination of the Aborigines, whether they favoured such an eventuality, were horrified by it or just considered it inevitable. We have no way of knowing how many settlers were what George Augustus Robinson called 'extirpationists' and how many others opposed them. The leading scholar of the Tasmanian Aborigines, N. J. B. Plomley, believed that in the 1820s most colonists were 'extirpationists at heart'.[44]

The assertion made here, that extermination was commonly discussed throughout the 1820s, is again not supported by the evidence Reynolds produces. All but one of the twelve statements he cites

[42] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 243

[43] Robinson, diary, 2 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 224

[44] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 71. Actually, Plomley never says 'extirpationists at heart' and in the reference Reynolds provides for the quote, *Friendly Mission* p 350, there is nothing on this page, or anywhere thereabouts, which uses the phrase. The closest Plomley comes is on page 98 where he says that those settlers who gave evidence to the Aborigines Committee in 1830 were 'extirpationists almost to a man', and on page 432 n 2 where he says 'the inhabitants of Launceston were extirpationers almost to a man'. Both comments refer to beliefs held not 'in the 1820s', as Reynolds claims, but in the year 1830.

were made either in 1830 or 1831. The sole comment from an earlier date was an article by the editor of the *Colonial Times* in December 1826, which did not actually use the words 'exterminate' or 'extirpate'. This is not some innocent mistake. To justify his extirpation thesis, Reynolds pretends his sources range across the 1820s. He wants us to see them as evidence for settler intentions from the initial outbreak of Aboriginal violence in 1824. However, by failing to produce any such evidence earlier than 1830, he throws his thesis into a very different light. The terminology he cites was really only used at the peak of the conflict, when passions came to a head for a brief period. Hence any desire that did emerge among some settlers to wipe out the Aborigines only came very late in the piece and as a *consequence* of several years of black robberies, assaults and murders. There was no support for the idea that such a desire was itself an initial cause of settler actions or provided the long-term fuel for a genocidal movement among the civilian population.

Moreover, the way that Reynolds deploys this evidence is itself suggestive. Had there been a large number of statements made in support of this view throughout the 1820s, Reynolds would surely have used them. The fact that he has disguised the dates of his sources is itself an indication there were very few statements of this kind ever made for the historian to find.

Having said this, I should report that in reading the colonial newspapers I found one statement from a settler made earlier than 1830 that did use the word 'exterminate'. It was made in April 1828 by a correspondent from Campbell Town writing in the *Hobart Town Courier*. In reply to a number of suggestions made by the newspaper to solve the growing problem of Aboriginal assaults, this unnamed writer suggested:

> They have acquired such a fondness for our blankets, dampers, flour, sugar, knives &c that for the sake of them they will continue to rob and murder, until we exterminate them or they us, unless for the sake of humanity they are sent off the island.[45]

Other examples, however, are difficult to find. It was far more common for the press, while expressing alarm at the level of Aboriginal depredations, to nonetheless counsel caution.

THE OPINIONS OF THE COLONIAL PRESS

Four of the statements Reynolds uses to back the extirpation thesis come from newspaper articles and editorials. He claims the local press fomented public opinion in favour of a policy of annihilation. Lyndall

[45] *Hobart Town Courier*, 12 April 1828, p 3

Ryan agrees. She says that the attitude of the press in both Hobart and Launceston was that 'the Aborigines were the enemy and nothing short of a full-scale military operation would "teach them a lesson"'.[46] Let us start with Reynolds's version of what the Hobart newspaper the *Colonial Times* was supposed to have said in 1826. Here are his comments followed by his quotation from the newspaper:

> The colonial newspapers regularly reported on conflict in the interior and at times called for the destruction of the tribes. In 1826, after reporting several murders of frontier shepherds, the editor of the *Colonial Times* declared:
>
> 'We make no pompous display of philanthropy — we say unequivocally, SELF DEFENCE IS THE FIRST LAW OF NATURE — THE GOVERNMENT MUST REMOVE THE NATIVES — IF NOT, THEY WILL BE HUNTED DOWN LIKE WILD BEASTS AND DESTROYED.'[47]

Once again, however, the full text of the statement reveals a different agenda. The *Colonial Times* was *not* calling for 'the destruction of the tribes'. It was making a case for the policy that the government eventually adopted, that of removing Aborigines from Van Diemen's Land to an offshore island. Rather than advocating extermination, the article was canvassing ways to respond to the increase in Aboriginal killings of stockmen. Here is its central passage, which Reynolds neglects to quote.

> It is impossible to suggest a perfect plan, but having collected the opinions of many intelligent persons, we are satisfied, that the first thing, is our own security; the second, the due and proper protection to the natives, and last, and least, the expence of the measure to Government. In the first place, they must be removed, either to the coast of New Holland, or King's Island. The latter is one of our Dependencies, fertile, well supplied with water, and no possibility of escape.[48]

Moreover, the editor was not advocating this solution for all the tribes, as Reynolds implies, but only for two of them. Removing them to an island, the editor hoped, was the best way to civilize them:

> There are two parties who have committed outrages — the Oyster Bay, and the Shannon parties. We would recommend their being taken, which could easily be effected — placed at King's Island with a small guard of soldiers to protect them, and let them be compelled to grow potatoes,

[46] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edn., Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p 108

[47] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 53. Upper case in the original source.

[48] *Colonial Times*, 1 December 1826, p 2. All upper case is from the original.

> wheat &c. catch seals and fish, and by degrees, they will lose their roving disposition, and acquire some slight habits of industry, which is the first step of civilization.[49]

This was plainly a ruthless solution but it does not mention extermination. The rationale for it was the same as that eventually adopted by both Edward Curr and the colonial governors: by continuing their hostilities, the Aborigines were provoking a violent response and thus digging their own graves.

> If they remain here, they are SURE TO BE DESTROYED. If they are sent to King's Island, they will be under restraint, but they will be free from committing or receiving violence, and we are certainly bound by every principle of humanity, to protect them as far as we can.[50]

At this distance, the purported humanitarian sentiment in these words might be hard to take seriously. The author wanted the two tribes removed from the settled districts and his humanitarianism appears more reflex verbiage than moral principle. But this still does not justify Reynolds citing the article as an example of press demands for the extermination of the Aboriginal tribes, when it was nothing of the kind.

Another example Reynolds cites is from the *Colonial Times* in September 1830. At the time, this newspaper was edited by Henry Melville, later author of the book *The History of Van Deimen's Land* (1835), which was highly critical of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur's policies towards the Aborigines. Reynolds quotes one of the paper's editorial comments about the state of mind of the local settlers: 'all was ardour and emulation among many of the Whites, trying who should hunt, kill, and destroy the most'.[51] What Reynolds fails to point out, however, is that these remarks were made by the newspaper as part of a sustained argument *against* government policy of forming the Black Line. Immediately after these words, which in context were heavily sarcastic comments about the deplorable results that government policy had cultivated among the convict lower orders, Melville continued:

> To be an Aborigine, and to once be in the neighbourhood of a settled district, was a sufficient cause for being chased down if possible, with savage ferocity; no matter whether the disposition of the individual had been friendly or not — whether his errand had been merely to indulge tastes and habits that had been acquired by mixing with Europeans or had been for the purpose of rapine or mischief. So dangerous, so indiscreet a latitude as was thus allowed to a class of persons so totally unable to discrimi-

[49] *Colonial Times*, 1 December 1826, p 2
[50] *Colonial Times*, 1 December 1826, p 2
[51] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 54

> nate as most to whom this Proclamation was particularly addressed, or at least, by whom its purport would have to be carried into effect, could only have had one result.[52]

The effects of these policies on the lower classes, the newspaper continued, were foreseen at the time by 'cool and reflecting persons', but not by the government. Melville went on to lambast:

> the inconsistent and ill-advised conduct of the Government towards this benighted race, and refer to an occurrence which is, and ever will continue, an indelible stain upon the history of this Colony. We allude to the execution for murder of two of them, about three years since, [the execution of the Oyster Bay blacks, Jack and Dick, in 1826] than which a greater cruelty was never practised — no, not even by the Spaniards upon their first settlement of America.[53]

In preparing for the Black Line, the dominant attitude among the settlers, Melville complained, was confusion about its objectives:

> As things are, we ourselves really do not understand, nor have we been able to meet with any who could explain to us, whether the sword or the Bible is meant to be the means of instructing the Aborigines in their relative duty to ourselves. In other words, whether destruction or civilization is to be the order of the day — are the numerous parties which are soon to scour the interior, to destroy or save these misguided creatures? Whatever may be the intentions of the Government, we are fully convinced, that most of those who are now preparing for the interior are not aware of the manner in which the Government expect them to act.[54]

In short, rather than evidence of an extirpationist sentiment, this newspaper editorial demonstrated a critical attitude towards government attempts at a military solution.

A third example of press opinion cited by Reynolds appeared in the Launceston newspaper, the *Independent,* in September 1831. Reynolds provides two instances of this newspaper's support for exterminating the Aborigines. In the first instance, Reynolds writes:

> The *Independent* reported in September 1831 that following the spearing of a prominent settler, Captain Thomas, several correspondents had written in arguing that 'nothing but a war of extermination now remains to be applied'.[55]

In the original version of this report, however, there were fewer readers advocating this course than Reynolds claims and they got no support from the newspaper, which actually wrote:

[52] *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 2
[53] *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 2
[54] *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 2
[55] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 54

> Two correspondents this week insist upon it that nothing but a *war of extermination* now remains to be adopted; but this is something stronger than we are at all prepared to recommend. That something *must* be done — and *IMMEDIATELY* is evident to everyone who takes the trouble of thinking. Who can tell to what lengths they may run this season, beyond all precedence, in taking vengeance upon the settlers for the routing they experience by the "Line" business?[56]

In the second example he cites from the *Independent*, Reynolds at last reproduces the newspaper's opinions accurately. He quotes the editor saying:

> Even their warmest advocates must, we fear, admit that unless something forthwith be done by the government, the end will be, horrible as the idea is, EXTERMINATION, as the only means of securing our settlers from their cruel and indiscriminate attacks.[57]

This is accurate both in the words cited and in the context of the story. It was written by the newspaper's publisher, Samuel Bailey Dowsett, at a time when the Launceston community was considerably distressed by the news that Captain Bartholomew Thomas had been killed at his property at Port Sorell, along with his overseer James Parker. Thomas, the brother of the colonial treasurer, was a popular and romantic figure who had served in the Napoleonic Wars and then with Simon Bolivar to liberate South America from Spanish rule. He arrived in the colony in 1826 and started a horse breeding property, Cressy, on Lake River, before founding Northdown, the first settlement at Port Sorell. He was well known for his conciliatory attitude to the Aborigines and his good relations with them. However, in September 1831 a band of blacks from Big River, feigning friendship, killed him and Parker and stole their guns, breaking what had till then been a long interval without incident in the north of the colony.[58] Despite backing the call for extermination of the blacks, Dowsett added immediately after the above words:

> God forbid that a warfare of this nature should be undertaken until every pacific attempt has failed; but we really do fear that the pious labour of such individuals as Mr Robinson will produce no good result; and that the sword and the sword *only*, will be a sufficient preservation to ourselves from the dreadful incursions of these inveterate enemies. We will yet hope, however, so long as hope is permitted us.[59]

[56] *Independent*, 10 September 1831, p 3. Emphases in original.
[57] quoted by Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 54
[58] H. R. Thomas, 'Jocelyn Henry Connor Thomas and Bartholomew Boyle Thomas', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2, 1788–1850, I–Z, pp 516–7; Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 471 n 271, 476 n 280, 511
[59] *Independent*, 24 September 1831, p 3. Emphasis in original.

The final example Reynolds cites for his thesis comes from the Hobart newspaper, the *Tasmanian*. Reynolds writes:

> In February 1830 the editor of the *Tasmanian* remarked that the Aborigines were displaying a determination to destroy all before them. 'Extermination', he declared, 'seems to be the only remedy'.[60]

This is, for a second time, an accurate rendition of both the words and sentiments of the newspaper's editor, Robert Lathrop Murray. Moreover, in this case, the full context (reproduced below) is actually more inflammatory than Reynolds indicates.

Anyone who has followed the career of Murray will find this a surprising statement for him to have made. As a journalist on the *Hobart Town Gazette* and *Colonial Times* in 1825–6, Murray publicized his liberal political views and was often critical of the colonial autocracy over which Arthur presided. He defended freedom of the press and argued that appointees to the Legislative Council should be more broadly representative. He was a penal reformer who was critical of the convict system and eventually became a leading advocate for the end of transportation.[61] He befriended the barrister and Attorney-General, Joseph Gellibrand, who in 1826 was dismissed from his position by Arthur partly because he refused to institute legal action to silence Murray's press criticisms. In 1827 Gellibrand became part-owner of the new Hobart newspaper, the *Tasmanian*, which he and Murray used to maintain their critique of the government. In 1828 Murray began publishing the *Austral-Asiatic Review*, a journal that expressed both his literary aspirations and his liberal political views. A year later he merged it with the *Tasmanian*, founded in 1827 and the most financially precarious of the four Hobart weeklies.[62] Although Murray subsequently modified his anti-government stance, in late 1830, when Arthur announced the formation of the Black Line, Gellibrand remained one of its most vocal critics.

Murray's call for extermination as the only remedy against black depredations was made in the context of a sudden increase in black assaults on whites in February 1830. The statement was part of a story

[60] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, p 53

[61] E. Morris Miller, *Pressmen and Governors: Australian Editors and Writers in Early Tasmania*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1952, pp 3–31

[62] Murray was a well-educated man (Westminster School and Cambridge University) who had been transported for bigamy but pardoned on arrival in Australia. He had liberal political opinions and, through the *Austral-Asiatic Review*, was the founder of literary culture in Tasmania: see E. Morris Miller, *Pressmen and Governors*, pp 9-13; C. R. Murray, 'Robert William Fenton Lathrop Murray', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2 1788–1850, I–Z, pp 272–4

about an Aboriginal attack on the settler John Sherwin and his family at their home at Mead's Bottom, near Bothwell, in which the house was burned to the ground and all their possessions destroyed. After announcing the attack, the story continued:

> Mr Sherwin's family has been dispersed by this dreadful calamity. They have lost their all. They are dependant for cloathing upon the humanity of their neighbours.
>
> A little boy was murdered by these people at Bagdad on Monday. Capt. Clarke's wheat was set on fire on Saturday. We have also heard of numerous other atrocities committed by them within the last week. There seems to be something like a determination to destroy all before them. Extermination seems to be the only remedy. It is a dreadful one. But surely such a horrible calamity as has befallen Mr Sherwin and his family, little short of ruin, requires some vigorous measures, or the general want of safety in the interior will become so apparent, that the most injurious consequences to the Colony will be the result.
>
> A Magistrate from the interior, was at our office today, whose estate is peculiarly open to the incursions of these people. This Gentleman, who has as much humanity in his composition as any individual in the Colony declared, that if his family was attacked, he would kill as many as he could of the murdering incendiaries, and affix their bodies to the trees, as he does those of any other ravenous animal! If Mr Sherwin was so to act, witnessing as he does, the ruin of his property, the dispersion of his family, his daughters seeking shelter wherever humanity will afford it, could he be blamed!

This last paragraph is perhaps the most violently anti-Aboriginal statement made during the whole of the conflict with the blacks. Even though it was out of character with its author's usual politics, and was, as shown in a later section below, a position Murray was soon to recant, it demonstrated the extent to which colonial passions could be stirred by continued Aboriginal assaults.

Overall, out of four examples provided by Reynolds, only two support his claim that the colonial newspapers wanted the extermination of the Aboriginal tribes. Both of the latter were made in 1830 and 1831 in the immediate aftermath of particular Aboriginal atrocities. What, then, can be said about the longer-term attitude taken by the colonial press to the Aboriginal problem?

At this time, there were six newspapers published in the colony, each appearing weekly. Even though the population was only 24,000 in 1830, the total newspaper circulation was about 11,000 copies a week. All of them took a political stance of some kind, mostly against the government, since Arthur retained a military man's dislike of a free press and tried to restrict newspaper criticism by licences, libel suits and the imprisonment of editors. However, ownership and edi-

torship changed rapidly, as did political allegiances, with government opponents one year becoming government supporters the next.[63] In 1830 and 1831 the papers were: the *Hobart Town Gazette*, a government-directed paper published by James Ross, consisting almost entirely of government and legal notices; the *Hobart Town Courier*, a more commercial pro-government newspaper published by James Ross; the *Colonial Times*, published in Hobart by the government critic, Henry Melville; the *Tasmanian and Austral-Asiatic Review*, edited in Hobart by Robert Lathrop Murray; the *Launceston Advertiser*, published by John Pascoe Fawkner, a former felon turned successful businessman and government supporter, and the *Independent*, a more liberal and critical Launceston paper published by Samuel Bailey Dowsett. Six newspapers serving such a small population meant that the editorial content of each was largely a one-man show, with the editor writing the whole of the content, except for overseas stories and brief reports of local news posted in by correspondents from towns and villages of the settled districts. Let me illustrate the range of press opinion at the height of the hostilities with more examples from the two best-read but most politically divergent newspapers, the *Hobart Town Courier,* which was a member of what was known as the 'Government House party', and the *Colonial Times*, its principal opposition.

The income of the publisher and printer of the *Hobart Town Courier*, James Ross, was largely dependent upon government patronage of his printing press. He fiercely guarded his monopoly of this business against rival publishers.[64] So, perhaps not surprisingly, his paper generally reflected the views of the Lieutenant-Governor. On Aboriginal policy, it supported Arthur's preference for conciliation and his reluctant resort to force. In January 1829, in the wake of the appointment of the roving parties to capture hostile Aborigines within the settled districts, the editor wrote:

> In the present state of things in this island with regard to the black natives, we consider it our duty as public journalists to send our voice abroad in the cause of humanity. Let the words of the late proclamation never be forgotten by those engaged in the pursuit, which enjoin them to spare the shedding of blood. Let them remember that when the thread of life is

[63] E. Morris Miller, 'The Early Tasmanian Press and its Writers', in Charles Barrett (ed.), *Across the Years: The Lure of Early Australian Books*, N. H. Seward, Melbourne, 1948, pp 35–49; E. Morris Miller, 'A Historical Summary of Tasmanian Newspapers', Parts 1 and II, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 2, 1, November 1952 and 2, 2, March 1953

[64] 'James Ross', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 2, 1788–1850 I–Z, pp 396–7

> once snapped nothing in the power of man can ever rejoin it. Their duty is to catch them *alive*, and convey them to the proper authorities. They are part of this community, and entitled in common with ourselves to the protection as well as the retribution of its laws and ordinances. Let us beware then of wantonly firing upon them, or taking any measure not imperiously called for which can deprive them of life. And when death does occur we presume it is as much the bounden duty of the Coroners of the island to inquire into the circumstances of it, as if their skins were white like our own, instead of black.[65]

While orthodox historians today mock any suggestion that an appeal to Christian values might have carried weight, James Ross did not think so at the time. In the same passage he warned his readers against succumbing to 'a latent spirit of revenge':

> But revenge is natural only to the savage tribes, and must not be permitted to enter the breast of civilized not to say Christian men, whose peculiar characteristic is forgiveness. The murders which the blacks commit are engendered in error, and are conceived by them to be their duty. But we have no such excuse, our religion, if not our hearts teach us better.

Even though the *Colonial Times* under Henry Melville was critical of many of Arthur's policies and although there was much personal animosity between the two men, when colonial hostility to the Aborigines was at its height in 1830, and when almost every edition carried several accounts of assaults on white settlers and stockmen, the paper's reports of these incidents were nonetheless usually conveyed not in terms of outrage but in a tone of pain and regret, very similar to that of the *Hobart Town Courier*. Here are some examples of the editorial approach of *Colonial Times* in August 1830. This was the single worst month for Aboriginal attacks in all of the hostilities between 1824 and 1831.[66] Reporting a series of incidents in the districts between the rivers Clyde and Dee, the paper emphasized its regret about Aboriginal deaths, the desirability for peace, its fear that settler revenge might lead to the destruction of the Aborigines and its preference for capturing the offenders rather than shooting them. It also mentioned 'the annihilation of the whole race'. Although the mere appearance of such a phrase in print is potential fuel for the extirpationist thesis, the full context shows that it would be unjustified for historians to exploit it in this way. Melville wrote:

> The country about Bothwell is in a sad state. The repeated attacks of the Aborigines on the Settlers of that District are every day getting more and more frequent. Indeed, the commencement of the spring seems to have given these misguided wretches a fresh impetus to commence their war-

[65] *Hobart Town Courier*, 24 January 1829, p 2
[66] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 34, Graph 5

> fare upon their enemies. At present, one of their chief holds is about the Dee Hills, between the Black Marsh and the Dee. It is said that Captain Wood's men have had several skirmishes with the different mobs, and we are sorry to say that several of the Natives have been killed. We do not wonder at those men taking revenge upon the Aborigines, when we consider in how many instances they have been sufferers by their attacks; but we fear the plan at present adopted will leave no other chance of obtaining peace than the annihilation of the whole race; for we imagine that the settlers have had convincing proofs that the Aborigines are a most brave and resolute people, who cannot be intimidated but will continue their warfare to the last moment. Something must be done! we have long exclaimed; but the question is, what is best to be done? The military are not the most proper persons to be employed, being unaccustomed as they are to the fatigues of the bush. Parties of the old inhabitants, with persons who are as acquainted with the country as well as the Natives themselves, would be the right kind of men to employ in capturing them, and in the end these must be the persons fixed upon; not one party but scores should be regularly appointed, who would be able to watch all the different passes at once, and not as has latterly been the case, every here and there one inefficient straggling party prowling about seeking after the Natives, who are generally better acquainted with their manner of acting than they are aware of.[67]

The same edition reported the killing of a settler at Spring Hill, near Jericho. Before it published the report from its local correspondent, the *Colonial Times* opened with some brief editorial opinion:

> It is with great pain we have to record another instance of the dreadful attacks of the Aborigines; it more particularly happens just at the time the Government are attempting to bring about some peaceable reconciliation, and we are fearful that by some the lately published Government Notices will be considered too lenient towards these poor misguided wretches. "Mr Hooper, who is well known to many of your Readers, with the female with whom he lived and his assigned servant, were in the road opposite the farm (to which he had latterly removed) when the blacks made their appearance. The man and woman ran away, and got to the Lovely Banks, leaving Mr Hooper to his fate, who went into the house and procured a double-barrelled gun and fired upon them, after which they instantly rushed upon him and murdered him with their waddies, leaving an axe stuck in the back of his skull. Mr Batman and Mr Thomas Pitcairn rode by Hooper's just after he was murdered but too late to save him."[68]

Even though the same edition ran three other stories about Aboriginal assaults, the *Colonial Times* could still find space to reproduce

[67] *Colonial Times*, 27 August 1830, p 3

[68] *Colonial Times*, 27 August 1830, p 3. The victim was James Hooper of Spring Hill.

the following item from the *Launceston Advertiser*, which hardly indicates an extirpationist attitude towards the whole race:

> On Monday the 16th inst., two of the Aborigines of this colony were married at St. John's Church, Launceston. This is the first marriage of the kind which has ever fell under our notice in this Colony; they had both been domesticated for some time amongst the European population.[69]

Similarly, while the Black Line was still in the field, the *Hobart Town Courier* chose to publish the following item, showing that, despite the 'sadistic frenzy' that Sharon Morgan claims dominated settler attitudes towards the Aborigines, there was still an interest in Hobart in collecting ethnographic information about them:

> Some of our musical amateurs have lately made some progress in recording the native melodies of our Van Diemen's Land Blacks, but what we have seen are of the rudest and most uncouth kind, though no doubt not without their charms to the sable ears.[70]

Even though the *Hobart Town Courier* generally toed the line of government policy, in some cases James Ross did express his own opinion. He was one of the first to argue that the only solution to the problem of Aboriginal violence lay in their separation from the white population. This eventually became a demand for the removal of the blacks to an island in Bass Strait. As noted earlier in this chapter, the idea was not original to Ross since the same call had been made in December 1826 by the *Colonial Times*. By 1830, when Ross repeated this demand, it had become a widely accepted notion. The following editorial is revealing, not only of the mood of the press at the time it was written. It also shows how reluctant the colony had been to adopt such a solution and how alien the policy had initially seemed to the instincts of colonial culture. Ross wrote:

> Some years ago, when we first started our proposal of placing them on some island from which they could not easily escape, such as King's Island, with a small detachment of troops and an instructor, it will be recollected what a loud and general outcry was raised against us for even suggesting such a plan so utterly unjust, it was said, and contrary to the laws of humanity and the rights of nations. But we doubt as things now stand, if even the secure and convenient position of Tasman's peninsula will now suffice to secure them ... Far be it for us to advocate harshness or severity to these poor people, the general tenor of our writing have all along shewn how opposite our sentiments are to such treatment. But as circumstances now stand, we would earnestly indicate strong but merciful measures. Misguided as they doubtless are by white miscreants, they are in some sense more to be pitied than blamed, but truly dangerous as by that

[69] *Colonial Times*, 27 August 1830, p 3
[70] *Hobart Town Courier*, 16 October 1830, p 2

> means they are now become, they are no more to be trusted than ought to be a wild beast, a lion or tiger let loose in a multitude. Every one that is caught must be kept in the most secure manner, and if even chains or shackles be necessary they ought to be had recourse to. Revolting as the idea may seem to the humane feelings of a stranger at a distance, unacquainted with the real state of things, some compulsory measures we are sensible must be resorted to for the sake of the general safety.[71]

THE LEGEND OF THE BLACKS' WHITE LEADER

The news pages of the colonial press were not only vehicles of straight news and political debate. Just like their modern counterparts, they were also repositories of entertainment, gossip, rumour and mythology. One of the most sensational myths that circulated throughout much of the period of Aboriginal violence in Van Diemen's Land was the one hinted at in the above passage: the blacks were being led astray by white men. The *Hobart Town Courier* eventually became the chief supporter of a story which held that malevolent white instigation was the cause of the upsurge in black violence. The fact the paper adopted such a thesis must have made it a common talking point among its readers.

The origins of the story go back to the early days of the colony when convict absconders, the original bushrangers, recounted tales of their contact with the blacks. Between 1808 and 1810, the bushrangers Richard Lemon and William Russell were thought to have had contact with the tribes. Russell was eventually killed by them. During his career in crime from 1814 to 1818, Michael Howe was known to have two black mistresses.[72] When the Aboriginal bushrangers Musquito, Black Jack and Black Tom organized their own gang in 1823 and 1824, the notion of white complicity gained currency through testimony of one of their victims. In the robbery and murder of Matthew Osborne at Jericho in the central midlands in 1824, the dead man's widow identified a white convict as one of the gang. He was an assigned servant to Eli Begent, himself a former convict and bushranger.[73] By 1828, the notion that other Aboriginal raids were led by white men was being treated seriously by the Hobart press. The *Tasmanian* claimed that when the Oyster Bay Aborigines made raids, two white men were 'at the head of the horde'. These men were 'partially naked and the parts of their bodies which are exposed are blackened'.[74] At the same time, a report in the *Hobart Town Courier* positively identified a white man with a group of Aborigines

[71] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 November 1830, p 3
[72] See Chapter Two, p 59
[73] See Chapter Three, p 68 n 28
[74] *Tasmanian*, 31 October 1828, p 3

who killed a boy during a raid on a property at Green Ponds in October 1828. One of the pursuit party, Zachariah Chaffey, a free man, said he saw a man named Green, a former convict servant of his father, with the Aborigines:

> The man was blackened in the face. His only article of dress was a striped shirt, below which his white legs were plainly seen. Zachariah Chaffey swore positively that he was a white man for he approached close to the horde next morning.[75]

These stories persisted and by 1830, the *Hobart Town Courier* was certain that whites were the principal instigators of Aboriginal depredations that had forced the colony to mount the Black Line. The evidence the newspaper offered in support, however, was hardly convincing.

> That they are led on and directed in their movements and outrages by White men is now beyond doubt ... The cunning of the Blacks in selecting the tempestuous night of Monday last to attempt their escape was remarkable, and, as our correspondent remarks, being a thing hitherto unknown, adds to the proofs already existing, of the presence of White men among them.[76]

Besides their use of the tempest as a cover to escape, the paper also noted that when a hut owned by Silas Gatehouse was robbed, the thieves found a box containing knives, but only took those that were new and had ivory handles, leaving the older and less valuable cutlery. This was 'a species of discrimination that has never yet been put in practice by the black natives' and hence proof they were led by a European. The paper found this prospect worthy of all the moral outrage it could muster:

> For we can conceive no species of depravity so enormous as that which would permit a man thus to use the knowledge he had acquired in a civilized and improved state of life, in order to corrupt and train to murderous habits upon his fellow creatures a race of originally harmless, defenceless people like the Aborigines of this island.

The author went on to point out that a party from the Black Line, while out searching for Aborigines, 'fell repeatedly on the tracks of the blacks, invariably accompanied with the prints of nailed shoes and other symptoms that white men accompany them'.[77] The paper

[75] *Hobart Town Courier*, 1 November 1828, p 2. Although at the coroner's inquest into the death of the boy, Chaffey swore positively that the man he saw was white, he declined to identify him under oath as Green.
[76] *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2
[77] *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2

reluctantly acknowledged, however, that some of its readers failed to find the thesis persuasive:

> Notwithstanding the proofs every day coming to light of the presence and directing influence of white men among the blacks, some people are still incredulous enough to disbelieve it, and to affirm that the proofs of shoes so frequently met with are no evidence of it, as the blacks might be supposed to wear them to protect their feet.

It went on both to denounce these disbelievers and to put forward a picture that drew on other mythical white figures from the literature of colonization:

> If those who discredit the presence of White man among the Blacks would reflect on the number of runaway prisoners that are not accounted for, some of whom after a length of time occasionally come to light, they would see with us the great probability of such men sojourning with the Natives in remote parts of the country and enjoying a life of indolent sloth.[78]

Unfortunately for the story, when all the Aborigines were finally rounded up and transported to Flinders Island, no one found any white men living among them. Nor did any of the conversations recorded with the blacks then, or at any time later, suggest that they ever had a white leader.

PRESS OPINION: A SUMMARY

Overall, there are four conclusions we can draw about the opinions of the colonial press. First, although they sometimes subscribed to myth and rumour, they generally fulfilled their role as journals of record quite well. Occasionally their reporters would let them down, like the Great Swan Port correspondent described in Chapter Five, but in cases of major events like clashes between settlers and Aborigines, most press reports appear to be generally reliable. They are very often corroborated by the records of police, coroners and other official sources. As one would expect, the colonial press shared the cultural and intellectual milieu of its time but, beyond this, it does not appear to have had any particular agenda to either play up or play down stories about violence on either side.

Second, in both pro-government and anti-government newspapers alike, there was no sustained campaign urging the violent destruction of the Aborigines. Although they demanded a solution to the hostilities, most of the time the press urged caution and humanitarianism, even if this put some of their readers in the more vulnerable districts off side. Nonetheless, as the examples from the *Tasmanian* in February

[78] *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2

1830 and the *Independent* in September 1831 illustrated, an upsurge of atrocities by Aborigines could stimulate an editor at times to make a call for extermination. But in these cases the demand was made in the heat of the moment and was out of character with the colonial press's longer-term approach to the subject.

Third, on matters of specific policy, the *Colonial Times* in 1826 instigated the call for the Aborigines to be removed from the settled districts and exiled to an island. This policy was subsequently endorsed by James Ross of the *Hobart Town Courier*, even though it was a controversial breach with prevailing religious and humanitarian principles. However, the policy was not consistently supported. By August 1830, Henry Melville of the *Colonial Times* frankly admitted he did not know what to do. When the Black Line was mounted in October that year, despite its endorsement by most of the civilian population and by the *Hobart Town Courier*, the *Colonial Times* remained one of its strongest critics.

Fourth, there was little support in the press for the notion that the settlers were in awe of the fighting abilities of the Aborigines. Henry Melville did, it is true, at times write that the settlers thought the Aborigines 'are a most brave and resolute people, who cannot be intimidated', but in the same passage he described them 'poor misguided wretches'.[79] Other editors took a far less flattering view. Even at the height of Aboriginal violence in 1830, the colonial press usually described them in terms such as 'a race of originally harmless, defenceless people', who were 'more to be pitied than blamed'.[80]

If anything, rather than fostering violent public opinion, colonial newspapers were more conciliatory on the Aboriginal question than their readers. By and large, they reflected attitudes of the two main population centres rather than of the settlers in the countryside. There are, in fact, clear indications that settler opinion was far from being monolithic, despite what the orthodox school of history maintains. It included not only moral divisions but also geographic camps.

THE TOWN VERSUS THE COUNTRYSIDE

Throughout Australian history, one of the longest-running divisions in white attitudes towards the Aborigines has been between the city and the country. Those most sympathetic towards the Aborigines have been those urban dwellers who have had least to do with them. Those Europeans living in the bush have long recognized this and often resented as impractical and unrealistic the policies that have

[79] *Colonial Times*, 27 August 1830, p 3

[80] *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2; *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 November 1830, p 3

been imposed upon them by authorities in the town. This is as true today in debates over 'land rights' as it was in debates over Aboriginal hostilities in early Van Diemen's Land where a similar division between urban and rural values arose.

In January 1830, the first meeting of the Van Diemen's Land Society, also known as the Philosophical Society, was held in the Court House in Hobart. As the most far-flung outpost of the British Empire, the educated members of Van Diemen's Land society clung more tenaciously than most to the literary and scientific foundations of the home culture. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur and his wife both attended the inaugural meeting to hear the president, the surgeon Dr John Henderson, explain the society's aims of publishing local scientific research and establishing a museum and botanic gardens. The proceedings of the speeches and the subsequent dinner were published in detail, taking up almost a full page of the *Hobart Town Courier*'s edition of 23 January. The main address was given by George Frankland, the head of the government's Survey Department, who gave a lecture on the progress of science. 'Our very residence in this island,' he told the meeting, 'may be termed the offspring of science, for it was the progress of astronomy and navigation which led to its occupation.' The same was true of the nations of India, which provided 'the most beautiful illustration of the practical effects of science that can be cited'. Though once ravaged by 'rapine and confusion', India was now 'by the introduction of our institutions, resting in peace and security under the magic shield of their influence'. Frankland continued:

> Would that it were possible to trace her steps with equal satisfaction to this naturally favoured little island! Science led to its discovery, but its discoverers instead of bringing blessings in their train have heaped ruin and destruction upon those children of misfortune, the Aboriginal owners of the soil — a people naturally amiable and intelligent, who with better treatment on the part of those who have come in contact with them, might have been rendered valuable friends, and have continued a happy nation! However I should hope that there is yet time to restore that harmony which, but for the brutal inhumanity of white men, had never been broken; and surely no more glorious object could this Society propose to itself than that of acquiring to more intimate acquaintance with this much wronged people, with a view of ameliorating their condition, and of saving them from being extirpated from the face of that earth on which the Almighty had placed them![81]

Frankland's speech was followed by a commentary by Joseph Hone, the barrister and head of the Courts of Quarter Sessions and Requests:

[81] *Hobart Town Courier*, 23 January 1830, p 3

> Mr Hone said he was glad that his friend the Surveyor General had alluded to the Aborigines, as a subject towards which the inquiries of this Society might be applied. He lamented the estrangement which had taken place between Europeans and the natives, and remembered a meeting which had been held in the building opposite (pointing to the Church) at which he had presided. Much had been said on that occasion and much had been done since. He regretted that he did not see in this meeting an individual who had been active in procuring the assembly to which he spoke. He alluded to the Reverend Mr. Bedford, whose professional assistance he should be glad to see united with the exertions of this Society towards so desirable an object as the amelioration of the natives.[82]

A month after this meeting was held, Archdeacon Broughton's Aboriginal Affairs Committee began issuing addresses and edicts in the local press. One government notice in mid-February 1830 recognized that there had been a rise in assaults on settlers but still held out hope that conciliatory policies would work:

> It is with concern quite inexpressible that the Lieutenant Governor continues to receive statements of the atrocities committed by the Aboriginal natives. The moderation with which a mob of natives have in one instance lately conducted themselves in the neighbourhood of Bothwell, affords ground to hope that the way to a reconciliation may be opening.[83]

At Bothwell itself, however, the settlers held few such hopes. There was no sympathy for the views of Frankland and Hone and more than a little resentment at a committee ensconced in Hobart telling them how to respond. A Bothwell settler wrote to the *Tasmanian,* complaining:

> Of His Excellency's Proclamation relative to the Aborigines, I have no observations to make. But as to the address published by the Aboriginal Committee, imploring the settlers to act on the defensive *only* — to retreat (when attacked) to the walls, and not to seek the Blacks nor act *offensively*! I say of this document, the catalogue of atrocities committed by the Natives during the last month, and deduced from official reports, will at once open their eyes, expose the ridiculousness of their address, and the question being handled by the public Press, may render very essential service to our Colonial community.

The unnamed author then listed thirteen attacks on settlers in the region between 4 and 23 February, which included three cases of arson, three of harassment, two of robbery, one of stock killing, and five of murder. He complained that the government's main response to the problem, the establishment of roving parties, left them exposed

[82] *Hobart Town Courier*, 23 January 1830, p 3

[83] Government Notice no. 31, Colonial Secretary's Office, 19 February 1830, published *Tasmanian*, 26 February 1830, p 471

because Gilbert Robertson's party had been disbanded and most of Jorgen Jorgenson's men had already earned their tickets-of-leave so that his force had dwindled to almost nothing. Only the roving party of John Danvers remained:

> But what can one party do for the defence of an Island as large as Ireland. God help us! Are the operations of the bush to be regulated by a Committee in Hobarton. What do they know about it? By the time the Committee is arguing, debating, bandying letters about from place to place, the white inhabitants are murdered, dwellings burned to the ground, and terror and consternation spread over the country. The settlers in the country take quite a different view of the matter to what do the Gentlemen at Hobarton.[84]

In the same edition of the *Tasmanian*, a settler on the Clyde River who signed himself 'Cerus' also addressed the Aboriginal Committee's proclamation. He provided a list of local cases of arson and harassment, adding:

> Please to recollect, that we in the interior, are in the most imminent daily danger of our lives and property — of having our houses and barns burnt about our ears in all directions, and our families butchered by these savages; and are we to be smoothly informed *how* we are to act, and *that* on the *defensive*, by a few comfortably seated Gentlemen in their well furnished and well-protected houses in Hobart-town.[85]

Despite all this heat, very few settlers in the countryside urged that the Aborigines should be exterminated. Instead of what he called 'the sugar system' of conciliation, the option favoured by 'Cerus' was not destruction but capture. He suggested that rewards for this might be effective, recommending that the members of the Aborigines Committee in Hobart set the example:

> Let these Gentlemen *take the field*, or they may drain their pockets of a few of His Majesty's sovereigns in the shape of rewards for apprehending the sable tribe. This will be more available than writing such addresses as they last issued.

Rhetorical though it was in this case, capture became the most frequently mentioned policy option, even from settlers in the worst affected districts. In March 1830, a settler from the Clyde River complained to the *Hobart Town Courier* about the ineffectiveness of the roving parties: 'They make so much noise by talking and blundering over the dead wood and bark with a heavy tread that the Blacks have no need to use their eyes (although very sharp sighted) their ears being sufficient to give the alarm'. He proposed procuring a pack of

[84] *Tasmanian*, 26 February 1830, p 471
[85] *Tasmanian*, 26 February 1830, p 471. His emphases.

bloodhounds to follow the Aborigines so they could be either captured or expelled from the settled districts.[86]

However, even on the edge of the frontier there was no uniformity of opinion. Another settler took exception to these comments from the Clyde. He was more appreciative of the roving parties. He thought they had a good track record in preventing Aboriginal attacks, if not actually in capturing any. But he was particularly concerned about the proposal to use bloodhounds. He thought such a tactic was alien to the British character. It would destroy the reputation of British colonialism and reduce it to that of the Spanish:

> It would appear that the writer of that *sensible* letter has two objects in view, viz. — to dampen the ardour of those roving parties who by day and night have for a length of time past defended the settlements against the incursions of the Aborigines; and to offer an advice, which if adopted, would at once compromise the national character of Great Britain, and expose the English to the same everlasting odium which history has fixed on the cruelty of the Spaniards, who used blood hounds for hunting down the unfortunate natives of the American islands who had taken refuge in the woods and caverns, to shelter themselves against the cruelties and avarice of their rapacious invaders.[87]

Bloodhounds, however, were never used in Van Diemen's Land. The view prevailed that tactics of this kind would stain the colonial character. While the Clyde River settler who proposed it had some supporters, they were out of step with the views of most of their peers, as the next section demonstrates.

THE 1830 SURVEY OF SETTLER OPINION

One of the surprises of doing research on Van Diemen's Land is how rich the archival sources are. This is especially so in terms of settler opinion. The Archives Office of Tasmania holds more than three hundred pages of letters written by settlers about the Aboriginal problem. Many of them were written to Archdeacon Broughton's 1830 inquiry into Aboriginal affairs. It is an even greater surprise to find that among these documents are answers to what was probably the first ever questionnaire survey conducted in Australia. Broughton's committee, having read the relevant government reports

[86] *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 March 1830, p 2. The author was John Sherwin, whose loss of his house and property to Aboriginal arson in February 1830 prompted the editorial discussed earlier by Robert Lathrop Murray. Sherwin made the same proposal to the Committee for the Care of Captured Aborigines, AOT CBE/1, p 6

[87] *Colonial Times*, 19 March 1830, p 3. The author was unnamed and his address not given.

and held one meeting where it heard verbal evidence from a handful of settlers who happened to be visiting Hobart at the time, decided on 2 March 1830 that it needed to cast its inquiry more widely. The chairman submitted that a number of questions 'be circulated to Gentlemen of experience and long residence in the Colony'.[88] The committee drew up nine questions and wrote to settlers of this kind. The survey drew a return rate of fourteen responses. They included farmers, pastoralists and professional men from all the main settled areas. They were:

Richard Dry: landed property Quamby Plains near Westbury, Elphin near Launceston
Patrick Wood: landed property Dennistoun on Clyde River
William Barnes: brewer; landed property South Esk, Tamar
Edward Franks: landed property Green Ponds
James Scott: surgeon; landed property Bothwell, New Norfolk
William Clark: landed property Bothwell, Green Ponds
John Hudspeth: surgeon; landed property Oatlands
Thomas Salmon: chief constable Oatlands; landed property Oatlands
Thomas Anstey: police magistrate; landed property Oatlands; Member Legislative Council 1830
William Gray: landed property Avoca
James Cox: landed property South Esk, Clarendon, Blessington; Member Legislative Council 1830
George Meredith: landed property Great Swan Port
Edward Curr: chief agent of Van Diemen's Land Company since 1826
Temple Pearson: surgeon, landed property Campbell Town

Some of their answers were very long and detailed, with Edward Curr's running to twenty pages. All told, the responses to the survey total almost one hundred pages, containing fifteen thousand words of evidence. They provide an obviously valuable insight into the colonial mentality.

You would never know this from reading the orthodox school of historians, none of whom mention the survey's existence. Some of them, such as Henry Reynolds, are well aware of it and have used it as a source. But instead of providing a summary or overview of its contents to indicate the full range of opinions it gathered, these historians have simply mined it to find a handful of selected quotations to support their own, predetermined theses. Reynolds has done this in two of his recent books, *Fate of a Free People* and *An Indelible Stain?*,

[88] Minutes of the committee for the care and treatment of the captured Aborigines, 2 March 1830, AOT CBE/1, pp 12–13

neither of which even hint at the existence of the survey itself.[89] Anyone wanting to read the original documents in full will find the questions at one archival location[90] and the responses at another.[91]

Given Brian Plomley's claim that those settlers who gave evidence to the committee in 1830 'were extirpationists almost to a man', and the discussion earlier in this chapter of Reynolds's assertions about settler opinion, the responses to this survey provide a good opportunity to test the truth of the extirpationist thesis. What follows are the nine questions it asked and a summary of answers given to each one.

1. Have you a recollection of the present Lieutenant-Governor's assumption of the Administration?

Arthur arrived in 1824, when twelve of the fourteen were already in the colony. Edward Curr originally arrived in 1820, took up land at Cross Marsh, but then returned to England in 1823. He came back to the colony in March 1826 as chief agent of the Van Diemen's Land Company. Major William Gray first arrived in 1827.

2. What at that period was the general state of feeling and intercourse between the Native Population and the Settlers?

Eleven respondents agreed that before 1824 there was only a little contact between Aborigines and colonists but what there was had been friendly. Richard Dry said: 'The natives were in the habit of visiting the settlers' farms, receiving presents of bread and cloathing, and in all instances that I have witnessed, seemed satisfied with the conduct of the whites.'[92] Edward Franks observed that 'considerable numbers called "tame mobs" migrated occasionally passing thro' the peopled districts, in which they sojourned a few days or a week, and appeared with proper feeling to receive the kindness of the Whites, evinced in the distribution of bread, potatoes and clothes'. However,

[89] *Fate of a Free People*, pp 30–1, draws on the responses to the survey by Richard Dry; *An Indelible Stain?*, pp 52–3, uses responses by William Barnes, Edward Curr and Temple Pearson. In the latter book, Reynolds disguises their origin, claiming Barnes wrote to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, and that Pearson wrote to the Colonial Secretary, whereas the passages he quotes from both settlers were written actually in response to the Aboriginal committee's survey.

[90] Minutes of the committee for the care and treatment of the captured Aborigines, 2 March 1830, AOT CBE/1, pp 13–14

[91] Answers by settlers and others to certain questions submitted to them by the Aboriginal committee, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 287–383

[92] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 288

he noted, that 'the greater part of the black population kept aloof from all correspondence ...'[93]

Of the three who disagreed, James Scott said at that period the natives were very hostile, except one or two small families who frequented the settled districts. This was because 'a Sydney native, Muskitto, committed many murders at the head of a large body of them'. 'Any stockkeeper met without arms would have been instantly speared — several were killed.'[94] Thomas Salmon said: 'There was at that time a more friendly intercourse than at present between the whites and the blacks but accompanied by a great deal of treachery on the part of the latter'.[95]

3. Do you remember at that time the occurrence of any instances of treachery or hostility on the part of the former or which shewed a spirit of mischief subsisting among them?

Nine of the respondents recalled cases where the blacks had assaulted or killed settlers. In several cases the white victims had been giving them handouts. Three respondents singled out the case of Matthew Osborne, who was killed and his wife wounded. They repeated the story that the couple were attacked 'in the act of shaking hands with one' and 'whilst in the act of presenting them with a loaf of bread'.[96] The blacks had been at the Osbornes' home at Jericho for several hours before they did this and the incident was recalled with particular bitterness.

Two respondents, without being asked, mentioned treachery on the part of the whites. William Barnes denied that in 1824 or previously there had been any instances of black treachery or hostility. 'But if a solitary instance had occurred, I do not hesitate to say that it was provoked by the massacre of hundreds of their people by the stock keepers in the outstations.'[97] William Clark recalled the case of a man named Jenkins, a stock-keeper employed by Edward Lord, who 'seized a native woman and kept her confined for some days in his hut, always chaining her with a bullock chain to his post whenever he went abroad'.[98]

[93] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 307
[94] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 315
[95] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 335
[96] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 307, 327
[97] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 299
[98] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 320

4. If any such instances occurred do you conceive them to have originated in any provocation offered by the Whites, or to what cause do you attribute them?

Five respondents agreed that actions by the whites had been the cause of hostilities. Three of these settlers blamed bushrangers and stockkeepers at remote locations, while one of them also thought the sealers in Bass Strait who stole Aboriginal women were another cause. Thomas Anstey mentioned the original conflict at Risdon Cove in 1804. 'I have heard and read much of the natives having been wantonly subjective to a murderous platoon firing in the early days of the colony; but of this I know nothing beyond common report.' Anstey denied, however, that any hostility was generated by the violation of black women by the whites. 'This is disproved by the universally admitted fact that the Aborigines will shamelessly prostitute their gins to the whites for so trifling a present as sugar or bread.'[99]

Four respondents disagreed that the whites were to blame. Patrick Wood and John Hudspeth thought the cause lay in the desire of the Aborigines 'to obtain the comforts enjoyed by the settlers' and 'in a thirst for plunder in the blacks'.[100] Similarly, George Meredith told of two incidents in which shepherds in his district had been murdered: 'The chief originating causes in such appeared to be a desire on their part for the possession of dogs, although in the latter other property was plundered.'[101]

5. What is the present state of the Natives in your neighbourhood with respect to their feeling towards the White Population, and what instances of violence or depredation committed by them upon the Whites, or by the Whites upon them, have fallen within your knowledge during the last six years?

There was unanimity in answer to the first part of this question. Six respondents chose the words 'decidedly hostile', while others said 'most hostile', 'hostile in the extreme', 'most determined hostility', 'particularly hostile', 'extremely hostile', 'the most rancorous animosity', and 'unequivocal hostility'. Only Edward Curr modified the picture by saying that the feelings of the natives 'seem to differ in the districts with which I am concerned'. At the Surrey Hills they were hostile, but his own men were to blame: 'two of whom I have heard shot a woman in that neighbourhood about two years since'.[102]

Three other settlers agreed with Curr that actions by whites were a cause of black hostility, while five said they did not know of any vio-

[99] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 341–2
[100] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 295, 328
[101] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 355
[102] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 361

lence committed by whites against the blacks. Three others thought the only time that whites attacked blacks was when in pursuit of them for crimes the blacks had initiated.

Richard Dry reported one incident in which stock-keepers at Smith's run on Quambie's Plains (Western Marshes) 'had forced some black women to their hut and that in revenge for this outrage the natives waylaid and killed the two stockmen'.[103] William Barnes described another incident in which a group of Aborigines had come into Launceston and camped near Government House. However, convicts had 'abused' the women and beaten the men. Apart from this, he did not give any specific instances or name any of those responsible, but he was nonetheless certain the whites were responsible for terrible atrocities:

> The depredations committed upon them by the white people have been carried on for many years and have been upon so large a scale the slaughter has been so indiscriminate and attended with such heart rending and unheard acts of barbarity, that it is impossible to describe them. These acts are never published in the papers, but are recounted by the propitiators and are made the subject of exultation — when the killing of from two to twenty blacks is spoken of without the least remorse.[104]

Thomas Anstey also said: 'I have heard that wanton acts of violence have been committed by the whites upon the blacks, but I cannot at present recollect a specific instance.'[105]

On the other hand, James Scott said that while instances of depredation by the blacks were numerous, and although he had heard reports of violence on both sides, his own personal experience had always been friendly. 'I have often fallen in with them in the interior, during the last ten years — but always being sufficiently armed, and invariably treating them with kindness, have never been obliged to have resource to violent measures — I have often been obliged to them for a meal, after being some days on short allowances.'[106]

John Hudspeth strongly denied the whites were to blame and said stories of outrages committed by convicts and stock-keepers were fanciful:

> I have never known an instance of wanton aggression on the part of the whites — on the contrary, I have witnessed nothing but the utmost kindness and liberality towards these people — the settlers generally giving them bread, sugar, and articles of dress, being what they seemed most to prize ... I am moreover of opinion that injuries alleged to have been

[103] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 289
[104] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 300
[105] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 343
[106] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 316

> inflicted on the Aborigines by the convict population are more ideal than real. I have had opportunities of knowing the intercourse between white men and the native women was not offensive to these tribes and cannot suppose than any bad blood has sprung from that cause.[107]

All fourteen of the respondents mentioned murders and robberies committed by the blacks. Some of them, such as Edward Franks, John Hudspeth and Thomas Salmon, gave specific details of recent Aboriginal assaults in their districts, with their answers listing up to fifteen separate incidents.

Edward Curr did the same for the territory occupied by the Van Diemen's Land Company, with his answer to this question taking eleven pages.[108] However, he was more concerned than the others to play down the question of violence. Curr recorded one incident at Circular Head where Aborigines robbed the hut of company sawyers, observing: 'They might have securely speared the sawyers if murder had been their object.' On another occasion, shortly after they plundered a hut, the blacks came within ten yards of a man digging potatoes but did not molest him. 'I mention these circumstances thus sincerely, that the Committee seeing on the one hand the opportunities the natives have had, and on the other their forbearance, may form their own judgement of their dispositions.' Curr said there were two possible reasons for this forbearance. They might have been intimidated by 'the example which was made of them two years since' (the killings at Cape Grim), or by the sealers who 'have occasionally landed on the main and made havoc amongst them'. On the other hand, he argued, 'it is possible that conciliation may in some degree be the cause of their forbearance'. He then went on to describe an experiment he conducted with an Aboriginal youth who he accommodated, took out on his boat and taught some English. Curr tried to persuade the youth that the intentions of the settlers towards the natives were peaceable and asked him to take this message back to his tribe. He thought it possible that the recent lull in hostilities was due to this contact. Of all the settlers, Curr was the only one who tried to see the relationship through Aboriginal eyes:

> They have pilfered a little it is true, but this I forgive, for it is probable they see no difference between our taking their Kangaroos and their taking our flour and sugar. What ideas can such men have of property? And how are they to understand the distinction between an imperfect property as their Kangaroos, and a proper one as our flour etc? It is probable they think the wrong they do us in pilfering to be a very trifling offence, and those who commit that, may be very far from being willing to commit

[107] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 330
[108] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 360–71

murder. I certainly will not sanction their being fired upon in retaliation for such an offence. If they attack our flocks again I shall consider the case to be quite different. To steal what is of use to them may be consistent with their notions of amity, and I think it is; but if they should commence a wholesale slaughter of our Stock it can have no other motive than our expulsion, and will justify our taking strong measures in our own defence.[109]

6. What is your opinion as to the natives of the transactions of the past year as compared with the preceding?

Twelve of the settlers agreed that Aboriginal assaults had got worse in the past year and that the natives had become more hostile. The other two were Edward Curr, who said he did not know enough about the settled districts to have an opinion, and James Cox who, although agreeing there had been increased hostility, said the government was now on the right track: 'At present the blacks coming into the settled districts, therefore consider the measures adopted during the last year to be highly creditable to the government for the protection given to the people and that the necessity of continuing and increasing that protection is strongly called for.'[110]

Some respondents said there was a qualitative difference in the hostilities of the past year compared to those previous. Richard Dry said that until recent years the hostility did not appear to have extended beyond the tribe or family in which it originated, perhaps by 'some temporary aggression of the whites, the remembrance of which gradually gave way to better feelings'. However: 'during the later years a determined spirit of hostility has been manifested by the whole of the black population, and acts of outrage committed by them on the lives and property of the settlers in almost every district of the island.'[111] William Clark observed that the blacks 'no longer confine their depredations to remote stock huts and isolated dwellings, they now plunder houses in populous places ...' Clark was particularly alarmed that they had added arson to their crimes: 'Lately they have commenced a system of destruction, which if persevered in, will involve many families in ruin, by destroying houses and barns by fire.' He described two instances of Aborigines setting fire to houses 'while the blacks looked on at a short distance, enjoying the confusion the family were thrown into by the conflagration'.[112]

Three other settlers, James Scott, John Hudspeth and Thomas Anstey, also mentioned the increase in arson. Anstey noted: 'The

[109] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 370–1
[110] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 353
[111] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 289–90
[112] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 321–2

murders in this district have been less numerous, but the burnings of houses, corn stacks, fences have greatly increased.' He went on to lament the changed attitudes on both sides:

> The natives are become bolder and the whites more timid. The latter save their lives by timely flight and sacrifice their property without resistance. Thus, so far from acting on a system of "wanton aggression" — the settlers and their men have not even spirit enough to *defend* themselves when attacked by the blacks.[113]

7. To what causes would you attribute the rise and progress of the hostility displayed by the Natives?

The most common answer given to this question was to blame the hostilities on the shooting of Aborigines at Risdon Cove in 1804. Even though none of the settlers in the survey had been in the colony at that time, they believed that subsequent relations between the races had been poisoned by this incident. Edward Franks said: 'It would be difficult to assign a cause for the enmity of the blacks other than the one generally attributed, viz the unfortunate transactions on the first landing.'[114] John Hudspeth and William Gray agreed that the cause lay in 'some premature and ill-judged severity practised upon them by the white people immediately after the first settlement was formed here'.[115] James Scott showed that he had derived his view from reading Charles Jeffrey's guide for immigrants to the colony. He repeated Jeffrey's false claim that the Aborigines at Risdon Cove were carrying branches of trees as emblems of peace and blamed the officer in command for 'having caused one or two guns loaded with canister shot to be fired into their ranks and swept up great numbers of them'.[116]

As well as these four, a clear majority of the respondents thought that the whites themselves, for various other reasons, were to blame. William Barnes referred the committee to his answer to the previous question where he had said 'their experience of the barbarity and treachery of the whites must render them for ever mistrustful of our professions.'[117] Edward Curr agreed: 'I consider, as I have said above, the *rise* of hostilities to be attributable to the whites, and its *progress* I

[113] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 343–4
[114] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 310
[115] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 331, 347
[116] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 316. For the inaccuracy of Jeffrey's assertion see Chapter One, pp 24-5
[117] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 301

believe has been caused by mutual wrongs, and the difficulty of coming to any understanding with the natives.'[118]

Two settlers agreed with the explanation put forward in various proclamations by the lieutenant-governors that the lower orders of the colony in remote locations were responsible. William Clark identified remote stock-keepers and bushrangers as the principal culprits in his district around Bothwell. 'Until Dunn the bushranger violated one of their women at Mr Thomson's hut, whither he had forcibly carried her in Oct. 1826, no murders were perpetrated in this vicinity. On the contrary, a friendly intercourse subsisted between the natives and the settlers'.[119] James Scott thought 'various wanton acts of bushrangers, sealers, stockkeepers and others' had helped maintain the animosity.[120]

Scott also thought that the displacement of the natives from the land was another cause: 'for all the best tracts of land in the island where they were originally to find abundance of game, being taken from them by settlers, arriving year after year from England'.[121] Temple Pearson concurred: 'In some measure the ill usage of their women and children, but more especially the occupation of their favourite hunting tracts by the whites'.[122] This explanation also generated a marked difference of opinion by two of the respondents, who both argued their case thoughtfully and who deserve to be quoted in full. The first was Richard Dry:

> To the rapid increase of settlers who now occupy the best portions of the land, extensive plains and fine forests where formerly emu and kangaroo fed in such numbers, that procuring subsistence was pastime to a black native, and not as it is now, attended with toil and uncertainty, from this land they are excluded and daily witness our encroachments in the extensive fences erecting by the settlers. These circumstances 'tho inseparable from the nature of the settlement, must impress the blacks with unfavourable ideas of our intentions towards them; yet the results cannot be [as] distressing to them as those arising from the wanton destruction of the animals on which they subsist, by collectors of kangaroo skins for sale; and to whom the carcass is of no value. I am confident that in this way also there are not less than eight thousand of these animals killed annually; by parties stationed in the interior, by stockkeepers, bushrangers, and others who to gain six pence / the value of a skin / destroy a quantity of food sufficient for the daily subsistence of six natives.[123]

[118] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 371–2. His emphases
[119] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 322
[120] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 316
[121] AOT CSO 1/323/7678/9 p 316
[122] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 380
[123] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 290–1

The other was Patrick Wood, who wrote:

> I was at one time disposed to consider the hostility of the natives was occasioned by the difficulty they had in procuring food from the number of kangaroos destroyed by stockkeepers and time-expired men who killed them for their skins and under this impression I urged His Excellency the Lieut. Governor to issue orders restraining the use of kangaroo dogs and since that time there can have been no scarcity of food as the kangaroo at present seem to be more numerous than at any former period. I therefore do not think that the present hostile spirit can be attributed to ill usage or the scarcity of food but is occasioned by the wish to possess themselves of the property of the settlers with whose weakness they are acquainted from their being so widely scattered and they have now much more confidence in their own prowess.[124]

A smaller number of explanations for the cause of hostilities attributed responsibility to the blacks rather than the whites. Thomas Salmon blamed 'chiefly the depredations committed by Musquito in the presence of his tribe'.[125] Similarly, Edward Franks thought the 'tame mobs' and their early leaders had committed most atrocities. From them, the antagonism spread to tribal Aborigines. 'These have perhaps taught their wilder countrymen many things relating to the whites unknown to them before and possibly have inspired them with greater confidence.'[126] William Clark argued that once the Aborigines discovered they could rob settlers with impunity, this encouraged them to continue their actions:

> The progress of this hostility, and the alarming height to which it has now arisen, may, I think, be attributed to the want of energy in the parties sent in pursuit of them and to the facility with which they can plunder the settlers. The occupation of a settler detains him, and his men, for the most part, in the fields and his house, left without protection, becomes an easy prey to these insidious depredators who will, for days and weeks, watch a house that they have marked out for plunder, till they find the whole of the males absent, they then pounce upon the dwelling, and with a celerity incredible plunder it of every article they consider valuable. They are seldom pursued by the settlers, from a despair of finding them in the almost inaccessible fortresses, which this side of the island everywhere presents, to facilitate concealment, thus escaping with impunity they are led on to renewed acts of outrage.[127]

However, John Hudspeth thought the initial cause lay in the Aborigines' desire for British goods. Eventually, settler retaliation and

[124] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 296
[125] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 337
[126] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 310
[127] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 323

government response forced the clash into a more general conflict. He wrote:

> Their violence has encreased from a desire to possess without limitation our common necessaries such as bread, sugar, blankets, knives etc, to obtain which without resistance they committed murder in such repeated instances as at length to rouse a spirit of retaliation on the part of the settlers, or rather a determination to repel them whenever they attempted to approach our dwellings. The Government also found it expedient to send out parties with a view to capture them. This they are well aware of, and have commenced a general and open warfare upon the settlers.[128]

8. Do you conceive the latter to be aware of the disposition subsisting on the part of the Government and the respectable settlers to treat them kindly, and to live with them on amicable terms?

Seven of the respondents gave negative answers to this question, with Richard Dry speaking for most when he said: 'I think the blacks look on the whole of the white population as enemies and are not sensible of any benefit they might derive from living with us on friendly terms.'[129] Two settlers, Patrick Wood and William Gray, said that the Aborigines once thought both the government and the respectable settlers would treat them with kindness, but the situation had deteriorated to the point where they must no longer believe this. William Barnes thought the blacks could once discriminate between the attitudes of the government and of the respectable settlers and the actions of others who had been their enemies. 'But I think there is now no possibility of convincing them that every person meeting them will not immediately destroy them.'[130] James Cox thought that many of them 'must be aware of the good intentions of the government and people to treat them kindly, but cannot suppose this to be generally understood by them, and from their wandering habits and savage and hostile manner they will I fear never be brought thoroughly to understand it.'[131]

9. What measures are in your opinion proper to be adopted for attaining this last mentioned purpose, or if it should prove unattainable for protecting the lives and property of the Community against the attacks of the Savages?

There were two parts to this question, which really amounted to asking, first, how to conciliate the Aborigines, and, second, if conciliation failed, what action to take then. Despite the general pessi-

[128] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 331
[129] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 291
[130] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 301
[131] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 353

mism about how the situation had deteriorated to the point where all the Aborigines were hostile to the white presence, seven of the fourteen settlers still thought conciliation was an option worth trying.

Both James Scott and William Gray thought it would still be possible to negotiate with the Aborigines. Scott recommended employing a party of five or six natives from New South Wales to persuade the local tribes to come in from the wild, after which they should be taken to an uninhabited part of the colony and confined there. Gray also suggested employing a party of Sydney natives to 'open up a means of communication' with them. John Hudspeth also recommended importing natives from Sydney to act as trackers, and advised that, to ensure their perseverance, they should be allowed to bring their gins with them.

The other four settlers who thought conciliation was still possible all proposed capturing some of the Aborigines, holding them for a time while the government's good intentions were explained to them, and then releasing them back to their tribes so they could communicate the good news. William Barnes proposed offering rewards of ten pounds for every male Aborigine, five pounds for every female and three pounds for every child captured and delivered alive to Ross, Launceston or Hobart. He spelt out what should happen next:

> I would then propose that they should be treated with every possible degree of kindness to convince them of the sincerity of our views — They should be made to understand most fully that the object of bringing them in, is not to punish or to injure them, but to prevent any further acts of hostility between them and the whites — after keeping them for some weeks with great care and incessantly explaining to them that the Governor, the public officers and respectable people are their friends, and as soon as there is reason to believe that they fully understand us — dismiss a few of them and their families with presents to join their tribes, to whom they will communicate what they had been told and how they had been treated.[132]

Others who advocated a policy along much the same lines were William Clark, Edward Curr (in his answer to question five) and Temple Pearson. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Pearson warned the committee that unless conciliatory measures were effective, total extermination would be the only option left. His preferred policy was that someone should learn the native language and negotiate with them, preferably someone of their own colour. He knew some of their vocabulary and offered to provide it to the committee. Small parties of prisoners should be used to capture Aborigines and explain

[132] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 302

the government's intentions. They were not as difficult to track in the woods, he said, as many people thought.

One prospect Edward Curr raised was for the Aborigines to be 'civilized through the medium of their vices'. In North and South America, he observed, the natives had been taught to drink and smoke:

> Occasional indulgence soon grows into a habit. When their supply is stopped they begin to consider how they can renew it, and they soon understand that they can only have their wants supplied, by giving an equivalent. There is the first dawning of trade: they process skins that they may barter them for spirits and tobacco, and then the gradation from Drunkenness to Christianity even! is not very remote.[133]

This was hardly, however, a practical proposition to put before this committee. It was more a sardonic barb aimed at Archdeacon Broughton and his evangelical ambitions than a seriously intended recommendation. Some of Curr's other answers can be read in a similar light, particularly the passage discussed above where he raised the prospect of exterminating the Aborigines, only to then declare himself against it. Curr was an intelligent man who enjoyed pursuing the logic of a position to its conclusion, even when he did not endorse the direction the argument took. He believed the situation between blacks and whites in Van Diemen's Land to be irreconcilable and he mocked the committee's hope of finding a solution.

The other seven respondents thought both the time and the opportunity for conciliation had now passed. Three of them suggested capturing the Aborigines and removing them to a location where they could no longer harass the settlers. Edward Franks thought it 'desirable to remove them to some place, or island, where they would be harmless and where their children might be reared with better feelings and receive instruction.' Franks also discussed using bloodhounds: 'however repugnant to British feeling and to the dictates of humanity, I would suggest but cannot recommend the ultra measure of the bloodhound', a proposition he thought 'appears frightfully on paper'. However, the 'obduracy and sanguinary temper of this savage race' meant the prospect should be raised.[134] Thomas Anstey said he did not think the blacks could be induced to live with the whites on amicable terms. 'Their capture and deportation to a distant land is the most efficient and humane measure that I can suggest.'[135] James Cox wanted them captured and 'transported to some secure place, and when removed from their native soil I have

[133] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 376–7
[134] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 311–12
[135] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 345

no doubt but they might be made useful in agricultural purposes, raise food for themselves under proper management'.[136]

The other four who despaired of conciliation recommended a resort to arms. Richard Dry suggested the settlers should pay for 'armed associations in each district ready to act in aid of the police and military'. They would eventually force the Aborigines into conciliation. 'When they are convinced that the forbearance of the whites hitherto has not proceeded from a want of power to repel their attacks and are made sensible of our superiority they may then be induced to enter into communications that may lead to an amicable termination.'[137] Patrick Wood thought it was 'not until a severe example has been made of them that they may again learn to respect the Europeans'.[138] Thomas Salmon could only suggest 'to send out a sufficient number of parties and station them judiciously'.[139] George Meredith proposed the most extreme solution:

> the earliest possible importation of bloodhounds — dogs which I ever thought *ought* to have been sent for at the first appearance of Bush Ranging — and in the meantime the training of colonial dogs — not to hunt and destroy the natives — but to be attached to every field party — to be *used in hand* — and thus to track unerringly and either insure their capture, or if indeed the alternative *must* be resorted to — their annihilation.[140]

The only other settler to seriously advocate extermination was John Hudspeth. While he initially recommended a policy of capturing the Aborigines, he said he doubted this was a practical solution, adding:

> I am solemnly of opinion that they can never be got alive in any considerable number — that their implacability will never cease and that if there were only five in number existing in the bush, these are sufficient (as they get more enlightened) to devastate the island from one end to the other and consequently I conceive the only remedy is their total annihilation to save ourselves from a similar fate.[141]

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE SURVEY

What overall conclusions can we draw from this survey? Although confined to the views of fourteen individuals, it provides the most comprehensive information about settler opinion at the time when the crisis of Aboriginal violence reached its peak. It was a selective

[136] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 354
[137] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 292
[138] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 296
[139] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 337
[140] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 pp 357–8
[141] AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 333

survey that obviously did not represent a complete cross-section of colonial society. Those approached were 'gentlemen of experience and long residence' and were representative of the respectable classes rather than the lower orders. Nonetheless, it is a valuable insight into the temperament of the times. The questions probed opinions about the causes and the history of the conflict and asked the settlers what they thought should be done about it. There is no other contemporary source that comes even close to providing such a range and depth of opinion.

The conclusions that may be drawn from the survey are fairly clear. They do not favour the interpretation offered by Brian Plomley, Henry Reynolds and Sharon Morgan. In fact, they refute the extirpationist thesis. Even at the height of Aboriginal violence, when Morgan claimed they were consumed by mass hysteria and a 'sadistic frenzy', most settlers remained cool and tried to assess the situation rationally. Rather than using black violence as an excuse to commit atrocities of their own, most placed more blame on their own side than on the blacks and sought to understand where they had gone wrong.

Plomley's claim that settlers who gave evidence to the Aborigines committee were 'extirpationists almost to a man', is not only false but defames the majority by attributing to them an outlook they never held. The evidence shows that half of those questioned in March 1830 still believed in conciliation. Only when asked what would happen *if all else failed* did any of them advocate exterminating the Aborigines. Only two out of fourteen settlers made an unequivocal call of this kind. This position was clearly at the extreme end of the scale of settler opinion. At the other end were those who despaired of the treatment the Aborigines had received at white hands and who, despite increasing attacks on white households, still wanted them treated with 'every possible degree of kindness'. In the middle were settlers who generally supported the policy that was eventually adopted, the capture of the Aborigines and their removal to a secure location where they could no longer raid the settlers' properties. There were also some who supported a big show of strength by the colony, which to this point had been lacking. Some settlers saw that the lack of a more determined military response had encouraged the Aborigines to imagine themselves more invincible than they really were and this had itself contributed to the growth of violence.

It is also worth emphasising that the survey is largely the voice of the countryside rather than the town. Ten of the settlers came from the three districts that had suffered most from violence: the central midlands (Oatlands, Green Ponds, Campbell Town), the Clyde and Big River districts, and Oyster Bay. All of them knew people who

had been killed or assaulted by Aborigines in the recent past. This was especially true of the two men who advocated extermination, George Meredith and John Hudspeth. Meredith's property at Oyster Bay had been raided a number of times and two assigned servants had been killed on his land. Later that year, two more men were to be killed on his stock run.[142] John Hudspeth was the surgeon at Oatlands, which between 1828 and 1830 was the district that suffered the worst human casualties. Hudspeth had frequently been present immediately after Aboriginal assaults to attend the wounded and dying and was often a witness at coronial inquests. Given some of the details he described in his clinical evidence, such as the mutilation of murdered white women and children,[143] it would not have been surprising to hear him express even more bloodthirsty opinions than he gave. Clearly, the settlers inhabited a culture that fostered restraint in these matters.

THE GREAT DEBATE, HOBART, SEPTEMBER 1830

In September 1830 an extraordinary public meeting was held at the Court House in Hobart. It was ostensibly to organize the free settlers into a town guard that would maintain security while the military was in the field pursuing Aborigines along the Black Line. The meeting, however, turned into a full-scale public debate over the merits of the Black Line itself. The proceedings were reported by the *Colonial Times*. Its edition of 24 September 1830 devoted two of its four broadsheet pages to the speeches given and to editorial comment about the government's decision. The meeting, it should be emphasized, was held on the eve of the most dramatic event that had ever occurred in the colony. The week before, the Lieutenant-Governor had announced the general mobilisation of the white population. The

[142] *Hobart Town Gazette*, 24 July 1824, p 2; Francis Aubin, Report of the Outrages Committed by the Aborigines at Great Swan Port, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, p 841; *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 3

[143] See especially his evidence to the inquest into the deaths of Anne Geary and Alicia Gough, 11 October 1828, Oatlands, AOT CSO 1/316/7578, pp 169–71. After Mrs Gough was speared twice in the throat and other parts of the body, she was clubbed in the head twelve or thirteen times. Her seven- and four-year-old daughters were similarly beaten about the head. Another settler who observed this kind of mutilation was James Cox, who told the 1830 Aborigines committee that in 1825, two stock-keepers were killed on his run at Mills Plains, Nile River, in a 'premeditated and cruel murder'. Their bodies were 'much bruised by waddies and afterwards their heads scorched by a small fire being made for that purpose after they were killed': AOT CSO 1/323/7578 p 351

line itself was due to begin its march in less than three weeks time. This was a heady moment.

The meeting elected as chair the master of the Supreme Court, Joseph Hone. The first speaker was Anthony Fenn Kemp, the former soldier, now a prominent merchant. Kemp said that, because of the atrocities the Aborigines had committed in the interior, it was necessary for the settlers to support the government by taking up town duty. But he blamed the origin of the conflict on the whites, especially those who fired on the Aborigines at Risdon Cove in 1804. Although he had been stationed at Launceston at the time, he had firm opinions about the incident. The *Colonial Times* wrote:

> Mr Kemp commented at some length upon the aggression committed by the blacks, which he attributed in a great degree to some officers of his own regiment (the late 102nd), who had, as he considered, most improperly fired a four pounder upon a body of them, which having done much mischief, they had since borne that attack in mind, and have retaliated upon the white people whenever opportunity offered.[144]

He was followed by the barrister and former Attorney-General, Joseph Gellibrand, who said he would express his opinions plainly and without reserve:

> It has been stated by Mr Kemp that we have been aggressors in the present unhappy state of hostility that prevails between the white people and the black Aborigines. This reflection cannot but give rise to the most painful feeling. How dreadful it is to contemplate that we are about to enter upon a war of extermination, for such I apprehend is the declared object of the present operations and that in its progress we shall be compelled to destroy the innocent with the guilty.

Gellibrand argued that, as the law of the colony now stood, those engaged in the Black Line were putting themselves in 'considerable peril' of criminal charges for they could not distinguish between the innocent and the guilty among the blacks:

> I admit that if any of the blacks who have committed the dreadful atrocities, the existence of which no man laments more than myself, could be identified, and were pursued and could not be captured, that it might then be justifiable to shoot them. But I doubt very much, whether, if unless such identity were ascertained, that any individual who should shed the blood of one of these unhappy people, would not, in the present state of the law, be guilty of murder.

After some appeals by other speakers to confine the debate to the purpose of the meeting, the midlands farmer, Benjamin Horne,

[144] *Colonial Times*, 24 September 1830, p 3. All the speeches that followed were recorded in the same edition.

reminded Gellibrand that, while he 'spoke on the subject of the cruelty of shedding the blood of the Aborigines', he had overlooked their slaughter of the whites. 'Surely he cannot have forgotten that the grass has hardly yet grown over the graves of the two children who were recently so barbarously murdered!' Horne said that the shepherds in the interior had become so alarmed by Aboriginal atrocities that 'they peremptorily refuse to go out with the flocks of sheep, which are thereby left to wander and stray away'. Horne went on:

> I am always opposed to appeals to the feelings in the way of argument. On the present occasion that appeal has been most powerfully made, but entirely on one side, in favour of the blacks against the whites. If therefore extermination is necessary, horrible as is the alternative, I do not see what other means of protection exist.

The Hobart medical practitioner Dr Adam Turnbull then took issue with some of the reservations expressed by Anthony Fenn Kemp and argued that they should not be daunted by the prospect of a war of extermination:

> It is so already, and a movement on a large scale as at present proposed, is infinitely preferable to a lingering warfare, in the course of which the flocks are cut off little by little — but still it is a [w]ar of extermination.[145] The present plan will strike them with dismay — they will be either taken or destroyed or driven into some of the recesses of the interior. The present warfare of the stockkeepers is infinitely more one of extermination than the proposed one will be. The simultaneous movement will excite terror, not rage. Two interests are concerned — the black and the white — and I think the simultaneous attack will be the means of saving and not shedding blood. The blacks will be less injured— the whites more secured.

After some more business about forming the town guard, the colony's Solicitor-General, Alfred Stephen, returned to the debate. He emphasized he was only there as a private citizen, not as a member of the government. He took the hardest line of all the speakers. He dismissed Gellibrand's argument that in pursuit of the blacks they might possibly commit a crime:

> I agree with Mr Horne that the slaughter of the whites has been as indiscriminate as any which can be the result of the proposed operations — and I say, that as they have waged such a war upon the settlers, you are bound to put them down. I say that you are bound to do, in reference to the class of individuals who have been involuntarily sent here, and compelled to be in the most advanced position, where they are exposed to the

[145] The original report transcribed this as 'law of extermination' but 'war' makes more sense.

> hourly loss of their lives. I say, sir (Mr Stephen here spoke with much animation), that you are bound upon every principle of justice and humanity, to protect this particular class of individuals, and if you cannot do so without extermination, then I say boldly and broadly, exterminate! I trust I have as much humanity as any man who hears me, but I declare openly, that if I was engaged in the pursuit of the blacks, and that I could not capture them, which I would endeavour to do by every means in my power, I would fire upon them.

The Shannon River farmer George Thomson seconded Stephen's sentiments adding: 'If there is an imperative necessity to destroy the blacks, then I say we are bound to use the means that Providence has placed in our hands for that purpose.' Gellibrand then replied to his critics, accusing Horne as being more emotional than he, especially in raising the issue of the murdered children. Gellibrand claimed their deaths had arisen 'entirely in retribution for atrocities of the most horrid sort committed upon the blacks by the stockkeepers'. He refused to abandon his point about the settlers breaking the law in pursuit of the Aborigines:

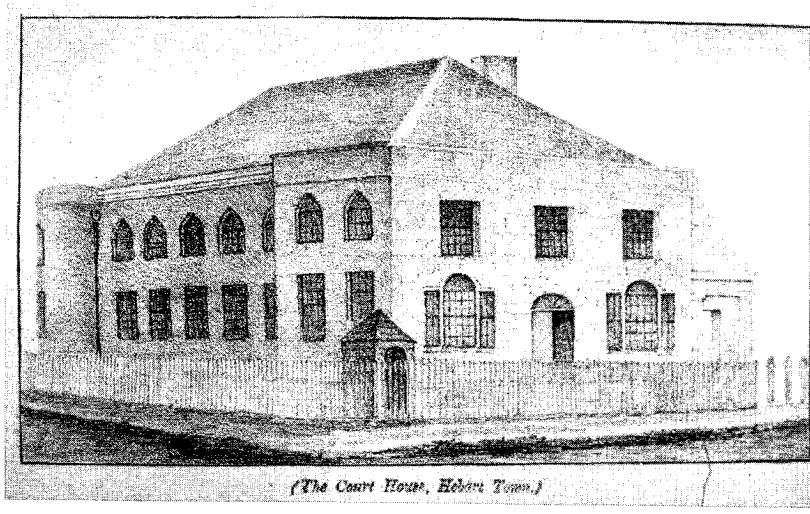
> I am of opinion that as the law now stands any man who may kill one of those blacks would place himself in a very dangerous situation. I well remember the time, when the gentleman who here presides [Hone], filled that high office against the power of the sanctions of which no man can stand. At that period, a very strong feeling existed in respect to the atrocities that had been committed upon the blacks, and I take upon myself to assert, without fear of contradiction, that if any man who had killed a black native, had been brought here under such a charge, that the Attorney-General would have brought him before the Chief Justice for murder, and that the Judge would have directed the jury to find him guilty.

Stephen then replied that he could not clarify the settlers' legal status as he had a responsibility to advise the government on the question, but he did support Gellibrand on one point:

> I admit that the atrocities of the whites against the blacks, particularly in the instance which Mr Gellibrand described to me this morning, to be dreadful beyond belief, and if I could discover the monsters by whom they had been perpetrated, I should only wish that they had each ten lives to expiate with them the horrid crimes they had committed.

Dr Turnbull, however, would not concede anything. He said:

> I differ entirely with the view Mr Gellibrand has taken upon the subject of extermination — that measure has been adopted in the sister colony, with the greatest success. The natives having committed great atrocities, the Government sent out a military force against them, by whom they were so destroyed, that the inhabitants of Sydney have since boasted of the tranquillity which has resulted therefrom.



Site of the great debate: The Court House, Hobart Town, 1834, by Henry Melville (W. L. Crowther Library, State Library of Tasmania)

However, this claim was immediately challenged by Robert Lathrop Murray, the editor of the *Tasmanian*.

> I beg leave to set Dr Turnbull right as to New South Wales. There was not a war of extermination there — nor was the measure of the Government such as he describes it. The incursions of the blacks had been found annoying in the neighbourhood of the new discovered country, over the Blue Mountains. General Macquarie dispatched Captain Schom with the light company of the 46th Regiment, with instructions to drive the natives into the interior, but to do so with as little bloodshed as possible. Those who knew General Macquarie need not be told of his humanity. Captain Schom marched about some weeks — drove the blacks into the interior — and the order ended, I believe, without the loss of a single life.

The Hobart distiller James Hackett then weighed into the debate in support of Gellibrand and Murray:

> The proceedings of this day will have a material influence on public opinion. Previous to the adoption of the measure of extermination which has been spoken of, I am desirous of its being considered whether everything possible has been done in the way of conciliation. I ask what attempts have been made to effect so desirable a purpose? Not one! It is a national disgrace to us, that this has been omitted. I believe I may venture to state, that there are not six persons in the whole Colony who are able to communicate with the blacks in their own language. Had we been a Colony of Frenchmen how different a policy would have been adopted. This, I think, is a matter deserving the most serious consideration.

The editor of the *Hobart Town Courier*, James Ross, then took issue with Hackett, giving the meeting a brief history lesson:

> I think, looking at the evidence of history, that the French, Spanish and Portuguese Colonists have treated the Aborigines in all the countries where they have settled very differently to what Mr Hackett seems to be aware of. I was a member of a corps of volunteers in one of the West Indies Islands some years ago, raised for purposes similar to the present, and the result was most satisfactory. We are blind to the situation of the settlers in the interior, that demand the strongest measures of protection.

After some banter by Murray who urged Ross to join the town guard rather than remain at his business in Hobart, the two delivered the following exchange:

> Dr Ross. — I cannot agree to that, the exigency is most serious, and requires the co-operation of every individual, and to such an extent have the aggressions of the blacks been carried, that if they are not prevented, they will come and drive us from this very Court-room, and compel us to take refuge in the ships. The present situation of things is extremely alarming, and I trust the strongest measures will be adopted, without any reference to the legal question which Mr Gellibrand has raised, with which I consider we have nothing whatever to do.

> Mr Murray. — I differ entirely with Dr Ross, on the subject of the alarm he feels as to the natives driving us from this room to the shipping. No doubt that they are enabled to commit many atrocities, most frequently by the exercise of that cunning by which all savages are distinguished; but to talk of six dozen of miserable creatures, and never was a larger body seen assembled than 72, driving us from this room, is of course a joke.

The meeting then went on to appoint a committee to organize the town guard and distribute its posts.

If one were adjudicating this particular debate simply on the number of supporters for each side, the result would be almost a tie. There were four main speakers for the anti-extirpationists (Kemp, Gellibrand, Murray and Hackett) and four for the extirpationists (Horne, Turnbull, Stephen and Ross), with the single-sentence contribution of Thomson tipping the balance in favour the latter. This is a result reasonably consistent with the answers to the questionnaire survey of the Aborigines committee earlier in the year, but indicates that there had been a hardening of attitudes between March and September, especially now that a full-scale military action was imminent.

It also indicates, however, how wary readers should be when historians quote isolated statements to illustrate the beliefs of people in the past. There are obviously opinions expressed in this debate that could be selectively extracted to provide evidence in support of whatever position the historian chooses to adopt. In his book *An*

Indelible Stain?, Henry Reynolds does give a partial account of both sides of this debate by citing two of the speeches.[146] He quotes Gellibrand decrying how dreadful it was that the colony was about to enter upon a war of extermination. Reynolds then writes: 'Among the numerous speakers who stood up to oppose Gellibrand, the most articulate — and influential — was Alfred Stephen, the colony's solicitor-general'. Reynolds then goes on to give a long quotation from Stephen's speech, the most inflammatory of the gathering. Reynolds's account gives the false impression that Gellibrand was a lone and futile voice, engulfed by the clamour of the meeting.

Moreover, it is clear that opinions on both sides were not permanently fixed. They waxed and waned in response to events and the shifting opinions of others. As the earlier discussion of the colonial press demonstrated, the editors Murray and Ross could both be quoted in other contexts taking the *opposite* positions to those they supported in the great debate in September. In the *Hobart Town Courier* right up to November 1830, Ross supported a policy of capturing Aboriginal assailants, urging his readers to ensure they were taken alive, while in the *Tasmanian* in February 1830, Murray had made a call for their extermination. Even the most fervent speaker at the meeting, Alfred Stephen, soon tempered his remarks and agreed with his opponents that the whites shared part of the blame.

What this debate really shows is the agonising dilemma that the continuation of Aboriginal violence created for the settlers. They were clearly shocked and angered by the escalation of Aboriginal robberies and murders and by the insecurity under which outlying settlers, their families and servants were forced to live. However, the more sensitive of them were also aware of the need to preserve their own reputations and sense of values. They wanted a solution to the Aboriginal problem but not at any price. They felt compelled to counsel their fellow colonists against the rush of blood to the head.

It is also clear that neither the speakers in the great debate, nor any who answered the survey questionnaire, nor any of the writers for the colonial press, expressed anything resembling the motives attributed to them by the historians of the orthodox school. No one called for extermination of the blacks in order to clear them out of their way or to remove them from the land they coveted, as Brian Plomley claims, or because of any sense of superiority or white supremacy, as Sharon Morgan alleges. In every case, even the hardest attitudes were generated solely by the desire to stop the blacks from assaulting and murdering whites. They would have been a peculiar people had they not felt the urge to retaliate. Despite the restraints of their culture and

[146] Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, pp 54–6

religion, and the admonishments of their government, the settlers of Van Diemen's Land were only human.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF THE SETTLERS

Despite all this analysis of settler opinion, it is important to recognize that it was not the decisive factor in determining what action would be taken against the Aborigines. The colony was not a democracy. Its Lieutenant-Governor was answerable not to the settlers but to the Secretary of State for Colonies, a minister of the British government. If they had a major disagreement with the Lieutenant-Governor's decisions, settlers could write to London with their complaints, but had little other formal redress.

In 1830, Arthur took major decisions with the concurrence of his Executive Council, which comprised himself, the Chief Justice, John Pedder, the Colonial Secretary, John Burnett, and the Colonial Treasurer, Jocelyn Thomas. These were the four who, in August 1830, decided to put the Black Line into the field. Since 1828, Arthur had also appointed a Legislative Council to make and approve laws for the colony. The Legislative Council included the members of the Executive Council, four other public servants, two bankers and five landowners.

Among the range of settler opinion discussed in this chapter, only two members of the Legislative Council were represented. Thomas Anstey and James Cox both answered the questionnaire put out by the Aborigines committee. By 1830 both supported firm measures against the Aborigines, in the form of their capture and removal to a secure place, but neither publicly expressed a sentiment in favour of their extermination. Anstey did play a role in Arthur's decision to mount the Black Line. In August, he passed on a note of concern from the coroner's jury that had inquired into the death of the Oatlands settler James Hooper, who had suffered his third Aboriginal assault in three years. Anstey added his own prediction that 'the ensuing spring will be the most bloody that we have yet experienced, unless sufficient military protection should be afforded'.[147] These were two of the most influential documents the Executive Council considered when it made its decision. Apart from this, however, the voice of the settlers was not decisive in determining either how or when Arthur acted.

It should also be emphasized that this whole chapter has been a discussion of expressions of opinion only. The fact remains that none of the few who called for the extermination of the blacks acted out their sentiments, or had the power to do so. In fact, not one of the speak-

[147] See Chapter Six, p 171

ers at the Court House meeting in September joined the Black Line or took up arms of any kind. When put to the reality test, rather than the annihilation of the blacks, the military campaign that eventuated resulted in nothing more genocidal than the shooting of three and the capture of two Aborigines.

In matters of this kind, the responsibility of the historian is not simply to report the opinions of the people of the past as if they were the definitive word on the subject and an accurate guide to what actually happened. There are two other issues the historian needs to resolve: whether their opinions were well informed by the actual events of the time and whether their words were matched by their deeds. The next chapter attempts to do this by examining the number of Aborigines who died violently at white hands.

CHAPTER TEN

The death toll and demise of the Aboriginal population, 1803–1834

> That many hostile collisions occurred between the two races during the 30 years that succeeded the first colonisation of the country is true enough; but I know of no trustworthy record of more than one, two, three or at most four persons being killed in any one encounter. The warfare, though pretty continuous, was rather a petty affair, with grossly exaggerated details — something like the story of the hundred dead men, reduced, on inquiry, to three dead dogs.
>
> —James Calder, *The Native Tribes of Tasmania* (1875)[1]

HOW many Aborigines died violently at the hands of colonists in Van Diemen's Land? If the orthodox school and those who have repeated its claims about genocide are right, it must have been a great many. After reading the secondary literature on Tasmania for his bicentennial history of Australia, *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes was certainly left with this impression: 'Perhaps ten blacks were killed for every white, perhaps twenty'.[2] Since some 187 colonists died at

[1] J. E. Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c, of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn and Co, Hobart, 1875, p 8

[2] Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987, p 414

indigenous hands,[3] this would mean the total number of Aborigines killed was between 1870 and 3740. In the following passage, one of Hughes's principal sources on Aboriginal affairs, Henry Reynolds, is more circumspect but still implies the total was more than a thousand:

> There is hard evidence of a decline from perhaps 1500 indigenous Tasmanians at the beginning of the Black War in 1824, to about 350 in 1831. As well, the high death rate at Wybalenna on Flinders Island is well known, with numbers falling from about 220 in 1833 to 46 in 1847. In the first period, many Aborigines must have been killed by British troops, official paramilitary roving parties or armed settlers encouraged by the government to defend themselves. Many others may have succumbed to the extreme rigours of guerilla war and the pressure exerted by the military campaign waged at the direction of Governor Arthur.[4]

While Reynolds here avoids putting a precise figure on it himself, the implication of this statement is that between 1824 when there were 1500 and 1831 when only 350 were left, some 1150 Aborigines were either shot dead by armed parties of troops and settlers or else succumbed to exposure and hunger during the military campaign. Since he believes that, before British colonisation, there were between 5000 and 7000 indigenous people in Tasmania,[5] Reynolds is therefore saying that between 16 and 24 per cent of the original population was wiped out during the 'Black War' alone. Lyndall Ryan also argues the death toll from violence was substantial, although her sums are not as high as those of Reynolds:

> In 1823 the estimated population of the Big River, Oyster Bay, North Midlands, North East and North tribes was about a thousand. By 1832, 156 had been captured, 50 lived with sealers, and 27 lived with settlers. Of the remainder, 280 were recorded shot, which leaves some 480 unaccounted for. It seems that even on the Tasmanian frontier only about one-third of the Aborigines killed were recorded and that a more realistic total would be about 700, or nearly four times as many as the 176 Europeans killed by the Aborigines.[6]

Since she believes that before the British arrived the indigenous population was between 3000 and 4000, Ryan's total of 700 killings in the Black War is, proportionately, about the same as that of Rey-

[3] Chapter Four has the statistics for white deaths and injuries, p 85

[4] Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, Viking, Ringwood, 2001, p 71. Reynolds's figures for Aboriginal casualties in *Fate of a Free People* are much lower than those he supports in *An Indelible Stain?*. In *Fate of a Free People*, pp 81–2, he put the total at 100–150 killed between 1803 and 1824, and 150–250 after 1824, that is, between 250 and 400 all up.

[5] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1995, p 4

[6] Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, (1981), Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p 174

nolds: between 17 and 23 per cent. Among some tribal groups, however, Ryan claims there was an extraordinarily high degree of violent death. 'Although the official reports suggest a much lower figure,' she argues, 'some 240 Big River people were killed in this period; out of the three hundred living in 1823, less than sixty remained in 1831.'[7] The numbers of Aborigines in the districts settled by colonists declined by a similar proportion, but at a much faster rate. She writes: 'Of the two hundred Aborigines in the settled districts in 1828, fewer than fifty survived the settlers' guns to surrender to Robinson.'[8]

Let us defer for the moment any discussion of how these authors arrived at their 'before' and 'after' figures. The truth is that, despite Reynolds's claim, there never was any 'hard evidence' about Aboriginal numbers at all. Until they got to count those captured and shipped to Flinders Island, the colonial authorities and settlers relied upon nothing better than uninformed speculation and wild guesses. Reynolds himself admitted this in an earlier book when he criticized the claim by the economic historian Noel Butlin that there were still 7000 Aborigines in the colony in 1818. This total, Reynolds said, 'is almost certainly mistaken. Officials had no idea of the population and 7000 was far too high a figure.'[9] A later section of this chapter will take up this issue in detail. First, however, let us focus on two major contradictions in the orthodox case.

AGILE BLACKS VERSUS BUMBLING WHITES

The argument of the orthodox school is hung on an unresolvable dilemma. On the one hand, its members want to argue that the Aborigines were accomplished guerilla warriors whose fighting skills, agility and knowledge of the bush easily outdid the bumbling red-coated British soldiers and the equally inept local settlers. On the other hand, they want to argue that the same soldiers and settlers mercilessly outgunned the blacks, almost slaughtering them at will, and inflicting four times as many casualties as they suffered themselves.

To preserve his guerilla warfare thesis, Reynolds wants us to see the Aborigines as accomplished warriors, well versed in military tactics. 'Observers not blinded by prejudice,' he writes, 'could discern the skill and the intelligence informing both raid and retreat.'[10] He is critical of other historians who have exaggerated the number of blacks killed in order to emphasize the brutality of the colonial encounter. He thinks this tendency is 'understandable' but is concerned that it

[7] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 122
[8] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 113
[9] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 224 n 98
[10] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 68

inflates the abilities of the Europeans and underestimates those of the Aborigines. 'The story then becomes a struggle between cruel but clever whites and sympathetic but stupid blacks.'[11] To do his bit to overcome such prejudice, Reynolds claims the blacks were much superior at bush fighting. British soldiers and settlers moved awkwardly through the strange Tasmanian terrain while the Aborigines exploited their environment with consummate skill. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur himself recognised that the expertise of the Aborigines, combined with the 'rugged and impervious nature' of the country, gave them 'an infinite superiority over their pursuers', Reynolds claims.[12] The ease with which they slipped through the Black Line of 1830 was proof of this. Reynolds writes:

> We know that even when European parties pursued Aborigines after a raid when they or their fresh tracks were clearly seen, the white men were rarely able to reach their quarry. So commonplace was this that the settlers often decided it was pointless to pursue the blacks into the bush. Sometimes the Europeans were lucky or the Aborigines less cautious than usual. But the record suggests that when Aborigines chose to avoid the Europeans they could do so with ease. When they met the Europeans it was at times and in places of their choice.[13]

Some of the early colonists who took the Aboriginal side in the conflict made the same point. In December 1831, George Augustus Robinson considered the issue in his diary:

> The military operations and armed parties sent out in quest of the hostile natives has frequently been the occasion of much reflection to my mind and the futility of such endeavour has been apparent. Nay, it has appeared to me as a visionary scheme, a battle with a shadow. They have not succeeded. None have been successful. How could they be? How could it be expected? ... The whole face of the country (with few exceptions) serves as a secure retreat. The woods, or to use the colonial phrase 'bush', is sufficient shelter that let you see a native, nay, let you be but a yard distant in some places and let him see you, he has sufficient time for him to escape and you lose him in the secure recesses of the forest. Instances, and not a few, have been where they have escaped from towns when surrounded by their foes.[14]

On the other hand, Reynolds claims the guerilla war found the colonists well out of their depth. The British troops had been trained

[11] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 77
[12] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 118
[13] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 78
[14] Robinson, diary, 14 and 15 December 1831, N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson,* Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1996, pp 552, 556

for European conflict in formal, disciplined manoeuvres on open battlefields. In the bush, they suffered the disadvantages of other European parties. They were on foot and had to carry their food, weapons and camping gear. They had little knowledge of the country and found the terrain difficult. They lacked bushcraft. Moreover, the soldiers were reluctant warriors. They were poorly paid, ill-educated and, to prevent them from getting drunk and fraternising with the convicts, their officers controlled them with rigid discipline, incessant drill and flogging.[15] Worst of all, according to Reynolds, while on patrol in the bush they were forced to wear their ridiculous red coats:

> The fact that discipline mattered more than effectiveness in the field against bushrangers and Aboriginal war bands was illustrated by the continued use of red uniforms which were unsuitable for life in the bush and highly visible for anyone seeking to evade capture.[16]

Reynolds also argues that the firearms used by the colonists and troopers did not give them superiority over the two main indigenous weapons, the waddie (club) and the spear. He cites the observations of James Calder who thought the Aborigines had the better of the conflict because the English musket was 'far less deadly than the spear of the savage'.[17] Reynolds describes the problems of using European weapons against the Aborigines:

> During night attacks the gunpowder often became damp from the dew and wouldn't ignite. The best chance of success was with a small party but this had limited firepower. Four men would only manage four shots at best, at obscure targets. The chance of reloading in the dark and shooting again were minimal.[18]

Sharon Morgan takes the same line:

> Spears thrown with dexterity could be far more dangerous than unreliable guns hastily used by inexperienced shooters. George Hobler commented wryly on the inefficiency of firearms of the period. The Natives, he said, 'appeared at the back of the farm robbed Mrs Monaghan of her bedding, her screams brought to her assistance two of my men clearing, who had a musket which as usual would not go off'.[19]

Other primary sources confirm that this aspect of the orthodox story is accurate. In June 1827, when Corporal Shiners of the 40th Regiment and four stockmen, in pursuit of the Aboriginal murderers

[15] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp 100–1
[16] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 104
[17] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 75
[18] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 80
[19] Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p 158

of a Western Marshes stockman, rushed their camp at night, three of their guns went off. However, 'Baker attempted to fire, but his pistol flashed in the pan',[20] that is, the gunpowder burnt without making an explosion in the chamber to fire the bullet. Edward Curr described one incident in January 1829 when a hostile tribe surrounded three employees of the Van Diemen's Land Company. 'The men had a musket, or I believe two, but one was useless, and the other soon became so, from their laying down their powder horn on the grass, and not being able to find it again.'[21] As Chapter Eight recorded in more detail, the Aborigines were well aware of the guns' limitations and knew that, once they had been fired and before they could be reloaded, they had plenty of time to either attack or flee. Moreover, the uncleared Tasmanian countryside, even in the drier south-east, is very rugged and densely wooded, which made shooting very difficult. At Prosser Plains in October 1830, a group of Aborigines tried to break through the Black Line and speared a sentry. Some of his colleagues came to his rescue:

> These men came up, but the blacks succeeded in making their retreat good, from the first man when running and in the act of cocking his firelock, falling over a dead tree, and from the country in that place being so rocky and heavily timbered.[22]

While these arguments and examples are convincing in showing that the Aborigines were not the helpless victims of ruthlessly efficient British forces, they raise a major problem for orthodox claims about the ratio of blacks deaths to white. If the Aborigines were the better fighters, if they made better use of the local environment and had better weapons, how could they have been defeated so badly in the war? What reason could historians have for claiming that in unrecorded conflicts on the edge of the frontier the whites killed four times more blacks (Ryan), or six times more blacks (Reynolds), than their own side lost? Either the Aborigines were not the great guerilla warriors they have been portrayed or their death toll was much lower than has been claimed. The orthodox thesis cannot have it both ways.

Brian Plomley attempts to get around the dilemma by saying the Aborigines were, in the end, simply outnumbered. Too many whites kept coming in boats. 'The Aborigines attempted to gain their ends by waging guerilla warfare against the settlers: tactically it was highly successful, defeated only by the declining number of the Aborigines

[20] Deposition of constable Thomas Williams, Mulgrave to Colonial Secretary, 30 June 1827, CSO 1/316/7578, p 31
[21] Curr to Aborigines Committee, 2 April 1830, CSO 1/323/7858/8, p 362
[22] *Hobart Town Courier*, 30 October 1830, p 2

and the rapidly increasing number of the settlers.'[23] But this still cannot account for the low white death toll compared to the black. If the Aborigines were the more successful warriors, the expansion of the white population, which in the 1820s grew from 5000 to 24,000, should have produced a far greater number of white casualties than 187 killed, compared to alleged black losses of between 700 and 1100 people.

Moreover, in this period the armed forces available to the colonial government did not expand at anything like the rate of the white population. Apart from the appointment of the effectively useless roving parties between 1828 and 1830 and the transfer the previous year of an additional thirty-four members of the 40th Regiment from the supervision of convicts to the protection of settlers in outlying areas,[24] there were few additional military resources deployed to counter the rise in Aboriginal violence. Several orthodox historians mention that soldiers from the 57th and 63rd Regiments were sent to Van Diemen's Land in 1829 but they neglect to say that that these were replacements for, not additions to, the troops of the 40th Regiment, which that year left for Bombay.[25] No matter how historians try to explain it away, this dilemma of the thesis remains.

There was one nineteenth-century author who resolved this question in favour of the Aborigines. While his opinions are rarely reproduced today, James Erskine Calder deserves to be taken seriously. He arrived in the colony in 1829, aged twenty-one, in the middle of the 'Black War' and was employed as a government surveyor thereafter. In the 1870s he wrote a series of essays on the demise of the Aborigines, which were later collected in his book, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c, of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*. Ever since his arrival, Calder had been sympathetic to the native plight.[26] Even though he thought George Augustus Robinson had exaggerated the degree of violence done to the natives, he nonetheless named Robinson on the dedication page of his book, describing him as 'Tasmania's greatest benefactor'.

When Calder wrote his essays, he examined the voluminous files on the subject that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had ordered to be preserved intact. Calder said he had made 'a pretty attentive perusal of the massive correspondence on the subject of the long quarrel between the two races, that is deposited in the office of the Colonial Secretary, filling nineteen awful volumes of manuscript papers.' From

[23] N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803–1831*, Queen Victoria Museum and art Gallery, Launceston, 1992, p 23

[24] See Chapter Five, p 142

[25] *Historical Records of Australia*, I, XV, pp 274–6

[26] See Chapter Two, p 36, and Chapter Four, p 104

this perusal he concluded that 'aggressiveness was almost always on the side of the blacks'. He made an estimate of the ratio of black deaths to white. The evidence he used came from the reports of coronial inquests into deaths after Aboriginal raids on white homesteads. Calder wrote:

> In the five years preceding the close of 1831, 99 inquests were held on such of the white people, whose bodies could be found after death, against 19 blacks, killed in these farm fights; and it is further recorded, that in the same period 69 Europeans were wounded against one, or at most two, of the other race; some of the latter were also taken.[27]

While these 'farm fights' were by no means the only kind of conflict, they provided one good indication of who got the better of the violence that did occur. Instead of four to six blacks killed for every white, Calder's findings led him to reverse this ratio. 'They [the Aborigines] took life about five times as often as it was inflicted upon themselves.'[28] While this conclusion clearly rejects most of the orthodox case, it does bear out part of it: the Aborigines were, indeed, the more deadly of the two sides.

THE QUESTION OF UNRECORDED FRONTIER KILLINGS

The problems of the orthodox case are compounded by a second inconsistency. This derives from the claim that the great majority of black deaths went unrecorded because they took place in remote regions on the edge of the frontier, and that those whites responsible covered up their deeds for fear of incriminating themselves.

In Van Diemen's Land, according to Lyndall Ryan, only one-third of violent Aboriginal deaths were recorded. The other two-thirds of her total of 700 went undocumented in the records of the day. This is one issue on which Henry Reynolds takes her to task. In his 1995 book, *Fate of a Free People*, he says Ryan's total is a serious attempt to arrive at a 'reasonable figure' but such an assessment is fraught with difficulty:

> No reliance can be placed on reports of Aboriginal deaths. No systematic count of bodies was ever made. Guesswork and exaggeration were common. Ryan's estimate is also based on the presumed population of the major tribes in 1823 which she puts at 'about a thousand'. This may have been wide of the mark. No one had any idea of the real figure.[29]

However, by 2001 when he wrote *An Indelible Stain?*, Reynolds seems to have forgotten his own comments and now made estimates

[27] Calder, *Native Tribes of Tasmania*, pp 8–9
[28] Calder, *Native Tribes of Tasmania*, p 55
[29] Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p 76

of the same kind he criticised in Ryan's work. In his latter book Reynolds now claims there is 'hard evidence' that the Aboriginal population declined from 1500 in 1824 to 350 in 1831. A later section of this chapter looks at the credibility of his and other estimates of the size of the Aboriginal population. For the moment, let us focus on the question of unrecorded frontier killings. This is a contentious issue not just in Van Diemen's Land but for the entire history of race relations in Australia.

The first and most obvious point to make is that any claim by a historian about unrecorded deaths is hard to sustain since deaths that went unrecorded would, by definition, remain hidden from historians. There might be rumours, gossip and legends that surface later but if there is no documentary evidence at all it is hard for the historian to determine the truth. This is not to argue that the lack of documents is of itself proof that nothing happened but, without reasonable evidence, the historian will find it difficult to sustain a case that something as dramatic as a killing did take place.

In some cases, though, where there was someone with military or police authority over a region and whose duty was to record violent deaths, a lack of documentation *can* sometimes be taken as grounds for believing there was actually little to record. As Chapter Eight argues, this is a plausible conclusion in the case of the Western Marshes in the late 1820s. In this district from 1828 to 1830, there were few incidents of Aboriginal assault, with only three white men wounded. This suggests that this district had the lowest level of violent confrontation in the colony and, therefore, the corresponding lack of documentation about Aboriginal deaths would have been an accurate reflection of the reality.

In a series of articles for the journal *Quadrant* in 2000, I made similar points about exaggerated claims by historians of violence across the whole of the Australian frontier. The articles generated a number of heated replies in the press and in subsequent media and conference debates. When I argued there was very little reliable evidence for most of the claims about the killing of Aborigines, defenders of the orthodoxy replied that this is just what you would expect in a frontier war situation. The frontier was a place where whites could kill blacks with impunity. No other settlers on the frontier would have reported them and the police either turned a blind eye or were complicit in massacres themselves. Hence widespread killings would have occurred without leaving any trace in the historical evidence. As it stands, this is a circular argument. To explain why there would be no evidence of widespread killings, it claims there was a frontier war situation, which, under this definition, is a place where there were widespread killings but where no evidence of them remained.

The *Quadrant* series also said there were two powerful constraints on white settlers killing Aborigines in the colonial period, one religious, the other legal. Most colonists were Christians to whom the killing of the innocent would have been abhorrent. But even those whose consciences would not have been troubled knew it was against the law to murder human beings, Aborigines included, and the ultimate penalty was execution. Now, the mere mention of Christianity in this context brought forth the most derision of all from my critics, not only from the usual suspects but also from commentators once regarded as less conformist, such as the Queensland anthropologist Ron Brunton, who called the suggestion 'either disingenuous or naïve'.[30]

Yet the orthodox position is dependent on these very concepts for its own claims about the unrecorded massacres of Aborigines in Tasmania and throughout the mainland. According to the Melbourne historian Bain Attwood: 'Most of the historical sources that might have enabled us to enumerate the number of Aboriginal people killed on the frontier have, for various reasons, either never existed or have since been lost or destroyed.'[31] Attwood does not specify the 'various reasons' for the loss and destruction of the records, but what reasons could frontiersmen have for deliberately concealing their deeds? Either they were worried about moral condemnation from their fellow colonists, or else they were hiding the fact that they had broken the law by killing the blacks. If orthodox historians don't invoke either religion, or a similar moral force, and/or legal sanctions, they are left without any explanation for the purported concealment and destruction of evidence. If they insist that neither Christian morality nor the rule of law had any force on the frontier, their whole thesis about unrecorded killings has no legs to stand on. Brian Plomley has unwittingly conceded this point for the history of Van Diemen's Land:

> In almost all the statements regarding the roving parties, there are references to the reluctance of the settlers to kill Aborigines unless it became necessary to do so to protect themselves during a hostile attack. Were these in fact sincere statements or face-saving declarations? The whole history of the reaction of white settlers to the presence of Aborigines on

[30] Ron Brunton, 'Theories on black massacres don't add up', *Courier-Mail*, 16 March 2002. Others who derided the notion were Richard Hall, 'Windschuttle's Myths' in Peter Craven (ed.) *The Best Australian Essays 2001*, Schwartz Publishing, Melbourne, 2002, pp 127–8; and Robert Manne, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*, Australian Quarterly Essay, Schwartz Publishing, Melbourne, 1, 2001, p 98

[31] Bain Attwood, 'Attack on Reynolds Scholarship Lacks Bite', *Australian*, 20 September 2000, p 35

> lands which they believed to be theirs is littered with such statements, but the actions taken were quite the reverse. The settlers did not allow anything to prevent or hinder them from using land they had appropriated in any way they wished, and their pronouncements were no more than an appeasement of conscience or an insurance against later blame or legal process.[32]

In this last sentence Plomley confirms that the prevailing religious, moral and legal codes had to be mollified, even beyond the frontier of settlement. If these codes had not existed, there would have been no reason for settlers to keep their alleged atrocities secret. There would have been nothing to inhibit them from boasting about their deeds. Again, the members of the orthodox school cannot have it both ways. They cannot claim both that settlers concealed their killings because of the prevailing religion and law *and* that these institutions were irrelevant to their actions. If they want to retain their 'unrecorded killings' thesis, they have to acknowledge the force of religion and law. But if they do the latter, their case about unrestrained frontier killings is severely weakened because they have to admit the existence of powerful social influences working to inhibit such deeds.

One thing the proponents of the 'unrecorded killings' thesis forget is that it was only relevant in Van Diemen's Land before the declaration of martial law in November 1828. For the following two years, it became legal for soldiers and police to shoot Aborigines on sight in the settled districts. Rather than reasons to conceal or gloss over their activities, colonial troops and police now had incentives to *publicize* any actions they might have taken against the Aborigines. They had a positive inducement to exaggerate their body counts in order to earn the gratitude of an apprehensive colonial populace. However, after November 1828, the documentary record does not show a sudden increase in the number of killings by whites. No previously concealed pattern of white violence came out into the open to reveal itself. As the next section demonstrates, there was, in fact, nothing in the empirical evidence on either side of this divide to provide any support for the 'unrecorded killings' thesis at all.

THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR ABORIGINAL KILLINGS

The only previous historian who has made a credible attempt to calculate the total number of casualties in Van Diemen's Land is Brian Plomley, who published a monograph on the subject in 1992. Plomley employed research assistants to comb the colonial newspapers and to go through the records held by the Archives Office of Tasmania.

[32] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land,* Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1991, p 22

From this he produced a table listing incidents reported between 1803 and 1831. The table recorded the date of the incident, its location, those affected, the nature of the assault or property damage, the reference to the original source, and incidental comments. From the data in the table, Plomley produced several graphs and maps showing the growth of violence in the late 1820s and early 1830s, the seasonal distribution of Aboriginal attacks, the type of damage done, the property stolen by Aborigines, and the correlation between assaults and the spread of white settlement.

This was a big project and had the potential to considerably illuminate the violence that marred the colony in this period. However, it had one great omission. Despite having seven columns of data, the table did not include a column specifically devoted to death or injury to Aborigines. This omission was not because Plomley did not have the information. Indeed, he did record Aboriginal casualties in the table but confined them to the column for references and incidental comments and did not summarise them. So while the table provided a very useful account of what whites suffered at the hands of blacks, which Chapter Four of this book uses for its own tables, it did not do the same for black suffering at the hands of whites. It is puzzling why, in a monograph entitled *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land,* Plomley declined to make a separate tally of black casualties.

Anyone who goes through Plomley's table to make his own list of the native casualties will find there are far fewer of them than the orthodox school would have us believe. In fact, if you add them all up (allocating three or five when the columns record 'some' or 'several') you find that, for the whole period 1803-1831 they amount to sixty-three Aboriginal dead and twenty wounded. This total excludes any number for the shootings at Risdon Cove in 1804, for which Plomley did not record a figure, and also excludes deaths on the property of the Van Diemen's Land Company, which he provided in a separate table. Adding this latter table plus three killed at Risdon Cove produces a grand total of 109 dead. Plomley believed that thirty Aborigines had been killed at Cape Grim in 1828, so this total includes that figure, not the six that I argue for in Chapter Eight.

Whatever way you look at them, these figures are very low. Over the entire period from 1803 to 1831, they average just four deaths a year, which, in the history of imperialism, must surely rank as just about the lowest rate of violent death ever meted out to indigenous inhabitants anywhere. Yet Tasmania is supposed to have been the site of one of the world's worst examples of genocide, the home to the greatest internal struggle Australia has ever faced, a killing field of guerilla warfare that lasted seven long years. There must be a mistake somewhere.

It is true that Plomley's survey did not include any of the killings recorded in Robinson's diaries, including a number by the Bass Strait sealers that did not make it into either the press or official records of the day. But as Chapter Eight argued, the diaries do not turn out, on examination, to contain a very large death toll either. Moreover, many of the incidents recorded by Robinson were also documented in the local press and government reports. Plomley picked up a number of them from these sources. The fact is that Robinson's diaries and Plomley's survey both record totals that are only a fraction of the number claimed by Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and other orthodox historians. Where, then, does the truth lie?

At the end of this chapter, Table Ten is my own attempt to answer this question. It was compiled in the following way. I started with Plomley's 1992 survey and then checked all his original sources. The great majority confirmed his account. In my own reading of the local newspapers and archive documents, I found a number of incidents that Plomley had not included. The major one was the killing of ten Aborigines by a party of the 40th Regiment near Tooms Lake inland from Oyster Bay in December 1828.[33] On the other hand, I excluded a small number from Plomley's list because the evidence indicated they were unlikely candidates. This included, for example, an incident on the west bank of the Tamar River in February 1829 where the press reported a military commander claiming his party had shot seven Aborigines, whereas his own officers subsequently denied this, telling the same journalist they had not even seen any blacks on their patrol. Plomley records this incident, without further comment, as seven natives killed,[34] but it seems to have been a case of a military officer misleading the media and should be put in the dubious-to-implausible category. Where there are conflicting accounts like this in the primary sources, I have indicated the reason for my decision in the last column. After making the additions and adjustments to Plomley's table from my own research, I also included those reported by Aborigines that did not make it into any colonial documents. These are all the incidents from Robinson's diaries listed in Chapter Eight, Table Eight, as either plausible or highly plausible. This added thirty-three deaths to the total. Where Robinson discussed events that Plomley also recorded, I have retained Plomley's version, as long as it was accurate.

Table Ten is therefore an attempt to record every killing of an Aborigine between 1803 and 1834 for which there is a plausible record of some kind. As with Table Eight, there may well be some

[33] Chapter Five discusses this incident, pp 160-1

[34] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, p 76

reports that Plomley, Robinson and I have all missed. I will post the table on my web site www.sydneyline.com and if anyone can point out incidents that should have been included, I will add them. The sole objective of the table is to produce as accurate a count as possible. As it stands now, the table in this third reprint lists a total of 121 Aboriginal deaths in the period. In other words, the indication given by Plomley's original survey was not a mistake. Both Robinson's diaries and my own work are roughly in line with it. British colonists killed very few Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land.

Moreover, whatever adjustments are eventually made to these figures, another thing is also clear. The number of Aborigines killed by colonists was far fewer than the colonists who died at Aboriginal hands. As Chapter Four recorded, between 1824 and 1831, the blacks killed a total of 187 whites. In the same period, Table Ten records the plausible total of blacks killed by whites as seventy-two. No matter how the figures might be revised in the future, the overall conclusion appears inescapable: during the so-called 'Black War', more than twice as many whites were killed as blacks.

THE SIZE OF THE PRE-COLONIAL POPULATION

The orthodox story is that Aboriginal society was devastated by the arrival of the British colonizers. From a pre-contact population now widely accepted as between 4000 and 7000, it fell to 2000 in 1818 (Ryan), to 1500 in 1824 (Reynolds), to 350 in 1831 (Reynolds), to 200 in 1834 (the number that eventually arrived at Flinders Island).[35] Clearly, the scale of the demise and its possible causes depend upon the accuracy of these figures.

These Australian estimates are part of an international debate over the size of indigenous populations of the New Worlds colonized by Europeans from Christopher Columbus onwards. In the United States, a movement emerged in the 1960s to radically redefine the subject. Until then, anthropologists had estimated the pre-1492 populations of North and South America based on their general understanding of the normal population densities of Neolithic tribal peoples. Their estimates ranged from 4 to 15 million, with the consensus of around 8 million people across the whole of the two continents. However, in 1966 the American anthropologist Henry Dobyns used estimates of deaths from European-imported diseases to radically revise the figures. He argued that pre-Columban North and South America would have held from 90 to 112 million people. In other words, according to this estimate more people lived in the Americas in 1491 than in the whole of Europe. This made central Mexico,

[35] These estimates are sourced on pages 52, 226 and 352

with about 50 million people, the most densely populated region on Earth.[36] Using accounts by Spanish priests of the impact of smallpox and other European-imported diseases, Dobyns claimed that in the first 130 years of contact, about 95 per cent of the indigenous population died. In 1983, he made further calculations of the pre-contact numbers in the areas colonized by the British in North America and revised his figures upwards.[37] Dobyns has been followed by a number of authors, including William McNeill in *Plagues and People* (1976), Kirkpatrick Sale in *The Conquest of Paradise* (1990) and David Stannard in *American Holocaust* (1992) who all claimed the earlier, lower estimate was an imperial myth, invented to make colonization appear to be a progressive development in which Europeans occupied a sparsely inhabited land, blessed with bountiful resources that the indigenous people were incapable of utilizing. In place of this myth, they substituted a picture of two continents that once teemed with vast populations, who used sophisticated agricultural practices and crops far in advance of those of their imperial conquerors.

In the past decade, however, these claims have been subject to a sustained revisionist critique. Their authors have been accused of selective and careless use of sources, questionable mathematics, mistranslations of the original documents, implausible epidemiological assumptions, as well as numerous unwarranted speculations and outright fabrications. Their main critic has been the University of Wisconsin historian David Henige, whose book *Numbers from Nowhere* (1998) shows how these authors have consistently refused to respond to serious criticisms and have publicly persisted with their claims in order to vilify the European presence in the Americas.[38] Although only a few Australian authors cite these American debates in their work,[39] most would be well aware of them. The orthodox school of Tasmanian history shares many of the assumptions about European imperialism that have emerged over the past thirty years, and has the

[36] Henry F. Dobyns, 'Estimating Aboriginal American Population: An Appraisal of Techniques with a New Hemispheric Estimate', *Current Anthropology*, 7, 4, 1966, pp 395–416. Other contributors to the debate over the Mexican population are Sherburne Cook, Lesley B. Simpson and Woodrow Borah: for a review of the literature see Lawrence Osborne, 'The Numbers Game', *Lingua Franca*, September 1998, pp 49–58

[37] Henry F. Dobyns, *Their Numbers Became Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1983

[38] David Henige, *Numbers from Nowhere: The American Indian Contact Population Debate*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1998

[39] Henry Reynolds uses some of the American arguments about smallpox as a biological weapon in colonial warfare in *An Indelible Stain?*, pp 45–8

same propensity to argue for as high a pre-contact indigenous population as possible, in order to make the decline appear all the more dramatic.

When historians today report the total pre-contact population of Tasmania, they choose from the high range of the estimates. Their figures also vary considerably, even in the one book. In *Fate of a Free People*, on page four Henry Reynolds puts the total at 5000–7000, but by page 52 it is down to 4000.[40] Both Lloyd Robson and Lyndall Ryan say the population ranged from 3000 to 4000 people, an estimate they take from a study by Rhys Jones.[41] Brian Plomley estimates the population at 4000 to 6000.[42] Michael Roe in the *Oxford Companion to Australian History* claims it was 6000.[43] The highest recent estimates are from the economic historian Noel Butlin, who claims there were still 7000 Aborigines left in 1818,[44] and the anthropologist David Davies, who says that in 1803, the indigenous population totalled 15,000, though he offers no explanation and cites no reference for the figure.[45]

In the nineteenth century, the estimates had an even wider span. They ranged from Henry Melville's 20,000, to James Calder's 6000–8000, Joseph Milligan's 2000, James Backhouse's 700–1000 and George Washington Walker's 500–650.[46] Melville and Calder arrived

[40] 'In 1830 alone', Reynolds writes on page 52, 'over 2000 whites arrived, a figure representing perhaps half the total indigenous population at the time of settlement.' A comparison of *Fate of a Free People* and *An Indelible Stain?* shows that, even though he confidently offers specific figures when it suits his case, Reynolds has no consistent view about the size of the Aboriginal population, nor of the rate of its decline.

[41] Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania, Volume One*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p 17; Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 14; Rhys Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', appendix to Norman Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974, p 325

[42] N. J. B. Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices as Tribal Indicators among the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Occasional Paper No. 5, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, n.d., p 12. In his book *The Tasmanian Aborigines*, Plomley Foundation, Launceston, 1993, p 85, he put the total at a more precise 5500.

[43] Michael Roe, 'Tasmania', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds.) *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p 628

[44] N. G. Butlin, *Economics and the Dreamtime: A Hypothetical History*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p 211

[45] David Davies, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Shakespeare Head Press, Sydney, 1973, p 120

[46] H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania* (1890), F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899 edn., pp 163–5

in the colony in 1828 and 1829, respectively, Backhouse and Walker visited between 1832 and 1834, while Milligan was medical officer and superintendent of Aborigines from 1843 to 1855, so all were contemporary with at least some of the Aborigines. However, the low estimates by Backhouse and Walker have been quietly airbrushed from the debate and no historian today ever mentions that any contemporary believed the pre-contact indigenous population was only 500–1000 people. In 1898, James Backhouse Walker, the son of George Washington Walker and a frequent contributor of historical and anthropological papers to the Royal Society of Tasmania, made the first attempt to use ethnographic evidence to analyse the tribal divisions and locations of the Aborigines. He estimated that when the British arrived, the population was less than 2000.[47]

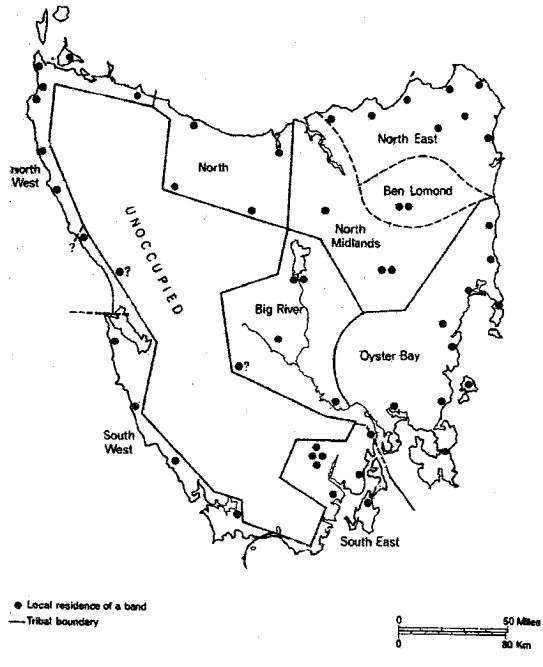
Of all the above, the only serious studies are those by Rhys Jones, Brian Plomley and James Backhouse Walker. Each used similar methodology. They worked out how many Aboriginal tribes or bands there were before colonization and then multiplied this number by an average band size. The principal source each used to calculate the number of different tribes or bands was the information provided by George Augustus Robinson. Wherever he went on his great treks around Tasmania, Robinson questioned the Aboriginal members of his party and those he encountered along the way about the names of the local tribes. Both Brian Plomley and Rhys Jones have gone through Robinson's diaries and extracted all the different tribal groups he identified. Plomley initially found ninety-seven different tribal names but because each tribe had two names, one by which it was known to itself, the other by which it was known to outsiders, he calculated they belonged to forty-six different tribes. He produced a map of their locations.[48] Jones argued that Plomley missed a few groups and so increased their total to fifty-three to fifty-five. Plomley later accepted this adjustment to the total, although he then added another two to lift it to fifty-seven.[49] Jones called these 'bands' rather than 'tribes' because he wanted the word 'tribe' to refer to the

[47] James Backhouse Walker, 'Some notes on the tribal divisions of the Aborigines of Tasmania', in *Early Tasmania: Papers Read Before the Royal Society of Tasmania 1888-1898*, Government Printer, Hobart, 1950 edn., pp 269, 278. As well as being, with Ling Roth, one of the two genuinely scholarly nineteenth-century investigators of the subject, Walker was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Tasmania 1898–99: Peter Benson Walker, *All That We Inherit: The Walkers in Van Diemen's Land*, J. Walch and Sons, Hobart 1968, pp 75–81

[48] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 970–5. Plomley provided a clearer picture in his 1971 Supplement to *Friendly Mission*, map 4 and pp 21–2

[49] Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices*, p 12

broader groupings identified by the white colonists. Hence, what the settlers identified as the Oyster Bay tribe actually contained ten different bands. The Big River tribe contained five bands. According to Jones's map (reproduced here), there were nine of these broad tribal groupings, although he admits these were the impressions of the settlers only and derived from no good ethnographic information.[50]



Jones argues that the fifty-three to fifty-five bands that were identified by name in Robinson's diaries are not all those that existed prior to colonization. He says that Robinson provided no names for bands who frequented the settled areas of the midlands, an area that would once have supported a sizeable Aboriginal population. So Jones arbitrarily increases the total by more than fifty per cent to put it at seventy to eighty-five bands to account for those 'missing' from the settled districts.

To work out the average number of people in a band, both Plomley and Jones relied upon the first observations made by pre-colonial explorers and by settlers in the early days of colonization. Plomley derives his average mainly from the head counts provided by the French marine explorers Bruny D'Entrecasteaux and Nicolas Baudin. He concludes that the average number of people in a tribe or band was seventy.[51] Jones bases his average size of a band on a wider range of observations, including those from settlers and others after 1803.[52]

[50] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 327. Map reproduced here is also from p 327.
[51] Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices*, pp 10–11
[52] Rhys Jones, 'The demography of hunters and farmers in Tasmania', in D. J. Mulvaney and J. Golson (eds.) *Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1971, pp 271-87

His original estimate was that typical band sizes were from forty to seventy people, but he later modified this to forty to fifty people.[53]

Plomley's best estimate, therefore, is that there were fifty-seven tribes each with an average of seventy people, which gives a total population of 3990. Plomley adds that an upper limit of 5500 'may be more realistic'. Jones's best estimate is that there were seventy to eighty-five bands each with an average of forty to fifty people, which puts the original population at 2800 to 4250.

There are two problems, however, with both these estimates. First, they count too many tribes or bands. Second, they do not take into account observations of some very small band sizes, especially on the west coast.

For a start, Jones's decision to arbitrarily add up to thirty additional bands to the total recorded in Robinson's diaries is unwarranted. This decision assumes that, when settlers took up land in the midlands, all the bands there suddenly ceased to exist. It is obvious that this would have once been a region that supported a relatively high Aboriginal population because it was good grazing country for kangaroo. It is equally obvious, though, that rather than simply disappear from the face of the earth, as Jones implies, these bands continued in existence, but they traversed slightly different areas. As Chapter Four argued, the maps that both Plomley and Jones provide for the distribution of bands are misleading. They imply that Aborigines were comparatively fixed to the one location, whereas they moved seasonally across far greater stretches of territory.[54] In the 1820s, bands from both Oyster Bay and Big River still regularly crossed the midlands, as numerous sightings by settlers testified. On its seasonal migration, a band that found some of its path across these plains occupied by whites could skirt around them. The band did not automatically become extinct just because one part of its nomadic route contained a farm. Even by 1823 when pastoral runs traversed much of the midlands, the settlers had still only alienated 3.1 per cent of the land of the island.[55]

Another reason why the band count is too high is that not all the groups named by Robinson existed at the same time, even in the pre-colonial era. Within tribal society, the formation and extinction of hunter-gatherer bands was a very fluid process. Bands could merge with one another or be destroyed by internecine warfare, all within the span of one generation. Robinson's own diaries provide plenty of evidence of this. He recorded one incident where natives from Bruny Island mounted a 'war expedition' to the Tasman Peninsula where

[53] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 325
[54] as demonstrated in Chapter Four, p 106
[55] see Chapter Three, p 78

they killed several of the men of the local tribe and took away their women. Obviously, without women, this band could not survive beyond the remnants of the current generation. Robinson records at least ten other incidents of inter-tribal fighting to capture women,[56] some of which must also have led to the complete inability of the losing band to reproduce itself. So just because there is a name of a band in the diaries this does not mean that we must assume the group had a permanent existence in the pre-colonial period. Several of the names were of bands that no longer existed, as he acknowledged himself.[57]

While Plomley's analysis of the French explorers' observations of Aboriginal numbers are all carefully done and credible as far as they go, the observations he uses were geographically limited, coming mainly from the east and south-east coasts. This was a fertile maritime and land environment with a moderate climate that could obviously support greater numbers than elsewhere. On the other hand, Jones's average population of forty to fifty people per band takes in the whole of the island, including many areas much less favourable for habitation.

However, Jones does not take into account some of the observations from Robinson's own diaries that reveal some areas had a very much lower population than others. This is especially true of the comparatively inhospitable south-west coast, which had no grazing land to speak of and where the Aborigines eked out a living mainly from the seashore of the rocky coastline. In terms of the original native habitation, this was a pristine region, untouched by the colonial presence. Apart from the penal settlement at Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour and an abandoned attempt at another at Port Davey,[58] there had been no colonists on the south-west or southern coasts until Robinson arrived. Yet in March 1830 he could find only twenty-six members of the Port Davey tribe. In 1833, when he went looking again, he could find only sixteen members of the Point Hibbs band, which by then included some ex-members of the Port Davey tribe.[59] Yet according to Plomley's survey there should have been six bands

[56] Robinson, diary, 21 June 1830, 24 July 1830, 25 October 1830, 16 July 1831, 15 November 1831, 11 December 1831, 15 December 1831, 19–20–22 June 1832, 19–21 June 1834, *Friendly Mission*, pp 181, 187, 257, 379, 520, 548, 554, 618–9, 887–8

[57] Robinson, report February 1831, diary, 20 November 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 225, 526

[58] M. D. McRae, 'Port Davey and the South West', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 8, 3, May 1960, p 47

[59] Robinson, diary, 20 May 1833, *Friendly Mission*, pp 724. Their names are on pp 741–3.

in this region,[60] numbering 420 people. Applying Jones's lower average, there still should have been 240–300 people there. The same was true of most of the west coast north of Macquarie Harbour. Here, according to Plomey's survey, there should have been seven bands with anything from 280–490 people. But all that Robinson encountered in 1830 were two groups at Sandy Cape and Mount Cameron West totalling, at most, fifty people.[61]

It is possible that the numbers of these bands might have been reduced by European disease, since some Port Davey natives had visited Bruny Island and the settled districts of the south-east in the 1820s, while the north-western tribes had some contact with the sheep run at Cape Grim. Nonetheless, the huge discrepancies between what the assumptions about band sizes would predict and what Robinson actually observed still leaves Plomley's and Jones's tallies for this region as considerable overestimates. Moreover, in February 1831 Robinson himself tried to calculate the population of the entire west coast from the information he had gleaned about the tribes. Using the same data as Plomley and Jones, he claimed there were still 700 Aborigines living there. Yet all he could find to bring in over the next two years was a mere 108.[62]

In the light of these qualifications, let us make some very modest adjustments to the estimates made by Plomley and Jones. First, there is no good reason to accept Jones's proposal to add another thirty unnamed bands to the population of the midlands. The fifty-five bands Robinson named remain the best count we have. However, this total should be discounted by at least five bands to account for some whose names he heard but which, in the normal process of band reformation, had probably ceased to exist even before white settlement. This means there were about fifty bands in the pre-colonial period. This total, it should be noted, is still more than the forty-six bands Plomley accepted in 1966 in his edition of Robinson's diaries, so it is still a generous assumption. Second, in the light of the fact that the typical size of a band was probably smaller than the maximum estimated by Jones, we should accept an average at the lower range of the band size he proposes, that is, of forty people. Fifty bands at an average of forty members per band equals 2000 people. Given the generosity of the assumptions involved in this estimate, we should thus regard the total pre-colonial Aboriginal population of Tasmania as less than 2000.

[60] Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices*, p 38
[61] Robinson, diary, 1 and 12 June 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 166–7, 172–4
[62] See Chapter Seven, pp 224–5

This is, in fact, the same figure that James Backhouse Walker arrived at in 1898 after a perusal of much the same evidence and before the tendency arose in our own time to count the population as high as possible in order to show how great had been the decline.

BULLETS RATHER THAN BACTERIA?

On the Australian mainland, Aborigines were recorded dying from European diseases after even minimal contact with whites. According to Lyndall Ryan, however, there were no comparable epidemics in Van Diemen's Land. 'Aside from the Aborigines at Bruny Island who were decimated by influenza in 1829,' Ryan writes, 'only one reference was found of an Aboriginal in the settled districts who suffered from disease before he was captured.'[63] In Sydney, a plague of smallpox wiped out a large proportion of the local Aborigines in 1788 and at Port Phillip an outbreak of influenza did the same in 1836. But the Tasmanian settlements at Hobart and Launceston were, she claims, largely spared such ravages.

There were two explanations for the native resistance to disease, according to Ryan. First, there were no epidemics among the British settlers in the early period and so no contagious diseases to pass on to the Aborigines. Second, the indigenous people themselves were particularly healthy. They inhabited a benign, temperate climate and their diet was high in protein, vitamin C, iron and thiamine. In the north, contact with the small number of sealers in Bass Strait in the decade before colonization may also have helped them build up a resistance to common European diseases.[64] Henry Reynolds agrees with Ryan's thesis on this issue. In a critique of Geoffrey Blainey's writings, Reynolds argued:

> There were no epidemics in Tasmania. Blainey's claim that by 1830 disease had killed most of the island blacks is simply not true, as Lyndall Ryan's research established as far back as 1976. The Tasmanians remained healthy until they came into European settlement. The same situation existed in most of north Australia where disease followed rather than preceded frontier conflict; bullets rather than bacteria broke Aboriginal resistance in many parts of the continent.[65]

The 'bullets rather than bacteria' thesis, however, flies in the face of all white observations of Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land. Even a

[63] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 175
[64] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 175
[65] Henry Reynolds, 'Blainey and Aboriginal History', in Andrew Markus and M. C. Ricklefs (eds.) *Surrender Australia? Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p 88. Reynolds was criticising comments made by Geoffrey Blainey in *A Land Half Won* (1982)

small degree of contact with the white population sent diseases ravaging through Aboriginal communities. The principal colonial observers all acknowledged this. Despite the vitamins in their diet, the Tasmanian Aborigines were highly susceptible to European diseases of the respiratory system, especially colds, influenza and pneumonia. George Augustus Robinson observed this everywhere he went:

> The aborigines of this colony are universally susceptible of cold and that unless the utmost providence is taken in checking its progress at an early period it fixes itself on the lungs and gradually assumes the complaint spoken of i.e. the catarrhal fever.[66]

The first contacts he made with tribal Aborigines were usually accompanied by the rapid onset of this kind of respiratory disease. In 1829, after the establishment of a whaling station at Adventure Bay and after a convict work party arrived to clear Robinson's land and construct his cottage at Missionary Bay on Bruny Island, the consequences for the local natives were devastating. That winter, twenty-two of them died from some kind of respiratory infection. By January 1830, of the total of more than forty Bruny Islanders who were there when Robinson arrived to civilize them, only seventeen individuals were left alive.[67]

This outbreak, moreover, was not confined to this tribe or location. In February 1830 at Recherche Bay, as he began his first trek to the west, some of the natives in Robinson's party found the body of a woman from Port Davey who had previously become ill and had been left by her tribe to die. The Aborigines told Robinson that her sickness had been widespread:

> The natives informed me that plenty of natives had been attacked with Raegerwropper or evil spirit, and had died. Thus the mortality with which the Brune natives had been attacked, appears to have been general among the tribes of aborigines.[68]

He found much the same pattern on both the west and north coasts. In September 1832, Robinson reported:

> The number of aborigines along the western coast have been considerably reduced since the time of my first visit. A mortality has raged amongst them which together with the severity of the season and other causes had rendered the paucity of their number very considerable.[69]

[66] Robinson, note with letter, Maclachlan to Colonial Secretary, 24 May 1831, *Friendly Mission*, pp 461–2

[67] For Robinson's reports of the death toll and the original size of the population see: Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 77

[68] Robinson, diary, 2 February 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 113

[69] Robinson to Curr, 22 September 1832, cited *Friendly Mission*, p 695 n 113

That year, he left twenty-seven natives on Hunter Island off the north-west coast to be shipped to the Aboriginal settlement at Flinders Island. While they waited, four of them died. A year later, the death rate among his captives was much higher. In late July and early August 1833, Robinson held twenty-five of the west coast Aborigines in the prison on Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour. Within the space of nine days, fourteen of them died from respiratory infection.[70] Brian Plomley has argued that the symptoms Robinson described indicated they all died of pneumonia.[71] At the same time, Robinson received news that another thirteen he had recently shipped to Flinders Island had died shortly after they arrived there.[72]

This type of sudden outbreak of disease, which carried off numerous people at a time, was characteristic of the pattern of deaths at the Flinders Island settlement throughout its history. Twenty-three people died from June to August 1833. Seventeen died in six months from January to June 1836. Another thirteen died from January to March 1837. In February 1839 after two supply ships, the *Tamar* and the *Vansittart*, brought a new influenza infection to the island, eight of the Aborigines quickly died in the ensuing epidemic.[73] The reports of the postmortems routinely conducted on those who died at Wybalenna revealed symptoms consistent with viral respiratory infection, particularly influenza and pneumonia, followed by a bacterial disease of pyemic nature. From 1837 onwards, acute pulmonary or miliary tuberculosis joined the other respiratory diseases as a major cause of death.[74] In all, between 1831 and 1847, some 132 Aborigines died on Flinders Island, the majority of them young adults, principally from common cold, influenza, pneumonia and tuberculosis.[75]

Death by disease also fits the observation by Brian Plomley that no large collection of bones of Tasmanian Aborigines was ever found.[76] Had large numbers of them been shot dead there would have been no one left to burn the bodies, a ritual that most tribes observed

[70] Robinson, diary, 25 July–4 August 1833, *Friendly Mission*, pp 770–6

[71] N. J. B. Plomley, 'Disease among the Tasmanian Aborigines', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 151, December 4–18 1989, p 666. Plomley records that fifteen Aborigines died on Sarah Island at this time but from Robinson's diary entries I could count only fourteen.

[72] Robinson, diary, 27 August 1833, *Friendly Mission*, p 785

[73] N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1987, pp 75, 108, 700

[74] Plomley, 'Disease among the Tasmanian Aborigines', p 667; *Friendly Mission*, p 965

[75] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 52–4, 99

[76] Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash*, pp 10–11

meticulously when they were able.[77] A more gradual process of death by disease would have given the survivors time to observe this rite.

Indeed, it was likely that European diseases had a dramatic effect on the Aboriginal population even before the first British settlements were founded at Hobart and Launceston in 1803 and 1804. The Aborigines probably contracted them from the Bass Strait sealers. British and American ships brought seal hunters to the Furneaux group of islands from 1798 onwards. These vessels would put ashore a small party of men on an island and return some weeks or months later to collect them and the seal skins and seal oil they had accumulated. The islands were within rowing distance of Tasmania and the sealers went there by whaleboat to acquire native women, either by trade or abduction.[78] They were probably responsible for introducing diseases that the Aborigines later recalled had a catastrophic impact on their numbers. James Bonwick recorded:

> Mr Catechist Clark was informed by the Natives, when at Flinders Island, that, before the English ships arrived in Sullivan's cove, a sudden and fearful mortality took place among the tribes. It was viewed as a premonition of a dreadful calamity affecting the race.[79]

The evidence for disease, then, as the major cause of depopulation is compelling. The indigenous people had no resistance to the diseases the British brought with them. Medical practice of the day had no cure for them, no proper understanding of their causes, nor even means of relieving their symptoms. Moreover, the experience in Van Diemen's Land was the same as that of mainland Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands in the same period. There is no reason to believe the Tasmanians, the most isolated people of them all in this region, could have remained immune from the same fate.

VENEREAL DISEASE AND LOSS OF REPRODUCTION

If disease reduced the size of the Aboriginal population, did it also prevent their reproduction? Lyndall Ryan denies this, claiming there was not much incidence of venereal disease among the Aborigines in

[77] While cremation was the most common, others disposed of their dead by placing them in trees. Some made tombs of bark. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, pp 116–22

[78] The most reliable account is Plomley, 'The Sealers', Appendix 7 to *Friendly Mission*, pp 1006–20

[79] James Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1870, p 87. In *Fate of a Free People*, p 185, Reynolds records a similar conversation, but it is not to be found in the location he cites, James Bonwick's *Last of the Tasmanians*, p 85, or on any other page of that book that I could find.

Tasmania. This is puzzling, she admits, because a number of those whites who had sexual contact with Aboriginal women, especially stockmen and sealers, were known to have syphilis. The Tasmanian natives, she claims, had a far lower rate of sexually transmitted disease than Aborigines in other parts of south-eastern Australia.[80] Once again, however, her conclusions are unsustainable.

What evidence we do have suggests that venereal disease spread rapidly among Aboriginal women. Truganini and two of her female friends, Pagerly and Dray, all picked up what Robinson called a 'loathesome disorder' from the whalers at Adventure Bay in 1829.[81] Truganini's biographer, Vivienne Rae-Ellis, says this was most likely a form of venereal disease that left her without obvious symptoms but infertile. During her long life, she had many lovers, including Robinson, but no children.[82] Brian Plomley suggests the disease was probably gonorrhoea, which, while rarely fatal or even likely to cause a marked deterioration in health, effectively inhibited pregnancy and child bearing.[83] Pagerly's infection, however, was obviously more virulent. She became the third wife of Truganini's father. He contracted venereal disease from her and died of it four months later.[84]

On Flinders Island, there were only a small number of children born, and the birth rate was noticeably lower than in tribal society.[85] Most women had no children and those that did often lost them in infancy. In the final years of the Oyster Cove settlement, the historian James Bonwick paid a visit and interviewed the nine women still living. Only two of them had ever had children, and they had all died many years ago. On this issue, if few others, Bonwick was credible when he wrote: 'The absence of births even more than the frequency of deaths completed the destruction of the people.'[86]

There is, however, another dimension to this explanation, which neither Bonwick nor any of his followers have felt the need to raise but which is essential to complete the story.

[80] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, pp 175–6
[81] Robinson, diary, 21–23 September 1829, *Friendly Mission*, p 77
[82] Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p 50
[83] Plomley, 'Disease among the Tasmanian Aborigines', p 667
[84] Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 32
[85] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 204–5, 702
[86] James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son and Marston, London, 1870, p 386

CULTURAL VULNERABILITY AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN

When first contacted in the eighteenth century, the Tasmanians were the most primitive human society ever discovered. One measure of this was the simplicity of their technology. The men hunted with one-piece wooden spears, wooden clubs and stones. The women used wooden digging sticks to uproot vegetables and wooden chisels to prise shellfish from rocks. They lived off kangaroos, wallabies and possums in the inland, and shellfish, birds and seals on the coast. For shelter, they sometimes stacked branches and bark to make temporary windbreaks and domed huts, but they usually slept in the open. They rarely stayed in one place more than a day or two. Settlers who came across their abandoned campsites found them strewn with the rotting remains of the animals they had eaten, and their faeces deposited close to the fires where they slept.[87] Their most sophisticated possessions were grass ropes to climb trees and woven grass bags. Their entire catalogue of manufactured goods comprised about two dozen articles. They went about completely naked, even in the snow-covered highlands. The women slung kangaroo skins over their shoulders not for clothing but to carry their babies. For warmth, they smeared themselves with animal fat and huddled around fires at night. Until they acquired British containers, they could not boil water. The colonists were astonished to observe they could not make fire, a skill that even Neanderthal Man had mastered. They carried firebrands and coals with them on their nomadic journeys. If the fires of one family were doused by rain or flood, they had to go in search of others to ask for a light.[88]

[87] The most useful overall view of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture is still H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899, which discusses the findings of all the original ethnographic studies. On campsite detritus: the Quaker cleric James Backhouse observed that the Aborigines 'daily moved to a fresh place, to avoid the offal and filth that accumulated about the little fires which they kindled daily, and around which they slept': *Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, p 79. In an 1830 report on various sightings he had made of the Oyster Bay Aborigines, the settler F. G. D. Browne described coming across a campsite where 'we found seven small fires still glowing, a number of kangaroo bones, several skins and a considerable quantity of human excrement ... appearances warrant the idea that they will not leave their fire, even to answer the calls of nature.' Browne to Mulgrave, 28 February 1830, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, pp 123, 129

[88] Robinson, diary, 28 December 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 567. Their inability to make fire has long worried many observers who do not like to admit the Tasmanians were bereft of so basic a skill. For several implausible rationalisations, see Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, pp 83–4

From excavations of some long-used campsites and caves, the archaeologist and prehistorian Rhys Jones, has concluded that several thousand years earlier, their technology had actually been more complex.[89] They once used bone tools, barbed spears and weaving needles made of fish bone. They also had wooden boomerangs, hafted stone tools, edge-ground stone axes and tools fashioned from volcanic glass. However, these had all long been abandoned by the time Europeans arrived. Only the tribes of the west and south coasts had canoes, which they made from buoyant bark strips of the swamp tea-tree tied together with grass rope, and propelled by sticks, not blades. In the east, the Aborigines crossed rivers and off-shore channels on bundles of logs, which they swam alongside.[90] Fish were originally an important part of their diet but the archaeological record shows they gave up eating fish, and the manufacture of fish hooks and fish spears, about 4000 years ago. Mainland Aborigines, for whom fish was a dietary staple, were amazed to find the Tasmanians refused to eat fish, even though they were abundant in the sea and the inland rivers and lakes, especially in winter when other food was limited. Instead of technological progress, the Tasmanians had experienced a technological regression. Isolated from the mainland when the waters rose 10,000 years ago, and lacking any outside source of competition or innovation, the Tasmanians suffered the consequences. Jones writes:

> Like a blow above the heart, it took a long time to take effect, but slowly but surely there was a simplification in the tool kit, a diminution in the range of foods eaten, perhaps a squeezing of intellectuality. The world's longest isolation, the world's simplest technology ... a slow strangulation of the mind.[91]

[89] Rhys Jones, Rocky Cape and the Problem of the Tasmanians, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971. The thesis was subsequently elaborated and debated in several journal articles: see footnote 91.
[90] James Calder, *Native Tribes of Tasmania*, p 35
[91] Rhys Jones, 'The Tasmanian Paradox', in R. V. S. Wright (ed.) *Stone Tools as Cultural Markers: Change, Evolution and Complexity*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, and Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1977, pp 202–3. See also Rhys Jones, 'Why Did the Tasmanians Stop Eating Fish?', in R. A. Gould (ed.) *Explorations in Ethnoarchaeology*, University of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, 1978. There have been several attempts to argue the Tasmanians were not as technologically backward as Jones claims. Few dispute his evidence, however, and instead offer rationalisations to show their actions were always 'functional' for their conditions. Arguments include: the abandonment of fish was adaptive behaviour in an especially abundant environment; when the weather turned colder 3800 years ago they chose richer sources of animal fats; they gave up fish because lobster was more to their taste. See D. R. Horton, 'Tasmanian Adaptation', *Mankind*,

It was not only their technology that caused problems for the Tasmanians. The aspect of their society that left them most vulnerable in the face of the European arrival was the treatment of their women. Apart from hunting kangaroos and wallabies, Tasmanian Aboriginal men contributed little to the social unit. The first European observers called the men 'indolent' and 'extremely selfish' and said they treated their women like 'slaves' and 'drudges'.[92] It was the women's task to make windbreaks and huts and to construct rafts and canoes. The women alone collected shellfish and crayfish, diving deep into coastal waters. Women also climbed trees to catch possums and swam to offshore rocks and islands for muttonbirds and seals. Despite the fact that they also cooked the food, they fed their husbands before themselves. According to a contemporary observer, they watched while 'he satisfies himself with the choicest parts, handing her from time to time the half-devoured pieces over his shoulder; this he does with an air of great condescension, without turning round'.[93] In 1802, the French anthropologist Francois Péron observed twenty women deposit the results of their fishing at the feet of their men. Although the women had not eaten, the men:

> immediately divided it up, without giving them any; they proceeded to group themselves behind their husbands, who were seated on the back of a large sand-bank; and there, during the remainder of the interview, these unfortunates dared neither to raise their eyes, speak, nor smile.[94]

The women also endured frequent violence. Péron said of one group: 'They were nearly all covered with scars, the miserable results of the bad treatment of their brutal husbands.' Ling Roth argues these scars could have had other origins. They might merely have been the cicatrices, or ritual scarring, with which they adorned themselves.[95] It is true they were ritually scarred but nonetheless there is abundant

12, 1, 1979, pp 28–34; H. R. Allen, 'Left Out in the Cold: Why the Tasmanians Stopped Eating Fish', *Artefact*, 4, 1979, pp 1–10; Gary Dunnett, 'Diving for Dinner: Some Implications from Holocene Middens of the Role of Coasts in the late Pleistocene of Tasmania', in M. A. Smith, M. Spriggs and B. Fankhauser (eds.) *Sahul in Review*, Department of Prehistory, Australian National University, 1993, pp 247–57; Sandra Bowdler, 'Fish and culture: a Tasmanian polemic', *Mankind*, 12, 4, 1980, pp 334–40

[92] H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899, pp 113–4

[93] R. H. Davies, 'On the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land', *Tasmanian Journal of Science*, II, 1846, p 415, cited Roth, *Aborigines of Tasmania*, p 114

[94] François Péron and Louis Freycínet, *Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes ... le Géographe, et le Casuarina,* 2 vols., Paris, 1807–1816, cited by Roth, *Aborigines of Tasmania*, p 113

[95] Roth, *Aborigines of Tasmania*, p 113

evidence of the violent nature of relations between the sexes. George Augustus Robinson recorded the courtship practice of Aboriginal men to stab their intended with sharp sticks and cut them with knives. In November 1830, on Swan Island, the first of his Bass Strait native settlements, Robinson observed the Aboriginal men forcing the women to their beds at knife-point. He wrote:

> Informed that Mannerlelargenner had cut Tencotemainner with a knife because she would not stop with him. The aboriginal females came to my tent and informed me that several of the men had concealed themselves in the bush and took knives with them, and when night came they meant to cut the women. And why would they do so? Because women no marry them.

The next evening the same courtship practices were re-enacted:

> Tonight was another scene of confusion, the men running after the women with knives in their hands and the women running away.[96]

If a woman or her family objected to the suitor, he would often abduct and rape her. On the other hand, if a woman refused a man who was favoured by her parents, then a sequence of violence, murder and retribution might ensue. In one diary entry Robinson wrote:

> Woorrady entertained the natives with an account of his nation. Said that plenty of mothers and fathers kill their daughters on account of their attachment to men whom they dislike and to prevent their marriage. He knew a mother kill her daughter whilst sitting at the fire by jabbing a spear through her body, in at her back and out at her belly, and kept stabbing her till she killed her. The lover hearing of it watched an opportunity when the men were away hunting, and went and killed the mother. The natives form very strong attachments and they bear implacable enmity to their foes. The Toogee and Ninenee have killed many daughters from the same cause.[97]

Aboriginal women who rejected advances from amorous males put their lives in danger. Tasmanian marriage was largely monogamous but murder of women because of insult, jealousy and infidelity was common.[98] The Big River chief, Montpeliatter, killed a 'tall, fine young woman' because she did not like him.[99] Out of jealousy, a man named Nappelarleyer killed 'quite a young girl' on Robbins Island, 'spearing her in both her sides and in her neck'. The murderer was

[96] Robinson, diary, 19 and 20 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 280
[97] Robinson, diary, 20 December 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 560. See also Robinson's account of 'marriage of the aborigines', p 888
[98] Jones, 'Tasmanian Tribes', p 324
[99] Robinson, diary, 24 November 1831, *Friendly Mission*, p 529

himself then killed by another man.[100] Even the heroine of modern feminist authors, Walyer the Aboriginal amazon, was subject to the same treatment, although this is something her current admirers are reluctant to divulge. In an attempt to kill her, an Aboriginal man beat her with a waddy and broke her back. To escape him, she made her way to the white sealers in Bass Strait.[101] This endemic violence left women in a state of fear during courtship, lest they offend their suitor. In 1829, when Woorrady was pressing his suit on Truganini, she was repulsed by him, branding him a raegewropper, 'a fearful term implying a reference to some evil quality'. Nonetheless, Robinson observed that 'though highly averse to her suitor and even incensed at his unceasing importunities she is fearful to betray her feelings by a word or a look ... This arises out of the fear of offending and a dread apprehension for its consequences'.[102]

Under these conditions, it was not surprising that some of the Aboriginal women who lived with the sealers found their position preferable to that in tribal society. This was apparently true even of Walyer, who assumed the name of Mary Ann and cohabited voluntarily with John Williams on Penguin Island until removed by Robinson to join his group on Swan Island.[103] Although Robinson claimed that the sealers' women were slaves subject to a cruel captivity, others who spoke with them received a different impression. In his book published in 1820, Lieutenant Charles Jeffreys wrote:

> The author had several opportunities of learning from the females that their husbands act towards them with considerable harshness and tyranny. These women are known sometimes to run away from that state of bondage and oppression to which they say their husbands subject them. In these cases they will attach themselves to the English sailors ... They give their European protectors to understand that their own husbands make them carry all their lumber, force them out to hunt, and make them perform all manner of work; and that they find their situation greatly improved by attaching themselves to the sealing gangs.[104]

The brutality that characterized personal relations between the sexes was matched at the group level. As Chapter Four demonstrated, the biggest single cause of internecine warfare between the Aborigines was the custom of bands raiding one another to abduct women, a practice that sometimes led to all the men on the losing side being

[100] Robinson, diary, 11 July 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 187
[101] Robinson, diary, 20 December 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 296–7
[102] Robinson, diary, 14 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 83
[103] Robinson, diary, 20 December 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 296–7
[104] Charles Jeffreys, *Van Diemen's Land: Geographical and Descriptive Delineation of the Island of Van Diemen's Land*, London, 1820, pp 118–9, cited by Roth, *Aborigines of Tasmania*, pp 114–5

killed. While this is hardly an unfamiliar source of conflict in tribal communities the world over — the Trojan Wars had the same origins — the fact it was so commonplace in the small, isolated Tasmanian community was anything but conducive to its long-term survival. There is not enough evidence to estimate how many Tasmanians were regularly killed in these exchanges, but if the Tasmanian experience was anything like that of mainland Australia, where Geoffrey Blainey has estimated the annual death rate from inter-tribal violence at between one in every 270 and one in every 300 of the population,[105] then it must have been one of the major causes of Aboriginal deaths. It was much higher than anything inflicted by British colonists who, as recorded earlier, were directly responsible for an average of only four deaths a year, or one in 500 of the pre-contact population.

This pattern of tribal conflict, involving raid, counter-raid and the pervasive fear it all engendered was, according to the American anthropologist Robert Edgerton, 'deadly, disruptive and purposeless'. He writes:

> There were no social or economic imperatives that drove Tasmanian men to treat their wives badly, to require them to carry out dangerous tasks, or to kill other men in pursuit of more wives, but there may well have been psychological imperatives that in the absence of social or cultural constraints led men to behave in these ways. Like many other small societies, Tasmanians failed to devise social and cultural mechanisms to control their destructive tendencies.[106]

[105] Geoffrey Blainey, *Triumph of the Nomads: A History of Ancient Australia*, revised edn., Sun Books 1983, pp 108–10. Though controversial when they were made, Blainey's figures are on the conservative side and have been confirmed by more recent international studies. The anthropologist Lawrence Keeley has shown that prehistoric warfare was more deadly, more frequent and proportionately more ruthless than modern warfare, including that of the wars between modern European nations: Lawrence H. Keeley, *War before Civilization*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996.

[106] Robert B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony*, Free Press, New York, 1992, p 52. The Tasmanians were by no means the only primitive society to act this way and there is a body of anthropological work on the general topic. Edgerton writes that without strong selective pressures from other populations or a rapidly changing environment, this is what one would expect unless populations' early solutions to the demands of their environments were remarkably efficient. C. R. Hallpike has argued that 'mediocre' practices and beliefs have quite commonly survived in small-scale societies, even though they were simple or inefficient to begin with, because there were too few selective pressures to force change. Weston LaBarre has used the term 'group archosis' to describe the persistence of false beliefs and lethal practices under similar conditions: Edgerton p 53

Into this setting, the British arrived. They soon put additional pressures onto Aboriginal women that probably tipped the balance of this already precarious population over the edge. The initial impact was the connection between prostitution and disease. As noted above, in the south of the colony, especially on Bruny Island, several young Aboriginal women began selling themselves for provisions to the convicts employed as whalers, timber-getters and stockmen. They quickly contracted venereal and other diseases and spread them among the local blacks. Within months, the majority of those on Bruny Island were dead.

In the north, the Bass Strait sealers both abducted Aboriginal women and purchased them from tribesmen. According to the harbour pilot James Kelly, a former sealer himself, Aboriginal men would barter women for dogs and supplies.[107] James Hobbs told the 1830 Committee that he knew of native men who had sold their women for four or five carcases of seals.[108] Lyndall Ryan claims the men were trying to incorporate the white visitors into their own society, but this is merely her interpretation of their motives.[109] Brian Plomley says, more truthfully: 'It is not known what the relationships were between the sealers and the tribes.'[110] The existing evidence is that the trade had a material rather than a political basis and that the women were bartered very cheaply. One Aboriginal woman, named Mary, told Robinson that the women were exchanged for provisions and that 'she herself had been bought off the black men for a bag of flour and potatoes'.[111] Mary did not agree to her sale and had to be carried off bound hand and foot. Another woman, named Jumbo, told him her group from Cape Portland raided other bands to seize their women and trade them: 'her people took the black women from the natives at Port Dalrymple and sold them to the sealers for dogs, mutton birds, flour &c.'[112] The travelling Quaker, James Backhouse, described one case on the west coast where local Aborigines traded a fourteen-year-old girl to the pilot at Macquarie Harbour in exchange for a dog.[113]

The loss of these women to their bands had serious implications for the ability of Aboriginal society to reproduce itself. Most of the femi-

[107] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 23–4
[108] James Hobbs, evidence to Aborigines committee, 9 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 221
[109] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p 67
[110] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 23
[111] Robinson, diary 10 October 1829, *Friendly Mission*, p 82
[112] Robinson, diary, 20 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, p 254
[113] James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, Hamilton Adams, London, 1843, p 58

nist historians who have commented on the trade deplore the lust of the white men who wanted these women,[114] but they say nothing about the active choices often made by the women themselves nor of the role of their menfolk who either did not prevent the trade or actively colluded in it. Although most historians portray the sealers as bywords for slavery and cruelty, when Robinson tried to recruit their wives for his settlement, a number of the women made it clear they preferred these Englishmen to their black counterparts. To others, like Walyer, the sealers offered the less objectionable of two violent alternatives. When interviewed by James Backhouse in 1832, several of the women expressed their fondness for their sealer husbands. Backhouse concluded:

> Though they may sometimes have been treated roughly by the sealers, their state may upon the whole be better than amongst uncivilized men of their own race, who like other uncivilized tribes make drudges of their women.[115]

Traditional Aboriginal society placed no constraints on the women's sexual behaviour with white men. Their husbands and fathers appeared to encourage their prostitution. In the 1820s, it was common for convict stockmen in the Oatlands district to bribe Aboriginal men with sugar to gain sexual favours from their wives.[116] Some tribesmen would offer their wives for bread.[117] At George Town in the north, a police constable reported:

> It was well understood there that Black men would prostitute their women to the stock men and others for sugar, bread and such like things. I always understood that the Blacks were not jealous of their women, but that they would, on the contrary, force the women to go and have carnal intercourse with the stockkeepers for any small present the Black men could get.[118]

While Truganini was prostituting herself with convict whalers on Bruny Island in 1829, her father was also living there but did nothing

[114] Anne McMahon, 'Tasmanian Aboriginal Women as Slaves', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 23, 2, June 1976
[115] James Backhouse, Journal, Vol 2, 18 February 1832, Friends' House Library, London, cited by Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 73
[116] Deposition by Thomas McMinn, 16 March 1830, CSO 1/323/7578, pp 197–8. There are two series of pages 170–199 in this file. This deposition is in the second series.
[117] W. A. Brodribb, evidence to 1830 Aborigines Committee, 11 March 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 224
[118] Deposition by John Jones, 16 March 1830, CSO 1/323/7578, p 171. There are two series of pages 170–199 in this file. This deposition is in the second series.

to stop her. Two of the other native women who sold themselves to the island's whalers were married at the time yet their Aboriginal husbands made no apparent complaint about what their wives were doing: 'they used to go of their own accord to the whalers and cohabited with them'.[119] Only Robinson went down to the whaling station two or three times to try to retrieve them and to scold them for their 'evil habits'.[120] But they would not listen to him and, for all their menfolk knew, they might never return. At least three women from Bruny Island did end up with the sealers in Bass Strait and, although later reports claimed they were forcibly taken,[121] their removal was probably more an extension of their existing prostitution than outright abduction. Far worse, however, were those Aboriginal men who actually sold off their women for sacks of flour or dogs. They took an exceptionally short-sighted view of what they were doing, even in terms of their own selfish motives. They deprived themselves not only of sexual companions and mothers for their children but of important providers of their own food.

Most orthodox historians agree that the sealers were responsible for the depopulation of many of the coastal bands. By abducting, buying or luring away their women, the sealers had a devastating effect on reproduction rates and had a major impact on the long-term demise of the Aboriginal population as a whole. There is some dispute over how many women the sealers actually removed from the tribes. Ryan says that between 1800 and 1835 there were seventy-four women with the sealers.[122] She claims to know their tribal origins but gives no indication of where her information came from. However, when Brian Plomley compiled his own list he could find only forty-nine women. He named each one of them and gave the names of the sealers with whom they lived plus a brief account of the information known about each individual. His is the only reliable count.[123]

Whether the true figure was about fifty or even seventy, the loss of this many women would not have had a major impact on reproduction if the total population was as large as the orthodox school claims, that is, from 4000 to 6000 people. However, if the population was the size argued in this chapter of less than 2000 people, then the loss

[119] Statement by John Freake, 27 November 1829, cited by Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 105 n 52. Freake identified four of the women as 'Dray, Tookanenna, Jack's wife and the Doctor's wife'.
[120] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 77, 105 n 52
[121] Robinson, diary, 10 October 1829, 11 October 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 82, 246. Robinson said the three women were Murrerninghe alias Kit, and two of Truganini's sisters, Lowhenunhe and Maggerleede.
[122] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Appendix 1, p 313
[123] Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, pp 1017–20

of even fifty out of its one thousand females would have been significant. It would have been five per cent of all females, and a much greater proportion of women of reproductive age. It would also have been a sizeable proportion of the population on the north and east coasts from where most of them came. The orthodox school cannot have it both ways and claim that there was a larger overall population *and* that the loss of women to the sealers contributed to population decline. If we accept the smaller population size, the case becomes credible.

In the long run, it seems clear that the loss of women had two conflicting influences on Aboriginal society. On the one hand, it is probably true that it played a significant role in population decline. On the other hand, the tiny mixed-blood community the women and the sealers created in Bass Strait was the principal means through which the ancient people of Tasmania left any human legacy at all.

In *Fate of a Free People*, Henry Reynolds urges us not to underestimate the ability of the Aborigines. They did not lack control over their own fate, he argues, and we should not see them as helpless victims of the invaders. This is a valid point. But it also means we should see them as active agents in their own demise because their men hired out and sold off their women without seriously contemplating the results. In doing so they dramatically reduced the ability of their own community to reproduce itself. Only men who held their women cheaply would allow such a thing to happen. The real tragedy of the Aborigines was not British colonization *per se* but that their society was, on the one hand, so internally dysfunctional and, on the other hand, so incompatible with the looming presence of the rest of the world. Until the nineteenth century, their isolation had left them without comparisons with other cultures that might have helped them reform their ways. But nor did they produce any wise men of their own who might have foreseen the long-term consequences of their own behaviour and devised ways to curb it. They had survived for millennia, it is true, but it seems clear that this owed more to good fortune than good management. The 'slow strangulation of the mind' was true not only of their technical abilities but also of their social relationships. Hence it was not surprising that when the British arrived, this small, precarious society quickly collapsed under the dual weight of the susceptibility of its members to disease and the abuse and neglect of its women.

TABLE TEN: ABORIGINES KILLED BY WHITES, VAN DIEMEN'S LAND 1803-1834

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
1804						
3 May	Risdon Cove	3	102nd Regt	Native hunting party mis-taken for attackers	Plausible	All sources discussed in Chapter One
12 Nov	Port Dalrymple	1	Guard of marines	Natives tried to steal tent and throw sergeant into sea	Plausible	*Historical Records of Australia*, III, I, p 607
1807						
14 Feb	New Norfolk	1	Robert Waring, kangaroo hunter	Attacked by natives in hut and speared, shot one native	Plausible	Knopwood diary 14 Feb 1807
28 Feb	Frederick Henry Bay	2	Two kangaroo hunters	Conflict over ownership of dead kangaroo. Natives threw spears, hunters shot back	Plausible	Knopwood diary 2 Mar 1807
19 April	Near Hobart	1	Kangaroo hunters	Governor's kangaroo hunters attacked, shot one native	Plausible	Knopwood diary 19 Apr 1807
1808						
Jan–Feb	N/a	5	Convicts Richard Lemon and John Brown	Confessed to killing 3 men and 2 women	Plausible	See Chapter Two

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
1816						
31 Aug	New Norfolk	3	Stock-keepers	Stock-keepers fight off attack by 20 natives	Plausible	*Hobart Town Gazette* 31 Aug 1816
c. 1816-18	Bruny Island	1	Sealers	White men in boat attacked camp, stabbed Truganini's mother	Plausible	Calder, *Native Tribes*, p 104
1819						
c. 1819	Oyster Bay	1	Stockman	N/a	Implausible	*Hobart Town Gazette* 20 March 1819
18 March	Stocker's Tier, Macquarie River	1	Stock-keeper	Stock-keepers fight off attack by natives	Plausible	CSO 1/323/7578, pp 191-3, *Hobart Town Gazette* 17 April 1819
1820						
c. 1820	Mount Cameron West	2	Sealers	Raided tribe to abduct women and shot men who resisted	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 185, 202, 203-4
1826						
3 Nov	Shannon River	1	Stockman	Natives attacked men in hut who shot one	Plausible	*Colonial Times* 10 Nov 1826
22 Nov	Allenvale, Macquarie Plains	2	Pursuit party	After two stockmen wounded, pursuit party shot natives	Plausible	CSO 1/316/7578 p 12

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
late Nov	Bothwell	2	Stock-keeper	Attacked in hut and roof set on fire, stockkeeper shot two blacks	Plausible	*Hobart Town Gazette* 2 Dec 1826
1827						
c. 1827	Eddystone Point	Several	Edward Mansell, John Riddle, Thomas Tucker, Jack Williams	Retaliation by sealers for natives killing four others	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 192-3, 249, 403, 437 n 16
12 April	Elizabeth River near Campbell Town	'a few'	Sawyers	Sawyers in hut fight off native attack	Plausible	*Colonial Times* 4 May 1827
late June	Western Marshes	1	Thomas Baker	Surrounded by '200 natives', Baker escaped, killing one in pursuit of him	Plausible	CSO 1/316/7578 p 24
August	Cape Grim	1	VDL Co stockmen	Stockmen tried to get women into hut. Native men objected	Plausible	*Friendly Mission* pp 175, 181. Plomley accepts Charles Chamberlain's claim that 'several' were killed, but all other accounts said it was only one, a tribal chief
1 Dec	Ritchie's stock hut, Western Marshes	3	VDL Co stockmen	Attacked by natives who they 'severely handled'	Plausible	VDL Co 5/1, Despatch no. 3, 14 Jan 1828 Curr to directors

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
1828						
c. 1828	Birch's Bay	2	Convicts Watkin Lowe and Paddy Newell	While abducting Truganini, they killed two natives trying to stop them	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 49, Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson*, p 32, Calder, *Native Tribes*, pp 104-6
28 Feb	Cape Grim	6	VDL Co stockmen	Natives arrived in numbers at hut, armed stockmen came out to meet them	Plausible	All sources discussed at start of Chapter Eight. Plomley says 30 killed.
9 April	Ben Lomond	1	John Batman	Pursuit of native killers, one shot but ran off	Implausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 12 April 1828. Plomley lists '1 nt. killed(?)'
September	Mersey River	1	Alexander Goldie and VDL Co stockmen	Reprisal for attack on VDL Co men at Burleigh	Plausible	Plomley, *Clash*, p 28, lists one dead, in *Friendly Mission* p 235 says 'several'
20 Oct	Green Ponds	Some	Pursuit party	Pursuit of natives who attacked Langford family	Implausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 25 Oct 1828 Pursuers 'returned unsuccessful'; *Tasmanian* 31 Oct 1828, 'fired after them and killed and wounded a considerable number'
25 Oct	Opposite Maria Island	1	Edward Walpole	Threatened by killers of stockman, Walpole fired	Plausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 1 Nov 1828

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
November	Western River	'More killed'	N/a	Aboriginal robbery and arson at Thomas Ritchie's hut	Highly implausible	CSO 1/316/7578, p 805 Plomley misquoted document, which said 'mare killed'
7 Dec	Break O'Day Plains	1	N/a	Attempt to rob hut	Implausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 13 Dec 1828
9 Dec	near Tooms Lake	10	40th Regiment	Party in pursuit of native killers shot ten	Plausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 13 Dec 1828, p 2 This incident not in Plomley's survey. See Ch 5 for location.
13 Dec	Sugar Loaf Hill	2	Patrick McOwen, Jonathan Kenzie	Attacked while droving sheep to Hobart. Shot two attackers	Plausible	*Tasmanian* 19 Dec 1828
27 Dec	Oyster Bay	1	Meredith's men	Pursuing natives who killed horses. Shot one who tried to spear them.	Plausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 17 Jan 1829
1829						
17 Jan	Bothwell	1	Sergeant of regiment	While guiding regiment Bruni Island Jack struck sergeant, was pursued to river and shot	Plausible	*Colonial Times* 30 Jan 1829, *Friendly Mission*, pp 285, 439, 506

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
c. 20 Jan	St Paul's River	9	N/a	N/a	Highly implausible	*Colonial Times* 30 Jan 1829, *Launceston Advertiser* 9 Feb 1829. See discussion Ch Five
26 Jan	Little Swan Port	1	David Rayney	N/a	Plausible	*Colonial Times* 30 Jan 1829, *Launceston Advertiser* 9 Feb 1829
18 Feb	Pleasant Hills, West Tamar	7	Officer of military party	Military party attacked by natives and responded	Implausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 28 Feb 1829. Other officers denied seeing any blacks at all
16 March	Launceston	6	Pursuit party	Natives killed three at farm, pursuit party overtook them and killed five	Plausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 21 Mar 1829; CSO 1/316/7578 p 230. HTC said 5 killed but Launceston police said total was 6
3 May	Morven, Brushy Plains	1	Pursuit party	Pursued robbers, shot one and wounded another	Plausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 16 May 1829
11 June	South Esk River, upper reaches	1	McLeod's shepherd	Skirmish with natives, one woman shot	Plausible	*Diaries of John Helder Wedge*, pp 56– 7
9-14 Aug	Jerusalem and Coal River	1	N/a	N/a	Highly implausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 15 August 1829. This report refers to a white man killed and another wounded by blacks

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
21 Aug	Emu Bay	1	Alexander Goldie and Richard Sweetling	Unprovoked attack on native women	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 192, 235 n 133
Early Sept	Ben Lomond	2	John Batman	Shot dead his wounded captives	Highly Plausible	CSO 1/320/7578 pp 142-5
18 Sept	Sorell	1	Shingle splitter	After woman killed by blacks, shingle splitters fired at them severely wounding one	Plausible	*Colonial Times*, 25 September 1829. Plomley records this as one native wounded but CT said 'one of them [blacks] was severely wounded, if not killed'
20 Dec	Orielton	1	Shepherd	Two natives attacked hut and one shot	Plausible	CSO 1/316/7578 p 382. Plomley records this as one native wounded but police report said 'a shot was fired by which one of them fell'
1830						
18 April	Whitefoord Hills, north of Deloraine	2	Stockman	Speared by natives and retaliated	Wounded plausible, killed implausible	CSO 1/316/7578 p 489 'we went in search of them ... but could see nothing of them dead or alive'
4 Aug	Shannon River	2	Humphrey Howells, settler	Rushed camp, woman killed. Man's body found later	Plausible	CSO 1/316/7578 pp 545, 565. *Friendly Mission*, p 522

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
27 Aug	Bothwell	Several	Captain Patrick Wood's assigned servants	Attack on stockman in hut, several natives killed, one man captured	Plausible	*Colonial Times*, 27 August 1830, 3 September 1830
September	VDL Co territory in northwest	1	Thomas John, VDL Co servant	Enticed native with food, stabbed him	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 210. See discussion of this story Chapter Eight
18 Oct	Sorell	1	William Gangell	Gangell and son wounded during native attack but stabbed one with pitchfork.	Plausible	CSO 1/316/7578, p 676; CSO 1/316/7578, p 681; *Hobart Town Courier* 20 November 1830. Plomley records this as a wounding but body was later found nearby
25 Oct	North of Forestier Peninsula	2	Edward Walpole	Black Line halted. Walpole went ahead and found native camp, captured two and shot two	Highly Plausible	Arthur, Memorandum, Sorell Camp, 20 November 1830, *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia*, 4, p 245
29 Oct	Break O'Day Plains	2	Police Magistrate James Simpson and constables	Pursued natives who killed settlers. Fight at Esk River where two shot dead	Highly Plausible	CSO 1/316/7578 pp 712-3, *Hobart Town Courier* 13 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 276, 284, 285

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
1831						
2 Feb	Barrowville, North Esk	1	Shepherd	Menaced by natives, who dared him to fire, shepherd shot one	Plausible	CSO 1/316/7578 p 881 Plomley records this as one native wounded but shepherd 'discharged two guns at them and observed one of the natives to fall who was immediately carried off by his companions'
13 Aug	Bashan Plains	1	John Espie's men	In attack on property, one native shot	Plausible	*Hobart Town Courier* 20 August 1831. Plomley records native wounded but 'a shot was fired which so wounded one of the blacks as to disable him from moving' and comrades carried him off into bush
4 Sept	Racecourse, Surrey Hills	1	VDL Co stockman	N/a	Plausible	Plomley, *Clash*, p 28, no source given
November	St Mary's Plains near Hampshire Hills	3	Alexander McKay and two VDL Co men	Two shot during attempt at capture. One shot another time by McKay	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 565, 583. Original number reported killed was four but Plomley p 686 n18 shows it was three

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
1834						
18 August	Hamilton	1	Shepherd	In attack on shepherd, one native shot	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 925
No date indicated						
	Recherche Bay	1	Soldier	Conflict over kangaroo hunt	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 84, 713, 807
	Woody Island	1	James Everitt, sealer	Native woman would not get mutton-birds for him	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 249, 279
	Kent Group islands	1	Bob Gambell, sealer	N/a	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 246
	Bruny Island	1	Meredith's people	N/a	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 311, 314
	Oyster Bay	1	Mr Wade's man	Saw native in bush and shot him	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 320
	N/a	1	Two stock-keepers	Tied up a native woman by heels and left her to perish	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 344, 346
	Huon River	Unspecified	'white people'	'shot the natives'	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 373
Early years of colony	Near Hobart	2	'white men who landed in a boat'	'shot two blacks dead'	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, pp 375, 465 n 202
	East of Campbell Town	2	'some white men'	Attack by armed whites on the native road	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, 484

Date	*Place*	*Number claimed killed*	*Identity of killer(s)*	*Circumstances*	*Reliability*	*Reference and comments*
	Shannon River	3	Mr Howell's men	N/a	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 506
	N/a	7	Various white men	Various tales of atrocities told to Robinson at camp	Plausible	*Friendly Mission*, p 522

Where number of killings is 'several', a figure of 5 has been allocated; where number of killings is 'a few' or unspecified, a figure of 3 has been allocated

Total number of plausible killings = 121

Sources: *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I and III. Mary Nicholls (ed.) *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1803–1838*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977. Archives Office of Tasmania: Colonial Secretary's Office papers 1/316/7578; Van Diemen's Land Company papers 5/1, 5/3. Hobart and Launceston newspapers from 1816–1831. N. J. B. Plomley (ed.) *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966. N. J. B. Plomley, *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land 1803–1831*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992. Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988. *The Diaries of John Helder Wedge*, ed. Justice Crawford, W. F. Ellis and G. H. Stancombe, Royal Society of Tasmania, Hobart, 1962

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The historian as prophet and redeemer

IN all of Europe's colonial encounters with the New Worlds of the Americas and the Pacific, the colony of Van Diemen's Land, according to the statistics produced in this book, was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed. In the entire period from 1803, when the colonists arrived, to 1834, when all but one family of Aborigines had been removed to Flinders Island, the British were responsible for killing 121 of the original inhabitants — less than four deaths a year. During the so-called 'Black War' from 1824 to 1831, the Aborigines killed a total of 187 whites. This compared to seventy-two blacks who died at white hands over the same period.

To compare these figures to the millions deliberately put to death in Pol Pot's Cambodia, Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany is bizarre and offensive. It trivialises the experience of those peoples who have suffered genuine attempts at extermination. The full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines did die out in the nineteenth century, it is true, but this was almost entirely a consequence of two factors: the long isolation that had left them vulnerable to introduced diseases, especially influenza, pneumonia and tuberculosis; and the fact that they traded and prostituted their women to such an extent that they lost the ability to reproduce themselves. Their numbers were small to begin with — less than 2000 people in the whole island — so it did not

take much for the inevitable arrival of the outside world to cause the demise of such a fragile population.

Despite its infamous reputation, Van Diemen's Land was host to nothing that resembled genocide or any attempt at it. The idea would have appalled the local authorities. The majority of the settlers, even those who had suffered Aboriginal violence, agreed with them. The only colonial sentiments openly expressed in favour of extermination were a handful of public statements made in 1830–31, in the aftermath of particular Aboriginal atrocities. But the historic record clearly shows this prospect divided the settlers deeply, was always rejected by government, and was never acted upon.

Nor, on the Aborigines' side, was there anything that resembled frontier warfare, patriotic struggle or systematic resistance of any kind. The Aborigines were nomadic hunter-gatherers who did not have a concept of possessing territory or of deterring trespassers from it. The so-called 'Black War' was a minor crime wave by two Europeanised black bushrangers, followed by an outbreak of robbery, assault and murder by tribal Aborigines. When the colonial government finally marshalled its resources against them in a determined way by mounting the infamous but commonly misinterpreted Black Line, the perpetrators quickly abandoned their actions and surrendered.

The ruling ideas of the age, both at home and abroad, favoured the conciliation of the Aborigines. Van Diemen's Land was colonized at a time when British society and politics were strongly influenced by a revival of Christian Evangelicalism, expressed in the successful campaign to end slavery, and by the philosophy of the English and Scottish Enlightenment, which spoke of the unity of humankind. The colonial governors and leading settlers not only held these ideas, they publicly expressed and acted upon them. While they suspected their convict lower orders of abusing the Aborigines, their main aim was to prevent this from happening. Even the military action the government eventually took was tempered by the humanitarian spirit of the age. Neither the authorities nor the free settlers hated the Aborigines: they pitied their savage state and sought ways to ameliorate their condition.

The claim that any of this deserves the label 'genocide' is an anachronistic absurdity. Similarly, the notion that the Aborigines of the 1820s and 1830s conducted anything resembling the anti-colonial guerilla warfare of South-east Asia in the 1950s and 1960s is a romantic delusion. Why, then, have historians persisted with such a story? Why the vast exaggerations, the wilful omissions, and the sheer invention of so many incidents? Why have there been so many people down the ages — from Las Casas to Robinson to the historians of our own era — who *want* to believe these fictions?

THE POLITICISATION OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY

> I have thought from the beginning of my career that historical writing was inescapably political — the history of race relations especially so. How could I pretend otherwise? Historians do not shed their ideological clothing or their personal feelings when they venture back into the past seeking to hear the words and to enter the minds of their chosen subjects.
>
> — Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?* 1999 [1]

Part, but by no means all, of the reason behind the fabrication of this story lies in the academic politics of the period since the 1960s. The universities in that turbulent decade were the scene of the revival of two nineteenth-century ideologies, Marxism and Romanticism, which supported and fed off one another. Combined with three major international political movements, black power and Indian activism in America and anti-colonialism in the Third World, these ideas strongly influenced Aboriginal historiography.

This was the time when Australian academic radicals began to take a substantial body of their political ideas from the United States. In race relations, they were initially in favour of the American civil rights movement's concept of integration. In the 1960s, black activists and white university students toured the Australian countryside, emulating their American counterparts in denouncing segregation, whether it was in the workforce, hotels or municipal swimming pools, and demanding integration.[2] At the time, this was a highly positive and badly needed political campaign. The publicity it attracted did much to end discrimination and to break down the racist system of reserves and missions to which many Aboriginal people had been confined since the nineteenth century.

However, by the early 1970s, intellectual circles began to abandon the concept of integration in favour of the notion that black and white people had incommensurable interests. Integration or any form of assimilation was dropped in favour of black autonomy. The followers of the Marxist guru Herbert Marcuse argued that just as capitalism co-opted the working class into accepting capitalist ideology, so whites wanted to co-opt blacks into a form of integration that would betray black interests and suppress black culture.[3] The attitudes of the American black power movement produced similar sentiments among Aboriginal activists in this country. At the same time,

[1] Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about our History*, Viking, Ringwood, 1999, p 244
[2] Ann Curthoys, *Freedom Ride*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002
[3] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964

a revival of political activism among American Indians produced a revisionist movement by historians, culminating in Dee Brown's popular and influential saga of the Indian wars, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*.[4] Both these American movements coincided with the decolonization struggles within Asia and Africa. The emergent nationalist movements in these regions were anti-imperialist and anti-European. Influenced by anti-colonialist writers, especially Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*,[5] many activists in Aboriginal politics came to identify Western imperialism as the cause of their problems.

Among historians, the notion that Aboriginal resistance to British colonization was a precursor of the guerilla struggles in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia derived from their political activism in this period. In his autobiography, Henry Reynolds describes how, as a young lecturer at Townsville University College in the 1960s, he and his wife became involved with local clergy, Communist Party and trade union officials in both the anti-Vietnam war campaign and the burgeoning Aboriginal political movement.[6] Some authors had even more direct inheritance from radical politics. Lyndall Ryan's parents, Jack and Edna Ryan, were well-known members of the Communist and Trotskyist political movements from the 1920s to the 1940s.[7] Others who began to write Aboriginal history at this time either had similar family connections or else developed a commitment to leftist politics under the influence of the radical climate of the times. Reynolds writes:

> The sudden emergence of Aborigines on the national political stage came without warning or prior reflection from historians. All this provided strong motivation to research and write and explain. There was a sense of urgency. We were self-appointed missionaries who were required to enlighten the public.[8]

These academic 'missionaries' not only rejected the conservatism of their professors and heads of schools, they also became impatient with the Marxist theory that the leading role in the socialist revolution was to be played by the blue-collar working class. As a result, they welcomed 'interest group' politics, in which women, students, gays, blacks and ethnics were all portrayed as oppressed by the prevailing

[4] Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1970
[5] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1963
[6] Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, pp 64–79
[7] Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia, from Origins to Illegality*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp 141–2, 168–72, 229, 388
[8] Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, p 95

social structure. The class struggle was replaced by the 'gender, race and class' liberation movements. After the fall of Communism in 1989, most quietly shelved Marxism to focus on their preferred interest group. Many abandoned the cause of the workers to take up the cause of the Aborigines.

The most influential single idea about history that emerged from the 1960s, however, was not so much the commitment to any particular interest group but the notion that history was 'inescapably political'. Without this, there might have been less licence taken with historical evidence and a greater sense of the historian's responsibility to respect the truth. But the argument that all history was politicised, that it was impossible for the historian to shed his political interests and prejudices, and that those who believed they could do so were only deluding themselves, became the most corrupting influence of all. It turned the traditional role of the historian, to stand outside contemporary society in order to seek the truth about the past, on its head. It allowed historians to write from an overtly partisan position and to justify this both to themselves and to anyone who dared challenge them.

There are actually two versions of this argument. The first is that historians are justified in taking a particular political line because everyone else is taking a political line too. The second is that the writing of history is an unavoidably political pursuit, as a matter of epistemological necessity. The first claim is obviously unacceptable. If a particular historian's case is based on false evidence, invented incidents and mistaken interpretations, then it is insupportable, no matter what political line anyone or even everyone else takes about the same subject. The second claim is little better. Just because it might be difficult for historians to shake off their own political prejudices and preferences, this does not mean it is impossible. It is a well-known truism that historians are creatures of their time and tend to set themselves problems that they and their contemporaries want answered, but this does not entail that their work must be fatally circumscribed by their politics. Advocates of this position often argue that because history is necessarily selective, the choices the historian makes must always be based on value judgements. But while it is true the historian must be selective, the rest of this argument does not follow. Bias is contingent, not necessary.[9] There is a world of difference between historians who go to the past to *investigate* the evidence about their subject and those who go to *vindicate* a stand

[9] For an extended discussion see Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past*, 4th edn, Encounter Books, San Francisco, 2000, pp 255–7, 328–30

they have already taken. The former usually begin with an idea of what they hope to find but are always prepared to change their expectations and conclusions in the light of what the evidence itself reveals. The latter, as the sorry example of Aboriginal history in this country reveals, only select evidence that supports their cause and either omit, suppress or falsify the rest.

The 1960s notion that historians should have a political agenda was developed in order to 'open up' scholarship so that all those voices that were allegedly excluded by traditional history could be heard.[10] Advocates of this idea are happy to legitimize a multiplicity of voices as long as they all belong to radical interest groups of which they approve: feminists, ethnics, blacks, gays and the like. However, it is not difficult to see that the politicisation of history is self-defeating for the aims of these interest groups themselves. By abandoning truth and objectivity, they unwittingly validate political positions they might find less congenial, such as those of white supremacists, ethnic cleansers, homophobes and misogynists. The result is cultural relativism in which the beliefs and prejudices of *any* culture, no matter how bizarre or anti-humanist, are given their own integrity.

This position is also fatal to the pursuit of history itself. If all history is political then all perspectives are legitimate. Nothing can ever be resolved and opposing sides are reduced to talking past one another or calling each other names. Genuine historical debate comes to an end.

In Australia, this approach has already led to the widespread corruption of Aboriginal history. This is true not only of the historical methods exposed in this book but in the beliefs that many Aboriginal people themselves now hold about their past. As the example of the Mistake Creek massacre in the introduction to this book demonstrated, Aboriginal oral history is today riven with wild allegations that the simplest amount of checking in the archives would immediately refute. Tales of this kind have now become endemic within Aboriginal culture. Not only are historians today unwilling to correct their most obvious falsehoods, they also give uncorroborated oral history the imprimatur of scholarly respectability. However, it does not take much foresight to see that the real interests of Aboriginal people are not served by any of this. These stories generate an unwarranted sense of bitterness and a debilitating resentment towards the wider Australian society. They lead many Aborigines to seek comfort in myth, legend and victimhood. They blame all their social

[10] A recent elaboration of this position is in Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1997, Chapter Five. For a review and critique see Keith Windschuttle, 'The problem of democratic history', *New Criterion*, 16, 10, June 1998

problems on the distant past and thus avoid taking responsibility for their own lives now and that of their children in the future. This is a process that is in nobody's interests except those academics and politicians, black and white, who have built their careers from the same shoddy materials.

The idea that historians are free to impose their politics onto their scholarship is also a corruption of their profession. It is vain and self-indulgent. Historians once believed they had a higher calling. It is a measure of the degeneration of standards within our universities that its perpetrators not only get away with it without reproach but have no inhibitions about declaring they are perfectly entitled to do so.

MORAL ANACHRONISMS AND CONCEPTUAL INCONGRUITIES

Two further consequences of the politicisation of history are the anachronisms and incongruities it positively encourages. The most unseemly example is the orthodox school's claim that the Tasmanian Aborigines of the early nineteenth century invented the same concept of guerilla warfare that was practised by very different societies in vastly dissimilar conflicts in Africa, Asia and South America in the mid-twentieth century. Reynolds's comment that the Aborigines' tactics 'could have come from the manuals of guerilla warfare which proliferated in the 1960s'[11] tellingly identifies his political inspirations. He imagines the Tasmanian Aborigine of the 1820s as the indigenous equivalent of a Che Guevara or Ho Chi Minh. This is not history: it is Sixties radical romanticism.

The concept of 'land rights', which now dominates both academic discourse and the Aboriginal political agenda, is also incongruous to Tasmania. The notion of 'rights' derives exclusively from the European political tradition, and has no meaning in traditional Aboriginal culture. The term 'land' is just as alien, having no role in either the vocabulary or the conceptual apparatus of Tasmanian hunter-gatherers.

Similarly, when Reynolds talks of the Black Line of 1830 as an example of 'ethnic cleansing'[12] he is invoking images of atrocities in the Balkans in the 1990s. Reynolds, of course, is far from being alone in this. Other authors routinely use such twentieth-century terms as 'transit camps' and 'concentration camps' to make tacit comparisons with the Holocaust, as well as overt links between the Aboriginal

[11] Henry Reynolds, 'The Black War: A New Look at an Old Story', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*, 31, 4, December 1984, p 2

[12] Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia's History*, Viking, Ringwood, 2001, p 76

settlement at Flinders Island and the totally different institutions at Devil's Island in the Caribbean and Alcatraz prison in San Francisco harbour.[13]

Historians once regarded faults of this kind as embarrassments. They were committed by people who failed the professional test of being able to locate themselves within the lives and times of their subjects. The most distinguished historian Australia has ever produced was Sir Keith Hancock. In a recent assessment by the editors of the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, Hancock was judged 'far and away the greatest historian of the Empire and Commonwealth'.[14] He wrote in the declining years of the Empire when it had many critics, both in the metropolis and the peripheries. One of his works was a two-volume biography of Jan Christian Smuts, the Boer War soldier and premier of South Africa, which Hancock published in the 1960s when that country was earning international pariah status for its policy of apartheid.[15] Responding to some of the English critics of his second volume, who thought he had not condemned his subject enough, Hancock said they had violated what he called 'the rule of contextual congruity'. He wrote:

> According to this rule it is wrong — in every sense of that word — to measure the thoughts and actions of people in the past by a measuring rod of knowledge and experience which did not come into existence until after those people were dead.[16]

It is unfortunate that neither Sharon Morgan nor her editors at Cambridge University Press were aware of this rule. Otherwise the following passage might have been edited out of her book on land settlement in Van Diemen's Land:

[13] Clive Turnbull, 'Tasmania: the Ultimate Solution', in F. S. Stevens, *Racism, The Australian Experience, Vol 2 Black versus White*, ANZ Book Company, Sydney, 1972, p 230, 231; Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, (1948), Sun Books, Melbourne 1974, p 224; Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987, p 423; Ben Kiernan, 'Australia's Aboriginal genocides', *Bangkok Post*, 10 September 2000, Perspective, p 2

[14] Wm. Roger Louis, 'Introduction', *Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume V, Historiography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p 30

[15] W. K. Hancock, *Smuts, Volumes I and II*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1962 and 1968

[16] W. K. Hancock, *Professing History*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1976, p 61

> Yet relatively few white women and children became casualties. The Natives treated them with infinitely more humanity and compassion than the invaders treated Aboriginal families.[17]

This statement is not only false — from 1824 to 1831 ten per cent of those murdered and assaulted by the Aborigines were white women and children[18] — but is an ahistorical moral anachronism. To talk about the Tasmanian Aborigines acting with 'humanity and compassion' is to invoke concepts they would have regarded with complete incomprehension. These terms come not from Aboriginal but from European culture. It was the European Enlightenment that founded the idea of the unity of humanity and the Christian religion that originated the notion of sharing the suffering of others. Neither was a concept held by hunter-gatherer society, in Tasmania or anywhere else, for whom the idea of loyalties owed and sentiments shared beyond the boundary of kinship was literally unthinkable.

To put European concepts into the minds of the Tasmanian Aborigines is not only to misunderstand their thinking and their motives, it is also to break every rule of the ethnographic investigation of other cultures. Rather than putting in the hard work to research the original evidence in order to enter the mentality of the Aborigines, it is so much easier to write as if they thought like we do today. This presumption devalues the mental universe the Aborigines actually did inhabit and reveals that those who make it are not really interested in their subjects for their own sake at all. Historians who write this way are arrogant, patronising and lazy.

THE MYTH OF THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN SILENCE

> The more I read the clearer it became that between 1900 and the 1960s the Aborigines were virtually written out of Australian history. 'The Great Australian Silence' settled over the new nation soon after Federation and was unbroken for over half a century.
>
> — Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?* 1999[19]

The title of Reynolds's political autobiography and its central theme is that an older generation of Australian historians failed their responsibility by completely omitting Aboriginal people from their works. It fell to his generation, Reynolds maintains, to take up this cause and to write them into history. Even though he acknowledges that this rewriting process has now been going on for more than thirty years,

[17] Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating and An Antipodean England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p 158
[18] See Chapter Four, p 87
[19] Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, pp 92

Reynolds still gets very angry when he recalls the neglect. He says that when he gives public lectures, many people approach him who still feel the same:

> It hasn't mattered where I spoke, what size the audience, what the occasion of the actual topic dealt with. Why didn't we know? Why were we never told? ... They believed their education should have provided the knowledge, the information, and hadn't done so. They felt let down, cheated, sold short. Why were they never told? Why didn't they know?[20]

Reynolds claims the neglect of the Aboriginal presence was a twentieth-century phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, books about Australia invariably gave the Aborigines a prominent place. However, this changed around the turn of the new century with the development of an Australian cultural and political identity that coincided with the flowering of Australian nationalism. After the nation was formed at Federation in 1901, historians wanted to focus on its virtues and to forget its dark underside. It was not until the generation of the 1960s emerged impatient with what they saw as a complacent, celebratory story that all this changed:

> Like many other young scholars around Australia at the time, I noted the Aboriginal relegation to obscurity with intense dissatisfaction which often enough erupted as anger at the cultural condescension and insensitivity it implied. Australia, we felt, had been badly let down by its historians. They provided no material, no analysis, no stories which would enable the community to understand the nature of contemporary relations between white and black Australians ... If we raised our voices we felt that was necessary to shatter once and for all the great Australian silence.[21]

The term 'the Great Australian Silence' was coined by the anthropologist W. E. H Stanner, in his 1968 Boyer Lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Commission.[22] At the time, Stanner was arguing against a claim by the Melbourne historian, R. M. Crawford, that Australia experienced a cultural turning point in the mid-1930s. Crawford's evidence for this phenomenon included the expansion of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, the formation of the Commonwealth Literary Fund and the Contemporary Arts Society, the welcoming of Jewish refugees from Europe, and government implementation of a policy of assimilation for Aborigines in the Northern Territory. Crawford's thesis now seems quaint and smacks of what Barry Humphries once described as

[20] Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, pp 1–2
[21] Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, p 95
[22] W. E. H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, 1968 Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1969, Chapter Two 'The Great Australian Silence'

'another one of those cultural renaissances Australia always seems to be having'. Stanner himself was unimpressed and used the low profile that Aborigines had in contemporary books as evidence that Crawford had got it wrong. Nonetheless, his case hardly amounted to the indictment of twentieth-century historians that Reynolds claims. Stanner acknowledged that his survey deliberately *excluded* books and articles written specifically about the Aborigines. He said there was actually a 'large array' of these works including Paul Hasluck's *Our Southern Half Castes* (1938) and *Black Australians* (1941) as well as E. J. B. Foxcroft's *Australian Native Policy* (1941). Stanner then went on to examine the content of ten more general non-fiction books published between 1939 and 1962. Rather than works of history, however, seven of these books were overviews of contemporary society, such as Hartley Grattan's *Introducing Australia* (1942), George Caiger's *The Australian Way of Life* (1953) and Peter Coleman's *Australian Civilization* (1962). The three history books were H. L. Harris's *Australia in the Making: A History* (1948), R. M. Crawford's *Australia* (1952) and Gordon Greenwood's *Australia: A Social and Political History* (1955).

Now, this was a small sample on which to build an argument for something as momentous as 'the Great Australian Silence', even if all the books Stanner mentioned had excluded Aborigines completely. But not all those he chose to exhibit his case actually did this. Stanner acknowledged that M. Barnard Eldershaw's *My Australia* (1939) devoted one tenth of its content to the Aborigines, and both Geoffrey Rawson's *Australia* (1948) and Crawford's *Australia* each had a chapter on the Aborigines. He also recorded that most of the other books had some references to the Aborigines — including one to which Stanner himself contributed a chapter. In most cases, these discussions were not to Stanner's taste but disagreement hardly justifies the charge of neglect. In some cases he actually approved of their Aboriginal content. Of Crawford's 1952 book, Stanner acknowledged:

> There is a chapter on the Aborigines; not the shortest chapter, and not a tailpiece, but one full of good information and well moulded general statements, and — a great novelty, this — a lively awareness of questions which historians ought to have but apparently had not, asked; for example what were the relations between the squatters and the aborigines?[23]

In other words, even on his own very limited evidence, Stanner's claim that historians were engaged in 'a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale' is not credible. 'The Great Australian Silence' is a dramatic title for a lecture and was obviously created to generate ratings for the broadcast lectures, but as an accurate summary of Austra-

[23] Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, p 23

lian cultural history in the first half of the twentieth century, it is not convincing.

Reynolds, however, accepts Stanner's claims uncritically and goes on to offer his own survey as corroboration of the thesis. Reynolds complains most about the book edited by Gordon Greenwood, *Australia: A Social and Political History*.[24] He used this as a text at Townsville University College in the 1960s at the behest of Greenwood himself, who was Professor of History and Political Science at the University of Queensland. 'Although the Greenwood book,' Reynolds says, 'was the worst example of its kind, the other available general histories were little better.' He then shows how they also contributed to the Great Australian Silence:

> Five other major histories of Australia by established scholars published between 1954 and 1967 showed a collective desire to consider the Aboriginal question as something that belonged to the early colonial period and had no modern sequel. All dealt with the Aboriginal policies of early governors, the Tasmanian Black War and conflict in the pastoral frontier in the 1830s. Only one author dealt with the second half of the nineteenth century and even he confined his attention to Western Australia.[25]

But hang on, this is supposed to be an account of how the Aborigines were, in Reynolds's own words, 'virtually written out of Australian history'. And yet here we are being told that five of the history books of the day discussed the Aboriginal policies of the early governors, the Tasmanian Black War and conflict on the pastoral frontier in the 1830s. But, if they covered all this ground, even if they did cut the story short in the mid-nineteenth century, why is Reynolds so angry? What justification could there be for his repetition of the rhetorical questions: 'Why didn't we know? Why were we never told?' On his own admission, five of the main textbooks of this allegedly most reactionary decade told their readers quite a lot about Aboriginal history. So what if they didn't tell it all down to the present? Reynolds himself wrote a book on Tasmania, *Fate of a Free People*, and yet, except for twenty-two pages at the end, the whole of his text is devoted to events in the early colonial period. On his own argument, this should make his own work every bit as culturally condescending and insensitive as those of the earlier historians he condemns.

The truth is that 'the Great Australian Silence' is largely a myth. Aborigines were not left out of history because of Australian nationalism or the desire to tell a celebratory story or any other imaginary cause. They might not have been treated in the way Reynolds and his

[24] Gordon Greenwood (ed.), *Australia: A Social and Political History*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1955

[25] Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, p 83

colleagues would have liked, but to claim the omissions of earlier historians left their readers 'let down, cheated and sold short' is a transparent case of damning the authors of the past in order to make their successors appear all the more virtuous.

The Melbourne historian Robert Murray made this clear in 1999 when he reviewed Reynolds's autobiography. 'Without leaving the room where this review is being typed', Murray wrote, he could find plenty of counter examples. The 1958 edition of the *Australian Encyclopaedia* devoted 75,000 words, the size of a small book, to the Aborigines. He also found M. H. Ellis's 1955 biography of the pioneer of the pastoral industry, John Macarthur, with eight index entries on 'Aborigines, troubles of settlers with', as well as Clive Turnbull's 1948 history of conflict in Van Diemen's Land, *Black War*, and a reader for nine-to-ten-year-olds, used in Victorian schools from the 1920s to the 1970s, which included the historical story, 'An adventure with the blacks', on page 2. Murray also spent an hour at La Trobe Library in Melbourne and, without even going to the stacks, found a number of other books published between 1924 and 1958, which 'showed many more contradictions of the "cover up" story'.[26]

The one example where Reynolds is reliable is his description of the 1955 Gordon Greenwood text from which he taught in the 1960s. That book does not have any serious discussion of the Aborigines. But while it might have been influential within the confines of the small Queensland higher education sector, where Greenwood himself controlled the curriculum, further south it had much less impact. In the history departments of the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales at the same time, the book was regarded as inadequate and out of date and was not recommended, let alone prescribed, to students. It is also true that, until 1970, Aboriginal history was not a clearly defined field. That year, Charles Rowley's book *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* burst onto the scene and single-handedly created an overarching perspective for its subject. Rowley took what previously appeared to be isolated, unconnected events and constructed a framework or paradigm that has persisted to this day, providing a narrative of conflict and incarceration from 1788 to the present. His work was a sharp contrast to everything that preceded it and immediately won over almost everyone who read it, including the present writer who, until he did his own research on the primary sources, thought it one of the outstanding works of Australian historiography.[27]

[26] Robert Murray, 'Who Wasn't Told?' *Quadrant*, November 1999, pp 56–9

[27] For an uncritical appraisal of Rowley's book see Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, pp 127–9, 273–4

None of this, however, justifies the histrionics of Reynolds's autobiography. A new interpretation of an historical topic does not automatically nullify the empirical work of previous authors, especially those who were working with different objectives. One way of reading early Australian history is to consult the biographies of the governors of the colonies, especially those who held that position before democratic self-government was instituted in the 1850s. Anyone who does this will find that the relations between the government and the Aborigines are a topic that almost all biographers discuss.[28] Nonetheless, most of these works do not devote a great deal of space to the issue: five to ten pages are usual in works that total from 300 to 500 pages. Is this, then, evidence of neglect, tokenism or an ideologically-inspired silence?

The reality is that, for almost all the governors, any problems they had with the Aborigines were minor compared to the other issues with which they had to grapple. This is true even of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur of Van Diemen's Land. Despite the drama with which Aboriginal historians like to surround the so-called Black War and the Black Line, these issues were by no means the greatest of Arthur's concerns. His primary responsibility was as supervisor of a penal colony. Administration and policy for the convicts was a far more important issue to him than anything to do with the Aborigines. Other matters that also weighed far more heavily were the legal and political progress of the colony, the development of land policy, the growth of commerce, and the construction of roads, bridges and government buildings. As a result, his biographer, A. G. L. Shaw, devotes about eleven of his 115 pages on Arthur's career in Van Diemen's Land to his Aboriginal policy and practice. This is about the right weight the subject deserved.

[28] George Mackaness, *Admiral Arthur Phillip: Founder of New South Wales, 1738–1814*, Angus and Robertson Sydney, 1937, pp 102–8, 139–40, 155–8, 168–9, 170–4, 187–9, 192–6, 200, 229–31, 289–99, 302–3, 334–5; Alan Frost, *Arthur Phillip 1783-1814: His Voyaging*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, pp 144–5, 183–4, 187, 260–1, 309 n 18; George Mackaness, *The Life of Vice-Admiral William Bligh*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, (1931) rev. ed. 1951, pp 60–4, 243–6; M. H. Ellis, *Lachlan Macquarie: His Life, Adventures and Times*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1947, pp 179, 327, 351–8, 507–8; John Ritchie, *Lachlan Macquarie: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp 109–10, 132, 152; Brian H. Fletcher, *Ralph Darling: A Governor Maligned*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1984, pp 183–90; A. G. L. Shaw, *Sir George Arthur, Bart 1784–1854*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980, pp 123–34; Hazel King, *Richard Bourke*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1971, pp 183-8, 191–5

THE DRAMATIC IMPERATIVE IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

History is both an art and a science. The historian who can capture both aspects of the discipline is very often rewarded with popular as well as academic acclaim. Historians who can construct grand, dramatic narratives can become as popular and revered as award-winning novelists. The difficulty in accomplishing this in Australia has always been that the history of this country has been so uneventful. There were no revolutions, civil wars or struggles for independence. The campaigns for reforms from which Australian democracy most benefited were all made in England. The great issues that at several times over the last two centuries shook Europe and America to their foundations were all resolved here without much fuss. As a result, in the writing of history the most publicly successful Australian authors have been those who could cook up something dramatic from the most meagre ingredients.

For instance, the reality of the Australian convict system was that it was a successful program of penal reform that turned most convicted criminals into useful labourers and law-abiding citizens.[29] However, by far the most widely read book on the subject has been Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*, which portrayed early Australia as a cesspool of sadism and cruelty, the British precursor to Stalin's gulag archipelago.[30] Two of the principal intellectual influences on the early Australian colonies were Evangelical Christianity and Enlightenment humanism, both of which were spread through the established church where, as in America, rationality and religion were not incompatible but worked in harmony.[31] But Australia's most celebrated historian, Manning Clark, built his reputation by constructing a story of the *conflict* between Enlightenment secularism and the Protestant and Catholic versions of Christianity.[32]

Historians of this dramatic bent have enlivened every period of the Australian past with struggles between contesting social classes: in the convict era, it was emancipists versus exclusives; in the gold rushes, diggers versus troopers; in the pastoral economy, squatters versus selectors; in the industrial economy, labour versus capital. The gold rush immigrants of the 1850s were actually intent on making them-

[29] Stephen Nicholas (ed.), *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1988

[30] Robert Hughes, *That Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987

[31] John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2002

[32] C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia, Volume I: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1962

selves rich in as little time as possible, but one of the most successful historical theses of the 1950s and 1960s, Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend,* discovered them to be the founders of collectivist values and participatory democracy.[33] As a result, trade unionists of the far left today carry their Eureka Stockade flag as a symbol of radical activism. In late nineteenth century Australia, the ambition of most 'selectors' was, like small farmers everywhere, to make a living as independent proprietors and eventually become large farmers. However, one of their number, Ned Kelly — in reality a small-time thief and offhand murderer — has since been apotheosised by historians and award-winning novelists as an Australian Robin Hood, a 'social bandit', and an icon of Irish independence and Australian republicanism.[34] In nineteenth century Australia, women gained legal rights, entered male professions and graduated from universities much earlier than in most Western countries. Conservative politicians gave them the vote decades before their English counterparts, without the need for any campaigning by suffragettes. However, the most successful feminist historians have adopted a plot that portrays valiant Australian heroines confronting an unyielding patriarchal hierarchy to reform the most chauvinist society in the Western world.[35]

The story constructed by Reynolds, Ryan and other members of the orthodox school of Aboriginal history has the same motives and the same veracity. Indeed, according to Reynolds, his story outdoes all the others in its dramatic appeal:

> Twenty thousand blacks were killed before federation. Their burial mound stands out as a landmark of awesome size on the peaceful plains of colonial history. If the bodies had been white our histories would have been heavy with their story, a forest of monuments would celebrate their sacrifice. The much noted actions of rebel colonists are trifling in comparison. The Kellys and their kind, even Eureka diggers and Vinegar Hill convicts, are diminished when measured against the hundreds of clans who fought frontier settlers for well over a century.[36]

[33] Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958, Chapter V

[34] John McQuilton, *The Kelly Outbreak 1878–1880: The Geographical Dimension of Social Banditry*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1987; Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, Lothian, Melbourne, 1995. Peter Carey's Booker Prize-winning *True History of the Kelly Gang* is a work of fiction deriving largely from these historical interpretations.

[35] Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1975; Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia 1788 to Present*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1976; Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999

[36] Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1982, pp 200–1.

Reynolds is also aware he is buying into the most enduring dramatic theme of the modern era: the struggle of the downtrodden against the powerful, and their brilliant triumph or valiant defeat:

> There is much in their story that Australians have traditionally admired. They were ever the underdogs, were always outgunned, yet frequently faced death without flinching.[37]

The appeal of such romantic drama, of course, is by no means confined to Australia. It has proven perennially successful in all democratic societies and in all forms of the entertainment media, from the novels of Victor Hugo to the toga-and-sandals epics of Hollywood. Aboriginal history is one more variation on a formula well-proven in the cultural marketplace. The only problem is that, just like the stories of Jean Valjean and Spartacus, it derives more from the creative imagination than the historical record. Reynolds and his colleagues have constructed a great drama that has swept all before it, but at the cost of deceiving those readers who came looking for the truth.

HISTORY, SIN AND REDEMPTION

> Christianity is historical in another and, perhaps, even deeper sense. The destiny of humankind, placed between the Fall and the Judgement, appears to its eyes as a long adventure, of which each life, each individual pilgrimage, is in its turn a reflection. It is in time and, therefore, in history that the great drama of Sin and Redemption, the central axis of all Christian thought, is unfolded.
>
> — Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 1941[38]

There is a much deeper dramatic theme at work here as well. Left-wing politics may be enough to explain the appeal of the Aboriginal story in academia, where the left rules the humanities, but not to other sectors of our intellectual and political elites. This is a story that has attracted some of the most eminent jurists, politicians and clergy of this country, including several High Court judges and former Prime Ministers, few of whom would have been so strongly attracted by the appeal of a political struggle against the established order.

Although we now inhabit a largely secular society, the chords of Christianity reverberate deeply within our culture, even among those

The figure of 20,000 dead is yet another invention: see Keith Windschuttle, 'The myths of frontier massacres in Australian History, Part II: The fabrication of the Aboriginal death toll", *Quadrant*, November 2000

[37] Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, p 201

[38] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of Historical Writing*, trans. Peter Putnam, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1954, p 5

who pride themselves on their rationality or their atheism. It is a well-known truism that in the modern era, radical politics was a substitute for religion for many who could not do without it. This was especially true for those intellectual classes attracted to the great utopian projects of Marxism and socialism.

It is less appreciated that some of the more recent versions of interest group politics have been a product of the same yearning, for both the religious and the non-religious alike. As the above quotation from Marc Bloch's classic work reminds us, the great drama of sin and redemption is built into our notions of the destiny of humankind. The idea that we are fallen creatures, racked with sin, is attractive to large numbers of people.

This is especially so in the prosperous societies of the West, which readily harbour the guilty suspicion that their success must have been at the expense of someone else. In the green version of this Christian drama, we have sinned against the environment and the planet itself. Such a notion is even more attractive to those who feel they have the ability to rectify the situation.

For such people, the story of Aboriginal depredation is tailor-made. Who among them would want to live in a largely benign, uneventful and moderately successful minor nation? How much more exciting to inhabit a country fatally flawed by, but oblivious to, its own terrible dark past. How much more rewarding to give oneself a chief role in its moral salvation.

In other words, the principal subjects of this great drama have not been the Aborigines at all. Its real heroes were always intended to be its authors — the white historians who rescued the blacks from the Great Australian Silence. These historians have set themselves up as prophets blessed with a vision hidden from ordinary Australians. They have also held out the invitation to their readers among the political and intellectual elites to join them in becoming their nation's redeemers.

Since 1996, the persistent demand for Prime Minister John Howard to say 'sorry' to the Aborigines has been integral to this ritual. So has been the lobbying for a permanent apology in the form of a monument to black 'resistance fighters' at the Australian War Memorial. Sir William Deane's misguided contrition at Mistake Creek in 2001 was part of the penitence. Those who possess this gospel will withhold their blessing until the nation recognises and confesses its mortal sin. Not until it does so, until it apologises, seeks forgiveness and makes offerings in atonement, will they declare it fit for redemption.

Aboriginal history, in short, is an exercise in white vanity. Just as earlier versions of utopian politics were driven by the impulse of men

to play God, contemporary Aboriginal interest group politics derives from the same audacious presumption. But just as the historical theory underpinning the former utopianism turned out to be flawed and defective, the history behind this successor is all smoke and mirrors too.

EPILOGUE

Heritage, genealogy and black intellectual authoritarianism

AT Risdon Cove, where the Union Jack was first hoisted in Tasmania in 1803, the flagstaff today flies an Aboriginal flag. The seventy-hectare site of the initial British settlement was transferred to the descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines in 1995 in recognition of land rights and as a gesture of reconciliation. At the time, it was part of a total transfer of 3800 hectares of what were claimed to be sites of cultural and historical significance to the Aborigines. Risdon Cove was on the list ostensibly because of the 'massacre' that occurred there in May 1804 but its acquisition was a considerable political coup for the activists who demanded it. Although the smallest of the sites handed over, it was symbolically the most valuable. It had previously been maintained by the state government to commemorate the founding of British settlement. In the late 1970s it had been a major project for historians and archaeologists of the Tasmanian Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage. They had uncovered the foundations of a number of the original buildings, identified the quarters of soldiers, convicts and settlers, restored the paths and fields,

reconstructed two of the original buildings, and turned it all into a heritage site for locals and tourists.[1]

Today, Risdon Cove under Aboriginal ownership is quite a different place. All the restoration work is visibly decaying. The painstakingly excavated ruins and foundations have eroded and are overgrown with weeds and blackberry. Many of the signs have fallen down and most of the paths have gone. Only one of the replica huts still stands and it lies open and disintegrating. Rather than a heritage site for visitors, the whole area is surrounded by intimidating signs painted with the black, red and yellow Aboriginal flag, declaring: 'Private Land: No public access beyond this point.'

Instead of reconciliation, or any other sign of harmony or accord, the symbolism now exuded by the site is the triumph of the activists who persuaded the government to hand it over. It not only tells Tasmanians of British descent that they no longer retain their founding site, but emphasizes they are trespassers. It is a considerable victory for radical Aboriginal politics, that is, the politics of victimisation and demonisation. Not having an answer to allegations about the treatment of Aborigines 170 years ago, governments of both conservative and social democratic persuasion have caved in and, without any legal obligation, apologetically handed over large tracts of land to organizations representing fifth-generation descendants of the original inhabitants.

Despite the fact that, as Chapter Four argued, the original Tasmanian hunter-gatherers did not have the concept of land ownership or any notion of private property, the appetite for land of their descendants has only grown the more it has been fed. At their instigation, the Tasmanian government in 2001 introduced a bill to hand over another 51,000 hectares. Following the bill's failure in the opposition-controlled upper house, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Legal Service announced that it would launch action in the Supreme Court to claim land amounting to half the state.[2]

The Commonwealth government through its Indigenous Land Corporation has provided the money to buy some freehold acreages in Tasmania, such as the Murrayfield sheep property on Bruny Island, even though sheep were introduced by the British and were unknown to traditional Aboriginal culture. However, most of what the local activists are now demanding is either Crown land or national park. So if this process continues, more public sites like Risdon Cove

[1] Angela McGowan, *Archaeological Investigation at Risdon Cove Historic Site, 1978–1980*, Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Occasional Paper no. 10, Hobart, April 1985

[2] See Chapter Seven, pp 236–7

will be targeted. Eventually, they too will be festooned with signs proclaiming 'Private Land', although, yet again, such a concept has no connection to traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, which never had the words 'private' or 'land' in its vocabulary.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND BLACK VANDALISM

Archaeologists have established that the human occupation of Tasmania is at least 20,000 years old. Materials found in caves in the south-west of the island have been dated as at least this age.[3] There are probably much older sites yet to be discovered. Until the seas rose at the end of the last ice age about 10,000 years ago, Tasmania was part of the continent of Sahul or Greater Australia, and on what is now the mainland some human remains have been dated more than 40,000 years old.[4] The British colonization of Australia coincided with the founding of the academic discipline of anthropology and this country has always figured prominently in attempts to understand the sudden explosion of human beings across the globe in the late Pleistocene period. As the anthropologist D. J. Mulvaney has remarked, the global significance of the Australian findings are great. 'As Australia, Europe and the New World were colonized by *Homo sapiens* in what may be a near synchronous surge across the continents, this was one of the major events of humankind.'[5]

However, in the past decade, the continuation of archaeological research in Tasmania has faced two major problems. Since the formation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council, the Tasmanian government has imposed increasingly stringent time restrictions on the permits it issues for research and has insisted that materials excavated be returned to local Aborigines after a specified period. The Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council now has the right not only to approve all research and to have all relics returned to it, but to insist its own consultants oversee excavations, decide what may be retrieved, and charge hefty consultancy fees for the privilege.

The second problem is far more disturbing. The excavated material returned to Aborigines is not being kept in storage and properly

[3] Barry Blain et al, 'The Australian National University/Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service Archaeological Expedition to the Franklin and Gordon Rivers: Summary of Results', *Australian Archaeology*, 16, 1983, pp 71–83

[4] In 2001 Alan Thorne of the Australian National University dated DNA sequences from Lake Mungo at 60,000 years old. However, the dating is controversial, with Chris Stringer of the British Museum of Natural History arguing the extracted DNA could not be reliable.

[5] D. J. Mulvaney, 'Past regained, future lost: the Kow Swamp Pleistocene burials', *Antiquity*, 65, 246, March 1991, p 14

identified for future scientific investigation. It is either being reburied in ways that render it unusable in the future or else destroyed altogether. In a case in 1994 involving excavations in caves in the Tasmanian south-west by the school of archaeology at La Trobe University, even though the sites concerned were from the Pleistocene era and were previously unknown to modern Aborigines, members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council insisted that the material was of great spiritual and psychological importance and they needed to rebury it to 'heal the wounds' created by the excavation. Instead, once the material had been handed back, they threw it into the waters of a dam at the site.[6] Museum collections of skulls and skeletons collected in the nineteenth century are now routinely returned to be burnt or buried. Brian Plomley has complained:

> This is a consequence of legislation that has compelled holders of skeletal material relating to the Tasmanian Aborigines, both full-blooded and hybrid, to hand it over to some people in Tasmania calling themselves Tasmanian Aborigines, who have destroyed it. The museums in Tasmania have been stripped, and collections elsewhere in Australia have been handed over to these people as well. They are now trying to gain possession of collections in Europe, America and elsewhere, and if they succeed there will be fewer remains of the Tasmanian Aborigines than feathers of the dodo.[7]

In 1995, acting on advice from his department that the advantages of 'empowering' the local Aboriginal community outweighed the scientific loss, the Tasmanian Minister for Environment and Land Management used his power under the Crown to seize other artefacts collected by La Trobe University archaeologists. These again were Pleistocene assemblages from south-western caves that had not been occupied by human beings for at least 12,000 years, mainly animal bones but no human bones, teeth or artefacts that might be considered sacred. Even though there was no established connection between this material and modern Aborigines, it was nonetheless returned to their representatives. The archaeologist in charge of the project, Jim Allen, has recorded 'the profound distress of my students and colleagues as they saw the work of eight years torn down by people with little interest in it'. Allen observed that events of this kind would inhibit the future of professional excavation in Tasmania:

> I find it more than coincidental that many of Australia's leading archaeological fieldworkers are currently moving to work offshore, either partly

[6] Tim Murray and Jim Allen, 'The forced repatriation of cultural properties to Tasmania', *Antiquity*, 69, 1995, p 871

[7] N. J. B. Plomley, commentary in *Current Anthropology*, 32, 1, February 1991, p 16

> or wholly. The implications of this for the well-being of prehistoric archaeology in this country are grim.[8]

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council is by no means the only group acting this way. The same policy is being pursued on the mainland by Aboriginal activists. A number of them supported their Tasmanian colleagues in the La Trobe University affair, urging Victorian Aborigines to cease co-operating with the school. On the mainland, the worst single act occurred in 1990 when the Museum of Victoria returned the Kow Swamp skeletons to the Echuca Aboriginal Co-operative, who reburied them in an unknown location. These were Pleistocene skeletons dated from 9000 to 15,000 years old found in Victoria in 1967–8 by Alan Thorne of the Australian National University. At the time of their discovery, the present Aboriginal community in the district did not exist. The skeletons were of people several hundred generations removed from modern Aborigines. D. J. Mulvaney, who made an unsuccessful appeal to the Victorian government to prevent their loss, has argued:

> Their kin cannot be presumed to have shared the same cultural values or religious concepts of this generation. Neither can a few people 'own' them, in the sense of being free to destroy them. Indeed, this vast time factor, combined with their distinctive physical differences, ensure that any line of descent is to the Aboriginal race everywhere, not to Echuca people alone. Whatever justifications the local people advance for re-burial, future generations of Australians of any skin colour will term it vandalism.[9]

Moreover, Mulvaney has argued that not merely the interests of Aborigines versus archaeologists are at stake. There are universal principles involved:

> It is worth reflecting that outrage would extend far beyond the ranks of the 'heritocracy' should the French nationalist 'owners' re-bury the Cro-Magnon human remains or overpaint Lascaux, if Ethiopians cremated 'Lucy', or the pyramids became a stone quarry and the Taj Mahal was razed to build apartments. People of all races, creeds and cultures would appeal to those same universal human values which govern UNESCO principles.[10]

Mulvaney wrote this in 1991. A more recent perspective would compare the modern Aborigines who buried the Kow Swamp skeletons to the Islamic Taliban who dynamited the giant Buddhist statues of Bamiyan. No matter what religious or ethnic justifications are

[8] Jim Allen, 'A short history of the Tasmanian affair', *Australian Archaeology*, 41, 1995, p 48

[9] Mulvaney, 'Past regained, future lost: The Kow Swamp reburials', p 16

[10] Mulvaney, 'Past regained, future lost: The Kow Swamp reburials', p 18

made for these acts, Mulvaney is right to say their perpetrators, and the politicians who assisted them, will be recognised by future generations as vandals of epic proportion.

During his futile behind-the-scenes campaign to persuade the Victorian government to save the Kow Swamp collection, Mulvaney observed that many of his anthropological colleagues thought he was being provocative in challenging Aboriginal 'ownership'. The argument that modern Aboriginal people 'own their past' is one that successive conferences of archaeologists and anthropologists have since confirmed with resolutions. Those who remain in the field have responded positively to Aborigines who have claimed this as a right. In 1983, the indigenous perspective on this issue was put forcefully in the journal *Australian Archaeology*. The author was Rosalind Langford of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. She argued:

> You seek to say that as scientists you have a right to obtain and study information about our culture. You seek to say that because you are Australians you have a right to study and explore our heritage because it is a heritage to be shared by all Australians, white and black. From our point of view we say you have come as invaders, you have tried to destroy our culture, you have built your fortunes upon the lands and bodies of our people and now, having said sorry, want a share in picking out the bones of what you regard as a dead past. We say that it is our past, our culture and heritage, and forms part of our present life. As such it is ours to control and it is ours to share on our terms.[11]

Even though most currently practising anthropologists have now accepted this case and try to do research through compromises within its confines, it is not a good argument. The 'past' is neither a piece of property nor an object of any kind. Indeed, it no longer exists, except in its consequences. We can *know* the past but it is literally impossible to own or control it. Langford's argument is disingenuous. It is not the past itself but knowledge about it that she seeks to control. She wants to do this by claiming ownership and control of the relics or heritage items from the past, whether they be buried in archaeological sites or lodged in archives. What radicals like her really want to control is white interpretations of the past. They want to dictate how whites should interpret black history. They want everyone to accept their own interpretation, especially the view expressed in the above passage, that the whites were invaders who tried to destroy black culture. Claims about 'ownership' of the past are really claims about the right to interpret the past — about who is to do it and the line they will be permitted to take.

[11] R. F. Langford, 'Our Heritage — Your Playground', *Australian Archaeology*, 16, June 1983, p 2

It should have been apparent to any self-respecting anthropologist that this argument is unacceptable. It breaches the fundamental principles of Western culture that both thought and speech should be free, and that no one has the right to restrict the interpretations of others, whatever their race or colour. In short, it is profoundly authoritarian. As one might have expected, Langford anticipated this objection with the assertion that the principles of academic scholarship are simply Western conventions and that Aboriginal culture has its own, different rules: 'Your science of archaeology is white organized, white dominated, and draws its values and techniques from a European and Anglo-American culture ... that reality of bias cannot be used to say our claims are unfair and unscientific.'[12]

If this is so, then no one who values academic freedom and the autonomy of scholarship should compromise with such claims. It is depressing to note how many members of the anthropological community today have crossed this floor and taken sides with those who want to keep cultural interpretation a closed shop.

Nonetheless, there is one issue that this debate has so far assiduously avoided. When Langford talks about 'our people', 'our past' and 'our culture', who are the people she is referring to? Apart from her own assertions, which are not infallible, how is anyone to ascertain who the modern members of this people and this culture really are? How can anyone tell that the platform from which Langford and her colleagues speak is legitimate? As the next section reveals, in Tasmania this is a question that has some unexpected answers.

GENEALOGY AND BLACK CENSORSHIP

In March 1996, the state secretary of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc., Rosalind Langford wrote to all the major libraries in Australia, asking them to remove from their shelves a publication about the history and genealogy of the Tasmanian Aborigines. She hoped that the libraries would co-operate voluntarily but backed her request with a veiled threat to take legal action.

The publication in question was entitled *The Tasmanian Aborigines and Their Descendants (Chronology, Genealogies and Social Data)*. Its author was the academic Bill Mollison, assisted by Coral Everitt. It was published in 1978 by their employer, the University of Tasmania in Hobart. An earlier version of the data it contained had appeared in separate volumes in 1974 but in 1978 the contents were revised and edited by Phil Hackett into a combined edition. The research project behind the publication had been funded by two Commonwealth government bodies, the Institute of Aboriginal Studies and the

[12] Langford, 'Our Heritage — Your Playground', p 2

Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Part of its method was to examine five earlier studies of Tasmanian Aboriginal family histories and to resolve some of their errors and inconsistencies.[13] The project also questioned a number of members of the local Aboriginal community about their own genealogical knowledge and family records. It eventually published a chronology of the history of the Aborigines in Tasmania, and their genealogy in the form of the family trees of the descendants of the various Bass Strait sealers and their Aboriginal wives, from the first generation who lived from the 1790s to the 1830s, down to the fifth generation, born between 1918 and 1967.

The authors were closely connected to the local Aboriginal community, whose support they acknowledged. Mollison had previously been the state secretary of Abschol, a Commonwealth program to provide scholarships for Aboriginal students. His co-author, Coral Everitt, bore the surname of a well-known Tasmanian family of Aboriginal descent. The project was primarily undertaken at the request and on behalf of the local Aboriginal community in order to establish their links with the past and to confirm the authenticity of their identity. The 1970s, of course, was a period when it became not only a matter of some pride to discover some Aboriginal ancestry in one's background but, through the number of government programs that then became available, an issue of financial relevance as well. Everything about the project seemed to confirm that it was conducted by academics with Aboriginal interests at heart and with their full support.

This is not, however, how the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre saw it in 1996. Langford told the libraries the publication involved a 'breach of confidence'. Those who supplied the information had given it privately and never imagined it would be made public. Moreover, it was full of errors. Langford wrote:

> None of the Aboriginal people who supplied the information to Mollison would have contemplated the information being made as public as it currently is. Much of the material supplied to Mollison was confidential. The exposing in the Mollison genealogies of private family matters, whether accurate or not, to public curiosity highlights the breach of that confidence.[14]

[13] Bill Mollison and Coral Everitt, *The Tasmanian Aborigines and Their Descendants (Chronology, Genealogies and Social Data)*, Vols 1 and 2 (edited as a combined edition by Phil Hackett), University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1978. The earlier studies had been written by N. B. Tindale, A. L. Meston, E. W. Stephens, J. B. Bladon and R. A. Littlewood.

[14] Letter to various librarians, 19 March 1996, by Ros Langford, state secretary, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc., Hobart

Langford did not identify any specific inaccuracies or particular breaches of privacy. Nor did she enclose any supporting documents of complaint from the Aboriginal families who helped with its production. She expected the libraries to take her word on trust. She warned that, although current copyright laws did not permit her to order them to withdraw the publication, legal action could possibly follow. 'The only protection for the Aboriginal community would rest in litigation for breach of trust, confidentiality or breach of a fiduciary duty.' She added:

> The Aboriginal community intends to apply its mind to the issue of the future use of the Mollison genealogies. In order that it may do so, we request you remove the Mollison genealogies from public scrutiny.

Now, the presumption of this organisation to speak for all Tasmanian Aborigines, when the local community was at the time riven by warring factions, was bad enough. But its audacity in claiming the right to decide the future of a work lodged in a public library simply because it contained information that was inaccurate or about private family matters is much more disturbing.

It is true there are occasions when some private documents in libraries do have restricted access. Some authors or donors give papers under certain conditions, such as a time embargo for public release or a stipulation than only bona fide researchers be given access. These are conditions imposed by the documents' owners when they are deposited, and libraries are free to accept or reject them, along with the papers concerned. What the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre sought, however, was something quite different. It wanted a publication it had neither owned, authored or produced removed because it disapproved of its contents. Of course, if inaccuracy or privacy ever became an accepted criterion for book removal from libraries, then vast quantities would have to be taken from the shelves. In this case, there was a particular agenda behind the request, which Langford avoided mentioning. Before looking at this, however, the principles involved are worth considering because the issue goes much further than the Mollison genealogies.

This is one more example of black activists attempting to control knowledge of the past. It is an extension of the assumptions that now pervade anthropology and archaeology to historical documents and publications. The fact that this was done by an Aboriginal organisation that had no role in producing this publication is a direct attack on freedom of information. However, what is far more disturbing than the demand itself are the principles under which it was made and the positive response it received from some major libraries. Indeed,

the current policies of the profession of librarianship now give demands of this kind their sanction.

Since 1994, an organisation called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network has been holding conferences to lay down policies for libraries and archives. It has since endorsed a document entitled *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*. The professional body, the Australian Library and Information Association, has published and circulated these protocols, which are guidelines not only for interacting with Aboriginal people and for handling materials with Aboriginal content, but also for a much more radical agenda.[15] They propose reforms of indexing terminology, subject headings and classification systems, declaring: 'there needs to be nothing less than a total paradigm shift away from Eurocentric approaches to categorisation and description'. The most contentious part of the protocols concerns intellectual property issues. The relevant section begins with a quotation from Marcia Langton, Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, who asserts:

> We can and ought to demand restricted access to some records. But in respect of any particular item, it must be the indigenous people with authority in the particular group who own the information who advise on research and curatorial practices.

Sentiments of this kind would once have been completely unacceptable to librarians, whose whole profession was dedicated to disseminating information as freely and widely as possible. However, the Aboriginal protocols not only endorse these comments but go on to propose new forms of restrictive categories in the form of 'cultural' and 'moral' ownership:

> The interests of the authors and publishers of records, books and other documentary material are protected by copyright law but the interests of those whose culture is described are not. The primary rights of the owners of a culture must be recognised.

The protocols recommend that librarians develop ways of protecting indigenous cultural and intellectual property, 'including the recognition of moral rights'. In other words, the Australian Library and Information Association is also proposing that, when it comes to Aboriginal holdings, libraries should abandon the traditional freedom of information, research and publication that prevails within Western culture.

The rationale for this cannot be based on any discrimination or exploitation suffered by Aboriginal authors or artists. Their rights are

[15] Available at www.ntu.edu.au/library/protocol.html

already protected by copyright laws, which ensure they own their work and get paid its sale or hire. Aborigines and white authors alike have their interests recognised by these laws. But the Aboriginal lobby in librarianship now wants to introduce collective ownership and 'moral rights' to information. It wants access to indigenous culture to be determined by 'people with authority in the particular group who own the information'. If this recommendation were widely implemented it would mean that only approved authors would be allowed to access information to write about Aboriginal society and Aboriginal history.

The outcome of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre's request for the removal of the Mollison genealogies demonstrates that some librarians are now prepared to go along with these demands. Being a university publication, Mollison's work should be held by most university libraries in Australia, especially those with departments of anthropology or history. A search of their catalogues, however, shows that it is only available in the following university libraries: University of Tasmania, University of New South Wales, La Trobe University, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology. I do not know if other university libraries originally held the publication and withdrew it as requested, or whether they simply never acquired it. However, with the major state libraries, the issue is clearer. The State Library of Victoria originally acquired the publication but now lists it as 'missing'. The Mitchell Library, Sydney, still holds it but has placed it under restricted access. The Mitchell catalogue says: 'Not available for public access. Refer to Indigenous Services Librarian'. The publication in the Mitchell stack is itself labelled: 'Not to be issued. Item not available for public access. Refer to Indigenous Services Librarian.'[16] Of all the major government libraries, only the Tasmanian State Library and the Northern Territory Library have the publication on unrestricted access.

The National Library of Australia in Canberra does not list the publication in its catalogue at all. When I initially asked National Library staff, I was told it had once been listed on its national data base but the record had since been altered and it was no longer available. After I explained my intention to write about this subject, a staff member called me back to say the National Library had not withdrawn the publication since it had never actually acquired it. This was a surprise. Under the Copyright Act, a legal deposit copy of every

[16] At the Mitchell, researchers who do insist on seeing the publication are referred to the Indigenous Services Librarian, who will retrieve it for them. Most readers, however, would be deterred by the advice in the catalogue and presume it is now completely inaccessible. The Mitchell based its decision to restrict access on the ALIA protocols.

Australian publication must be given to the National Library. Publishers who neglect to do this receive a letter reminding them of their obligation. It would have been very unusual for a university publisher who provided copies to the state libraries in New South Wales and Victoria to have omitted the National Library in the first place. It would have been even more unusual for it to ignore the reminder letters as well.

The library of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra has put the genealogy under the following restriction: 'Closed access — Principal's permission. Closed copying and quotation — Principal's permission'. The 'principal' in this case is the head of the institute. AIATSIS informs me that, despite these restrictions, any bona fide researchers would be given ready access.

To their credit, both the University of Tasmania library and the Tasmanian State Library in Hobart refused to go along with the demand. They kept the publication on their shelves, fully available. This might have been because they had some local knowledge of what actually lay behind the request. For the real reason had little to do with privacy, the ownership of Aboriginal culture, or the moral rights of indigenous communities.

Anyone familiar with contemporary Aboriginal politics who accesses the publication and reads it through will soon see why Ms Langford wanted it withdrawn. The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc. is an organisation founded by the lawyer Michael Mansell, who has been a prominent figure on the left of Aboriginal politics since the 1970s. He was also the founding secretary of the Aboriginal Provisional Government, an organization that wants to secede from Australia and establish an Aboriginal state. In 1987, Mansell attracted considerable publicity by going to Libya to attend the World Conference Against Zionism, Racism and Imperialism and seeking thirty million dollars from the Libyan dictator, Colonel Gaddafi, to fund his organization. He has staged a number of media stunts to promote his secessionist movement, which calls for a separate Aboriginal nation owning all unalienated Crown land.[17] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, organizations connected to Mansell and his relatives became the major recipients of Aboriginal funding and land grants made by successive Tasmanian state governments.

When the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre sought to suppress the Mollison genealogies in 1996, its control of Aboriginal resources in the state had come under challenge. The year before, the centre be-

[17] Michael Mansell, 'Seeking Real Rights for the Aboriginal People of Australia', Aboriginal Provisional Government, Hobart, February 1994, p 12

gan demanding that many other people calling themselves Aborigines provide a family tree to prove it. This was to keep those of whom it did not approve from voting in elections for the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council, an organization run by Michael Mansell's cousin, Clyde, and the recipient of all the land grants the government had so far made. The Australian census taken that year showed that the local Aboriginal population had apparently grown from about six hundred in 1971 to a total of 14,600.[18] The Mansell faction, however, wanted to disenfranchise most of those who had recently discovered their Aboriginality, labelling them 'frauds' and 'impostors'. Some of them had organized a rival faction that threatened to break Mansell's monopoly of Aboriginal resources. At stake was the $5 million a year the state government provides to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. Mansell's law firm has a retainer from the centre to provide legal services, a business that grosses it about one million dollars a year.

The rival group argues its own members are descended not, like that of the Mansell faction, from the nineteenth-century Bass Strait sealing community but from those Tasmanian Aborigines who integrated into colonial society during the twenty-five years prior to Robinson's round-up. They call the Mansell faction the 'Pallawah' people, and themselves the 'Lia Pootah'. An 'elder' of the latter group, Kaye McPherson, says: 'In 2002, Lia Pootah acknowledge eight communities who have Aboriginal people with a two-century history of integration, acknowledge their Aboriginal ancestry from family and oral histories'.[19]

In 1997, this dispute turned litigious when the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre launched a case in the Federal Court to prevent eleven candidates from Tasmania standing for elections to the board of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, claiming that they did not have Aboriginal ancestry. The Mansell faction largely lost that case. After a two-year hearing, which cost taxpayers $1.2 million and took 1000 pages of affidavits, only two of the eleven candidates were barred by Justice Ron Merkel. But the issue has remained a matter of fierce contention. In 2002, one of Mansell's colleagues, Gary Maynard, was still publicly denouncing the inability of their opponents to produce an authenticated family tree. 'The only people who can legitimately do that are the Bass Strait island families,' he said. The

[18] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population Distribution, Indigenous Australians, 1996*, Cat. no. 4705.0, Table 2: Estimated Resident Population, Indigenous Population — 30 June 1996, p 13. The 2001 Census revised the 1996 figure to 13,873.

[19] Kaye McPherson, 'Message from Tasmania', *Koori Mail*, 17 April 2002, p 11

others could only rely on what he calls 'loose unsubstantiated oral evidence [that] is dangerous, unreliable and open to misuse'.[20]

There are two heavy ironies involved in all of this. In most of Australia, Aboriginal groups who claim to be entitled to land rights do so on the basis of little more than the same kind of 'loose, unsubstantiated oral evidence' that Maynard here condemns. The application of the Tasmanian logic to the mainland would see the land rights industry in serious trouble.

The other irony stems from the content of the Mollison genealogies themselves. The publication provides exhaustive documentation of up to five generations of fifty-five Tasmanian Aboriginal families, most of whom are descended from the Bass Strait sealers and their Aboriginal women. One of the biggest genealogies is of the Mansell family, extending back to the English sealer Edward (Sydney) Mansell, and his three Aboriginal wives who lived in Bass Strait in the 1820s and 1830s. However, the name of Michael Mansell does not appear in the family tree. Nor is there any reference to a Rosalind Langford. There is no genealogy of any Langford family at all, and the first name of Rosalind was never given to any of the children born to any of the other families.

The reasons for this are as follows. Michael Mansell was the son of a part-Aboriginal woman, Furlie Doreen Beeton, and one of her two white husbands. Furlie herself was the daughter of another white man Alfred Landon 'Pipey' Woods and Clydia Robena Beeton. Clydia later married Clarence Alexander Mansell and then adopted two of Furlie's sons, Michael and Brian, rearing them with her then husband's surname. Michael Mansell is actually recorded in the Mollison genealogies, but not with that name. He is listed under the Beeton family tree.[21] Ros Langford, however, is not descended from the Tasmanian Aborigines at all. She is a part-Aboriginal woman from Victoria. She has recently taken up painting and, in a story advertising her work in 2003, she said her 'home country' was near Echuca.[22] In the Hobart Magistrate's Court in April 1998, Langford was sentenced to nine months in prison after admitting to 306 charges of embezzlement from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Education Council. Between

[20] Gary Maynard, 'Sorting out "genuine blackfellas" from the rest', *Mercury*, Hobart, 25 May 2002, p 23. The best recent account of these factional conflicts is: Richard Guilliatt, 'A whiter shade of black?', Good Weekend supplement, *Sydney Morning Herald,* 15 June 2002, pp 18–23. See also Carol Altmann, 'When Black and White Turns Grey', *Australian*, 15 July 2002, pp 1, 4

[21] Mollison and Everitt, *Tasmanian Aborigines and their Descendants*, Vol.2, pp EM 1.2.6–1.2.6.6. I am indebted to Bruce Patmore for tracking this down.

[22] *Art Mob*, May 2003 Newsletter, Hobart

1992 and 1995, she stole more than $74,000 of the council's money while she was its chair.[23] Such are the loyalties within left-wing Tasmanian politics, however, that this criminal conviction was no bar to her later being appointed by the Bacon Labor government to official positions. She was appointed to the government's organizing committee for the Tasmanian Bicentenary in 2003.[24]

The sordid politics of this dispute are bad enough. But there is a more important issue at stake. The whole notion endorsed by the Australian Library and Information Association that Aboriginal groups have cultural or collective rights to suppress or restrict information is alien to the Western scholarly tradition. This is especially true of the institution of the library. The free dissemination of publications in libraries is something most of us take for granted but it deserves to be regarded as a rare and precious legacy. It derives from two great concepts that distinguish Western culture. One of these is the principle that the received learning and the new discoveries of science and the humanities should be public knowledge. The other is that the repositories of this knowledge, the libraries, ensure the pursuit of learning is not limited to some but is available to all.

By caving in to the demands of radical Aboriginal activists, the Australian Library and Information Association has departed from these principles. To put the most charitable interpretation on it, the association was apparently acting in the mistaken belief it would somehow respect the cultural sensitivities of indigenous people. However, the genuine interests of Aborigines, just like everyone else, will always be served by open access to all that human ingenuity has to offer. Freedom of information might be a cultural artefact born in the West, but it belongs to all of humanity. Indigenous cultures that reject this principle only diminish themselves. The only people to benefit from the suppression of information are those with something to hide.

Moreover, the threat the Aboriginal library protocols pose to the freedom of historians to pursue their subject should be seen as a real one. The partial success of the Tasmanian case will only encourage

[23] *Mercury*, Hobart, 7 April 1998, p 3

[24] The resulting commemorations revealed how little the orthodox version of history contributes to reconciliation. Instead of a celebration to mark the arrival of the British two hundred years earlier, the Bicentenary committee decided to hold an official church service to mourn the occasion. Michael Mansell held a symbolic protest at Risdon Cove to liken British colonization to 'an invasion by the Nazis'. Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre chairman, Philip Beeton, described the first settlers as a 'bunch of terrorists' and said their arrival was worse than the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001: *Mercury*, Hobart, 9, 12 and 13 September 2003

radical activists to extend their demands from libraries to the archives. Australian history could potentially end up in the same sorry state as Australian archaeology.[25]

THE INVENTION OF ABORIGINALITY

The political movement among Tasmanian Aborigines is a product of the 1970s and largely of the activism of Michael Mansell himself. After the Whitlam Labor government began funding Tasmanian Aboriginal legal services in 1973, he built its organizations largely from scratch. Mansell was born and grew up in the city of Launceston but his modern urban background was no inhibition to identifying with the ancient hunter-gatherers. He became the chief spokesman for Aboriginal land rights and proved very adept at publicising his demands. In 1977 he gate-crashed a reception in Hobart to present a land rights petition to the Queen. He subsequently set up an 'Aboriginal embassy' outside the Tasmanian Parliament in Hobart.[26]

One of the unexpected stunts of this kind was the protest Mansell and his colleagues organized in 1978 against the premiere in Hobart of the film by Rhys Jones and Tom Haydon, *The Last Tasmanian*. To most cinema-goers, the film appears to tell a strictly orthodox story about the demise of the Aborigines after 1803, including, as Chapter Two noted, some of the most transparently fabricated atrocities claimed by any members of the school. Nonetheless, Mansell and other activists staged a vehement demonstration outside the premiere and defaced the film's posters with the slogan: 'RACIST! This film denies Tasmanian Aborigines their LAND RIGHTS.' Lyndall Ryan reproduces the defaced poster in her book and gives a brief discussion of the protests, but she fails to mention the real bone of contention.[27]

This was the fact that two people interviewed in the film from the Bass Strait islander community both denied they were Aborigines. One of them, a woman engaged in the traditional islander occupation

[25] This situation has, in fact, already arrived as far as the reproduction of historic illustrations held by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery is concerned. Publishers who want to reproduce paintings that depict Aborigines in any way are now told by the museum that 'clearance is required from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community via our Curator of Indigenous Cultures'. To gain reproduction rights, publishers have to submit for approval 'details of context of use of images', even for paintings by well-known nineteenth-century British artists such as John Glover and Benjamin Duterrau.

[26] Lyndall Ryan glowingly chronicles these events in the second edition of *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, pp 263–75

[27] Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians*, includes an illustration of the posters and comments on the film, pp 254–5.

of muttonbirding, was quite emphatic. She acknowledged that some of the old people of the community in the past had some partial descent from the Aborigines but stated: 'I'm not an Aborigine ... There are no Aborigines now.' In an article denouncing the film in the Melbourne Marxist journal *Arena* in 1978, Mansell focused on these particular comments, which he labelled a 'misrepresentation to make a more dramatic story'.[28]

They were actually much more than that. They were prima facie evidence that, when the interviews for the film were recorded in the 1970s, members of the Bass Strait island community did not identify themselves as Aborigines. Despite recent claims that the only authentic Tasmanian Aborigines are descended from that community, the film revealed that one of the crucial components of Aboriginality, identification as an Aboriginal, was absent at that time.

The author Patsy Adam Smith had made the same point in the 1960s, well before the current political movement emerged. She visited the Furneaux Islands many times over a twelve-year period and got to know most of the inhabitants for her very sympathetic book *Moonbird People* (1965). She said that while those she interviewed were well aware they were the descendants of the English sealers and their Tasmanian Aboriginal wives, they considered their own mixed blood community a distinct breed of people. They called themselves 'straitsmen' and 'islanders' and regarded themselves as neither European nor Aboriginal. They had formed a tightly-knit community in the nineteenth century but by the 1960s were abandoning the islands. As soon as their children were old enough, they were sending them to Launceston to become mainstream Australians. Smith concluded:

> The race that began only a hundred and fifty years ago on the Furneaux is already dissolving into this pattern of life change, losing its identity, melting into the main stream of Australian community life.[29]

The loss of Aboriginal identity and the passing of Aboriginal culture was subsequently confirmed by the most scrupulous scholar of the subject, Brian Plomley. In 1987, in the introduction to his history of the demise of the Aborigines on Flinders Island, *Weep in Silence*, he wrote:

> As a result of this [British] invasion, the Tasmanian Aborigines ceased to exist as a natural society, and their numbers were reduced within three-quarters of a century to a few individuals of mixed blood, the majority of

[28] Michael Mansell, 'Black Tasmanians Now', *Arena*, 51, 1978, p 7

[29] Patsy Adam Smith, *Moonbird People*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1965, p 220. During her visits, the last 'quarter-caste' Tasmanian, Walter Beeton, died.

whom had formed a special community on the Furneaux Islands. All these people of mixed blood lost most of their original Aboriginal culture.[30]

As noted earlier in this chapter, in the conflict over the preservation of Aboriginal skeletal remains, Plomley refused to acknowledge the current activists as genuine representatives of the original inhabitants, sarcastically labelling them 'some people in Tasmania calling themselves Tasmanian Aborigines'.

All this suggests that, rather than Aboriginal culture and identity surviving down the generations through the island community, it has a more modern source. It was not a product of any continuous cultural link to the ancient people at all. Instead, it was an invention in the 1970s by modern urban political activists.

Since then, the movement to promote this interest group has grown well beyond its founders' expectations. At the 1971 Census, there were 668 people in Tasmania who identified themselves as of Aboriginal descent. At the 2001 Census, the same category contained no fewer than 15,773 people.[31] Part of the reason would no doubt be that Aboriginality is no longer a badge of inferiority and that more people are now willing to declare it. But it is equally clear that a great incentive is access to the more generous welfare payments available to Aborigines than to whites. Aboriginal descent provides benefits such as cheap housing, health care, legal aid and education grants. In particular, a full-time university student in Tasmania who claims to be an Aborigine gets much more money than a white student.

As noted above, this has become an issue of considerable contention. In the 1997 Federal Court case in which the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre challenged the right of its rivals to stand for ATSIC elections, the white historian Cassandra Pybus provided evidence for the Mansell faction. She claimed that most of those currently claiming to be Tasmanian Aborigines did not have an indigenous ancestor.[32] Pybus, who says she has traced the genealogies of all the non-whites in the early colony, noted what she thought was the sad irony of this case. None of Mansell's opponents, she claimed, were authentic.

[30] N. J. B. Plomley, *Weep In Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1987, p 1

[31] For 1971 Census: Mollison and Everitt, *The Tasmanian Aborigines and their Descendants*, p 2.4. Of these, some 562 had been born in Tasmania. The rest were born interstate. For 2001 Census: Table 4, Selected Ethnic Characteristics, *Census of Population and Housing, Selected Social and Housing Characteristics, Australia, 2001*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. No. 2015.0, Canberra 2002, p 31

[32] Federal Court of Australia, Edwina Shaw and Another v Wolf and Others, Merkel J, Tasmania District Registry, 4–8, 12, 19 August, 24–25 September 1997; 20 April 1998, *Federal Court Reports*, 1998, 83 FCR, pp 113–38

They were merely white people identifying themselves as Aborigines in order to gain access to greater welfare benefits and to make claims for land rights. Hence, the descendants of those who killed the Aborigines and took their land now also wanted to receive benefits allocated to Aborigines as compensation.[33]

There are two responses that can be made to this. First, the Lia Pootah might be an even more recently invented Aboriginal community than its rivals, and the smoking ceremonies it conducts and the ochre it daubs on the faces of initiates may well be culturally bogus, but this does not mean its members are entirely the frauds and impostors claimed by the Mansell faction. The genealogical lineages identified by Pybus were not exhaustive. The existence of several other indigenous lineages besides the Bass Strait islanders is highly plausible. As Chapter Two recorded, at least twenty-six Aboriginal children living with white families were christened in Hobart between 1804 and 1819. There is also plenty of documentation about other Aborigines who assimilated into the early colony.[34] Some of these people would have left progeny. DNA testing could possibly confirm the authenticity of some who claim to be their descendants. However, when this was proposed during the 1997 Federal Court action, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre objected, claiming a DNA test would be 'discriminatory, insensitive and stupid'.[35]

Today, most of the fifth-generation descendants of these alternative lineages would have no greater Aboriginal connection than to one of their thirty-two great great great grandparents, but this is true of a number of their factional rivals as well. Of course, anyone with such a slender link who seriously claims to be 'Aboriginal' can only be

[33] Cassandra Pybus, evidence to Legislative Council Select Committee on Aboriginal Lands, Parliament House, Hobart, 10 April 2000; John Hirst, 'Aborigine and Migrants: Diversity and Unity in Multicultural Australia', *Australian Book Review*, February/March 2001, pp 34–5

[34] As well as the Aboriginal farmers listed in Chapter Four, n 123, there was the English stockman Punch in the Western Marshes who had a half-caste Aboriginal wife, by whom he had two children: Robinson, *Friendly Mission*, p 219. Not all the Aborigines placed on Flinders Island remained there until shipped as a group to Oyster Cove in 1847. The best known was Fanny Cochrane who left in the early 1840s and figures in most of the published genealogies. There was also the half-caste girl Mary Ann Thompson who accompanied Rev. Thomas Dove and his wife when they left Flinders Island in 1839. She last figured in the documentary record in 1848 when in the service of Mrs Roope of Macquarie St, Hobart. It is possible she married and changed her name: Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 194, 865. See also Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p 42 n 39

[35] *Australian*, 15 July 2002, p 4

regarded with cynicism by outsiders. But as long as government largesse is available, the charade is sure to continue.

Second, there is an irony in Pybus's complaint that cuts the other way. The members of the Mansell faction are actually faced with a more acute dilemma than their opponents, once their British rather than their Aboriginal origin is considered. According to the diaries of George Augustus Robinson, the English sealer Edward Mansell had one of the worst records of all those in Bass Strait for atrocities against the Aborigines. In 1827 at Eddystone Point on the north-east coast, Mansell was a member of a four-man party who, in retaliation for earlier killings of sealers, shot dead several Aborigines.[36] In 1832 on Flinders Island, Mansell shot and wounded two other Aborigines. Mansell was arrested for this last action and sent to Hobart. There is no known record of whether he was tried for the crime,[37] but he later returned to Bass Strait. Similarly, the sealer Jem Everitt, from whom the Mollison genealogy records Michael Mansell (Beeton) is descended on his mother's side, shot dead a native woman, Worethmaleyerpodeyer, on Woody Island after she refused to collect muttonbirds for him. Robinson recorded that other sealers flogged their women, beat them with sticks and cut them with knives.[38]

If only a proportion of the stories Robinson told about the sealers were true, then most of those who today trace their ancestry to the Bass Strait community must be the descendants not only of Aborigines but also of people who committed atrocities against Aborigines. Hence the current crop of political activists must have just as much Aboriginal blood on their hands as the descendants of the other white colonists could possibly have, five and six generations later. In short, the Tasmanian 'Aboriginal community' today embodies both the invaders and the invaded. Such a dilemma renders the current political movement's appeal to historical injustice an absurdity. The descendants of whites who killed Aborigines now want compensation intended for their Aboriginal victims. It also makes a mockery of their claim to the exclusive 'ownership' of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal history. The descendants of those whites who had a direct role in the destruction of Aboriginal society now want to control how historians interpret their past.

[36] *Friendly Mission* pp 192–3, 249, 403, 437 n 16, 591, 593, 681–2 n 8, 685 n 15. Mansell's accomplices in these murders were John Riddle, Thomas Tucker and Jack Williams. None of the latter appear to have created lineages that survive to the present.

[37] Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp 40, 42

[38] Robinson, diary, 15 October 1830, 10 November 1830, *Friendly Mission*, pp 249, 270, 1013. Both this killing and those at Eddystone Point in 1827 are recorded in Table Ten.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS: ARCHIVE SOURCES

Archives Office of Tasmania, Hobart, Colonial Secretary's Office papers:[1]

CSO 1/316/7578 Reports of the murders and other outrages committed by the Aborigines upon the settlers and reports of sightings of the natives in the settled districts.

CSO 1/317/7578 Minutes of the Lieutenant-Governor. Colonial secretary's letters, present orders and proclamations. Reports from Mr G. A. Robinson whilst in command of the different establishments formed for the Aborigines.

CSO 1/318/7578 Reports of Mr G. A. Robinson whilst in pursuit of the natives.

[1] The seventeen volumes from 1/316 to 1/332 in file 7578 of the papers of the Colonial Secretary's Office during the regime of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur were compiled on the instructions of Arthur to bring together all government documents relevant to Aboriginal policy. Within each volume there are further divisions designated by additional numerical suffixes. For example 1/317/7578 contains 1/317/7578/2 and 1/317/7578/3. However, because there is another, alternative set of suffixes to these volumes, they are too confusing to use in a bibliography. They are of no help to researchers anyway, since volume, file and page numbers are all that is needed to find a source in the microfilmed copies of the original documents. None of this, however, excuses the misleading bibliography in Henry Reynolds's *Fate of a Free People*, pp 240–1. Reynolds purports to list the seventeen volumes but anyone using him as a guide will find there are actually only fifteen volumes in his bibliography, with 1/318 listed twice and 1/319 and 1/330 omitted altogether. His descriptions of the volumes are also sloppy and misleading. Several of what he claims to be the contents of one volume are actually to be found in another.

CSO 1/319/7578 Papers relating to, and reports of the committee formed for the purpose of superintending matters relative to the Aborigines.

CSO 1/320/7578 Reports of police magistrates concerning the roving parties and other matters from 1827. Batman's reports 1829–30. Cottrell's reports 1831–3. Jorgenson's reports 1828–31. Danvers's reports. Reports and journals of various roving parties

CSO 1/321/7578 Applications of and offers of services from individuals to be employed in search of Aborigines and other Aboriginal services

CSO 1/322/7578 Applications to go in pursuit of the Aborigines. Applications for rewards for capture and requisitions for supplies.

CSO 1/323/7578 Mr Jackson's of the cutter Charlotte reports respecting the islands in the straits. Suggestions from settlers about the capture of natives. Answers given by settlers to certain questions submitted to them by the Aborigines Committee

CSO 1/324/7578 Papers relative to the campaign after the natives in 1830. Proceedings of and letters written by the Lieutenant–Governor. Major Douglass's reports. Reports etc of the commissioned officers. Names etc of different parties out on the line. Miscellaneous letters and reports.

CSO 1/325/7578 Correspondence etc concerning the Flinders Island establishment.

CSO 1/326/7578 Correspondence chiefly concerning the roving parties.

CSO 1/327/7578 Papers relative to the Sydney natives used in the capture of the Aborigines. The eligibility of Bruny Island for the Aboriginal Establishment. Two native boys held by Batman at Ben Lomond

CSO 1/328/7578 Lieutenant-Governor's minutes. Government orders and proclamations. Correspondence concerning the issue of stores.

CSO 1/329/7578 Correspondence relating to roving parties and the Black Line.

CSO 1/330/7578 Miscellaneous papers including Major Abbott's various reports. Charles Sterling's reports. Mr Curr's and other reports respecting the death of an Aboriginal female at Emu Bay. Reports of killings and captures. Some Flinders Island papers.

CSO 1/331/7578 Letters and reports in connection with Gilbert Robertson's expedition in pursuit of Aborigines. Journals of roving parties under Gilbert Robertson.

CSO 1/332/7578 Minutes of the Aborigines Committee

CSO 8/109 Letter from Gordon to Burnett

Archives Office of Tasmania, Hobart, other papers:

CBE/1 Minutes of the Committee for the care and treatment of the captured Aborigines

VDL Company papers 5/1, 5/3, 23/4

Governor's Office papers, Duplicate despatches received by the Colonial Office, GO 33/7

Convict Department papers, Conduct registers of male convicts arriving in the period of the assignment system CON 31/6

Alexander Laing Story, The: District Police Constable Pitt Water Tasmania 1819–1838 NS 1116/1

Mitchell Library, Sydney:

Tasmanian Aborigines, Robinson's Reports etc, A612

Papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1818–1849, A7022–7084

Robinson, George Augustus, Periodical Report, 24 June 1837, A7044

Report of a Board of Enquiry, Flinders Island, 25 March 1839, in George Augustus Robinson, Correspondence and Other Papers, Jan–April 1839, Miscellaneous, A7071, A 7072

Despatches of Lieutenant-Governor William Sorell, 1819, ML 1352

Diaries of 'Pioneer' George Hobler, unpublished

ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS: PRINTED SOURCES

British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, Australia, 4, Correspondence and Papers Relating to the Government and Affairs of the Australian Colonies, 1830–36, Irish University Press Series

Historical Records of Australia, Series I, Governors' despatches to and from England, 1788–1840, Volumes I–XX; Series III, Despatches and papers relating to the settlement of the states 1803–1827, Volumes I–VI, Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1914–1925

Historical Records of Victoria, Volume 2a, The Aborigines of Port Phillip 1835–1839, ed. Michael Cannon, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1982

EARLY NEWSPAPERS

Derwent Star and Van Diemen's Land Intelligencer

Hobart Town Gazette

Hobart Town Courier

Colonial Times

The Tasmanian and Austral–Asiatic Review

Launceston Advertiser

The Independent

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Allen, H. R., 'Left Out in the Cold: Why the Tasmanians Stopped Eating Fish', *The Artefact*, 4, 1979

Allen, Jim, 'A short history of the Tasmanian affair', *Australian Archaeology*, 41, 1995

Altmann, Carol, 'When Black and White Turns Grey', *The Australian*, 15 July 2002

Attwood, Bain, 'Attack on Reynolds Scholarship Lacks Bite', *The Australian*, 20 September 2000

Backhouse, James, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, Hamilton Adams, London, 1843

Barbeliuk, Anne, 'Aborigines set to claim half the state', *The Mercury*, Hobart, 7 September 2001

Bartlett, Richard H. (ed.) *The Mabo Decision*, Butterworths, Sydney, 1993

Beaglehole, J. C., *The Life of Captain James Cook*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1974

Blain, Barry, and eight others, 'The Australian National University–Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service Archaeological Expedition to the Franklin and Gordon Rivers, 1983: A Summary of Results', *Australian Archaeology*, 16, June 1983

Blainey, Geoffrey, *Triumph of the Nomads: A History of Ancient Australia*, (1975), 3rd edn., Sun Books, Melbourne, 1997

Bloch, Marc, *The Historian's Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of Historical Writing*, trans. Peter Putnam, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1954

Bonwick, James, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1870

Bonwick, James, *The Last of the Tasmanians: or the Black War of Van Diemen's Land*, Sampson Low, Son and Marston, London, 1870

Bowdler, Sandra, 'Fish and culture: a Tasmanian polemic', *Mankind*, 12, 4, 1980

Boyce, James, *God's Own Country? The Anglican Church and the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart, 2001

Brading, David, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763–1810*, Cambridge, 1971

Brading, David, *The First America: the Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492–1867*, Cambridge, 1991

Brooks, Geraldine, and Tony Horwitz, 'As Olympics loom, Australians agonize over Aborigine issues', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 August 2000

Brown, Dee, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1970

Brown, Joan C., *Poverty is not a Crime: The Development of Social Services in Tasmania 1803–1900*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1972

Brunton, Ron, 'Theories on black massacres don't add up', *Courier-Mail*, 16 March 2002

Buckby, Pauline, *Around Circular Head*, Denbar Publishers, Stanley, 1984

Butlin, N. G., *Economics and the Dreamtime: A Hypothetical History*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993

Cain, P. J., and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914*, Longman, London, 1993

Cameron, Patsy, and Vicki Matson–Green, 'Pallawah Women: Their Historical Contribution to our Survival', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 41, 2, June 1994

Cassrels, Deborah, 'History of Manne', *Courier–Mail*, Brisbane, 2 June 2001

Churchill, Ward, 'Genocide: Towards a Functional Definition', *Alternatives*, XI, 1986

Clark, C. M. H., *A History of Australia*, Volume I, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1962

Clark, Julia, in *The Aboriginal People of Tasmania*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 1983

Clement, Cathie, *Historical Notes Relevant to Impact Stories of the East Kimberley*, East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project Paper no 29, Canberra, 1989

Clendinnen, Inga, *True Stories*, Boyer Lectures 1999, ABC Books, 1999

Cocker, Mark, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1998

Commager, Henry Steele, (ed.) *Documents of American History*, 8th edn., Appleton–Century–Crofts, New York, 1968

Connor, John, *The Australian Frontier Wars 1788–1838*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 2002

Curr, Edward, *An account of the colony of Van Diemen's Land, principally designed for the use of emigrants*, London, 1824

Curthoys, Ann, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002

Davies, David, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Shakespeare Head Press, Sydney, 1973

Davies, R. H., 'On the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land', *Tasmanian Journal of Science*, II, 1846

Davison, Graeme, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre, (eds.) *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998

Deane, Sir William, Governor–General, Australia Day message, 26 January 1998

Deane, Sir William, 'A Few Instances of Reconciliation', address to the Millennium Dinner, Southern Queensland Theology Library, Toowoomba, 5 November 1999

Deane, Sir William, 2001 Sydney Peace Prize lecture, University of Sydney, 8 November 2001

Deane, Sir William, *Directions: A Vision for Australia*, St Pauls Publications, Sydney, 2002

Denholm, David, *The Colonial Australians*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1979

Diamond, Jared, 'In Black and White', *Natural History*, October 1988

Dobyns, Henry F., 'Estimating Aboriginal American Population: An Appraisal of Techniques with a New Hemispheric Estimate', *Current Anthropology*, 7, 4, 1966

Dobyns, Henry F., *Their Numbers Became Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1983

Dow, Gwyneth and Hume, *Landfall in Van Diemen's Land: The Steels' Quest for Greener Pastures*, Footprint, Footscray, 1990

Duncombe, Kathy, *Excursion: North Bruny Island*, Irene Schaffer, Hobart, 1996

Dunnett, Gary, 'Diving for Dinner: Some Implications from Holocene Middens of the Role of Coasts in the late Pleistocene of Tasmania', in M. A. Smith, M. Spriggs and B. Fankhauser (eds.) *Sahul in Review*, Department of Prehistory, Australian National University, 1993

Edgerton, Robert B. , *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony*, Free Press, New York, 1992

Elder, Bruce, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 1998

Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1963

Featherstone, Donald, *Weapons and Equipment of the Victorian Soldier*, Blandford Press, Poole, 1978

Fein, H., *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective*, Sage Publications, London, 1990

Fels, Marie, 'Culture Contact in the County of Buckinghamshire, Van Diemen's Land 1803–11, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 29, 2, June 1982

Fenton, James, *A History of Tasmania from its Discovery in 1642 to the Present Time*, J. Walch, Hobart, 1884

Fletcher, Brian H., *Ralph Darling: A Governor Maligned*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1984

Fredrickson, George M., *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1981

Frost, Alan, *Arthur Phillip 1783–1814: His Voyaging*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987

Frost, Alan, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994

Gascoigne, John, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002

Gould, Bob, 'McGuinness, Windschuttle and Quadrant: The Revisionist attack on Australian history about British conquest and Aboriginal resistance', Gould's Book Arcade, Newtown, 11 November 2000, http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/Windschuttleblack.html

Grafton, Anthony, *The Footnote: A Curious History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997

Greener, William, *The Science of Gunnery, as Applied to the Use and Construction of Fire Arms*, London, 1846

Greener, W., *The Gun and Its Development*, London, 1910

Greenwood, Gordon, (ed.) *Australia: A Social and Political History*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1955

Guilliatt, Richard, 'A Whiter Shade of Black?', Good Weekend supplement, *Sydney Morning Herald,* 15 June 2002

Hakluyt, Richard, *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the two Richard Hakluyts*, ed. E. G. R. Taylor, Vol I, Hakluyt Society, London, 1935

Hall, Richard, 'Windschuttle's Myths' in Peter Craven (ed.) *The Best Australian Essays 2001*, Schwartz Publishing, Melbourne, 2002

Hancock, Keith, *Discovering Monaro*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1972

Hancock, W. K., *Professing History*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1976

Hanson, Victor Davis, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1989

Hare, Rosalie, *The Voyage of the Caroline from England to Van Diemen's Land and Batavia in 1827–28*, ed. Ida Lee, Longmans, Green, London, 1927

Harris, Stewart, *'It's Coming Yet ...' An Aboriginal Treaty within Australia Between Australians*, Aboriginal Treaty Committee, Canberra, 1979

Hartwell, R. M., *The Economic Development of Van Diemen's Land 1820–1850*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1954

Hasluck, Paul, *Black Australians: A Survey of Native Policy in Western Australia 1829–1897*, (1942) 2nd edition, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1970

Headley, John M., 'The Universalizing Principle and Process: On the West's Intrinsic Commitment to a Global Context', *Journal of World History*, 13/2 (2002), pp 291–321

Heeres, J. E., (ed.) *Abel Janszoon Tasman's journal of his discovery of Van Diemen's Land and New Zealand in 1642,* Amsterdam 1898

Henige, David, *Numbers from Nowhere: The American Indian Contact Population Debate*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1998

Himmelfarb, Gertude, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994

Hirst, John, 'Aborigine and Migrants: Diversity and Unity in Multicultural Australia', *Australian Book Review*, February/March 2001

Hobart Town Almanack for the year 1830, James Ross, Hobart, 1830

Horton, D. R., 'Tasmanian Adaptation', *Mankind*, 12, 1, 1979

Hughes, Robert, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868*, Harvill Collins, London, 1987

Idriess, Ion L., *Tracks of Destiny*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1961

Jeffreys, Lieutenant Charles R. N., *Van Diemen's Land. Geographical and Descriptive Delineations of the Island of Van Diemen's Land*, J. M. Richardson, Cornhill, London, 1820

Jones, Ian, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, Lothian, Melbourne, 1995

Jones, Rhys, 'Tasmanian Aborigines and Dogs', *Mankind*, 7, 1970

Jones, Rhys, 'The demography of hunters and farmers in Tasmania', in D. J. Mulvaney and J. Golson (eds.) *Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1971

Jones, Rhys, 'Tasmanian Tribes', appendix to Norman Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*, Australian National University Press, Canberra 1974

Jones, Rhys, 'The Tasmanian Paradox', in R. V. S. Wright (ed.) *Stone Tools as Cultural Markers: Change, Evolution and Complexity*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, and Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1977

Jones, Rhys, 'Why Did the Tasmanians Stop Eating Fish?', in R. A. Gould (ed.) *Explorations in Ethnoarchaeology*, University of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, 1978

Jones, Rhys, and Tom Haydon, *The Last Tasmanian*, produced and directed by Tom Haydon, Artis Film Productions, Sydney, 1978

Josephus, Flavius, *The Wars of the Jews*, (75–79 AD) J. M. Dent and Sons, London, 1915

Keegan, John, *A History of Warfare*, Hutchinson, London, 1993

Keeley, Lawrence H., *War Before Civilization*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996

Kiernan, Ben, 'Australia's Aboriginal Genocides', *Bangkok Post*, 10 September 2000

King, Hazel, *Richard Bourke*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1971

Knightley, Phillip, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo*, (1975) Revised edn., Prion, London, 2000

Knightley, Phillip, *Australia: A Biography of a Nation*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2000, p. 107

Kupperman, Karen Ordahl, *Settling with the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640*, Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa, 1980

Langford, Rosalind, 'Our Heritage — Your Playground', *Australian Archaeology*, 16, June 1983

Las Casas, Bartolomé de, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. Anthony Pagden, Penguin Books, London, 1992

Lehman, Greg , 'Our story of Risdon Cove', *Pugganna News*, 34, April 1992

Lennox, Geoff, 'The Van Diemen's Land Company and the Tasmanian Aborigines: a reappraisal', *Papers and Proceedings of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, December 1990

Lippmann, Lorna, *Generations of Resistance: The Aboriginal Struggle for Justice*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1981

Locke, John, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, Mentor, New York, 1965

Louis, Wm. Roger, (ed. in chief), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, *Vols 1–11*, 1998, *Vols III–V*, 1999

Macintyre, Stuart, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia, from Origins to Illegality*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998

Manne, Robert, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*, Australian Quarterly Essay, Schwartz Publishing, Melbourne, 1, 2001

Mansell, Michael, 'Black Tasmanians Now', *Arena*, 51, 1978

Mansell, Michael, 'Seeking Real Rights for the Aboriginal People of Australia', Aboriginal Provisional Government, Hobart, February 1994

Marcuse, Herbert, *One Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964

Mazian, Florence, *Why Genocide?* Iowa State University Press, Des Moines, 1990

McGowan, Angela, *Archaeological Investigation at Risdon Cove Historic Site, 1978–1980*, Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Occasional Paper no. 10, Hobart, April 1885

McKay, Anne (ed.), *Journals of the Land Commissioners for Van Diemen's Land 1826–28*, University of Tasmania and Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1962

McMahon, Anne, 'Tasmanian Aboriginal Women as Slaves', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 23, 2, June 1976

McQueen, Humphrey, *Aborigines, Race and Racism*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1974

McQuilton, John, *The Kelly Outbreak 1878–1880: The Geographical Dimension of Social Banditry*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1987

McRae, M. D., 'Port Davey and the South West', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 8, 3, May 1960

Melville, Henry, *The History of Van Diemen's Land from the year 1824 to 1835, inclusive, During the Administration of Lieutenant–Governor George Arthur*, ed. George Mackaness, Horwitz–Grahame, Sydney, 1965

'Memoranda relating to Van Diemen's Land', transmitted to England by a resident upon the Island, June 1819, *The Asiatic Journal*, September 1820

Meston, A. L., *The Van Diemen's Land Company 1825–1842*, Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, 1958

Meston, Archibald, *Queensland Aboriginals: Proposed System for their Improvement and Preservation*, Government Printer, Brisbane, 1895

Miller, E. Morris, 'The Early Tasmanian Press and its Writers', in Charles Barrett (ed.), *Across the Years: The Lure of Early Australian Books*, N. H. Seward, Melbourne, 1948

Miller, E. Morris, *Pressmen and Governors: Australian Editors and Writers in Early Tasmania*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1952

Miller, E. Morris, 'A Historical Summary of Tasmanian Newspapers', Parts 1 and II, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 2, 1, November 1952 and 2, 2, March 1953

Mollison, Bill, and Coral Everitt, *The Tasmanian Aborigines and their descendants (chronology, genealogies and social data)*, Vols 1 and 2 (edited as a combined edition by Phil Hackett), University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1978

Montgomery, Bruce, 'The First Patriots', *The Australian*, 3 April 1995

Moran, Rod, 'Mistaken Identity: The Massacre of Aborigines at Mistake Creek', *Quadrant*, May 2002

Morgan, Sharon, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992

Morris, James, 'The Final Solution Down Under' (1972), in F. Chalk and K. Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: analyses and case studies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990

Mulvaney, D. J., *Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606–1985*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989

Mulvaney, D. J., 'Past regained, future lost: the Kow Swamp Pleistocene burials', *Antiquity*, 65, 246, March 1991

Murray, Robert, 'Who Wasn't Told?' *Quadrant*, November 1999

Murray, Tim, and Jim Allen, 'The forced repatriation of cultural properties to Tasmania', *Antiquity*, 69, 1995

Nash, Gary B., Charlotte Crabtree and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1997

Nicholas, Stephen, (ed.), *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1988

Nicholls, Mary, (ed.) *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1803–1838*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977

Nyman, Lois, *The East Coasters: the Early Pioneering History of the East Coast of Tasmania*, Regal Publications, Launceston, 1990

Osborne, Lawrence, 'The Numbers Game', *Lingua Franca*, September 1998

Pagden, Anthony, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, 1500–1800*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995

Péron, François, and Louis Freycínet, *Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes ... le Géographe, et le Casuarina,* 2 vols., Paris, 1807–1816

Piggin, Stuart, *Evangelical Christianity in Australia: Spirit, Word and World*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996

Pike, Douglas (ed.) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume I: 1788–1850 A–H, Volume II: 1788–1850 I–Z, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1966, 1967

Pink, Kerry, 'The Woolnorth "Massacre"', *Circular Head History Journal*, 2, 4, November 1986

Pink, Kerry, and Annette Ebdon, *Beyond the Ramparts: A Bicentennial History of Circular Head, Tasmania*, Mercury–Walch, Hobart, 1988

Plomley, N. J. B., *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1929–1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966

Plomley, N. J. B., (ed.), *Friendly Mission, A Supplement*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1971

Plomley, N. J. B., (ed.), *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1987

Plomley, N. J. B., 'Disease among the Tasmanian Aborigines', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 151, December 4–18 1989

Plomley, N. J. B., (ed.) *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1991

Plomley, N. J. B., commentary in *Current Anthropology*, 32, 1, February 1991

Plomley, N. J. B., *The Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen's Land*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992

Plomley, N. J. B., *The Tasmanian Tribes* and *Cicatrices as Tribal Indicators among the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Occasional Paper 5, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1992

Plomley, N. J. B., *The Tasmanian Aborigines*, Plomley Foundation, Launceston, 1993

Pybus, Cassandra, *Community of Thieves*, Minerva, Melbourne, 1992

Rae Ellis, Vivienne, *Trucanini: Queen or Traitor*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1981

Rae–Ellis, Vivienne, *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988

Rentis, Rex and Thea, 'Some notes on the ancestry and life of the Rev. Robert Knopwood', *Papers and Proceedings Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, 12, 1964–5

Reynolds, Henry, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, (1981) Penguin, Ringwood, 1982

Reynolds, Henry, 'The Black War: A New Look at an Old Story', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*, 31, 4, December 1984

Reynolds, Henry, 'Blainey and Aboriginal History', in Andrew Markus and M. C. Ricklefs (eds.) *Surrender Australia? Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985

Reynolds, Henry, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1995

Reynolds, Henry, 'A War to Remember', *The Weekend Australian*, 1–3 April 1995

Reynolds, Henry, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and the Land*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996

Reynolds, Henry, *Frontier*, ABC Television, 1997

Reynolds, Henry, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998

Reynolds, Henry, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History*, Viking, Ringwood, 1999

Reynolds, Henry, 'From armband to blindfold', *The Australian's Review of Books*, March 2001

Reynolds, Henry, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia's History,* Viking, Melbourne, 2001

Ritchie, John, *Lachlan Macquarie: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1986

Roberts, Jan, *Massacres to Mining: The Colonization of Aboriginal Australia*, Dove Communications, Blackburn, 1981

Robertson, George, *The Discovery of Tahiti: A Journal of the Second Voyage of* HMS Dolphin *Round the World 1766–1768*, ed. H. Carrington, Hakluyt Society, London, 1948

Robson, Lloyd, *A History of Tasmania, Volume 1*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983

Roth, H. Ling, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899

Rowley, C. D., *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice – Volume I*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970

Ryan, Lyndall *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, (1981), 2nd edn., Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996

Scheding, Stephen, *The National Picture*, Vintage, Sydney, 2002

Shaw, A. G. L., *Convicts and the Colonies*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966

Shaw, A. G. L., *Sir George Arthur, Bart 1784–1854*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980

Shaw, G. P., *Patriarch and Patriot: William Grant Broughton 1788–1853*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1978

Stanner, W. E. H., *After the Dreaming*, 1968 Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1969

Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council, *Land Rights in Tasmania*, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Hobart, 1986

Tindale, Norman, 'Tasmanian Aborigines on Kangaroo Island', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, Adelaide, 1937

Tindale, Norman, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974

Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Harper Collins, New York, 1985

Turnbull, Clive, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, (1948), Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974

Turnbull, Clive, 'Tasmania: the Ultimate Solution', in F. S. Stevens, *Racism, The Australian Experience, Vol 2 Black versus White*, ANZ Book Company, Sydney, 1972

Turner, Henry Gyles, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, Vol I, Longmans Green and Co, London, 1904

Vamplew, Wray (ed.), *Australians: Historical Statistics*, in *Australians: A Historical Library*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, Sydney, 1987

von Stieglitz, K. R., *A Short History of Circular Head and its Pioneers*, Circular Head Historical Society, Smithton, 1952

Walker, James Backhouse, *Early Tasmania: Papers read before the Royal Society of Tasmania during the years 1888 to 1899*, Government Printer, Hobart, 1950

Walker, Peter Benson, *All That We Inherit: The Walkers in Van Diemen's Land*, J. Walch and Sons, Hobart, 1968

Ward, Russel, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958,

Wedge, John Helder, *The Diaries of John Helder Wedge*, ed. Justice Crawford, W. F. Ellis and G. H. Stancombe, Royal Society of Tasmania, Hobart, 1962

Wentworth, William Charles, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description of the colony of New South Wales* ..., Whittaker, London, 1819

West, John, *The History of Tasmania*, (1852), ed. A. G. L. Shaw, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971

Windschuttle, Elizabeth, *Taste and Science: The Women of the Macleay Family 1790–1850*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney, 1988

Windschuttle, Keith, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past*, (1994), Encounter Books, San Francisco, 2000

Windschuttle, Keith, 'The problem of democratic history', *The New Criterion*, 16, 10, June 1998

Windschuttle, Keith, 'Rewriting the history of the British Empire', *The New Criterion*, May 2000

Windschuttle, Keith, 'The myths of frontier massacres in Australian History, Part I: The invention of massacre stories', *Quadrant*, October 2000

Windschuttle, Keith, 'The myths of frontier massacres in Australian History, Part II: The fabrication of the Aboriginal death toll', *Quadrant*, November 2000

Windschuttle, Keith, 'The myths of frontier massacres in Australian History, Part III: Massacre stories and the policy of separatism', *Quadrant*, December 2000

Windschuttle, Keith, 'Wrong on Mistake Creek', *Australian Financial Review*, 18 June 2001

Windschuttle, Keith, 'History, Anthropology and the Politics of Aboriginal Sovereignty', *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Conference of the Samuel Griffith Society*, Volume 13, Sydney, 2001

Windschuttle, Keith, 'The Fabrication of Aboriginal History', *The New Criterion*, September 2001

Wright, Ronald, 'Living on haunted land', *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 February 2001

ACADEMIC THESES

Desailly, Bronwyn, The Mechanics of Genocide: Colonial Policies and Attitudes towards the Tasmanian Aborigines 1824–1836, Master of Arts thesis, Department of History, University of Tasmania, 1977

Kemp, Susan M., John Leake 1780–1865: early settler in Tasmania, thesis, St John's College, York, 1969, held by Archives Office of Tasmania

Jones, Rhys, Rocky Cape and the Problem of the Tasmanians, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971

Ryan, Lyndall, The Aborigines in Tasmania, 1800–1974 and their problems with the Europeans, PhD thesis, School of Historical, Philosophical and Political Studies, Macquarie University, 1975

INDEX

This is the first volume in a series re-appraising the now widely accepted story about conflict between colonists and Aborigines in Australian history. The series begins in Tasmania, with later volumes covering the whole of the mainland.

In a close re-examination of the primary sources used by historians, Keith Windschuttle concludes that much of their case is poorly founded, other parts are seriously mistaken, and some of it is outright fabrication.

The author finds the British colonization of the Australia was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World. It did not meet any organized resistance. Conflict was sporadic rather than systematic. The notion of 'frontier warfare' is fictional. The claim that the colonists committed genocide is unsupported by the historical evidence.

This is a series that overturns the received version of the relations between Europeans and Aborigines and rewrites the most contentious part of Australian history.

"Keith Windschuttle's first volume on the fabrication of Aboriginal history is a scholarly masterpiece. It is destined to become an historical classic, changing forever the way we all look at the opening chapters of Australian history."

ROGER KIMBALL, *THE NEW CRITERION*, NEW YORK

ISBN 1-876492-05-8

9 781876 492052