

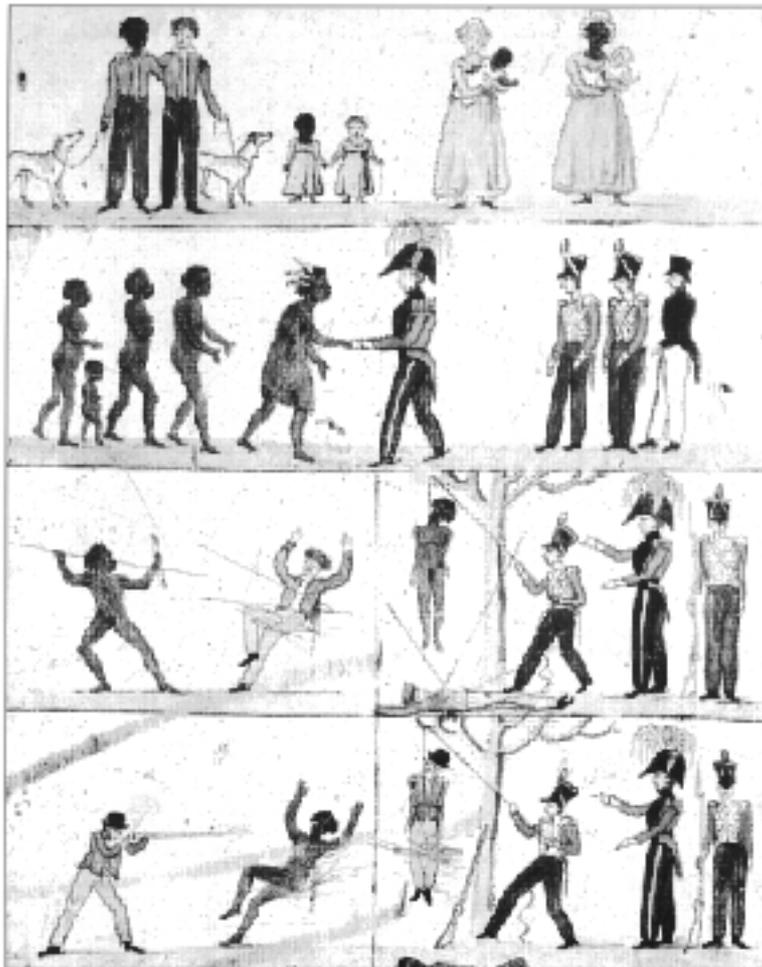
'Conciliation' and exile of the Macquarie Harbour Aboriginal people

Today's Aboriginal community retains a sense of injustice to the invasion of its land. Such sentiments have been exacerbated by successive proclamations by historians and scholars that the Tasmanian Aboriginal people were exterminated during the bleak decades of the 19th century. Such misinforma-

tion has filtered down into school history books and, even today, remains the conviction of many members of the Tasmanian public. Consequently, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community has had to overcome public misconceptions as to its very existence, let alone address pressing issues such as

inequities in health, housing and education and the pursuit of land rights.

When Europeans invaded in the early 19th century, Tasmania was occupied by a population of 4000–7000 Aboriginal people. In the years that followed, forceful eviction and attempted genocide greatly reduced the Aboriginal population to an exiled community, divorced from their home lands, on pathetic 'settlements' on a series of Bass Strait islands.



Governor Arthur's proclamation of equal justice for Europeans and Aborigines. No Europeans were ever executed for killing an Aborigine. (reproduced courtesy of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery)

Black and white conflict

The conflict which was to result in near extermination of a whole group of people was based upon cultural arrogance and a failure to understand the Aboriginal world-view. Europeans, who brought with them delusions of superiority and western notions of land ownership, failed to recognise that Aboriginal culture is essentially different. Further, the Government never acted on the notion that the Aboriginal people had rights to their own land, nor was compensation to Aborigines forced from their traditional hunting grounds ever

seriously considered.

These irreconcilable differences led to increased outbreaks of violence by settlers and others becoming increasingly common throughout the 1820s. In turn, Aboriginal people responded with attacks upon settlers, and throughout Tasmania the conflict escalated to a state of war. Pitted against the sheer numbers of European settlers arriving, the Aboriginal resistance had little hope of succeeding. In addition, the introduction of new diseases such as influenza, added to the already terrible burden on the Aborigines.

Martial law was declared in 1828 and for the three years that it was in place the Aboriginal population of the settled districts was reduced from about 200 to less than 50, while 89 white settlers were killed. In 1830 an operation involving 2000 men and enormous expense was established in an attempt to round up the Aboriginal people. The so called 'Black Line' managed to collect one boy and an old man.

Robinson, the 'Conciliator'

In March 1829 Governor Arthur ordered the removal of the Aboriginal people from Tasmania and their relocation to Flinders Island. George Augustus Robinson, who had previously been appointed to oversee the Aboriginal community on Bruny Island, approached the Governor with the suggestion that he lead an expedition to 'conciliate' the Aborigines and

bring them to the government settlement. For the next six years Robinson was to travel widely throughout the island in the company of a group of Aboriginal people, including the well-known Trucanini and her husband, Woorrady.

Robinson made two journeys to the west coast in 1830 and again in 1833, using the penal settlement of Sarah Island as his base. On his second expedition to the Macquarie Harbour region to round up the remaining Aborigines, Robinson's previously amicable approach to the indigenous people had diminished. After failing to encourage them to come with him peacefully, he captured the last of the Aboriginal people by threat of force:

'I ordered the two white men and my sons to uncover their fuses, 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'.

Robinson brought 28 of the Peternidic and Ninene people to Sarah Island between April and August 1833, where they were initially kept on the exposed Grummet Island. Fourteen Aboriginal people died during their stay at the penal settlement.

They were later moved to the lower floor of the penitentiary on Sarah Island, where the prisoners above them 'took every occasion to annoy and would not think it a crime to murder them.' The convicts

harassed the Aborigines, 'pouring down water through the boards, urinating upon them and hammering on the floor.' They were again moved to the cramped prison hospital, where a further five died within 24 hours. On Commandant Baylee's insistence, the surviving Aborigines were moved to the harbour entrance where they awaited transportation to the Bass Strait islands.

On 3 February 1835, Robinson reported, somewhat inaccurately, to the Colonial Secretary that 'the entire aboriginal population are now removed.' In little over 30 years of European settlement nearly the entire population of a people who had lived in Tasmania for over 36 000 years had been either killed or evicted from their land.

Many were sent to Flinders Island, where a pitiful settlement was established at Wybalenna (Blackman's place). Here the deaths continued unabated. It is from these survivors of one of the bleakest chapters in Australia's history that the present day Tasmanian Aboriginal community is largely descended.

Further reading

Rae-Ellis, V. (1988). *Black Robinson*. Melbourne University Press.

Ryan, L. (1981). *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.