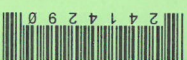


# **The Black Resistance**

An introduction to the history of  
the Aborigines' struggle  
against British Colonialism

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### 3 Tasmania

The Tasmanian War raged from 1804 to 1834. The British colonialists fought a war of genocide to rid Tasmania of its Aboriginal inhabitants and to occupy the temperate reaches of the islands. The Tasmanian Aborigines fought for the defence of their people, their land and their culture — the three being inseparable.

British colonialism set up penal colonies in Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land) in 1803. Their colonisation was originally motivated by fear of French competition and to break up concentrations of convicts on the mainland.

However, the British had an eye for the economic advantages of Tasmania. In 1826, for example, the Van Diemen's Land Company reported that Tasmanian wool possessed 'some of the qualities most essential to the woollen manufacturers, in a degree superior even to the choicest fleeces of Spain and Germany'.<sup>1</sup>

Nor was the strategic position of the island ignored:

By its proximity to the Indian and Chinese Seas, it has the power of supplying the tropical countries of the East with all the productions of the temperate zone ... [it has] the facility, also, with which a commercial intercourse may be maintained with both the Eastern and Western coasts of America, the Maritime ports of which are fast rising into wealth and importance ...<sup>2</sup>

These considerations led to the formation of the Van Diemen's Land Company and the Australian Agricultural Company in the 1820s. The former was granted 202 500 hectares in north-west Tasmania.

Thus the fate of Tasmania was at first to be a prison island and then a big sheep run serving the mills of Liverpool and Birmingham. As we shall see the colonialists valued the Tasmanian Aborigine less than they valued sheep.

Because the Aborigines held the land they had to be dispossessed. Because they resisted and refused to give up their traditional ways and become wage slaves, they not only had to be dispossessed, they also had to be exterminated. And once they were exterminated, the *Hobart Town Courier* could say:



... the large tracts of pasture that have so long been deserted ... will now be available.<sup>3</sup>

The first European aggression against Tasmania occurred in 1772 when the French explorer Marion, shot dead an Oyster Bay tribesman. This was just a foretaste of what the Tasmanian people in general and the Oyster Bay tribe in particular were to suffer under the British some thirty years later.

On 3 May 1804, at Risdon the 102 Regiment of the British Army, commanded by Lieutenant Moore, shot dead fifty Oyster Bay people including women and children. The Tasmanians had approached without spears and with green boughs in their hands (the universal symbol of peace). Bowen, the Officer in charge of Risdon, did not 'apprehend' that the Aborigines would be 'of any use' to the British. Subsequently, the official papers relating to the massacre were burned. Even the Governor had to condemn it as a 'lasting stigma' on the British Empire. As a result of the massacre, Tasmanians were to shun the colonial settlement for many years.

Tasmania was to see many Risdons. In 1819, in a battle between the British and Tasmanians, both sides suffered one fatality (in addition, a number of cattle and sheep were speared). The 48th Regiment later went out and shot dead seventeen Tasmanians. Said a contemporary colonialist:

Let them have enough of red coats and bullet fare. For every man they murder, hunt them down and drop ten of them.<sup>4</sup>

The 'red coats' overfilled the target.

Near Launceston, in December 1824, 200 Tasmanians were fired upon. The tribes women were treated with indescribable brutality. For killing some thirty Aborigines, John Batman the 'founder' of Melbourne was granted 810 hectares of land, for services rendered.

In evidence to the Aborigines Committee (23 February 1830), G. Robertson — who himself hunted Tasmanians — stated that:

Great ravages were committed by a party of constables and some of the 40th Regiment sent from Campbell Town: the party consisted of five or six; they got the Natives between two perpendicular rocks ... seventy of them were killed by that party ... the party killed them by firing all their ammunition upon them, and dragging the women and children from the crevices of the rocks and dashing out their brains.<sup>5</sup>

It was Robertson's view that captured Tasmanians should be treated 'as prisoners of war', but the British Government for obvious tactical reasons viewed them as felons who had to be tried in British courts as British subjects.

As evident in the above quotation, the British war of genocide

was characterised by brutality and sadism. Atrocities of a particularly cruel nature were common.

Carrots, a European, not only killed a Tasmanian man, but he also drove his widowed wife ahead of him as his prize, and forced her to wear, dangling around her neck, her husband's bleeding head. A pregnant woman was chased up a tree and shot in childbirth. The testicles of male Tasmanians were cut off to give the British 'exclusive rights' to their women folk. It has been further alleged that Tasmanians were shot for dogs' meat and that one European used an Aboriginal's thumb as a pipe-stop.

The Tasmanian Aborigines responded to the violence of the colonial aggressor with their own defensive violence. Resistance commenced in 1804 immediately the colonialists appeared. Cattle were systematically speared and in 1807 a party from the British base on the Derwent were driven back to their camp and heavy casualties inflicted.

Limited fighting continued into the early 1820s until a Port Jackson Aboriginal patriot, known to the British invaders as 'Mosquito', was transported to Van Diemen's Land. In a few months of his arrival 'Mosquito' had performed two invaluable services. He organised a group of demoralised Tasmanians into a formidable fighting force which then conducted a series of brilliantly executed raids. He was able to achieve this because of his second great accomplishment. From his acquaintance with the invaders at Sydney he had learned that as soon as their muskets had been fired they were helpless until they reloaded. Mosquito was able to take advantage of this tactical information in the months of his campaign. He had demonstrated that weapons do not mean everything and that a disciplined and well-led force of the people can always find new means of defeating their enemies. Mosquito was captured through the treachery of a traitor known as Tegg who had been promised a boat if he betrayed his country man. But when he kept his part of the bargain, the British, typically, refused to keep theirs.

As the 1820s proceeded the lessons which 'Mosquito' had taught were improved upon and tactics devised for wearing down the invader. Decoys were used, often women who led parties of colonialists into carefully laid ambush. Attacks were feigned on insignificant targets to draw off men from neighbouring properties and leave their own premises exposed for plunder. New leaders emerged, including 'Black Tom Birch', who was described by a Hobart newspaper as a 'civil or internal rebel'.



The Tasmanians were skilful and talented fighters, much feared by the invaders.

They had no shields or boomerangs. Their spears were about three metres long and were hurled without a throwing stick to a distance of 100 metres and with great accuracy at sixty metres. Stones, also, were thrown with great force and accuracy. Tasmanians were very swift and agile and could run almost as fast as their dogs. Moreover, they had remarkable powers of concealment in the bush. They were excellent bush people as the following illustrates:

Their ability to conceal themselves, assisted by their colour, proved the quickness of their eye, and the agility of their limbs. A shooting party approached a native near the Clyde, and found they had just abandoned their half-cooked opossums and their spears; expecting a small group of wattle bushes, at the distance of ten yards, the ground was free of all but the lofty trees: the travellers immediately scoured this thicket, but on turning round, they, in great astonishment discovered the opossums and spears were all gone. It was the work of a moment, but traces of the Aborigines were unseen.<sup>6</sup>

The women were more than simply complements to their men folk. Like the men they had muscular builds. Extremely agile, they specialised in climbing tress, swimming and diving (they were described as 'half-amphibious'). One old woman, being chased by French sailors leaped over thirteen metres down a precipice and ran away. A final proof of the women's militant character, the Big River tribe was led by a woman who was distinguished for her ferocity.

In addition to developing a technique to overcome the superior fire power of the enemy the Tasmanians adapted themselves to the Europeans' weaponry by 'liberating' guns and gaining a less than perfect mastery of firearms. On 3 October 1831, two attacks were made with firearms. The *Colonial Times* noted the Tasmanian's adaption to European warfare, and their acquired knowledge of British manners. When Aborigines, enslaved from childhood returned from the bush they took with them subversive information:

thereby rendering [their people] more formidable by enlightening them — any increase of knowledge is only stirring up the flame within their bosoms and by becoming acquainted with our manners, they are less to be intimidated by us ... Now they are in possession of cutlasses, pistols, muskets, bayonets, etc. which they have learned the use of by those brought up ... in civilised society ... They are now becoming dangerous and if not checked in time will become as formidable in their descents on the settlers, as those on the Caffres at the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of their struggle against British colonialism the Aborigines developed an effective military science. According to the Select Committee on Aborigines, the Tasmanians implemented 'modes of hostility indicating advances in art, system, and

methods'. A common fighting (and hunting) formation was the 'half moon ring'. One particular incident exemplified this tactic well. A Mr Franks on horseback was driving cattle, when he saw eight Aborigines forming a line behind him to prevent his retreat. Each Aborigine was armed with one uplifted spear in one hand and a bundle of spears in the other. Then they dropped onto one knee, menacing him with their spears before running towards him in exact order. While they distracted him with their movements, other Tasmanians gathered around from all sides.

The Tasmanians relied on their superb bush skill, and tactics of surprise. The colonialists were given to complain, that they 'do not, like an Englishman, give notice before they strike'. Together with the ruggedness of the bush and their sheer determination, the Tasmanians were able to hold out for many years against their foreign invader. Their position of strength was recognised by an official report which said that unless stringent measures were taken 'the total ruin of every establishment is but too certainly to be apprehended'.<sup>8</sup>

After years of skirmishing and unofficial war, in November 1826, the colonial authorities decided to arrest Tasmanian leaders of the resistance. Magistrates were empowered to use force against the Tasmanians and put down disturbances as riots. This decree did not work so, in April 1828, the authorities forbade Aborigines from entering European settlements. They were restricted to the far north-east, the far west and the forest of the south-west. This decree also failed. On 31 October 1828, the minutes of the Executive Council meeting concluded,

To inspire them with terror ... will be found the only effectual means of security for the future.<sup>9</sup>

In November 1829, the settled districts were put under martial law. Governor Arthur said that martial law was 'treating them [the Tasmanians] as open enemies'. 'Terror may have the effect,' Arthur continued, 'which no proffered measures of conciliation had been capable of enducing'. The colonialists were declaring with words in 1828 a war which they declared with bullets, at Risdon in 1804.

But martial law did not work either and Arthur was left uneasy. On 15 April 1830, he requested that the colonial secretary shift the 63rd regiment of the British Army from Swan River to Tasmania and send out an extra 2000 convicts at once. The convicts were sent out but the 63rd Regiment was not dispatched.

Clearly at this point in the war, the British were beginning to panic. Such was their desperation that all kinds of proposals were put forward to suppress the resistance. Proposals ranged from running Tasmanians down with dogs (which had been done in



Cuba and Jamaica) taming them with 'sweet music' and importing Maoris from New Zealand to fight them.

Arthur set up groups of 'Five Pound Catchers' offering a reward of five pounds for every Tasmanian adult and two pounds for every child captured alive. More Tasmanians were murdered than caught.

None of these measures succeeded. Therefore on 7 September 1830, the infamous and inglorious 'Black Line' was announced. On 1 October the whole island was put under martial law. Five thousand men were mobilised to march three metres apart and drive the Tasmanians into a peninsula in the south eastern part of the island. The British Army mustered 1000 muskets, 30 000 rounds of ammunition and 300 handcuffs.

### Extracts from a document entitled *Military Operations Against the Aborigines* gives a vivid picture of the so-called Black Line.

Preliminary orders took the following form:

The Community being called upon to act en masse on the 7th October next, for the purpose of capturing those hostile tribes of the Natives which are daily committing renewed atrocities upon the settlers: ...

Active operations will at first be chiefly directed against the tribes which occupy the country south of a line drawn from Waterloo Point east, to Lake Echo west, including the Hobart, Richmond, New Norfolk, Clyde and Oatlands Police Districts; at least within this country the military will be mainly employed the capture of the Oyster Bay and Big River tribes, as the most sanguinary, being of the greatest consequence ...

In furtherance of this measure, it is necessary that the Natives should be driven from the extremities within the settled districts of the county of Buckingham, and that they should subsequently be prevented from escaping out of them; and the following movements are therefore directed, first, to surround the hostile native tribes; secondly, to capture them in the county of Buckingham, progressively driving them upon Tasman's Peninsula; and, thirdly, to prevent their escape into the remote unsettled districts to the westward and eastward ...

The parties of volunteers and ticket-of-leave from Hobart town and its neighbourhood will march by New Norfolk, for the purpose of assisting Captain Wentworth's force in occupying the Clyde: ...

When the whole brutal exercise was completed the authorities had this to say in review.

It therefore appeared that the only remaining means of remedying the evil, with a due regard to humanity towards the Natives, was to drive them to a peninsula in which they could be confined by a small force occupying its isthmus, and then to induce them to surrender themselves without bloodshed. To effect this, it would be necessary to beat the bush in a systematic manner ... As the strength in troops was quite unequal to an undertaking on so extended a scale, it became necessary to call upon the inhabitants to rise en masse' and to enrol themselves for this particular service under leaders which the Government should nominate ...

That the advance of the forces had effectually hemmed in the two worst tribes which had infested the settled districts was about this time satisfactorily shown, by the circumstance of a small party, under Mr Walpole, while examining the

country to the front, having fallen in with a large body of Natives who were hunting; he watched them until they hurtled themselves for the night and in the morning he and his party rushed in upon them capturing two, and in the scuffle shooting two others; the remainder, about 40 or 50, immediately saved themselves by flight into thickets, whither it was impossible to follow them. One of the captives belonged to the Big River Mob, as it is termed, and the other to the Oyster Bay Mob; and they declared that those two tribes, which have always shown themselves to be the most blood-thirsty, had coalesced, and were then united.

Lieutenant Governor Arthur summarised the results of the 'Line' to Colonial Secretary Sir George Murray in the following words:

with reference to my Despatch of the 20th November last, I regret to report that the measures which I had the honour to lay before you terminated without the capture of either of the Native tribes ...

The 'Black Line' expired after two months — at a total expense of 36 000 pounds. Only one man and a boy were captured. Tasmanians freely breached the 'Line' and killed two enemy. In addition, five Redcoats died accidentally. By 21 November Arthur wrote to the Colonial Secretary that the scheme had failed. Operations were brought to a halt five days later.

The significance of the failure of the 'Black Line' is that the British Army never defeated the Tasmanians 'militarily'. Tasmanian resistance continued into the mid 1830s. One tribe, which fought the British until 1834 had determined never to be taken; to perish rather than yield.

Quite consciously, the British sought to defeat the Tasmanians through treachery. The Tasmanian Aborigines were never defeated with real bullets; they were subdued by 'sugar-coated' bullets. The agent of this treachery was G. A. Robinson, a thoroughly corrupt and violent Wesleyan 'preacher' whose mission was to pacify the Aborigines and persuade them to resettle on Flinders Island.

Robinson overcame Tasmanian resistance with false promises about Flinders Island. The Tasmanian refugees — only numbering 200 — were all taken to Flinders Island, their population had been reduced from 5000 in 1803 to 200 by 1835. It is quite understandable why the Aboriginal people went with him. They were dying out. They had been subjected to deliberate shooting; distributions of poisoned flour; abduction of women; separations forced upon their children; the spread of disease; the destruction of the animals upon which they depended for food and warmth; and acts of wanton barbarity such as castration.

His reward for the deception of the Tasmanians was far from a heavenly one. Robinson asked the earthly powers for a lump sum of money, a pension, a land grant, and official positions for himself



and his son — in addition to twice the rate of pay he was originally offered. The earthly powers (British colonialism) agreed. Robinson was granted in all, 1 075 hectares of land; lump sums totaling 8 000 pounds and he was made Chief Protector of the Port Phillip Aborigines in 1838.

As for the Flinders Island concentration camp, it is sufficient to point out that the first officer-in-charge, Sergeant Wight, was characteristic of commandants who followed. On the pretext that a rebellion had broken out Wight imprisoned fifteen male Tasmanians on a rock in the ocean for five days — without food, water or wood — so that the 'guards' could rape the women without interference.

Despite every degradation they suffered, the Tasmanians were never cowed. When Robinson was commandant of the island he decided to take a number of Aborigines including the famous Truganini, to Port Phillip.

For Truganini (one of the captive Tasmanians) her sufferings at Flinders Island were only the culmination of a life of degradation at the hands of the colonial aggressor. She was born the daughter of Mangana the respected elder of Bruny Island. Her uncle was shot by a colonist, her mother stabbed to death, her sister abducted and enslaved and her 'fiance', Paraweena mutilated and drowned.

In Victoria the group split away and made a series of attacks on the settlement. Following their capture two were hung. Truganini was shipped back to Tasmania. After she died in 1876 and as a final insult to her race, her body was disinterred and her bones put on public display in the Tasmanian Museum.

Had not Robinson appeared, West, author of *The History of Tasmania* commented, 'the last savage ... would have perished with his weapon in his hand.'<sup>10</sup>

The Tasmanian Aborigines were never completely exterminated (they have direct descendants in Tasmania today) originally numbering no more than 5 000, their crowning glory is that they held the British advance in Tasmania for three decades setting an example of heroic struggle against foreign control.

#### REFERENCE

- 1 Bischoff, J. *Sketch of the History of Van Dieman's Land*. (1832) p. 11
- 2 Ibid, pp. 102-103
- 3 Levy, M. *Governor George Arthur*, p. 121
- 4 Ibid, p. 119
- 5 Turnbull, C. *Black War*, p. 40
- 6 West, J. *The History of Tasmania*, Vol. II, p. 85
- 7 Turnbull, p. 72
- 8 West, p. 219
- 9 Bischoff, p. 195
- 10 West, p. 65

## 4 Victoria

British colonial aggression and expansion into the Port Phillip district became pronounced by the mid-1830s. Before 1851, Victoria was not an independent colony, but merely that section of New South Wales south of the Murray and east of what is now the South Australian border. It was administered by a police superintendent under the authority of the Governor of New South Wales.

The history of the first years of settlement was a bloody one in which the British colonial invasion encountered fierce resistance from the Aborigines. However, these encounters have been largely obscured. Instead emphasis has been placed on John Batman and his 'treaty' of 1835; on the squating aristocracy, especially the Hentys; and on the political elite of the period, headed by Lonsdale and then LaTrobe. A magnificent resistance movement has been 'neglected' and the British colonisation glorified — presented to schoolchildren as a progressive untroubled march of civilisation and progress. In fact, British colonisation did nothing but harm to the Victorian Aborigines. What is more, the Aborigines did all in their power to resist and hinder it: in the late 1830s and early 1840s the Port Phillip Aborigines waged a fierce war against the encroachments of the colonists.

The invasion of the Port Phillip tribal regions took the form of a two pronged attack, coming from New South Wales to the north, (roughly following the route of the present day Hume Highway), and from Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land) to the south. The latter was spearheaded in 1835 by John Batman, whose treaty with two or three of the Aboriginal tribes around Melbourne was a grotesque piece of trickery, aimed at defrauding the people of their land and winning Government endorsement for a private venture. The Aborigines had no concept of land as personal private property, something that could be bought and sold; the purpose of the treaty was merely to put pressure on the Govern-