

1830

MASSACRE IN TASMANIA

The greatest massacre in Australian history took place just over a century ago in Tasmania where, during a mere seventy years, an entire race was wiped out by perhaps the most degenerate, ruthless, and cruel Britons ever congregated together in one place. In 1802, a year before the Europeans crossed Bass Strait to settle in Tasmania, about 20 000 Aborigines lived on the island; seventy-four years later, the last one, an old woman named Truganini, died in Hobart. What happened is the saddest and most shameful story this country has ever known.

The first Britons to occupy Van Diemen's Land (as Tasmania was then known) were Lieutenant John Bowen and a party of thirty-five convicts and thirteen soldiers who established a settlement in September 1803 at Risdon Cove, eight kilometres from present-day Hobart.

They found settled on the island about nine tribes of Aborigines who (anthropologists now tell us) had moved there from mainland Australia some 20,000 years earlier across a connecting land bridge. They were still a stone-

age people who lived a nomadic hunters' life. For weapons they had spears, 2.4 to 5.4 metres long and up to 2 cm thick, and waddies, a type of club about 60 cm long.

It was here, early the following year, that the first 'battle' of the Black War took place when a group of about 300 Aborigines, including women and children, met with British soldiers, while hunting kangaroo. One eyewitness, a servant named Edward White, later described the incident:

The Natives did not attack the soldiers. They could not have molested them. The firing commenced about eleven o'clock. There were many Natives slaughtered and wounded. I don't know how many. But some of their bones were sent in two casks to Port Jackson [Sydney] ... to be studied ... A boy was taken from them. This was three or four months after we landed.

Such unprovoked slaughter did little to encourage friendship between the primitive Aborigines and the well-armed Europeans. Tensions increased as pastoralists took over the Aborigines' traditional hunting grounds. When the Aborigines killed stock for food, the farmers retaliated by hunting them down as they would dangerous animals. Bushrangers provided a further threat to the Aborigines: one boasted that he had often killed them to feed his dogs.

Not surprisingly, the settlers tried to blame the Aborigines for provoking them to violence. But Governor Macquarie, on a visit to Tasmania from Sydney, stated categorically that he had found sufficient evidence 'to convince any unprejudiced man that the first personal attacks were made on the part of the settlers and their stockmen'.

Successive Tasmanian lieutenant-governors warned that Aborigines were as much under the protection of the law as Europeans, but few took these proclamations seriously. Acts of indescribable horror and cruelty continued unabated, as these excerpts from local newspapers and personal narratives reveal:

The Bushranger Carrots killed a black-fellow, and seized his gin; then cutting off the man's head, the brute fastened it round the gin's neck, then drove the weeping victim to his den.

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A party of military and constables got a number of natives cornered between two perpendicular rocks, on a sort of shelf, and in the end killed seventy of them. The women and children had pressed themselves into the crevices of the rocks, but were dragged out and their brains dashed out on convenient rocks.

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A number of blacks with women and children congregated in a gully near Hobart and the men had formed themselves into a ring around a large fire, while the women were cooking the evening meal ... They were thus surprised by a party of soldiers, who without warning fired into them as they sat, and then rushing up to the panic stricken natives started to go in at them with rifle butts. A little child being near its dying mother, the soldier drove his bayonet through the body of the child and pitchforked it into the flames ...

The Aborigines soon hit back by killing some isolated settlers. They never, as David Davies points out in his excellent study *The Last of the Tasmanians*, raped any white women, and only rarely attacked white women and children.

Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, desperate to end the constant clashes, decided to separate Europeans and Aborigines with a 'line of demarcation'. The Aborigines were confined to the wet and foggy western part of the island, described by Davies as today 'the most desolate spot in the whole of Australasia'.

This demarcation came into effect in 1828, and 'martial law' was proclaimed to keep the Aborigines in their reserve. Bounty hunters received £5 for each Aboriginal adult and £2 for each Aboriginal child they caught in the 'white' area. But the Aborigines, baffled, hungry, and persecuted, refused to be contained behind this line.

Finally, in 1830, Arthur adopted a new plan to settle the problem: a 'Black Line' drive by troops, settlers, and convicts to force the Aborigines into the south-east corner of the island and then capture them.

A call for volunteers was issued in September, which asked the community 'to act en masse on October 7th next, for the purpose of capturing those hostile tribes of natives, which are daily committing renewed atrocities upon the settlers, and the Whites generally, wherever found'.

On the appointed day about 2000 men set off to flush out the Aborigines, and, as Arthur's proclamation put it, 'to capture and raise them in the scale of civilization, by placing them under the immediate control of a competent establishment, from whence they will not have it in their power to escape

and therefore to molest the white inhabitants of the country’.

The campaign ended seven weeks later-with the only captives a woman and a boy. It had cost the British Government over £30 000, and even Arthur had to admit that ‘the Expedition has not been attended with the full success which was anticipated’.

What 2000 armed men failed to accomplish in seven weeks was achieved by a former builder named George Augustus Robinson during the following years.

As ‘Protector of Aborigines’ on Bruny Island, south of Hobart, from 1829, he acquired sufficient knowledge of Aboriginal customs and language to believe he could reach them in the bush, and then convince them by reasoning that they should accompany him into captivity to be civilised for their own good.

His main ally or ‘bait’ in this venture was a beautiful young princess named Truganini, who was very attached to Robinson.

From a European viewpoint the mission was a success from the start. Soon Robinson was shipping hundreds of Tasmanian Aborigines to the isolated Flinders Island in Bass Strait, the last arriving in early 1835.

Van Diemen’s Land was finally rid of its first inhabitants. Nothing now remained to impede the spread of British civilisation.

His duty done (for a handsome financial reward), Robinson left for Port Phillip in 1838 to ‘protect’ the Victorian Aborigines. By then only eighty-two Tasmanian Aborigines were still alive in the island jail he had created for them:

forty-two males and forty females, including only fourteen children. Deprived of their freedom to hunt and to roam on the lands of their ancestors, the last Tasmanians did not reproduce; instead they died of what can only be diagnosed as broken hearts.

Late in 1847 the remaining twelve men, twenty-two women, and ten children were brought back to live at Oyster Cove, a few kilometres from Hobart. But even here they continued to pine away.

In January 1868 the last male Tasmanian Aboriginal, William Lanney (popularly known as King Billy), accompanied the Duke of Edinburgh on a visit to the Hobart Town regatta, suitably 'civilised' in his blue sailor's suit. Fifteen months later, at the age of thirty-four, he was dead.

On the day before the funeral, King Billy's head mysteriously vanished- almost certainly removed by a local doctor and sent to London for 'scientific examination'.

This macabre event greatly upset the princess Truganini, the last survivor, and on her deathbed she pleaded that her body be left undisturbed.

Instead, with a utilitarian callousness, her skeleton was placed on public display in the Tasmanian Museum in Hobart for about a hundred years.

Finally, in May 1976, she was laid to rest when her bones were cremated at the behest of Aboriginal rights workers and scattered over the ocean.