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The Aborigines of Tasmania and Christianity

An Essay

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In this essay I will briefly be considering the impact of Christianity on the Aborigines of Tasmania. My focus is on the very early period and confines itself to examining attempts to Christianise and civilise people of full Aboriginal descent.

All contact between the Tasmanian Aborigines and Europeans was minimal until the years 1830-1834, when the small remnant of the original population was brought into captivity and lodged in a settlement prepared for them on an island off the coast of mainland Tasmania.

The period prior to 1830 can be divided into three sections. The first was one of 8,000 to 10,000 years during which the Tasmanian Aborigines lived in isolation from their mainland neighbours. This isolation continued until the last years of the eighteenth century, when Tasmania (then known as Van Diemen's Land) was visited by several exploring ships, most of them British but three of them French. These visits were usually short, on average about a week, and were made for the purpose of renewing supplies of wood and water. During such visits only casual contact was made with the Aborigines and no attempts were made either to impart Christianity or to learn anything of Aboriginal religion. Two of the French expeditions, however, stayed a good deal longer: Bruny D'Entrecasteaux came for about a month in 1792 and for approximately the same period again in 1793; and Nicholas Baudin for about two months in 1802. Both these expeditions visited the same general area of south-eastern Tasmania. The records of the Baudin Expedition contain no suggestion of any attempt to impart Christianity to the Aborigines (see Plomley 1983); which was probably true of the D'Entrecasteaux Expedition, although in this case a detailed examination of the records has not yet been made. Language difficulties were, of course, always a barrier to communication.

The third period covers the early years of settlement, which began in Tasmania in 1803. Settlement expanded from two bases, one at Hobart in the south-east of the

territory, and the other at Launceston in the north. In the first phase of settlement between 1803 and 1825 there was an uneasy calm in relations between the Aborigines and the settlers. The impression gained from the scanty information available from this period is that the Aborigines withdrew without resistance as settlement spread, although attacks upon them by the settlers were sometimes met by retaliation (Nicholls, ed. 1977:51). During this period the main Christian influence was on Aboriginal children who had been kidnapped by Europeans or separated from parents fleeing for their lives. These children were sometimes baptised and given some instruction in Christianity by the settlers in whose households they lived. The baptisms began within a few months of first settlement, when the Rev. Robert Knopwood made a nominal Christian of a child captured at the time of the Risdon "massacre" of November 1803 (Plomley 1987:Chap. 1). From time to time thereafter there are records of the baptism of Aboriginal children.

It seems that the practice of bringing up Aboriginal children in the households of settlers became fairly common, and a source of much ill-will on the part of the Aborigines. Both Davey and Sorell drew public attention to the practice and appealed for its cessation. The purpose of these kidnappings seems to have been largely to provide house-servants, and it is noteworthy that on reaching puberty, or soon afterwards, most of the children absconded to rejoin their families. By doing so they brought upon their heads accusations of ingratitude. One of the more notorious among these young people was Black Tom, or Tom Birch as he was often known, who left his foster parents and gathered around him a group of Aborigines who became active in attacking the settlers. Furious that an Aborigine brought up to experience the advantages of British civilisation should not only opt for the Aboriginal way of life, but also use what he had learnt against them, the settlers sought vigorously to capture him.

There is from this period at least one record of a Christian marriage between two Aborigines. This took place at St. John's Church Launceston on 16 August 1830 when Black Bill Sherwin, also known as William Ponsonby, was married to Catherine Kennedy by the Rev. W.H. Brown. These two Aborigines were members of the household of John Batman at "Kingston", Ben Lomond (Marriage register, St. John's Church, Launceston).

The last years of contact between settlers and Aborigines in mainland Tasmania (1825-1830) were marked by an increasing conflict between the two groups. Governor Arthur had taken over the government in Tasmania in May 1824, and the first six years of his rule were to be marred by a rapidly increasing struggle between Aborigines and settlers for the possession of the land.

In their struggles the Aborigines were at a disadvantage not only from the numerical and technological superiority of the settlers, but also from the decentralised structure of their own political system. For the first twenty years of settlement the bands which made up the Aboriginal population had virtually acted independently. Between 1825 and 1830, however, the Aborigines still alive either came to a common decision to unite, or did so because a decimation of numbers forced many bands to come together into single units. Examples were the so-called Big River and Oyster Bay 'tribes', or perhaps better, federations. The outcome of these federations was dramatic, because even these small remnant groups of Aborigines pressed on the settlers so heavily with their superior bushcraft and well organised guerilla tactics that they came close to driving the settlers from some areas (Plomley 1966:Chap. 2).

As a result of this state of warfare, communication between settlers and Aborigines broke down completely. Arthur made two attempts to get a 'message' across to the Aborigines. The first was two series of hangings (one in February 1825 and the other in September 1826) of Aborigines found guilty by the Supreme Court of murder. These hangings were designed to show Aborigines that they must live within the British law and that if they killed settlers they must pay the penalty (Plomley 1987:Chap. 1). Judging by the increased aggression thereafter, the hangings did nothing but convince the Aborigines they could expect only death at the hands of the settlers. The second attempt was conciliatory: signboards showing that black and white would be treated equally under the law. If any of the Aborigines saw the boards, it is unlikely that the message would have countered the reality of the attacks upon them.

During the early years of his governorship, Arthur did make an attempt to bring Christianity to the Aborigines. This took the form of an application to the Church Missionary Society in about 1828 for a missionary to work among "the wretched Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land". His application was rejected, the Society not being able to assist "until larger means are obtained, to enter on new fields of labour" (Plomley 1966:43, n.44). Arthur was not only a humane man but he was deeply religious. His humanity had earlier been evident in his treatment of the blacks when he was Superintendent of the settlement at Belize in Honduras. His religious views led him to believe in the inherent wickedness of humanity and the need to draw people to God's way by faith. Unfortunately, while Arthur acknowledged that the formalities of English Christianity might not be entirely suitable in evangelising "the heathen", he could not see beyond the church service and catechetical teaching as the basis for demonstrating the "superiority" of the Christian God over all others (Plomley 1987:68f.). As we shall see, such methods failed dismally at the Aboriginal Settlement.

Although in New South Wales there were a number of early attempts to make real contact with the Aborigines — particularly Lachlan Macquarie's efforts to set up schools for their children — there was no official move in Tasmania either to give the Aborigines a European education or to promote Christianity among them. The difference between the settlers in the two states was that in New South Wales there was some faint glimmering of the idea that the Aborigines were human beings, while in Tasmania they were thought of as little more advanced than beasts who hampered the settlers in following their 'lawful pursuits'.

The Aborigines of south-eastern Tasmania were never so involved in attacks on the settlers as those in other parts of the territory. From time to time small parties of them visited Hobart, and there whites and Aborigines became used to one another. The Aborigines were seen as beggars who were the recipients of the bounty of whites. No attempt was made to promote Christianity among them although at least two missionaries who visited Hobart saw something of them. The first of these was Lawrence Threlkeld, who visited Hobart for three months on his way to Sydney in 1817. He and his colleagues seem to have spent their time ministering to the settlers and to have had no religious contact with the Aborigines, but they were horrified by the callous indifference of some of the settlers towards them. Threlkeld says one man "boasted of shooting Blacks like Birds off the branches of trees on which they had climbed for refuge" (Gunson 1974:19). The other visitor was Samuel Leigh, who was in Hobart for a few weeks in August 1821 when he busied himself with religious

duties. Although he wrote a short account of the Aborigines, there is no indication that he made any religious contact with them, although he does remark that "several young natives have been baptised into the Christian faith", and as well says something of their "notions of religion" — that they believe in two spirits, one ruling the day who is good, and other ruling the night who is evil (Leigh 1822:243f.).

Although the year 1825 marked the beginning of real warfare, it was not followed by a cessation of the visits to Hobart of small parties of Aborigines. One such visit in April 1828 led Arthur to instruct the Colonial Secretary to arrange for a soldier to be stationed on Bruny Island to issue biscuits and potatoes to the Aboriginal people there. In August the scheme was extended to the issue of blankets, and at the end of November Arthur gave instructions that some "well conducted convicts" were to be sent to issue blankets and rations, and cultivate a few acres of land for potatoes. Evidently encouraged by the results of these undertakings Arthur instructed the Colonial Secretary to write to four police magistrates to ask if they knew of anyone willing to undertake a conciliatory mission to the Aborigines. No one was, and in March 1829 a government notice was issued offering a salary and rations to "a steady person of good character, ...who will take an interest in effecting an intercourse with this unfortunate race, and reside upon Bruny Island, taking charge of the provisions supplied for the use of the natives of that place" (Plomley 1966:50f.).

George Augustus Robinson was one of nine who applied. He not only showed a keenness to undertake the work of conciliation, but he also offered to visit some government sawyers at Birches Bay on Sundays. Robinson had been a strongly religious person when he came to Tasmania as an immigrant in 1824, and once there he became involved in preaching to seamen and visiting the gaols, which must have added to his suitability in Arthur's eyes. He was appointed, and took up his duties at the end of March 1829. On 15 April he addressed a memorandum to Arthur in which he set out his ideas on his work among the Aborigines; they were to be ameliorated by being civilised, which was to be achieved by forming a native village and by instructing them in the principles of Christianity through public worship and schooling. This proposal, which was very much to Arthur's way of thinking, was accepted, although Robinson himself only put it into practice after October 1835, when he became Commandant at the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement.

Robinson spent 1829 at Bruny Island, but his time there was broken by visits to Hobart, an excursion to Maria Island and so on, so that almost nothing was done either in the way of building a village or beginning a school. However, he did gather round him the nucleus of a devoted band of Aborigines who thereafter became major participants in his work. During his first years among the Aborigines, Robinson's religious teaching seems largely to have been confined to telling them about God, and holding services on Sundays, when he attempted to preach to them in their own tongue. His first sermon is quoted in his diary, and although it seems no more than words strung together, it did take the very important step of trying to use the indigenous language for instruction (Plomley 1966:61). Unfortunately, Robinson did not follow this method in his attempts to instruct on Christianity at Flinders Island.

By the beginning of June 1829 Robinson was suggesting to Arthur that he should visit the tribes of south-western Tasmania and an expedition to this area began on 30 January 1830 (*op. cit.* 1966:111ff.). From that time until the beginning of

August 1834, Robinson was almost continuously travelling in search of Aborigines. By the beginning of November 1830 he was gathering them up and sending them to a settlement being formed on the Furneaux Islands. Occasionally he would spend a few months with his family in Hobart and usually his Aboriginal companions were there too. He took them to church on Sundays, as he had first done during visits to Hobart from Bruny Island in 1829. They were always attentive, though it is doubtful if they understood very much of what went on. When in the bush Robinson held services on Sundays when there were opportunities for doing so, hoisting the Bethel flag — Robinson had become secretary of the Van Diemen's Land Seamen's Friend and Bethel Union Society at its formation in January 1828 — as a sign of the occasion. There is no indication that any of the Aborigines associated with Robinson during his bush journeys or in Hobart were in any degree influenced by the Christian worship they attended.

Turning now to the Aboriginal Settlement, we find a very different state of affairs. The settlement was located on Swan Island from November 1830 to March 1831; at Gun Carriage (Vansittart) Island until November 1831; at "The Lagoons" on Flinders Island until February 1833; and then at its permanent home at Pea Jacket Point on Flinders Island, where it was named "Wybalenna". When "Wybalenna" was abandoned in October 1847, the forty-six Aborigines still living were removed to Oyster Cove on D'Entrecasteaux Channel near Hobart. The last of them was a woman named Truganinni who died in May 1876.

Until the beginning of March 1832 when W.J. Darling came to the settlement as commandant, it had been conducted on the lines of a concentration camp, the secure custody of the Aborigines being the only consideration. Darling's rule was the opposite: kindly treatment and the absence of any show of force. Some simple form of Christian instruction was instituted by Darling, who held services on Sundays which the Aborigines attended. This was followed by the appointment of Thomas Wilkinson as catechist to instruct the Aborigines in Christianity. Wilkinson arrived at "Wybalenna" towards the end of June 1833. In formulating the duties of the catechist, Arthur had this to say:

> It is not easy to define Mr. Wilkinson's duties very precisely....Keep a school — have divine service twice on Sunday and encourage morning and evening prayer....Say the guidance of such a person will have the effect of leading the Aborigines to see at least at an early period one striking particular in the Christian Dispensation — I mean the strict observance of the Sabbath — during which say they may readily be instructed that hunting and many other worldly pursuit gives place to the worship of an Almighty Creator. (Plomley 1987:68)

It will be noticed that formal worship rather than the inherent meaning was the basis of Arthur's idea of teaching Christianity, and when Wilkinson translated "the principal parts of the first four chapters of Genesis" into one of the Aboriginal languages, Arthur failed to appreciate his efforts, rebuking him with the statement "the perusal of this leads me deeply to regret that a person who can be so useful should have, unfortunately, acted so imprudently" (*op. cit.*:69). Arthur simply could not understand that the only way to enter the hearts and minds of the Aborigines was through their own language.

Whatever Arthur may have thought of Wilkinson, the catechist was active in his work among the Aborigines and showed his care for them in what he did. Unfortunately, he fell out of favour with Darling, who suspended him from duty in October, and after unsuccessful attempts to resolve their differences, Wilkinson was dismissed in April 1834. He was replaced in August by Robert Clark, who except for a break between 1839 and 1844, continued as catechist to the Aborigines until his death on 29 March 1850 at Oyster Cove. Clark was an unfortunate appointment. Although he always spoke of the Aborigines as his "black brethren", there is no evidence that he cared for them, and he was not above neglecting or exploiting them whenever it suited him. He was also continually making trouble among the Europeans at the settlement. His misdemeanours led to his dismissal in 1839. Franklin was then the Governor, and it says little for his acumen that a few years later Robert Clark was reinstated, only to continue as before.

Of the eleven years during which Clark lived among the Aborigines we only have a detailed record of his religious activities for the three and a half years when Robinson was commandant at "Wybalenna" (October 1835 to February 1839). During the last of those years Rev. Thomas Dove, whom Franklin had appointed settlement chaplain, conducted the church services. Dove largely neglected the Aborigines and made general trouble. Although found unsuitable early in 1839, Dove did not leave "Wybalenna" for several months, until an appointment had been found for him elsewhere.

While Robinson was commandant, there was much activity in the teaching of Christianity. Robinson sincerely felt that he must show the Aborigines the benefits of Christianity, although apart from a belief in the "brotherhood of man" his views were similar to those of Arthur. He believed in forms and dogmas, and had a rigidity of outlook that could see no good in any other religion.

The method adopted by Robinson to teach Christianity to the Aborigines was a catechism in which teachers drilled them to answer such questions as — "what is God?", "where is God?", "what did God make you for?", "what is Hell?", together with innumerable questions on biblical history, which could have had very little meaning for them. The pupils were examined in these matters periodically, and the questions and answers were written down by Robinson's clerk: the documents are a chilling record of meaningless futility. It goes without saying that such learning by rote was quickly forgotten when the forced-feeding ceased (*op. cit.*:97, 103).

As well as this religious schooling there were church services on Sundays and prayer meetings of one sort or another. The Aborigines behaved decorously in church and it seems often dozed during the incomprehensible proceedings. Clark had previously attempted to make himself understood by using a *patois* of English and Aboriginal languages, although he did not really understand any of the latter. Robinson protested about this many times, maintaining that the Aborigines understood, and many spoke, English.

The end result of all this endeavour was some repetition of catechism, some religious harangues by Aborigines admonishing their fellows against the Devil and bad habits and urging them to love God, and some sermons written by two or three Aboriginal youths who could speak English well (having been taught at the Orphan School at Hobart, not at Flinders Island!), which followed the same pattern and were heavily influenced in their content by Robinson and Clark (*op. cit.*:appendix 4c).

With the departure of Robinson in February 1839, all formal teaching seems to have ended. Any presentation of religious instruction was now no more than church services or prayer meetings. At Oyster Cove even this ceased, perhaps even before the death of Robert Clark. Thereafter the Aborigines were rarely exposed to Christianity. A local minister visited the Aborigines there from time to time from 1855, chiefly it seems to "admonish them against drunkenness and immorality" (*op. cit.*:182), but his visits finally ceased because "in a very short time the natives hated the very name of prayer, detested myself and finally bolted into the bush" (*op. cit.*:186). In June 1859 James Bonwick wrote to the Governor protesting about the neglect of the Aborigines, and emphasising the need for "the constant labour of some simple minded affectionate and christian agent". Even the Aborigines were conscious of their neglect and one of them remarked "they think we have got no souls now" (*op. cit.*:185f.). The outcome was the appointment of a catechist, but this position was terminated in May 1862.

From the beginning of the Aboriginal Settlement there had been a need for "some simple minded affectionate and christian agent". To some extent Darling had occupied that position, but his youth and military training diminished its fulfilment. Robinson also had such a role when he was Commandant, although he was more a paternal figure than a compassionate friend. At other times there was generally a neglect of friendly intercourse, and this reached its height at Oyster Cove, where the Aborigines became a neglected and forgotten people, with only their last superintendent, John Strange Dandridge, providing any of the friendly support they so much needed. Christianity had entirely failed them. Is it any wonder that Truganinni should exclaim on her death bed: "*Rowra* catch me, *Rowra* catch me". *Rowra* was her "devil" (Agnew 1889).

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