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## Quaker Dreaming: The “Lost” Cotton Archive and the Aborigines of Van Diemen’s Land

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This article explores interactions between Tasmanian Aborigines and residents of a Quaker settler property in documented actuality and familial, regional, and scholarly memory. Debunking a recent suggestion that authentic Tasmanian Aboriginal religious rituals and mythologies were kept secret by these settlers for a century and a half, I argue that such “mythologies,” and stories of their transmission, are post-colonial inventions that attempt to render this part of the narrative of Quaker colonialism in Van Diemen’s Land as principally humanitarian, with Quakers acting as a benignly aberrant exception to the wider phenomenon of settlers dispossessing Indigenous peoples. Demonstrating that these settlers colluded in wider colonial practices and policies, and were active participants in networks of scientific study of the Tasmanian Aborigines, this article serves as a case study of the multi-layered nature of colonial action and post-colonial historicism, and also points to a self-referential tendency in historiographies of colonial Tasmania. I suggest that the stories presented as an authentic body of Tasmanian mythology in *Land of the Sleeping Gods* (2013) unconvincingly attempts to reinscribe Quaker colonialism as pacifist and humanitarian, and I argue that in fact Quakers demonstrably contributed to the dispossessing of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples from their traditional lands.

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On 12 January 1831, several of the prominent men of the District of Great Swan Port, on the East Coast of Van Diemen’s Land, met to discuss collectively writing to Lieutenant Governor George Arthur. They wished to offer him a vote of thanks for, as they put it, “his great exertions during the late operations against the Aborigines.”<sup>1</sup> Such letters of gratitude were not unusual in this context, with other districts doing likewise about this time.<sup>2</sup> What sets the Great Swan Port District’s petition apart, however, is that several draft copies of the letter survive, attesting to the careful wording behind what on the surface could otherwise be dismissed as a formulaic address to the Lieutenant

1. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Cotton Family Papers, C7/58(1), fol. 1

2. For examples, see *Hobart Town Courier*, 11 December 1830, 2; *Colonial Times*, 31 December 1830, 3; *Hobart Town Courier*, 15 January 1831, 4; *Hobart Town Courier*, 22 January 1831, 2.

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Governor. In most versions, the drafts refer to the particularity of that district having had a greater than average danger because of “the well known Hostile Tribe of Natives that infests it,” who across various drafts committed “Atrocities,” and “Outrages & Murders [...] against the white population.” Glad to be free of “continual Fear & Alarm for our Lives & Property that [...] hangs over us while these people are at large,” the letter also expressed a wish that Arthur would continue to work towards “ameliorating the condition of these benighted people.” The signatories hoped the Government would “bring them [the Aborigines] from their state of Pitiabie Barbarism to enjoy some of the benefits of Civilized Life.”

The second and third signatures ascribed to this address to Arthur were those of “George F Story” and “Francis Cotton,” prominent Quakers in early Van Diemen’s Land (renamed Tasmania in 1856). Yet these two men have recently been proposed as keepers of an unbelievable secret. It has been claimed that “Story and the Cottons personified what would now be called a liberal attitude ... that Aborigines were made welcome on their properties, and that a handful were allowed to make their homes there.”<sup>3</sup> These Aborigines, a particular Cotton family story runs, lived for perhaps forty years beyond the period when George Augustus Robinson assisted in the relocation of all known Tasmanian Aborigines to islands in the Bass Strait, thereby escaping conflict and exile under the secretive protection of a prominent Quaker family. From these previously unknown and unverifiable Aborigines, the story goes, authentic Tasmanian Aboriginal “lore” was passed on down the Cotton family through a manuscript archive. This archive was then destroyed by fire in 1959, and reconstructed by memory by William Cotton (1909–1981) in the later mid-twentieth century. William Cotton’s writings have recently been published in the volume *Land of the Sleeping Gods: Untold History and Mythology of the Tasmanian Aborigines*.<sup>4</sup> That no corroborating evidence exists for the Aborigines or the manuscript collection was dismissed by the editors of the volume as no barrier to its authenticity as a body of historically important material. “They [the Cottons] have had no reason to lie,” one of the editors noted, suggesting that “it is perfectly plausible that the situation, and the records of it, were kept secret because of the likely opprobrium of other colonists.”<sup>5</sup> It is thus the particularity of a sort of notional Quaker colonial mindset, timelessly honest, which is central to the claim for the *Land of the Sleeping Gods*’ authenticity. Such assumptions about Quaker colonials’ honesty, pacifism, and difference thus posit them as aberrant humanitarians, separate and distinct within a belligerent settler whole.

The publication of *Land of the Sleeping Gods* forms the inspiration for the present study, in which I explore processes of colonial and post-colonial

3. J. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods: Untold History and Mythology of the Tasmanian Aborigines, The Writings and Drawings of William Jackson Cotton* (Hobart: Wellington Bridge, 2013), xii.

4. This sequence seems to encompass an unusual case of mixed settler transfers. See L. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33–52.

5. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, xii. [sic]

recordings and renderings, firstly of how Quaker colonialism impacted on Tasmanian Aborigines, and secondly of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples' history, ethnography, and religious beliefs and practices before, during, and after this colonial intervention. Through detailed archival analysis, notably including Story's extant manuscript diaries of which the *Land of the Sleeping Gods* editors seemed unaware, I chart interactions between Quaker settlers and Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land centred on the Cottons' property at Kelvedon in actuality and memory. I recover Story's prominent role as an agent of the colonial government, and demonstrate how even while the Cottons rarely engaged with local Aborigines they were nonetheless part of a wider phenomenon of dispossession. I also show that after Aborigines were exiled to the Bass Strait Islands Kelvedon became a centre of and for ethnographic and scientific study, which in turn was of great importance to early ethnographies and histories of Van Diemen's Land. Kelvedon was demonstrably one of a number of nodal points in a complex geographical and chronological web of scholarship extending from the former frontier to London, with information and research questions demonstrably circulating in fascinating ways.<sup>6</sup> From all of this I argue that *Land of the Sleeping Gods* therefore represents the apparent invention of "Aboriginal" mythologies and ritual practices by post-colonial members of a settler family. Furthermore, I explore how this purported package of "Aboriginal" belief is supported by mythologies pertaining to the settlement period in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the process of settlement for members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), which seems to be a product of a self-consciously "Quaker = Humanitarian" reimagining of the colonial past in Van Diemen's Land that attempts to render Quaker colonialism as principally humanitarian in its approach to Indigenous peoples: non-invasive, passive, and protective.

This invention of "Aboriginal" religion, and the stories pertaining to its supposed origins and transfer, are unpacked below in three distinct parts relating to the major "authenticating" claims of the *Land of the Sleeping Gods*. Firstly, I challenge the notion that there was a secret group of Aborigines hiding on the property of these men, illustrating instead how documentation remains extensive, contact with Aborigines was minimal yet also very important to early family narratives of settlement, and that there was a normative engagement with wider colonial policies and practices during the time of the Black War and in operations to remove Aborigines from the settler landscape. Secondly, I problematise the notion that there was an authentic, contemporaneous, and lost manuscript collection that recorded material provided by Aborigines secreted on the Cotton property. This is undertaken by exploring and exposing

6. This study therefore echoes and extends work on colonial and imperial webs and networks, historical and historiographical, with an interesting mixture of settler, scientific, governmental, postcolonial, and antiquarian foci. See, for instance, T. Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 2012); Z. Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); T. Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

the strong historical, ethnographical, and scientific interests of Kelvedon's settler inhabitants and their very active roles within wider networks of enquiry and as informants for scholarly narratives developed during the later nineteenth century. Through this I uncover important new evidence about late nineteenth-century amateur-professional scientific networks, revealing the relationships and layers of correspondence and communication which linked informants, scientific authors, and key ethnographical research questions.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I turn briefly in conclusion to provide some preliminary scholarly reading of the *Land of the Sleeping Gods*' "mythological" material, to address one way in which Quaker humanitarianism seems to have acted as an explanatory and excusatory framework for Quaker colonisation, in this case seemingly resolving the problematically undeniable fact that the Cottons were occupiers of what had previously been Aboriginal land.

### Secret Aborigines

Francis Cotton, the subject of this notice, was born in London in 1801, was educated at Friends' School, Ackworth, and having served an apprenticeship to a builder and contractor in London afterwards engaged in business on his own account. ... the family left England during the latter part of the year 1828, in the *Mary* ... and arrived in Hobart ...<sup>8</sup>

So ran the obituary of Francis Cotton, the progenitor of the Van Diemen's Land Cottons, after his death in 1883. The arrival notice of the *Mary* in the *Hobart Town Courier* confirms that seven Cottons landed in Hobart in December 1828.<sup>9</sup> After "about six months" residing in Hobart, and with travels into the interior to identify good land, Cotton relocated the family to the east coast of Van Diemen's Land, first settling in Swansea in "a sod hut, which Dr. Story, district assistant-surgeon and commissariat officer, had prepared."<sup>10</sup> George Fordyce Story, another key figure in the present story, had travelled to Van Diemen's Land with the Cottons in the *Mary*. Story died in 1885, and the obituary for this "well-known colonist," drew attention to his having been appointed "district assistant surgeon and commissariat officer to Swanport" shortly after his arrival.<sup>11</sup>

Through his position, Story was well placed to help Cotton establish himself on the East Coast. The Cotton's new hut, as just noted, had been prepared with Story's assistance. "The sod walls had been built by the Government boat's crew, the doctor got it roofed, and the soldiers had thatched it."<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately a fire destroyed the building and contents, but once again officialdom was on

7. Thereby I also extend my explorations of the historiography of contact and conflict in Van Diemen's Land. N. Brodie, "From 'Miss Dalrymple' to 'Daring Dolly': A Life of Two Jstorographical Episodes," *Aboriginal History* 38 (2014): 89–107; N. Brodie, "'He had been a faithful servant': Henry Melville's Lost Manuscripts, Black Tom, and Aboriginal Negotiations in Van Diemen's Land," *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 17 (2015): 45–64.

8. *Mercury*, 23 April 1883, 3.

9. *Hobart Town Courier*, 20 December 1828, 2.

10. *Mercury*, 23 April 1883, 3.

11. *Mercury*, 1 July 1885, 3.

12. *Mercury*, 23 April 1883, 3.

hand to help, no doubt with Story's assistance. With government transport and aid Cotton returned to Hobart, restocked his supplies, and relocated to Kelvedon, the site where Cotton remained and is erroneously supposed to have later harboured Aborigines. Story's personal assistance was later repaid by the Cottons, with Story living with them at Kelvedon in his retirement as he gradually became blind.<sup>13</sup>

After Francis Cotton's death the master of Kelvedon was his son, Edward Octavius Cotton, who lived there until his death in 1912.<sup>14</sup> Edward's importance more rightly belongs to the following sections addressing the transmission of "secret" "Aboriginal" legends, but is worth addressing here briefly because his occupation of Kelvedon extended beyond that of the last of the "secret" Aborigines said to have resided at Kelvedon, a man identified as "Timler," who according to the Cotton family legend died in 1886, "ten years after the death of Truganini."<sup>15</sup> There is no corroborating evidence of Timler's death or prior existence, and the remains were apparently "cremated" at a place "unknown" by Joseph Cotton, Edward's younger brother, who lived nearby.<sup>16</sup> Joseph was the ancestor of the author of the Cotton story collection (William Cotton), and ostensibly the source of the information concerning the "secret" Aborigines and their legends and stories, both (lost) archival and oral.

Proving a negative, that is that Timler and others did not live at Kelvedon in secret for many years, therefore never died, and were not cremated, is obviously a task fraught with difficulty. To even engage with the story, incredible as it is, runs the risk of giving it credibility. But the story and setting provide an extremely useful analytical framework for revisiting a notional Quaker settler-humanitarianism that developed during and survived beyond the period of colonisation, and encapsulated by the Cotton legends. This equation of Quakers with humanitarians in Tasmania, almost in a synonymic way, is probably derived in large part from the well-known mission of James Backhouse and George Washington Walker to Australian Colonies where they viewed and reported on the conditions of convictism and the treatment of Aborigines.<sup>17</sup> Penelope Edmonds has situated Backhouse and Walker's expedition within a wider imperial framework, revealing the ambiguities and wider context behind their self-aware humanitarian objectives and pointing to their insider role as imperial "institutional opponents."<sup>18</sup> As I will suggest in the following section, this paralleling of Quaker colonialism, whether settler or missionary, was furthered in a historiographical sense by the prominent role of the early

13. *Mercury*, 11 October 1884, 1; *Mercury*, 1 July 1885, 3.

14. *Mercury*, 25 November 1912, 4.

15. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 8.

16. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 8.

17. J. Backhouse, *Extracts from the Letters of James Backhouse, now engaged in a religious visit to Van Diemen's Land, and New South Wales. Accompanied by George Washington Walker*. First Part, third ed. (London: Harvey and Darton, 1838); J. Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1843); J. Backhouse and C. Taylor, *The Life and Labours of George Washington Walker, of Hobart Town, Tasmania* (London: A. W. Bennett, 1862).

18. P. Edmonds, "Travelling 'Under Concern': Quakers James Backhouse and George Washington Walker Tour the Antipodean Colonies, 1832–41," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (2012): 769–88.

Tasmanian historian and ethnographer, James Backhouse Walker, son of one missionary and partly named for the other, who was an acquaintance, co-religionist, and correspondent with residents of Kelvedon.

Yet, despite being prominent Quakers who even hosted the Backhouse and Walker mission, by looking at Story and Cotton's first known encounter with the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land, and then charting their respective relationships and attitudes with and towards Aborigines throughout the period of their supposed sheltering of a secret group of Aborigines, it becomes clear that the Cottons and Story participated in the processes of displacement of and conflict with Aborigines, in fact in Story's case, greatly so. These men's experiences of Aborigines were largely of violence and absence following dispossession, intersecting with and typifying the wider policies and events of the period. A skirmish on the property bears comparison with many other actions of this time. In mid 1829 a hut was being built at Kelvedon, presumably as a stockmen's residence, when the men clearing the ground were attacked. The earliest record of the event was a brief description in Hobart's *Colonial Times*:

A tribe of Natives lately visited the farm of Mr. COTTON, near the Salt-water Lagoon, Great Swan Port. They speared three workmen, who however escaped without much injury. We have little doubt but the numerous parties now out in pursuit of these creatures, will capture them, and place them in safe keeping. Our correspondent says, they speared a few cattle, and shaped their course to the northward.<sup>19</sup>

When Story later recounted the story, he said the attack was timed so that the Aborigines "secured the guns" before the workmen could defend themselves.<sup>20</sup> Francis Cotton by happenstance encountered the fleeing men, and "hurried back to Swansea and obtained a party."<sup>21</sup> Story himself rode on in advance, but found the Aborigines "had vanished."

The event points to a few features of the settlement of Kelvedon and wider frontier conflict in Van Diemen's Land at this time. The attack occurred during a period of hostilities between settlers and Aborigines, part of what came to be called the "Black War," an intense period of sporadic guerrilla conflict and cyclical "tit for tat" attacks throughout the settled districts.<sup>22</sup> The assault on Kelvedon demonstrated familiarity with European weaponry by the way the guns were the first priority of the Aboriginal attackers. Cotton's response was to flee for military support at Swansea, which then went in pursuit, which highlights the seriousness of the conflict and the fact of military involvement, but was also a fairly typical settler response. And Story's mounting of a scouting expedition to track the attackers points to his personal involvement in overseeing such military retribution. Nothing in this episode points to Cotton and Story being later harbourers of Aborigines, but in fact clearly points to

19. *Colonial Times*, 7 August 1829, 3.

20. *Mercury*, 11 October 1884, 1.

21. *Mercury*, 11 October 1884, 1.

22. For recent work on this see N. Clements, *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2014); and M. Johnson and I. McFarlane, *Van Diemen's Land: An Aboriginal History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2015).

their being representative of settler and military actions in a wider pattern of Aboriginal–Settler violence.

In fact the encounter clearly entered family lore in a demonstrable fashion. Writing to the Hobart *Mercury* half a century later, in 1878, Edward Octavius Cotton noted how

My father settled on “Kelvedon” June 1829, and is the only white man who ever held it (early in the following August his men were speared and routed, robbed of guns, kangaroo dogs, flour, bedding &c., and himself waylaid). ... Kelvedon is the only estate in this district which still rejoices in its original white owner, who displaced the blacks — Francis Cotton, to wit.<sup>23</sup>

In 1906 Edward again wrote to the *Mercury*, and quoted a letter from Story in his possession that demonstrated how the period was one of intense conflict, and how as surgeon Story witnessed the results first-hand:

When I first arrived the district of Great Swanport was scarcely known ... and was infested with a very ferocious tribe of aborigines, known by the name of the Oyster Bay tribe, in whose excursions through the district some, either soldiers or convicts, were sure to be attacked and injured ... not to mention the dangers to which I have been exposed in crossing rivers swollen by the floods; or in travelling during excessive rains; or in the night to afford relief to the victims of the aborigines’ barbarity.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, this sentiment is repeatedly recorded in Story’s surviving notebooks. Apparently unknown to the editors of the *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, several of Story’s notebooks and much of his correspondence survives in the Crowther Collection in the State Library of Tasmania, the Special Collections in the University of Tasmania Library, and the Mitchell Library in New South Wales.<sup>25</sup> Generally letter copybooks, the notebooks contain some general notes and drafts. Like the drafts of the 1831 petition of thanks to Arthur which Story co-signed, his notebooks help attest to his state of mind and attitude towards the Aborigines, as well as fleshing out some of his experiences.

A draft “Memorial to the Secretary of State for the Colonies,” written sometime after 1843, shows Story recalling his difficult duties.<sup>26</sup> It was, he noted, a “Dist[ri]ct being very remote & infested with a hostile Tribe [of] Aborigine[s].” He described how “During this first period the Dist was infested with a very hostile tribe of Aborigines so travelling was always attended with danger and both convicts & soldiers fell victims to their hostility so great indeed was the danger of travelling that a Garrison Order protected a Private Soldier from pursuing his Route without being accompanied by another.”

23. *Mercury*, 13 September 1878, 1S.

24. *Mercury*, 14 December 1906, 2.

25. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/1–8; Sydney, State Library of New South Wales, A 1470/Vols. 1–2 (mostly related to his convict duties and having little relevance to this discussion); Relevant G. F. Story papers and manuscripts are dispersed within the wider collections of the University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Hobart, but are digitally collected under the Dr G F Story Collection at <http://eprints.utas.edu.au/view/collections/story.html>

26. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/6, unpaginated notebook.

The drafting process shows Story's mind dwelling on it being a place and time "infested with a very hostile Tribe of Aborigines who in traversing the dist[ri]ct committed savages & murders wherever opportunity offered." He described how "travelling was attended with danger as no one could be aware of the Aborigines lurking amongst the trees." Gradually the form of his letter stabilised, as disparate forms of wording and concepts came together. He tried variants of Aborigines having "infested" the region five times. Aborigines were variously "hostile" (five times), "lurking" (three times), and brought "savages," "murders," and "violence." The same Memorial drafting also shows the violence continued "up to 1833," "until ... the Aborigines were [*text unclear*] & removed from the Island," and only ended "After the removal of the Aborigines from the Island."

Story's notebooks allow for further insight into the specific operations against the Aborigines in the Swanport District during the Black Line and a subsequent expedition into the Schouten hills, and highlight his personal involvement in both exercises.<sup>27</sup> The military engagements with the Aborigines made it difficult for Story to maintain his regular reports to his superiors. In October 1830 he wrote that "Lieut Aubin is absent from this Stat[io]n with the Expedit[io]n against the Aborigines & my accounts for this month cannot be closed until he returns."<sup>28</sup> This note highlights clearly that this area was part of the Black Line operations of late 1830. As Arthur's orders required the participation of "all settlers in that district" with Aubin's movements, there is little reason to think that Francis Cotton was not involved.<sup>29</sup> The idea of a large geographic sweep, being supplied by Story, and probably participated in by Cotton and his employees and convicts, makes the idea of any "secret" Aboriginal presence very unlikely.

In January 1831 Story's settling of accounts helps further illustrate his engagement with military operations, and again illustrates his role in facilitating provisions. He reported that "there was no Tobacco spice during the Expedition against the Aborigines, the order for its [*text unclear*] not arriving until the parties had passed Waterloo Point"<sup>30</sup> He also noted how the expedition had "Received of Mr. Alexander Reid at Waterloo Point, the use of his Cart, Bullocks & Driver, being hired for the Publick Service during the Operations against the Aborigines in carrying Provisions."<sup>31</sup>

27. The Black Line was an operation to corral Aborigines with a significant and moving cordon of men deployed across parts of the island. For recent writing on the Black Line see L. Ryan, "The Black Line in Van Diemen's Land: Success or Failure?," *Journal of Australian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 3–18; N. Clements, " 'Army of sufferers': The Experience of Tasmania's Black Line," *Journal of Australian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 19–33; E. Cave, "Journal during the expedition against the blacks": Robert Lawrence's Experience on the Black Line," *Journal of Australian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 34–47.

28. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/1, unpaginated ([letter copy] Commis[aria]t Officer, Waterloo Point 20 Oct 183[0]).

29. *Hobart Town Courier*, 25 September 1830, S1–S5.

30. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/1, unpaginated ([letter copy] Com Of 17<sup>th</sup> [Jan?] 1813 [*sic*]).

31. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/1, unpaginated ([letter copy ] Commissariat Office, Waterloo Point 17<sup>th</sup> Jany 1831).



Story's involvement continued after the abandonment of a single act of containment, although another smaller "line" was deployed at Freycinet Peninsula in late 1831. In October 1831 he wrote to the Commissariat Office in Hobart that "the expedition of w[hic]h I inform you in my letter of 25<sup>th</sup> against the Aborigines, has most unfortunately failed the Natives hav[ing] [broken] thro the line & escaping on the night of 25<sup>th</sup>."<sup>32</sup> Another letter the following month makes it clear that this was a reference to "the Parties in pursuit of the Aborigines at the Schoutens."<sup>33</sup> It, too, refers to how "the Aborigines had broken through the line & the parties were returning home." This particular expedition also saw Story involved in the supplying of provisions "to Aborigines or civil parties in pursuit of the rest," and reveals the participation of "Mr Ch[arle]s Meredith who was one of the principal persons in the expedition." The use of Aborigines as part of the various expeditions is not unknown, but does point to the unlikelihood of any friendly Aborigines being secreted away. A few other notes about supplying "a Roving Party" and "Robertson & party in pursuit of Natives" further illustrate that Story was deeply and personally involved in these more successful operations designed to "conciliate" and capture Aborigines.<sup>34</sup> His involvement was sufficiently important to his mind that he made note of it when drafting his Memorial to the Colonial Secretary: "Jany – 1831 – The Blacks expedition finished but Abor not received," "October 23 to 27 1831 Line across Schoutens."<sup>35</sup> This was not someone colluding with a settler friend in hiding Aborigines, but rather someone proud to have served against them, who drew attention to his participation when it later suited him to do so as a petitioner trying to make a case for good service in difficult conditions.

Direct contact between Story, Cotton, and Aborigines, is hard to identify in the archival record, but one case is clear. In January 1831 Story wrote to the Commissariat Office in Hobart regarding "a requisition for provisions issued to Mr G. A. Robinsons party."<sup>36</sup> He lists the "Flour," "Fresh Meat," "sugar," "Tea," "salt," and "soap" that was issued to George Augustus Robinson, the famed "Conciliator" of Aborigines who was travelling and bringing in the Aborigines, ultimately for relocation to islands in Bass Strait. The survival of Robinson's diaries is well known, and has dominated the study of Aboriginal Tasmania since their publication in the mid-late

32. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/2, unpaginated ([letter copy] Commt Office, [...] 27<sup>th</sup> Oct 1831).

33. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/2, unpaginated ([letter copy] Comm Office, Waterloo Point 16<sup>th</sup> Novr 183[1]).

34. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/2, unpaginated ([letter copy] To R Neill Esqr, and [brief note of letter] Sat 3d [January?] 1832 [?]). The Roving Parties refers to missions to track and capture or convince Aborigines to come in and have had little scholarly treatment in recent years. See K. Harman, "Send in the Sydney Natives! Deploying Mainlanders against Tasmanian Aborigines," *Tasmanian Historical Studies* 14 (2009): 5–24.

35. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/6, unpaginated notebook, (Memorial to the Secretary of State for the Colonies).

36. Hobart, W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, CRO25/1/1, unpaginated ([letter copy] To Mr Lemprier 17<sup>th</sup> Jany 1831).

twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> William Cotton, for example, is even known to have perused a copy.<sup>38</sup> In doing so, it is likely that he paid particular attention to Robinson's entry for 11 January 1831. Robinson commenced that day "At Waterloo Point."<sup>39</sup> He "Took breakfast and dined with Lieutenant Aubin," and "Got a week's supply of tea and sugar and flour and three day's supply of meat." Then, "At 5 pm walked in company with Dr Story to Mr Cotton's [Kelvedon], about six miles distant, as also the natives, and stopped for the night." The following day the party left Kelvedon "At 8 am."<sup>40</sup> The visit could not have totalled much more than fifteen hours. Aborigines had camped at Kelvedon, but not secretly, and not for long.

Like the attack on the Stockmen in 1829, the 1831 overnight visit of Robinson and the Aborigines demonstrably entered family lore. Francis Cotton's obituary gave some details of the visit: "it may be mentioned that Robinson, the 'black tamer,' camped at Kelvedon with a relay of his captured blacks, who displayed their agility in playing with a ball and in spear-throwing. A 'gin' ran up a bare brick wall for the ball as easily as a mouse does."<sup>41</sup>

The same text was reproduced by the *Mercury* almost verbatim in October 1884 when a traveller recounted the history of Kelvedon.<sup>42</sup> A semi-regular correspondent to the *Mercury*, Francis' son Edward Cotton also noted in 1884 that "A party of those Aborigines captured by Robinson stayed here a little while."<sup>43</sup> In 1893 he provided another story that confirms the idea that the Aborigines "played" during their overnight stay: "In a small party under G. A. Robinson's care, which rested here a little, was a young mother who had lost her baby. She, while the others played with light-hearted gaiety, sat apart in quiet sorrow, appreciating the comfort another mother offered her, but gently refused to be comforted."<sup>44</sup> Edward was not yet born when Robinson visited, so the story must have been passed down. It is clear, therefore, that it was a family talking point.

### Aboriginal Secrets

The late nineteenth-century recollections of Robinson's visit to Kelvedon are part of a wider phenomenon, of which Edward Cotton and George Fordyce Story were observably integral parts. The two interactions between the Cottons, Story, and the Aborigines that are best documented in the 1820s and 1830s (the attack of 1829 and Robinson's visit of 1831) were the very events that were widely recounted from about the 1870s onwards. Not only does this point to

37. N. J. B. Plomley, ed., *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834* (Hobart and Launceston: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, and Quintus Publishing, 2008); 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* (Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 1987).

38. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, xiv.

39. Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 345.

40. Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 346.

41. *Mercury*, 23 April 1883, 3.

42. *Mercury*, 11 October 1884, 1.

43. *Mercury*, 27 September 1884, 1S.

44. *Mercury*, 28 September 1893, 3.

their being the main intercultural interactions that took place, it also illustrates the development of a scientific and ethno-historical interest in Tasmanian Aborigines that developed from the middle of the nineteenth century. Several factors contributed to this interest in the experience of settlement and encounters with Aborigines. As the first settler generations passed away, there was a process of memorialisation and remembrance of the colonisation process generally. Old men like Story, “full of the lore of old days,” became authorities on the past.<sup>45</sup> This process is borne out in the way that settler obituaries from this period often recounted a particular encounter that person had had with Aborigines.

Complementing these general features of Australian colonial self-reflection, in Tasmania the deaths of the last “full-blood” Aborigines were followed in the press with morbid fascination, as people felt they were watching the death of an entire people. The Cottons had a family connection with a late stage of this process that was remembered for long afterwards. A history of the family published in the 1980s recounted how

When he [Joseph Cotton, 1840–1923] was 14 years of age, he was sent to a school at New Norfolk and while he was there he made the acquaintance of “King Billy” (William Lanney), the last full-blood male Tasmanian aborigine. King Billy had a team of oxen for hauling timber and often stopped at the school when the boys were playing marbles; he was an adept at the game.<sup>46</sup>

Like the visit of Robinson to Kelvedon, glancing encounters with Aborigines later held significant places in the Cotton family story, seeming to root them deeply into the colonial past, part of a time before Aborigines disappeared. This belief in the extinction of fully traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal people and culture, as Tom Lawson has recently argued, formed part of a resonating sense of British imperial power and progress.<sup>47</sup> Even while mourning the passing of “inferior” people, the ease with which this was achieved seemed part of the intellectual basis for notions of cultural “superiority” and imperial destiny. By this sort of reasoning, the failure of humanitarian governance was less a moral failing, but rather a scientific inevitability. Examining the Cottons’ and Story’s stories supports Lawson’s general argument. Just as the Cottons and Story were part of the complex reality of ethnic dispossession and cleansing of the late 1820s and 1830s, so too they subsequently became active participants in the development of the ethnographical and biological discourses of Tasmanian Aboriginal extreme cultural and mental simplicity, and informants for historical narratives of well-intentioned albeit unsuccessful British humanitarianism. As sources of data and participants in literary debate, both Story and Francis Cotton’s son Edward contributed directly to the production of a body of scientific and historic literature about the Aborigines of Van Diemen’s Land.

45. *Mercury*, 11 October 1884, 1.

46. F. Cotton, *Kettle on the Hob: A Family in Van Diemen’s Land 1828–1885* (Orford: Joan Roberts, 1986), 79.

47. T. Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

Story had lived through the Black War, contributed to the Black Line, the Schoutens line, Roving Parties, and Robinson's expedition, so he had some opportunities, albeit limited, for witnessing Aborigines directly. Yet writing to James Bonwick, author of *The Last of the Tasmanians; or, The Black War of Van Diemen's Land*, a historical narrative of the Black War, and also of *Daily life and Origins of the Tasmanians*, an ethnographical account, Story suggested that "my own knowledge of the Aborigines was very small indeed."<sup>48</sup> He continued:

When we came to this country in 1829 & located ourselves in the district of Oyster Bay the tribe of Aborigines was held to be a very dangerous one. The tribe either sometimes in a body or other times in separate parties travelled ... & in their journeys served the opportunity of attacking & killing every one whom they found alone & unprotected. Our first experience of them was on settling at Kelved[o]n ...<sup>49</sup>

After describing the details of the attack, he noted that "they had disappeared & could not be traced anywhere," and that of two dogs taken by the Aborigines, "one of these returned in a few days hardly able to crawl f[ro]m several spear wounds." He noted the fear felt by the settler community, and the difficulty in knowing where the Aborigines were, or when they would attack. He noted how "no one was safe to travel with[ou]t a Gun," and that it was better to retain the potential to fire rather than discharging their guns, because "they knew you could only fire once without reloading & would serve the opportunity of rushing upon one with their spears and waddies."

Story's information was received and acknowledged by Bonwick in *The Last of the Tasmanians*. Bonwick regularly quoted directly from correspondence or publications, in this case apparently a version of the draft letter surviving in the Cotton Collection at the University of Tasmania quoted above. Bonwick wrote that "Dr. Story's own experience is related thus: 'We commenced settling at Kelvedon in 1829; Francis Cotton, his family, and myself living at Waterloo Point, the military station, until a hut should be built and some land cleared. ...'"<sup>50</sup>

Story's details about the attack on the hut, even to the specific details of the wounded dog, demonstrate how Bonwick's colonial informants established facts and perspectives by gathering, proffering, and potentially filtering information. Story's role, like that of other correspondents, clearly extended beyond relaying his own experiences, as Bonwick made clear:

A characteristic tale of the times has recently been sent to me by Dr. G. F. Story, of Swanport, an excellent member of the Society of Friends in Tasmania, whose

48. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Cotton Family Papers, C7/127, fol. 1. This is a letter from Storey to Bonwick, which was subsequently quoted from and cited by Bonwick (see below). J. Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians; or, The Black War of Van Diemen's Land* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1870); J. Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1870).

49. University of Tasmania, C7/127, 1.

50. Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, 117–18.

friendship I formed twenty-eight years ago in Hobart Town. He had been giving me an account of some ancient wrongs of the settlers, and appended this narrative to his letter, obtaining his information from the daughter of the gentleman who suffered from the marauding violence of Mosquito's gang, just fifty years ago.<sup>51</sup>

Bonwick then quoted Story's description of a battle at Thomas Buxton's hut.

Story also informed Bonwick that he did not know of any "half-caste" Aborigines.<sup>52</sup> He was Bonwick's source of the notion that "the *Line*" scared the Aborigines into joining Robinson's "Friendly Mission."<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Story attributed the demographic collapse of the Aborigines to a cessation of childbirths after 1823 and the development of an "apathetic condition of the constitution" by being held on Flinders Island, that is, the idea that they pined away to death.<sup>54</sup>

In Bonwick's *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians* Story was cited as a source of information about body sizes.<sup>55</sup> In fact, it seems that George Story was a key source for two claims that have had significant scholarly repercussions. The first concerned the notion that Tasmanian Aborigines did not eat scale-fish, an idea made infamous by Rhys Jones' "slow strangulation of the mind" anthropological hypothesis concerning the loss of cultural information among peoples isolated for 10,000 years from other humans.<sup>56</sup> Bonwick's treatment of the subject clearly points to Story as being his source, despite an obvious misprint about "shell" and "scale" fish: "Though not fastidious in their eating, they had their prejudices. Dr. Story told me that some of the tribes would never eat shell-fish. The South Australian Blacks, in the early days of the colony, seeing people gather the native currant, to send to town for preserves, predicted misfortune, saying 'Ah! plenty die Adelaide now'."<sup>57</sup> This same general idea is recorded in the surviving letter copy, where Story writes that "The women would dive in the sea after shellfish but it seems they never caught other fish no fish bones having ever been observed at their fires. & perhaps they may have had a prejudice against eating them as the Aborigines of Sth Australia had against eating the native currant ..."<sup>58</sup>

Other details of the letter also highlight Bonwick's reliance on Story for this concept, who was himself relying for his information of material he had read, and potentially also on personal investigation of middens. In 1873 Story wrote to the Royal Society of Tasmania "giving, from information he had received, some account of certain habits of the aborigines."<sup>59</sup> Although not published

51. Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, 116.

52. Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, 227.

53. Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, 227, 309–10.

54. Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians*, 388.

55. Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origins*, 119.

56. R. Jones, "The Tasmanian Paradox", in *Stone Tools as Cultural Markers: Change, Evolution, Complexity*, ed. R. V. S. Wright (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1977), 203; R. Jones, "Why did the Tasmanians Stop Eating Fish?," in *Explorations in Ethnoarchaeology*, ed. R. Gould (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 11–48.

57. Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origins*, 18.

58. University of Tasmania, C7/127, 3.

59. *Mercury*, 21 August 1873, 2.

in full, the letter was clearly about “implements,” and “the information was very similar to that already laid before the society,” suggesting that Story did not have any particular information from a secret group of Aborigines. Edward Cotton certainly wrote about the fish-eating question in a conditional way: “They were fools if they didn’t eat fish,” he said.<sup>60</sup>

The other significant idea that Bonwick presents about the behaviour of Tasmanian Aborigines, for which Story is his explicitly-identified source, seems a touch bizarre: “Dr. Story gave me his experience, saying ‘they must have been indifferent to their offspring, for they would nurse the puppies, and be more careful of them than of their *babes*.’”<sup>61</sup>

These are perhaps slightly strange ideas to be developed by one who confessed that “my own knowledge of the Aborigines was very small indeed.”<sup>62</sup> The notions point therefore, less to the personal experiences and contacts that informed Story’s information for Bonwick’s historically focused *The Last of the Tasmanians*, and more towards a personal interest in reading and theorising about the Tasmanian “race” of a sort that Bonwick’s *Daily Life of the Tasmanians* encapsulates. Published in the same year, the twin volumes belonged to a wider scholarly trend, part of the international study of races, the search for the origins of humanity (or variant humanities), and the rise of social-Darwinist paradigms for interpreting colonisation. In Tasmania, Story helped Bonwick to build a scholarly understanding of violence-prone Aborigines, with bestial traits, and having what Rhys Jones would later characterise as a “cultural maladaptation.”<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, just as Story helped Bonwick, so too Edward Cotton demonstrably contributed to H. Ling Roth’s research for *The Aborigines of Tasmania* a few decades later.<sup>64</sup> Edward demonstrated a great scientific interest in the Aborigines of Tasmania, and insofar as he was able, he contributed to inquiry and debate in a more public and regular manner than Story. Some of the letters Edward wrote have already been quoted or cited concerning the events of the 1820s and 1830s. But Edward also conveyed more general information about what he characterised as “the cunning and revengeful race now passed away.”<sup>65</sup> For instance, perhaps with Story’s guidance, he took an interest in phrenology and craniometry: “A Tasmanian black’s skull may be known by its extraordinary thickness, and by having the organs of locality and of caution singularly developed. The “intellectual” and the “moral” parts of brain are inferior. It is the skull of a creature fitted to find measurable happiness in his circumstances and surroundings....In 1860 we found in the mouth of Sandspit River the front of a black’s skull with a young oyster attached inside.”<sup>66</sup>

60. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library, Special and Rare Collections, Walker Family Papers, W9/C4(15), not paginated.

61. Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origins*, 78.

62. University of Tasmania, C7/127, 1.

63. Jones, “Why did the Tasmanians Stop Eating Fish?,” 47.

64. H. L. Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, 2nd ed. (Halifax: F. King and Sons, 1899).

65. *Mercury*, 13 September 1878, 1S.

66. *Mercury*, 9 October 1905, 8.

The Cotton property and district proved a valuable source of Aboriginal artefacts and human remains, collected by generations of Cottons. On another occasion Edward noted how “I have known of skulls being ploughed up here and there — saw the top of one, cannot say dome[d], in the mouth of a sandspit with a young oyster attached inside. One shot in an encounter with George Meredith’s stockmen lay on the battlefield till the gannets in millions picked his bones white and the cattle ate them.”<sup>67</sup>

That a farmer in Tasmania would refer to whether an Aboriginal skull had a “dome” points clearly to the pervasiveness of this new scientism and Edwards’s relationship with it, even to the extent that he dabbled in amateur craniometry and phrenology. Examining “the skulls I have,” he believed they indicated “neither intellectual nor moral stowage room.”<sup>68</sup> Following on from this assessment, he characterised Tasmanian Aborigines as having a bestial predisposition to violence: “You bet they slept with one eye open & the other half shut & their ears acock and ready to kill the other fell[o]w.”<sup>69</sup> In fact it turns out that Kelvedon continued to be a focal point for archaeological and osteological interest in the Tasmanian Aborigines during the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>70</sup> Artefacts were regularly donated by the Cottons to the Tasmanian Museum.<sup>71</sup>

Like Story, Edward drew on his own experience, and that of informants, to garner information about the Aborigines. When he wrote about “the tribe of half-bred sealers of the Straits,” his source of information about the violent capture of Aboriginal women by the sealers was from “an old hand, now departed, [who] told me” and also “a vile-looking convict of the earliest times [who had] recounted” the details.<sup>72</sup> Edward seems to have used his language to distance himself from subjects, events, and sources, even as the genealogy of the story was essential to conveying its authenticity. Generally, however, Story’s information was from informants, and Edward’s was from bones, stones, and books. In this respect, the few decades separating the bulk of their surviving correspondences mark an ethnographic-scientific shift in primary evidence, not just research agendas.

But to a degree Story’s and Edward’s interests and sources points to a particularly Quaker interest in the Aborigines of Tasmania, and also to the centrality of Kelvedon and the Cottons in the development of a Quaker narrative of Aboriginal Tasmania. Writing in 1884 about the “COLOUR OF THE ABORIGINES,” Edward sourced his information as coming from “Life and labours of G. W. Walker, page 97.” Considering the way that many letter-writers, including Edward and Story, were content to use generalisations like

67. *Mercury*, 28 September 1893, 3.

68. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Walker Family Papers, W9/C4/1(25), not paginated.

69. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Walker Family Papers, W9/C4/1(25), not paginated.

70. *Mercury*, 16 August 1907, 7; *Mercury*, 10 July 1934, 11; *Examiner*, 10 July 1934, 10.

71. For instance: *Mercury*, 1 July 1901, 2.

72. *Mercury*, 28 September 1893, 3.

“old settler” for their sources, he was particularly concerned that readers could access Walker’s book:

The book will be found in the Hobart Library, and if not in Friends’ Library, Murray street. Those who wish to know more about the lost race than the colour of their skin, will find many pages concerning them and their doings recorded by this quick and intelligent observer and pleasant writer, while he stayed among them, or met them on the mainland, or among the sealers.<sup>73</sup>

Although themselves colonial informants for the literary establishment, some of Story’s and Edward’s information about the early days of the colony, and even information about their particular part of it, was clearly circulating back to them through print media. James Backhouse’s publications charting his and G. W. Walker’s journey in the late 1830s throughout the Australian Penal Colonies, ostensibly examining the conditions of transportation and the treatment of Aborigines, thus became a source for Edward’s understanding of the Aborigines of Tasmania.

This reliance on Backhouse and Walker is interesting in light of the way that Kelvedon was a place the missionary pair regularly visited, and how George Story served as a sort of regional guide for the visitors.<sup>74</sup> Whereas the first-hand information about the Aborigines was derived by visiting Flinders Island Establishment (after which they stayed at Kelevdon for a time), the examination of archaeological remains also formed part of their stay with the Cottons: “20th 1st mo. [20/1/1836] Before breakfast we walked with our energetic host to the side of the estuary of Little Swan Port, to see the mounds of oyster-shells, left by the aborigines, who formerly resorted hither. They must have been the accumulation of ages: the shells are now dug out, and burnt for lime.”<sup>75</sup> Yet by the late nineteenth century, Edward Cotton was one of the informants used by J. B. Walker (G. W.’s son), and through him, also of H. Ling Roth.

The first edition of Roth’s book was published in 1890, and the second revised edition in 1899. The second edition reveals how his information was supplemented by the work of J. B. Walker in Tasmania during the interim. In the second edition Walker was given an assistance credit on the title page, it was noted that “Mr. J. B. Walker’s local knowledge of Tasmania, and his unwearied labour, have been invaluable in the augmentation and revision of the work,” and in addition to being cited where he had offered new information, large excerpts from some of Walker’s published papers on language were also included and fully acknowledged.<sup>76</sup> Walker even contributed to the large fold-out map attached to the volume.

73. *Mercury*, 27 September 1884, 1S.

74. J. Backhouse, *Extracts from the Letters of James Backhouse, now engaged in a religious visit to Van Diemen’s Land, and New South Wales. Accompanied by George Washington Walker*. First Part, third edition (London: Harvey and Darton, 1838), 18–76; J. Backhouse and C. Taylor, *The Life and Labours of George Washington Walker, of Hobart Town, Tasmania* (London: A. W. Bennett, 1862), 173–74.

75. Backhouse, *Extracts from the Letters of James Backhouse*, 44; also in J. Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1843), 348.

76. Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, 2nd ed., ix, 165–90.



In addition to gaining local knowledge, and access to Walker's research, Roth was able to use Walker to source osteological materials for study, and it is this that demonstrates the particular input of the Kelvedon collection. Writing in March 1897 to Roth, Walker stated that "I am rather hoping when Easter comes to pay a visit to Mr E O Cotton at the E Coast & see what more I can get from him. He has 4 or 5 undoubted genuine skulls, w[hic]h have never been described."<sup>77</sup> This clearly piqued Roth's interest. A letter from Roth to Walker from February 1898 shows him querying "how many skulls Cotton has in his possession?"<sup>78</sup> In another from August 1898 Roth states: "Your remarks about Cotton's skulls is good — if only these could be measured in time for publication in the book & there is time yet."<sup>79</sup>

In 1925 the *Burnie Advocate* noted how "remains of the now extinct aborigines of Tasmania were found on his [E. O. Cotton's] property at Kelvedon, and were placed in a building," but also drew attention to the way that Edward insisted the remains stay on the property rather than be forwarded to scientists overseas.<sup>80</sup> With no secret that there were human remains available for study at Kelvedon, it is rather unlikely that a secret group lived on at the property and had their remains secretly cremated and buried. Yet, while this anecdote highlights how the human remains at Kelvedon were being integrated into studies of the British empire's Indigenous peoples through the co-operation of men interested in the scientific study of Aboriginal remains at the empire's centre and periphery, it also points to the development of a notional Quaker scientism that is, similar to the narratives of Quaker colonialism, passive and protective.

In part, however, the Quaker parallels in history and ethnography were prompted by the highly cyclical movements of data and the self-referentiality of research queries in a fairly closed loop. This is discernible in the sorts of queries that Roth made, and to which J. B. Walker responded. In a surviving manuscript, titled "Notes on Tasmanian Aborigines," Walker describes how "Mr Edward Cotton, Kelvedon near Swansea East Coast of Tasmania informs me that many years ago an old settler showed him the Aborigines method of obtaining fire by friction. ... He confirms the account of the blacks spearing stingaree (sting-ray) on the mud flats, but does not know of them eating fish."<sup>81</sup> This information is included in Roth's second edition as the final proof that Aborigines did not eat fish.<sup>82</sup> Not only was Cotton being used as a source of information (albeit some of it second-hand), he was being asked for information concerning two particular points of ethnographic interest to the scientific community that had stemmed from the work of Bonwick: the making of fire

77. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Walker Family Papers, W9/C19(38), fol. 4.

78. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Walker Family Papers, W9/C19(25), fols. 3–4.

79. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Walker Family Papers, W9/C19(29), fol. 4.

80. *Advocate*, 18 April 1925, 10.

81. Hobart, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Collections, Walker Family Papers, W9/C4/1(11), fol. 1.

82. Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, 2nd ed., 102.

and the eating of fish, both points that were thought by some to demonstrate that the Tasmanian Aborigines were at the bottom of the simplified evolutionary ladder of the late nineteenth century. In the case of the latter concerning fish, it appears that Story had a role in giving the idea considerable publicity through Bonwick. The idea had come from Kelvedon, gone to the centre of the scientific community's discourses about race, and then been verified by a chain of enquiry, apparently ignorant of the idea's origin, which lead back to Kelvedon.

### **Quaker Dreaming**

This nineteenth-century scientism detailed above is in striking contrast to the materials presented in *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, ostensibly authentic Tasmanian Aboriginal "lore" as recorded by Story and the Cottons. This notion of secretly transmitted authenticity relies, however, on a series of data transmission points extending over several generations, and with no corroborative evidence. Working backwards, there is the editing of the papers of William Cotton, which resulted in the published volume. Prior to that, William Cotton reportedly wrote down from memory what he could remember of the family's Aboriginal "lore." One portion of this remembered data reputedly came from the family archive which had been destroyed by fire in 1959. This archive, according to present legend, included "several at least of Story's journals," "journals kept by Joseph," various "letters and notes" by various other Cottons (including Francis), writings and drawings by the secret Aborigines, and more.<sup>83</sup> It is asserted that this "trunk" of writings was "passed to Adam" in 1923 when Joseph died, and then given to William about 1950.<sup>84</sup> The other part of William Cotton's remembering were of oral stories, reputedly told by the Aborigines to Francis Cotton's children, specifically Joseph, who then told the stories to his son Adam, which were then reportedly told to William.

As already noted, but worth further stressing, none of this can be corroborated. Moreover, as the above sections show, there is considerable circumstantial evidence that mitigates against the claims about the family "lore," and against the authenticity of "lore" as presented. But there is, nonetheless, an interesting correspondence in the way that the family's "lore" runs completely counter to the documentation, and it is this twentieth-century reconstruction of the Cotton-Aboriginal relationship that I want to close by addressing.

Firstly there are the facts of documentation. The *Land of the Sleeping Gods* is reliant on, and points to, lost manuscript material. Yet there is no real lack of Cotton and Story manuscript or published material, as the preceding discussion clearly illustrates. The University of Tasmania Library's Special and Rare Collections has a considerable amount of Cotton family material dating from the 1820s throughout the nineteenth century. Similarly, although only rediscovered in the process of researching this article, Story's manuscript letterbooks in the Crowther Collection at the State Library of Tasmania contain

83. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 9.

84. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 9.

a wealth of manuscript material dating from the 1820s and 1830s. Furthermore, other journals authored by Story are extant in the Mitchell Library in New South Wales. That a wealth of private family material survived a fire of 1959 is further highlighted by the 1986 family history written with the use of family letters from the 1820s onwards.

In another opposition, all of the documentary evidence of the 1820s and 1830s, and the later documented statements of Story and Edward Cotton, point to a relatively limited engagement with Aborigines during the period of early settlement. Yet the *Land of the Sleeping Gods* builds an argument that has the Cottons and Story involved in an exceptional, secret, and extraordinarily high level of direct engagement with some Aborigines. The family legend points to two particular (otherwise unknown) Aboriginal individuals as interacting with the Cottons and passing on “lore.” The first of these was “Toli,” who was reportedly “a Loon-Tite tribesman who had been born in the immediate area. Toli was an Oyster Bay raka-burrock, or medicine man, and a tribal historian. He was unknown to the authorities, deeply versed in the folklore of the Oyster Bay people, and a great source of information about the coastal area.”<sup>85</sup> The other figure was “Timler”: “a powerful and legendary chief who was the last Larnu (sacred man or high priest). As head of the mysterious Brayleny, the island’s religious hierarchy, he had an intimate knowledge of the whole island and its population.”<sup>86</sup>

In contrast to Francis Cotton’s first experience, where Aborigines attacked his hut while he was not even present, to Story’s chasing after them and finding nothing, to Story’s distant provisioning of military expeditions against them, and the brief overnight stay of Robinson’s “Friendly Mission” at Kelvedon, the *Land of the Sleeping Gods*’ picture is one of regular contact and an intense and lasting friendship. Moreover, the legendary version of Cotton–Aboriginal interactions has secrecy as an increasing factor towards the end of the nineteenth century, in complete contradiction to the quite public and prominent roles played by Edward Cotton and Story in the scientific study of Aboriginal culture and the collection of human remains for such scientific study. Edward Cotton may not have sent the Aboriginal osteological remains overseas, but nor did he reinter them, rather keeping them handy for analysis “in a building,” until some were eventually handed over to the University of Melbourne.<sup>87</sup> Regarding Tasmanian Aborigines, the nineteenth and early twentieth-century activities and networks of these Quakers were primarily scientific, grounded in an early colonial experience as settlers who partly prompted, facilitated, witnessed, and benefited from Aboriginal dispossession, but which have been re-imagined as principally humanitarian, passive, and protective.

And in yet another contradiction, whereas the physical remains and the ethnographic observations of the Cottons and Story were all anonymous, the

85. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 6.

86. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 7.

87. J. Wunderly and F. Wood-Jones, “The Non-Metrical Morphological Characters of the Tasmanian Skull,” *Journal of Anatomy* 67, no. 4 (1933): 583. Skull numbers 32–38, then at the University of Melbourne, were described as having “formerly belonged to the late E. O. Cotton, Esq.”

legendary Aborigines are all named and known. Here the stories of Timler are particularly revealing about what cultural purpose these stories may have served for the Cotton family in the twentieth century:

Timler was a man of action and great resourcefulness who disbanded the centuries-old Brayleny about 1825 and led a war of attrition against the whites. A will-o'-the-wisp operator, he too [i.e. like "Toli"] was unknown to the authorities and was never on their blacklist. The natives regarded him as their direct representative of the gods and never disclosed his identity, even to their friend George Augustus Robinson, appointed by the government to "conciliate" the Aborigines.<sup>88</sup>

"But eventually, with Toli as intermediary, Francis Cotton and Story gained Timler's confidence and turned him from his warlike pursuits sometime in the 1830s. In return they promised him protection from Robinson and the authorities, but this could only be achieved by Timler's going into hiding."<sup>89</sup>... "With this continuing contact, Timler and his family entrusted their tribal knowledge to their settler friends, who cared for their welfare and helped them in their transition into the white man's world."<sup>90</sup>

The notion of the "Brayleny" was, according to "lore," an elite religious caste, descended from Portuguese shipwrecked sailors (William Cotton surmised), who were authorities for the mysteries of Tasmanian "Aboriginal" religion. This heritage enabled Timler, "his wife Urally and their son Terom [to have] lived clandestinely for many years" under Cotton protection, working openly because of their white skin, but unrecorded because of their names.<sup>91</sup> It thus serves as a useful narrative tool for explaining how a secret group could have hidden so well, and also how the Cotton's could have accessed a whole-of-island understanding.

But to me, when read in a wider context, the story seems to convey a sort of conversion narrative. The stone-age peoples of Tasmania (read: Pagans) were overseen by a ritualised religious hegemony derived from the Portuguese (read: Roman Catholic), who were then brought to peace and civilisation through the agency of Cotton and Story (read: Quakers). Sensitivity to a sectarian element of the narrative is thus important for appreciating its contents, but it particularly highlights how the stories about the passing on and preservation of Aboriginal "lore" shows a blended re-imagining of Quaker colonisation and humanitarianism where Quaker colonialism is rendered as pacifist.

Story's background had already been treated in some detail, which shows his role in the machinery of governmental action against the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land. It is perhaps also worth noting that Francis Cotton played his part in the administration of the convict penal colony. He was, his ancestor noted, fond of the adage "if you want to beat a dog, you can always find a stick."<sup>92</sup> This was a reference to his attitudes towards his convict servants,

88. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 7.

89. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 7.

90. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 7.

91. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 7.

92. Cotton, *Kettle on the Hob*, 30.

which numbered a dozen or so at any given time. His and Story's conspiracy to hide Timler becomes ridiculous when the many visitors and workers on the property are fully factored in. Moreover, not only was he a significant landholder and convict master, he was also a Justice of the Peace. Cotton and Story would not hide Aborigines from the government because, in Little Swanport, they were the government.

They were also connected to those prominent "institutional opponents" of empire, necessitating an international conspiracy for Kelvedon to be seriously considered as a secret Aboriginal "safe zone." As a major resting place for Backhouse and Walker's mission, Kelvedon was central to the great Quaker mission in Van Diemen's Land. But with regard to the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land it was a mission written up with concerns expressed after the fact, in the abstract, and without any major demonstrable outcomes, and all done mostly after the mission period. Backhouse's description of the visit to the Flinders Island Aboriginal Establishment does not record any practical recommendations for treatment of the Aborigines, but is instead spotted with positive comments about how well they were treated by the authorities. The key suggestion concerned their spirituality: "I was particularly desirous of this opportunity, to point out to the Europeans their responsibility to God, for being blessed with the knowledge of the gospel, especially as it regarded their influence and example among the unenlightened people, with whom they are placed."<sup>93</sup>

They also chastised the sealers for their use of Aboriginal women, "but our expostulations did not seem to make much impression upon them."<sup>94</sup> Overall the humanitarian element of the mission was to humanise the Aborigines, not a task or achievement to be mocked in the context of 1830s Van Diemen's Land, but even they ascribed most of what they saw as the achievements of government paternalism to George Augustus Robinson. Although not a Quaker himself, Robinson was a preacher of sorts, and combined with the perception that he was the saviour of a people, the religious overtones of his endeavour greatly appealed to the development of a self-consciously Quaker narrative of humanitarianism. In an 1878 edition of the *Good Words and Sunday Magazine*, it was noted how "George Augustus Robinson's story has been often told. The Quakers heard it from his own lips, and were much moved by it. It was, in fact, a story such as a Quaker might have loved to tell to Quakers."<sup>95</sup> Robinson therefore became a sort of adopted Quaker humanitarian figure, and the hagiography of his endeavour cast a long shadow on Quaker narratives of Quakers' engagement with the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land.

In hindsight, however, the Flinders Island Establishment was a demographic catastrophe for the Aboriginal peoples of Van Diemen's Land. Thus the *Land*

93. *Extracts from the Letters of James Backhouse, now engaged in a religious visit to Van Diemen's Land, and New South Wales, accompanied by George Washington Walker* (Lindfield: W. Eade, 1834), 53.

94. J. Backhouse and C. Tylor, *The Life and Labours of George Washington Walker, of Hobart Town, Tasmania* (London: A. W. Bennett, 1862), 94.

95. *Good Sunday Magazine*, Vol. 19, 1878, 201.

*of the Sleeping Gods* appears to write against a later awareness that Robinson's role as "Conciliator" did indeed warrant the apostrophising that could indicate the term's problematical nature. Moreover, the role of the Cottons and Story as protectors of "secret" Aborigines at Kelvedon from Robinson as well as other settlers, glosses over the role of the Cottons and Story in displacing Aborigines from their traditional lands, and ignores the way they supported the removal of Aborigines through official channels (including hosting Robinson). If the Backhouse and Walker mission produced a sort of nineteenth-century autobiographical hagiography, the *Land of the Sleeping Gods* reads very much like a twentieth-century apocryphal and Gnostic Quaker-hagiography, making of Francis Cotton and George Fordyce Story a pair of even greater pseudo-Robinsons. This effect is doubly interesting for seeming to attempt to write against historical narratives and ethnographical understandings, variously echoing, contradicting, and reinforcing elements of Bonwick's Quaker-informed writings of the 1870s.

Further examination of how the *Land of the Sleeping Gods* reflects or rewrites colonial history may prove fruitful for charting continuities and discontinuities in Quaker self-perception, as well as noting the historical disjunctions noted above, so I want to conclude with some preliminary observations along this line. Without labouring the point or the details, the style and substance of the "lore" presented in *Land of the Sleeping Gods* bears more in common with fantasist writings of the twentieth century than genuine ethnographic accounts of any period. Timler has quite the touch of Tom Bombadill from *The Lord of the Rings* about him, the conversion narrative and overtones of secrecy have elements of C. S. Lewis, and the semi-mystical medicinal skills of Toli read to me a bit like the Spiritualist-focused works of Arthur Conan Doyle. Moreover, there are profound echoes of Walter Scott running throughout the whole body of writings, which point to a Tasmanian neo-Aboriginal medievalism, or perhaps an affective and performative *Indigenism*. The historicist fantasy of *Ivanhoe* is echoed in Aboriginal warriors and battles, complemented by a strange historico-scientism similar to *The Lost World*. The substantive content, with its tiresomely frequent explanations for landscape, flora, and fauna, acts out and seemingly creates a sort of encyclopaedic Tasmanian catalogue of "Dreamtime stories."

Additionally, there are occasional echoes of the historiographical preoccupations, which are also reminders of the primacy of secrecy. One notable example described a religious ritual (with no known genuine Indigenous counterparts), involving group masturbation into a lake.<sup>96</sup> This bizarre story, with fish being fed on human sacrifice, then semen becoming a substitute, serves as a convoluted explanation for why Tasmanian Aborigines avoided eating fish. The supposed (but unconvincing) avoidance of fish is a focus of historiographical discourse that became very significant, largely because of Story's own comments on the subject. Unknowingly, it seems, the *Land of the Sleeping Gods*

96. Cooper, *Land of the Sleeping Gods*, 24, 31–32.

attempted to write against Kelvedon's contribution to historiography as well as history.

Overall, the *Land of the Sleeping Gods* appears to reflect a desire to re-imagine the Tasmanian past, to take some charge for what was clearly felt as a lost Aboriginal presence, and to reconfigure the Quaker settler experience as a salvation narrative. Its contents attempt to address queries of the post-settlement period, reacting against narratives of dispossession, and leaning heavily on the uncertainty of the established historiography courtesy of Tasmania's prominent role in Australia's "history wars." So Timler, Toli, and a mythological package act to reconfigure Kelvedon as a Tasmanian "Rivendell." Fantasy has a long history as a tool for understanding both past and present, and so perhaps some member of the Cotton family attempted to acquit their family of guilt over Aboriginal displacement by ascribing to the family an exceptional burden of secrecy, and a new history of care and concern that fit a typically Quaker narrative pattern focused on humanitarianism and passivity.

Yet Edward Cotton was certainly not so sentimental. Writing with some pride in 1877 of his flock of sheep (including one named "King Billy"), Edward wrote that the sheep "as a race, have lived on their own runs since they displaced the blacks."<sup>97</sup> It is a touch reminiscent of Thomas More's line in *Utopia* about how "sheep eat men," and deeply prescient about the probable processes at work in the displacement of the Aborigines, and the causes of conflict. But precisely because Edward Cotton and George Fordyce Story took such a particular interest in the study of Aboriginal artefacts and remains, we know that on a nearby farm one Aboriginal body was reduced to bones and then "the cattle ate them," a plausible fact considering that cattle do sometimes lick or chew bones for phosphorus and Tasmania has some of the most phosphorus-deficient soils on Earth.<sup>98</sup> These men certainly knew a number of Aborigines in the 1870s, only they were dead, and the Cottons had the remains to prove it.<sup>99</sup> Kelvedon became a reliquary only after the bones were long gone.

97. *Mercury*, 12 November 1877, 3.

98. *Mercury*, 28 September 1893, 3; <http://soilquality.org.au/factsheets/phosphorus-tas>

99. R. J. A. Berry and A. W. D. Robertson, "Preliminary Communication on Fifty-three Tasmanian Crania, Forty-two of which are now recorded for the first time," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria (New Series)* 22, no. 1 (1909): 52. The authors report examining nine skulls "in the possession of Mr. E. O. Cotton, Kelvedon" on site, of which two were fragments. The fragments seem not to have passed to Melbourne University.