

# The National Confessional

Lallah Rookh, or Truganini,  
photograph by C. A. Wolley, 1886,  
National Library of Australia

## Rebe Taylor

1 Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The  
Extermination of the Tasmanian  
Aborigines*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1948.  
2 Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Trucanini: Queen  
or Traitor?*, O.B.M., Hobart, 1976.

WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU LOOK AT TRUGANINI'S FACE? Do you feel challenged? A sense of sadness and regret? Or are you so empathy-fatigued you make an inward groan? Not again! We know that sad story. We have said sorry. The History Wars have been waged.

Truganini's face launches an internal conversation. This conversation has a history, one that unpacks like a matryoshka doll. Truganini has long been the symbol of a terrible but straightforward story of extinction, what is often popularly concluded to be one of the most clear-cut cases of genocide. This is how Tasmania appears from the outside: the Holocaust of the British Empire, international shorthand for all colonial guilt. But beneath this layer is a nation looking to itself, or rather looking down to its island state, in an effort to understand its history. To white Australians, Tasmania has been the yardstick of 'our' brutal past, the worst of what 'we' did. It may now seem a kind of convenient truth to view Tasmania this way, but it was real to those caught up in the anti-colonialist politics of the late 1960s, seeking to break the 'silence' over Australia's frontier past.

Looking more closely at Tasmania, you see a small colonial outpost trying to make sense of the inherited (and self-created) guilt of exterminating the island's indigenous peoples within a generation. The nineteenth-century Tasmanian community was the first to make Truganini a legend, and its historians were the first to berate the colonial administration for the demise of the Aborigines. There is an archaeology of collective remembering, history writing and creating identities from Tasmania's Aboriginal past that spans centuries and continents. I look at myself, now in Melbourne, digging into these layers. I wonder: do we still need to look at Truganini to do that?

In 1840 Benjamin Duterreau painted Truganini among several Tasmanian Aboriginal people as they surround government conciliator G.A. Robinson. (The painting is called *The Conciliation*). Clive Turnbull, author of the strident 1948 book *Black War*, assumes Truganini is the woman standing next to Robinson, the woman who tried to save her people from extinction.<sup>1</sup> Vivienne Rae-Ellis, in her controversial 1976 book *Trucanini: Queen or Traitor?* asserts Truganini is the woman pulling Woureddy to meet Robinson: the traitor who helped lead her people to extinction.<sup>2</sup> But in 1988 Tim Bonyhady identified Truganini correctly: she is the woman peeking over the hill, seen behind Robinson's left shoulder ('almost out of sight' as Lyndall Ryan puts it). She is one of the mission Aborigines who helped Robinson conciliate the 'wild' ones. This meeting is an important moment for the white Tasmanians remembering the recent Black War.<sup>3</sup> Duterreau asks them to join with Truganini to watch



ABORIGINES OF TASMANIA.  
No. 4.  
LALLAH ROOKH, OR TRUGANINI (*Seaweed*).  
FEMALE—BUMTJARI TRIBE—65 YEARS.

3 Lyndall Ryan, 'The Struggle for Trukanini 1830–1997', 1997 Peter Eldershaw Memorial Lecture, in *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings*, 44(3), 1997, pp. 168–9; and Suvendrini Perera, 'Claiming Trukanini: Australian National Narratives in the Year of Indigenous Peoples', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1996), pp. 404–5; Tim Bonyhady, 'To Quit Barbarous for Civilized Life', in Daniel Thomas and Ron Radford (eds), *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art 1788–1988*, International Cultural Corporation of Australia and Art Gallery of South

history being made—no, constructed! Trukanini is painted looking at the white Tasmanians of 1840 as they compose their triumphant narrative.

Such triumphalism did not endure. In the opening of *Fate of a Free People*, Henry Reynolds remembers, as a university student, telling his history lecturer about the 'appeal' of Tasmania's landscape. 'No,' he was reprimanded, 'it's a bloody sad place. You can still hear the Aborigines crying in the wind.'<sup>4</sup> His lecturer's family still owned the land where Aborigines had been killed, and where a shepherd was buried with spear wounds.<sup>5</sup> I know from my own research that frontier history and Aboriginal people were also remembered in stories embedded in the landscape throughout Australia in the mid twentieth century, but they were often spoken of with reticence and clandestine ambiguity.<sup>6</sup> In Tasmania, however, it seems the colonial descendants shared a more open, and remorseful, collective memory. When English amateur anthropologist Ernest Westlake visited Tasmania in 1908–10 the word 'shame' appeared repeatedly in his notebooks as white colonists and their descendants remembered the Aborigines.<sup>7</sup> Reynolds suggests the feeling was not suppressed by subsequent generations.

Perhaps extinction bred a candid shame. If southern mainland Australians noted (with regret) the passing of the last 'full-blood' of their local 'tribe', they knew members of the same race were still living further north. It was not a closed chapter (so best kept quiet). But the Tasmanian Aborigines were then assumed to have been a unique and different Aboriginal race. Thomas Huxley's assertion in 1870 confirmed that they were too different from mainland Aborigines to share the same origins.<sup>8</sup> White Tasmanians inherited the burden—and the benefits—of complete extermination.

'When I was a kid we were told we were Trucannini's descendants,' writes Ian Anderson. 'In actual fact we aren't.' Aboriginal Tasmanian elder Ida West has suggested that Trukanini had a daughter, Louise Briggs, who lived in Victoria, but this is not the genealogy that Anderson is referring to here.<sup>9</sup> Anderson is a descendant of Woretermoeteyenner (daughter of Mannerlargenna) and her partner George Briggs. What he meant by being one of Trukanini's 'children' was that they were 'the children of the vanquished and gone—hybrids, half-castes, those touched with the tar brush, with a bit of the splash, of the descent. We were born at the end of history ... of that moment in 1876 when TRU-GAN-NAN-NER ... died.'

Trukanini became a 'colonial symbol', the last 'authentic' Aboriginal person in Tasmania: 'exotica ... outside of European history, insulated in a bizarre world of "otherness"', writes Anderson. A historical 'full-stop' marking a land now 'empty of natives'.<sup>10</sup>

Australia, Adelaide, 1988, p. 76.

4 Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2004 (2nd edn), p. 1.

5 Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p. 1.

6 Rebe Taylor, *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2008 (2nd edn).

7 Ernest Westlake Papers, Tasmanian Notebooks 2–6, Pitt Rivers Museum Manuscript Collections.

8 T.H. Huxley, 'On the Geographical Distribution of the Chief Modifications of Mankind', *The Journal of the Ethnographical Society of London*, 2(4), 1870, pp. 404–12; J. Lubbock, *Pre-*

*historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, Williams & Norgate, London, 1865, pp. 336–7; and E.B. Tylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, republished from the 3rd edn, Paul Bohannan (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1964, p. 195.

9 Ryan, 'Struggle for Trukanini', pp. 172–3.

10 Ian Anderson, 'Re-claiming TRUGER-NAN-NER: De-colonising the Symbol', in Penny van Toorn and David English (eds), *Speaking Positions: Aboriginality, Gender and Ethnicity in Australian Cultural Studies*, Department

of Humanities, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, 1995, p. 32.

11 Cassandra Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1991; and Colleen Coy, *Tunapi Three: From Family to Community*, ALBE Resources Unit, Devonport, Tas., 1994, pp. 4–5.

12 Taylor, *Unearthed*, pp. 139–49.

13 Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p. 2; Andrys Onsman, 'Trukanini's Funeral', *Island*, no. 96 (2004), p. 40.

14 David Hansen, 'Seeing Trukanini', *Australian Book Review*, May 2010, pp. 45–53.

But her very otherness, her status as a 'full-stop', meant Trukanini was not 'outside' white Tasmanian history, she was central to it. Many colonial-descendant Tasmanians were directly responsible for the suffering of the Aborigines, but the deliberate policies and decisions of the former colonial administration were largely beyond their control. They were left, in their colonial outpost, with the task of trying, collectively, to understand and close that history. It was not merely 'blood' or 'race' that defined Trukanini as the symbolic 'Last' for white Tasmanians; it was their own sense of geography and history.

Most Tasmanians (especially in the island's south) would have known that Fanny Cochrane-Smith, who died in 1905, maintained she was a full-blood (a fact wrongly denied by contemporary anthropologists), and they knew her many descendants were living in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, south of Hobart.<sup>11</sup> Many, especially northern Tasmanians, knew the Aboriginal families living on the islands of the Bass Strait by name. Some may even have heard of the 'full-blood' women still living on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, two of whom outlived Trukanini.<sup>12</sup> But Trukanini was the last Aboriginal resident of the mission station at Oyster Cove, south of Hobart. She was the last Aboriginal person to have worked closely with conciliator G.A. Robinson, and to have been involved directly with the Black War. Her death closed an important chapter for white Tasmanians.

This was especially true for those living in or near Hobart. Reynolds' own childhood memories include his grandmother telling him how she had often seen 'Queen Trukanini' around the town. Outliving her compatriots by several years, she became a well-known, lonely and wretched figure. 'Her death', reflects Andrys Onsman, 'began long before her final breath.'<sup>13</sup> It continued long after. By 1904 her skeleton, disinterred from her grave in 1878, could be viewed on display in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart. As it was removed only in 1947, former curator David Hansen deduces that many 'born and bred' Tasmanians would have seen Trukanini, 'would have had the myth of the "The Last ..." reinforced'. 'One of the most persistent memories of my Tasmanian childhood', writes Cassandra Pybus, 'was Trukanini's skeleton on display in the Hobart museum. Of course I could not have seen it, because it was taken away the year I was born.'<sup>14</sup>

Pybus had a friend who 'confused' Trukanini's skeleton with an Egyptian mummy displayed in the museum 'under the stairs'.<sup>15</sup> Considering how many times the story was recycled in newspapers and histories, it was no doubt well known by many Tasmanians that Trukanini had requested to be buried 'behind the mountains' or, more often, in the 'deepest part' of D'Entrecasteaux Channel.<sup>16</sup>



<sup>15</sup> Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, pp. 176–9; and Perera, 'Claiming Truganini', p. 408.

<sup>16</sup> Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996 [1981], p. 218; Pybus, *Community of Thieves*, p. 172; Martin Flanagan, *In Sunshine or in Shadow*, Picador, Sydney, 2002, pp. 173, 175; John McLean, *Bruny Island and Adventure Bay*, Telegraph Printery, nd, p. 65; Rae-Ellis explains that the Reverend Atkinson's son told the *Hobart Mercury* in 1947 that Truganini had asked his father to put her body in a bag with a 'stone inside' and throw her into the D'Entrecasteaux

The sadness of her unheeded request may have echoed in their minds as they looked at, or remembered, her small skeleton. If Truganini was their 'colonial symbol', it was a contained, local understanding of colonialism: they were the inheritors of the land where the shot Aborigines and speared shepherds were buried, where they could still hear the crying in the wind.

This collective memory was overlaid with what Reynolds reflects was 'a long tradition of writing about the ... the Aborigines' tragic fate'. Nineteenth-century historians, including J.E. Calder and James Bonwick, wrote about the Tasmanian Aborigines 'with real distinction'. Even when Australian historians disregarded Aboriginal history in the first half of the twentieth century, 'the Tasmanian story continued to attract the attention of scholars', including Clive Turnbull and Michael Levy.<sup>17</sup>

Again, it was extinction that motivated these writers. Ann Curthoys explains that Bonwick, and later Turnbull, sought to understand not merely how, but why the Tasmanian race disappeared. For Bonwick it was not a racial weakness, but (as Curthoys puts it) 'the British'. Turnbull's conclusion was similar—it was a 'ruthless policy' employed by his own countrymen. Turnbull was deeply influenced by the Holocaust. While Turnbull did not use the word 'genocide', Curthoys thinks that had he read Raphael Lemkin's work in which the term was coined in 1944 (*Black War* was written some years before it was published in 1948), he may well have found the term appropriate.<sup>18</sup> (It had also been a postwar decision to take Truganini's skeleton off display in the Hobart museum.)

Turnbull's *Black War* inspired David Boyd's seventeen portraits of Truganini, shown in the 1959 Antipodeans Exhibition in Melbourne. Boyd thought Truganini offered an 'Australian theme' when Australian art needed to look to its own history ('a story in which we are all involved') in order to 'make its own way'. It was an early signal of Truganini's later national significance. Others, such as playwright Bill Reed, followed more than a decade later.<sup>19</sup> As Australian intellectuals made their first attempts to break the 'great ... silence', they turned to the colonial story that had never been silenced. It was in direct response to W.E.H. Stanner's call that Bernard Smith opened the first of his Boyer Lectures in 1980: 'A spectre has haunted Australian culture, the spectre of Truganini ... since 1788 Aborigines have been treated in their own country as if they were sub-human ... Truganini's story must stand, in these talks, for all those that will never be written.'<sup>20</sup>

What 'a sad indictment', reflects Onsman, that the Tasmanian Aborigines' extinction could be reasserted as late as 1980.<sup>21</sup> Looking back to Turnbull in the 1940s and Boyd in the 1950s, Smith's does not seem an innovative plea. And

Channel because, in her words, 'I know that when I die the Tasmanian Museum wants my body': Rae-Ellis, *Truganini*, p. 123. The Rev. Akinson gave a similar account when interviewed by Ernest Westlake in 1908: Westlake, *Notebook* 2, pp. 1, 3.

17 Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, p. 3.

18 Ann Curthoys, 'Genocide in Tasmania, the History of an Idea', in Dirk A. Moses (ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2009, p. 239.

19 Ryan, 'Struggle for Trukanini', pp. 161–5.

20 Bernard Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, 1980 Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1980, p. 10.

21 Onsman, 'Truganini's Funeral', p. 45.

22 Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p. 257.

23 Curthoys, 'Genocide in Tasmania', p. 241; Tom Haydon (dir.), *The Last Tasmanian: A Story of Genocide*, Artis Film Productions, Sydney, 1978.

24 'Genocide: How capitalism

annihilated the entire race of the Tasmanian Aborigines', announced the *Workers News*, 6 July 1978; 'The last Tasmanian', *Sun*, 4 November 1978; 'Sheer bloody murder!', *TV Times*, 30 September 1978, pp. 30–1; Don Groves, '\$50,000 gamble on genocide', *Herald-Sun*, 29 October 1978.

25 Ryan, 'Struggle for Trukanini', p. 153.

yes, Smith should have had his ear closer to the ground and known that a very strident, self-determinist Aboriginal community had emerged in Tasmania. But it was another year before Lyndall Ryan published *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, the first history to conclude 'the Tasmanian Aborigines have survived'.<sup>22</sup> And nearly another decade before the idea was accepted widely within the academy. This was still the nascent phase of Australia's historical revisionism. Smith's declaration was then poetic and novel.

Moreover, two years earlier, in 1978, Tom Haydon's successful film *The Last Tasmanian* had revitalised the idea of extinction, giving it confident validity. The film's subtitle, 'A Story of Genocide', helped to make the idea of genocide synonymous and interchangeable with that of extinction in the Tasmanian context.<sup>23</sup> The film recast a well-rehearsed history and local sense of shame in an international language of radical anti-colonial politics. While Turnbull (and Bonwick before him) may have provided the moral and historical groundwork, it was Haydon's film that reached into the broader populace and made Tasmania become, for many, the Holocaust of the British Empire. This is how many mainland Australians, and people all over the world, learned of Tasmania's now-famous violent frontier history.

An airborne camera sweeps viewers over a stunning Tasmanian wilderness, as actor Leo McKern's commanding voice proclaims it a land bereft of Aboriginal people. A passionate Rhys Jones tells them why, recounting, in location, bloody battles fought in deep valleys, fatal incarceration on distant islands, and skulls collected and sent to museums the world over. Audiences were shocked, as left-wing Haydon and Jones had intended they should be. 'Genocide: How capitalism annihilated the entire race of the Tasmanian Aborigines', announced the *Workers News*. 'Our own awful holocaust', declared the *Sun*. 'Sheer bloody murder!' exclaimed the *TV Times*. The film was released in cinemas across Australia and Europe, and Australian television's Channel 10 paid \$50,000 for the rights to show it. Genocide entered Australia's lounge rooms.<sup>24</sup> *The Last Tasmanian* became integral to changing the popular perception of Australia's colonial history in the late 1970s from ignorant silence to that of disgrace.

Tasmania became the national confessional. Truganini was reified, elevated from local legend to become, as Onsman puts it, an 'icon of new consciousness'. Ryan summarises: 'Trukanini has been the subject of more than fifty poems, a number of novels and plays, several histories and biographies, at least fifty paintings and photographs and nearly fifty scientific articles.'<sup>25</sup>

She has appeared on a postage stamp and countless posters. She has several places named after her, including a Melbourne suburb. Midnight Oil's 1993

26 Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, pp. 203–4.

27 Perera, 'Claiming Truganini', p. 407.

28 J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, Vintage, Sydney, 2004, pp. 202–3.

29 Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines, A History since 1803*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2012, pp. 144–145.

30 Curthoys, 'Genocide in Tasmania', pp. 242–7; Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*, Viking, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 49–85; James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, Black Inc., Melbourne, pp. 295–296; Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines*, p. 215.

hit song 'Truganini' questioned the very point of Australia's colonisation. She became, as Bernard Smith first suggested she should, the nation's 'tragic muse'. She is the poster girl of our national story of indigenous dispossession. The woman whose story we recount, 'for what it tells us about European ideology and actions', Reynolds explains, 'rather than for what she believed in and for what she did in life'.<sup>26</sup> As Suvendrini Perera puts it, Truganini has a disturbingly powerful 'foundational authority' in the 'discourses of [Australian] national identity'.<sup>27</sup> Despite these words of admonition, still we turn to Tasmania to summarise our guilt. As J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello struggles before a panel of judges to make the statement of belief that will release her from purgatory, she is asked:

*'What of the Tasmanians?'*

*'I have always found them decent people ...'*

*He waves impatiently. 'I mean the old Tasmanians, the ones who were exterminated?'*

*...*

*The extermination of a whole people ... of the old Tasmanians by her countrymen, her ancestors. Is this, finally, what lies behind this hearing, this trial, the question of historical guilt?*<sup>28</sup>

Tasmania's frontier was arguably no more violent, nor disastrous, for Aboriginal people than the other Australian frontiers (indeed Ryan demonstrates there were 'much lower' rates of deaths of Aboriginal people in Tasmania compared to colonial Victoria and Queensland).<sup>29</sup> But the idea of extinction has made it seem so, made it seem a clear a case genocide. While the terms were often used interchangeably from the 1970s, they are distinct: Ann Curthoys argues that the Tasmanian Aborigines did not become extinct, but they did suffer genocide. She is joined by James Boyce, and, even more recently by Lyndall Ryan, but this is a marked shift; Ryan did not draw this conclusion in the first two editions of her book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, while Henry Reynolds has carefully questioned the broad assumption that genocide occurred in Tasmania.<sup>30</sup> Still Ryan and Reynolds were targets in the first shots in the History Wars. It was arguably the popular presentations of Tasmania's past that were Keith Windschuttle's true targets; what inspires shame tempts controversy.<sup>31</sup> While the conservative voices have found traction, and white Australia has shown impatience with black-arm-band guilt, Tasmania remains the bloodiest chapter in our history.

## Essay

**31** Keith Windschuttle, 'The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History', *Quadrant* (in three parts): October 2000, pp. 8–21; November 2000, pp. 17–25; and December 2000, pp. 6–20; Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.  
**32** Jim Davidson, 'Tasmanian Gothic', *Meanjin*, no. 2, 1989, pp. 307–24.

**33** Onsmann, 'Truganini's Funeral', p. 40 (paraphrasing Martin Flanagan, *In Sunshine or in Shadow*, Picador, Sydney, 2002).  
**34** Tom Haydon, 'A Witness to History', *Film News*, April 1979, p. 12.  
**35** Perera, 'Claiming Truganini', pp. 397–8.  
**36** Michael Mansell, 'The Last Tasmanian', *Racism in Tasmania*, pamphlet, National Union of Students, Glebe, NSW, 1978, p. 2 (also published as Michael Mansell, 'Black Tasmanians Now', *Arena* 51 (1978), pp. 5–8).

But is it 'our' history, or is it 'their' history: part of what has made Tasmania, in Jim Davidson's words, "always seem ... 'different'"? Both. As it seems cut off and distant, mainlanders have long imposed their own myths and converse realities upon their island state. It is not part of the 'sunburnt country'; it is the politicised and historicised Wilderness of mountains and mists; a place haunted by a maudlin past of brutalised convicts and eradicated Aborigines. A story of extinction allows white Australians to share the old Tasmanians' shame with the added convenience of living somewhere else. Truganini can still symbolise the guilt of a nation, but she also belongs to another island, a place so unlike ours it is not really part of us at all. 'Our own little Gothic repository', as Davidson puts it.<sup>32</sup> An off-shore historical dumping ground. Or in the words of Onsmann (paraphrasing Martin Flanagan): 'By accepting that the Tasmanians exterminated "their" Aborigines, the rest of Australia can heap its collective guilt upon the island state, secure in the knowledge that they, at least, weren't as bad as that.'<sup>33</sup>

Confession makes us clean. Tasmania has been useful in shaping a fresher, whiter, Australia. But who has borne the cost of such cleansing? If *The Last Tasmanian* was a turning point for the construction of a new national identity, what did it mean to those who it claimed were no longer there?

'RACIST! This film denies Tasmanian Aborigines their LAND RIGHTS', proclaimed banners pasted over posters of *The Last Tasmanian*. Protests were staged at cinemas in Hobart, Melbourne and Sydney. 'How can a film be damned as "racist" when its main burden is an indictment of the whites of what they did to the blacks?' asked Tom Haydon.<sup>34</sup> (Midnight Oil songwriters asked a similar question when Tasmanian Aborigines objected to the description of Truganini as 'the last Tasmanian' in their *Earth and Sun and Moon* album sleeve notes).<sup>35</sup> Tasmanian Aboriginal leader Michael Mansell explained: 'Whites today must be shown the irreparable damage that their ancestors did to our heritage.' But *The Last Tasmanian* 'perpetuates past myths ... undermines the current struggle of Aboriginal people for recognition of our rights and identity'.<sup>36</sup>

The film did not exclude contemporary Aborigines; it misrepresented them. They are filmed scattering Truganini's ashes in 1976 (her pleas were never forgotten), but their strident voices are edited out. When they speak it is to deny their Aboriginal identity. A Cape Barren Island woman tells the camera while (ironically) plucking a mutton bird: 'I'm a descendant. I'm not an Aboriginal. I'm only a descendant of one. Just compare the Aborigines that were here with the descendants living today—there's a hell of a difference.'

Since 1973 the Commonwealth Government had funded an Aboriginal legal service as part of the Tasmanian Information Centre, which by 1977 was called



- 37 Haydon, 'A Witness to History', p. 14.  
38 Greg Lehman, 'Being Black', in G. Burenhult (ed.), *Traditional Peoples Today*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1994, p. 89. See also Jim Everett, 'Aboriginality in Tasmania', *Siglo 12* (2000), pp. 2–6.  
39 Anderson, 'Re-claiming TRU-GER-NAN-NER', pp. 33, 38–9.  
40 Richard Flanagan, 'The lost tribes', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 2002.  
41 Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines*, pp. 340–343.

the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC). To accept Commonwealth funding was to accept the title 'Aboriginal'. But for many people, who had grown up with other names for themselves, such as 'half-castes' or 'Islanders', this change in nomenclature was difficult, even disrespectful, to the 'old people'. It is a dispute that has largely passed (the Cape Barren Islander regretted her comments). *The Last Tasmanian* could have documented this dispute, indeed Rhys Jones said to me that the film's title should have had a question mark, but it never raised the idea of survival. It was, in Haydon's words, 'essentially the story of the full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines, and how they were wiped out'.<sup>37</sup>

Lyndall Ryan was researching her PhD when the furore over the film broke out. It was in response not only to the increasingly strident self-determinism of Tasmanian Aborigines, but also to the equally strident reassertion of their extinction by Haydon, that she affirmed that Tasmanian Aborigines had 'survived'. While the idea of their survival has yet to filter much beyond the academic and intellectual circles of contemporary white Australia, elder Jim Everett explained to me that in his community survival 'is no longer a useful word'. During the first wave of radical self-determinism it had meaning; now it suggests a kind of coping, a culture defined by struggle, when in reality it is so much richer. 'The politics of survival are not our culture,' explains Greg Lehman, 'they are a measure of the days we live in. Our true culture is where we stand—on our land'.<sup>38</sup>

Anderson writes that while his people have suffered a 'regime' that aimed to "fuck 'em white" and/or "train 'em right" ' (one that aimed to produce 'hybrids' who 'have no history'), 'to resist' is to 'make whole'. It is by accepting the impact of changes wrought by colonisation that (paradoxically) a coherent Aboriginal identity emerges. Then the 'symbol' of Truganini is subverted. 'No longer are we hybrid children of the dead race ... we are ... the mutton bird mob'.<sup>39</sup>

These sophisticated and positive interpretations of identity were published in the mid 1990s when the question of who was Aboriginal had in fact become highly controversial in Tasmania. The numbers of Tasmanian Aboriginal people counted in the national census had grown rapidly: less than 700 in 1971, almost 9,000 by 1991, and close to 16,000 by 2001. Following the 1996 ATSIC elections, members of the TAC petitioned the Federal Court with the claim that eleven of the Tasmanian candidates (four of whom had been successful) were not Aboriginal.<sup>40</sup> Justice Merkel agreed with the TAC that two of the ATSIC candidates were not Aboriginal, but found it could not be proven the remaining nine did not have 'some' Aboriginal descent. '[I]n truth', Merkel admitted, 'the notion of 'some' descent is a technical rather than a real criterion for identity,

42 Heather McRae, 'The Criminal Justice System and the Construction of Aboriginality', in Andrew Goldsmith and Mark Israel (eds.), *Criminal Justice in Diverse Communities*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2000, pp. 148-166, pp. 157-158.

43 Will Sanders, 'The Tasmanian Electoral Roll Trial in the 2002 ATSIC Elections', Discussion Paper No. 245, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Australian National University, Canberra, 2003, <caep.ranu.edu.au/Publications/DP/2003DP245.php>, accessed 8 August 2012.

44 'Tasmanian DNA tests halted', transcript of *The World Today*, ABC Radio National, 3 September 2002, <www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s666117.htm>, accessed 8 August 2012; John Gardiner-Garden, 'Defining Aboriginality in Australia', Current Issues Brief no. 10, 2002-03, Australian Parliamentary Library, 3 February 2003, <www.aph.gov.au/About\_Parliament/Parliamentary\_Departments/Parliamentary\_Library/Publications\_Archive/CIB/cib0203/03Cib10#crisis>, accessed 8 August 2012.

45 'Blood lines called into question', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 August 2002.

46 Richard Flanagan, 'The lost tribes', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 2002.

47 'Lost Tribes of Israel: The Lemba, the Black Jews of Southern Africa', *Nova Online*, <www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/familylemba.html>, accessed 4 April 2012.

which after all... is a social, rather than a genetic, construct'.<sup>41</sup> In 2002 Tasmania became the first place to trial an ATSIC electoral roll. There were more than 1,200 applications to join the roll to which there were over 2,500 objections. Two of the nine-member Independent Indigenous Advisory Committee convened to adjudicate the process were themselves subject to objections (which were dismissed by the other seven members). The committee rejected nearly half of the 1,200 applicants.<sup>42</sup> They also suggested supplementing archival genealogical records with DNA tests to be carried out by the University of Arizona, a partner in the Human Genome Project. About thirty Tasmanians accepted offers from Arizona to have their DNA tested for free, but the project was halted with concerns it was insensitive and potentially unreliable.<sup>43</sup> Tasmanian ATSIC Commissioner Rodney Dillon, who had spent much of 2002 trying to repatriate colonial-era Tasmanian Aboriginal human remains from overseas museums, was outraged that Aboriginal people were gifting their DNA to another institution.<sup>44</sup> The comparison reveals an interesting inversion: colonial-era collectors sought to own a piece of a dying race; in 2002 biological samples were taken in an attempt prove who was a living Tasmanian Aborigine. 'Access to the public purse demands ... proof of blood,' asserted Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan.<sup>45</sup> It was blood that once denied Tasmanian Aborigines their existence; it is a controversial, and problematic notion to suggest blood alone could determine identity.

The attempt to use biological testing is not unique to Tasmania. It is used in the United States, Kimberly Tallbear explains, to 'measure who is truly Indian' and to 'justify cultural and political authority'.<sup>46</sup> Laboratories advertise the service. There are other interesting examples. Genetic studies of the Lemba of southern Africa suggest their claims to be Jewish may be accurate. Does this give them automatic right to Israeli citizenship and residency?<sup>47</sup> The Taino of Puerto Rico were widely assumed to be extinct from the early 1500s, but research 'shows that traces of Amerindian genomes are still present' among living Puerto Ricans. The Taino Genome Project report does not tell me if any Puerto Ricans now feel, or identify, as Taino.<sup>48</sup> Is it possible to identify with a lost gene? I look back to my people. Does my ancestry (Dutch, German, English, Irish) make me unique, or is it the opposite?

'If we go sufficiently far back, everyone's ancestors are shared,' writes Richard Dawkins. What is 'sufficiently'? The question is the point of his book *The Ancestor's Tale*, and (with Yan Wong) he models an answer with Tasmanian geography. When rising seas at the end of the Pleistocene isolated the Tasmanians they became, Dawkins posits, the first group of humans

**48** The Taino Genome Project, Laboratory of Genomic Diversity at University of Puerto Rico, <<https://sites.google.com/a/upr.edu/dna-lab/1000genomes/the-taino-genome-project>>, accessed 4 April 2012.

**49** Hansen, 'Seeing Truganini', pp. 48–53.

**50** Onsman, 'Truganini's Funeral', p. 50.

geographically removed from a previously shared global gene pool. The last Tasmanian generation, or, more symbolically, the last Tasmanian 'mother', to bridge the separated populations potentially encompassed the genes of all humanity. She is our 'Mitochondrial Eve'.<sup>49</sup> I wonder: does this make us all Tasmanian Aborigines? Or, by the same reasoning, does it make no-one a Tasmanian Aborigine? Or is the question ridiculous? There was no 'Tasmania' or 'Aborigine' at the end of the Pleistocene. But at what point in history does it become less problematic to map DNA to land and culture? Was Justice Merkel right: is identity social and not genetic?

The messy detritus of colonialism has linked legal definitions of Aboriginal identity inextricably to biology for reasons of politics and access to funding and resources. The loud, heart-thumping remorse of white Australia, regurgitating the myth of extinction, has not helped. Nor has reinventing the otherness and distance of Tasmania's geography and landscape to make it a convenient dumping ground for the worst of the nation's historical guilt. Even the most radical anti-colonial remorse was more concerned with reconstructing a white national identity than it was with the real problems of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

But have not 'we' (of the academy, the intelligentsia) since become more self-aware, more reflexive? In the mid 1990s a cluster of sophisticated, postcolonial-theory-inspired essays critiqued the historical representations of Truganini in particular: Anderson's 1995 essay 'Re-claiming TRU-GER-NAN-NER' (from which I have quoted) was followed by Perera's 1996 'Claiming Truganini' (which consciously joined Anderson in conversation). Ryan's 1997 'Struggle for Trukanini' offered what remains the most detailed historiography to date.

Yes, we have chastised our self-chastisement (that first naive blush of shame) and gone on to battle history wars. We have even become irritated with our political sensitivity. In his *ABR* essay 'Seeing Truganini', David Hansen describes the loud protest by Tasmanian Aborigines in 2009 to the attempted sale by Sotheby's (and any display) of the beautiful 1830s busts of Woureddy and Truganini. The response from his fellow art historians and curators, he wonders, whose very professions rely on access to such images? Silence. The debate was 'a cultural phenomenon to observe. A post-colonial conflict.' But this is 'cowardice and evasion' that Hansen deplors. His penance (he too once committed the sin of silence) is to return to the story and imagery of Truganini as an 'object lesson ... to the purveyors of postmodern platitudes'. Let us remember Truganini not as the 'grizzled, overweight old lady terrified of her posthumous mutilation' but as a young, vital woman who was, his research reveals, 'the very spirit of resistance'. We are asked, finally, to look at Truganini (presumably the lovely young woman





TRUGGERNANA:

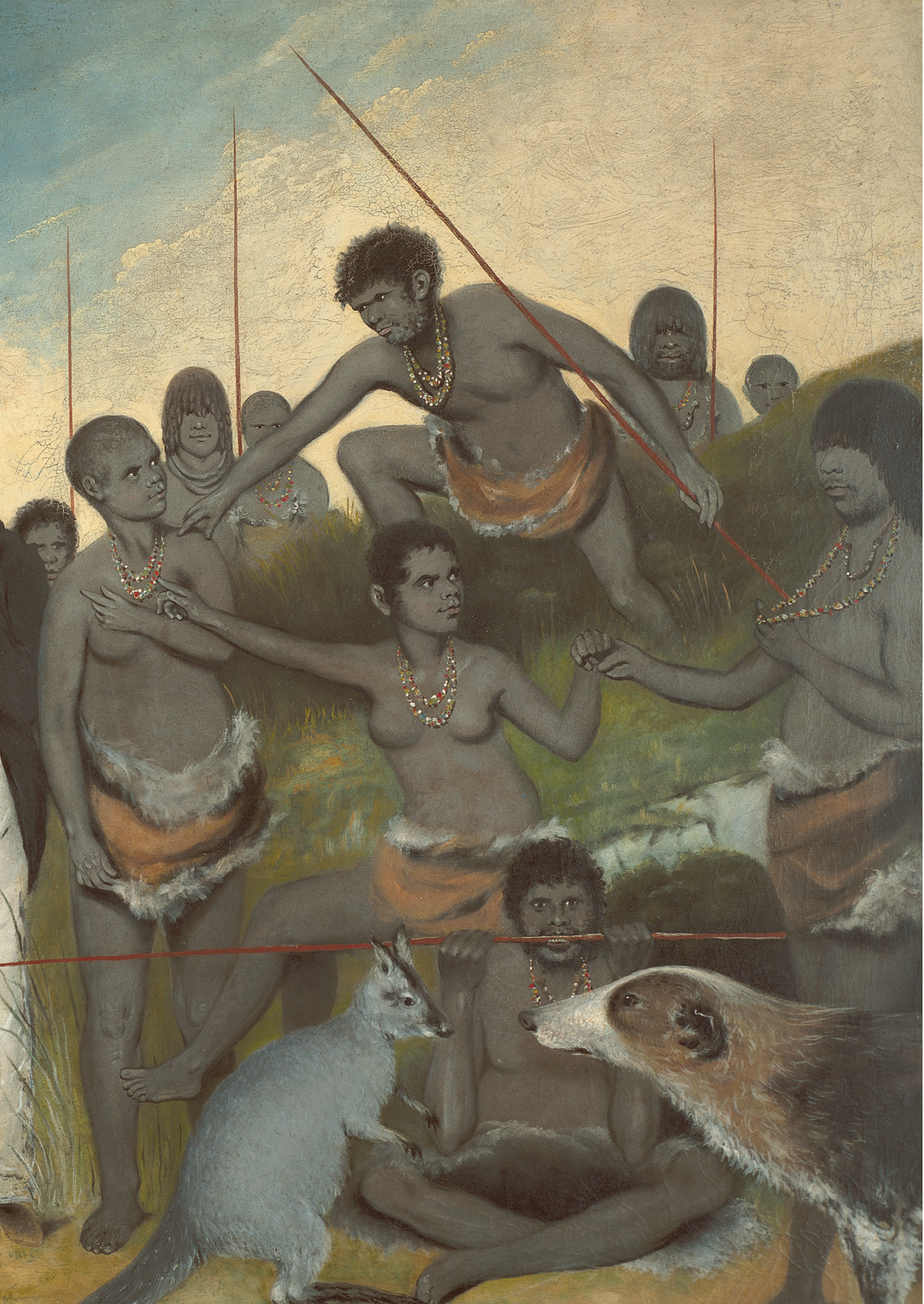
*Native of the southern part of*

VAN DIEMEN'S LAND.











Previous pages: *The Conciliation*, by Benjamin Duterreau, oil on canvas, 1840. Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Museum Fund and the Murray Fund, 1945. Reproduced by permission of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

51 Vivienne Rae-Ellis, 'The Representation of Trucanini', in Elizabeth Edwards (ed.), *Anthropology and Photography*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1992, p. 233.

in the 1837 Thomas Bock watercolour reproduced in his essay): 'Just look at those eyes. Truganini can take care of herself.'<sup>50</sup>

His words are perhaps an unwitting echo of Onsman's earlier essay in *Island*, which concludes with a similar request, this time to look at Truganini as she was captured by photographer Charles Woolley in 1866: 'Her piercing gaze challenges everyone who looks at the photo to understand that the men of science would have to cut out her eyes before they could get to her bones.'<sup>49</sup> Onsman's words make yet another echo: of a piece by Rae-Ellis written in 1992 in which she too asks readers to look at Woolley's photograph, and to look into Truganini's 'expressive and much-admired eyes' to see her 'tragic appeal'; to realise this is 'a portrait of an elderly woman in despair'.<sup>51</sup>

I am not sure why these requests to look into Truganini's eyes make me uncomfortable. Certainly her eyes are penetrating. Is it that these requests seem a little sentimental? Or is it that I do not share these writers' confidence?

We have travelled a long way in the ways we see, and portray, Truganini (from Boyd's tragic muse to Gordon Bennett's postcolonial *Triptych*; we finally found her in *The Conciliation*), but when we are asked to look at her, is it really to see her? Or is it to look, once again, at ourselves? To look not only at our historical crimes, but to face our guilt that she was once (is still?) our confessional? Can we ever get past our own self-reflection? This is what Hansen has urged us to do, but can we rely upon Bock's paintbrush to capture the 'real' Truganini, contained and self-reliant? Or upon Woolley's camera to capture her determination? To do so is not merely hopeful, it is to grant ourselves absolution. It is still all about us.

I turn again and look at Truganini looking into Woolley's camera. She is old. Why do both Hansen and Onsman need to make Truganini young in order to make her real? (Onsman spends some pages quoting men who found her attractive.) Why can't an old, grizzled, overweight woman be real? This is the iconic muse of a nation's guilt, but it is also Truganini. When I look at her eyes I want to see her eyes. If they appear to stare is it to keep still for the camera's slow exposure? This I will consider. But I don't want to be told she is challenging 'everyone', or me. I don't want to presume I am an important part of her story, nor presume to know her mind. To do that is to try to own her once again. **M**

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