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# Return to Eden: Van Diemen's Land and the Early British Settlement of Australia

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## ABSTRACT

Tasmania (formerly known as Van Diemen's Land) received approximately 72,000 convicts, mainly from the British Isles and Ireland, between 1803 and 1853, and convicts and their descendants formed the large majority of the population of the island colony throughout this time. This article focuses on the environmental experience of this unusual settler population especially in the first decades of settlement. It argues that, contrary to the dominant paradigm of Australian history, the new land was not experienced as a hostile or forbidding place, but a comparatively benign refuge from the brutality of servitude.

The argument is put that Australian environmental history has been distorted by a failure to recognise that the rigorous attempts to reproduce English society – social and environmental – were largely undertaken by a relatively small group of free settlers. The dramatically different experience of convict settlers demonstrates the importance of considering the extent to which socio-economic background shaped the environmental encounter.

## KEYWORDS

Tasmania, Van Diemen's Land, convict settlement, hunting, historiography

## PROLOGUE

Stored in the vaults of the Bird Collection of the British Natural History Museum since 1838 have been the skins of two Tasmanian emu, the only remaining specimens of what was Van Diemen's Land's largest land animal.<sup>1</sup> Like the distinct King Island and Kangaroo Island sub-species, the Tasmanian emu fell victim to a predator unknown before British settlement – the dog. The eggs, chicks, and – usually after a ferocious fight – adult birds too, provided food for the human invaders and their canine companions who settled Van Diemen's Land from 1803.

Given its importance, and the prominence that might be expected from the tragedy of extinction, the fact that few Tasmanians now know that there ever was a Tasmanian emu is illuminating. The emu and forester kangaroo (which also narrowly escaped extinction on the island and is now confined to regions far from the capital) that remain on Hobart's coat of arms are seen as quaint decoration, not a picture of the city's birth. The city motto that underlines the posing animals, *Sic Fortis Hobartia Crevit* ('Thus by Industry Hobart Town Increased') – first used by Robert Knopwood in his diary on the last day of 1804 when the chaplain, with evident gratitude, tallied the numbers of kangaroo his convict gamekeepers and hunting dogs had killed – has been reduced to an obscure piece of Latin unrelated to the bounty framing it.<sup>2</sup> Cultural memory has been so distorted by the mythology that Tasmania was an Antipodean England, that the fact that the emu and the forester kangaroo were important food sources for the first British settlers is virtually unknown. There is no feast of Thanksgiving to remember the fruitfulness of the earth that sustained our founding fathers and mothers, and it is hoped that few would want to celebrate a bounty so associated with such human and environmental tragedy. Nevertheless, the failure to tell the story of how the convict and the poor settler experienced their land of exile has influenced our understanding of what it means to be Tasmanian (and indeed Australian), and diminished the imagination needed for making a just and sustainable home upon this conquered earth.

The Tasmanian emu, it is true, was not so different from its mainland cousins, but 12,000 years of isolation and different environmental conditions made for some variations – most noticeably its smaller size – a distinctive feature highlighted in the coat of arms. While similarities with the emu's mainland cousins are obvious enough, it is surely the differences that define it. The same is true of Van Diemonian Britons, self-evidently related closely to British peoples everywhere, not least in New South Wales; but isolation and environment nevertheless produced some novel adaptations.

The starting point for the change that occurred was the convict experience. The vast majority of Britons who came to Van Diemen's Land had socio-economic and cultural backgrounds radically different from the elite free settlers, and this shaped their goals and values, and their experiences of the new environ-

ment. While there is no longer silence about Tasmania's convict past (indeed, the packaging of this 'cultural heritage' is an integral part of the burgeoning tourist industry), elements of the old public amnesia remain in the reluctance to claim the convicts as the true founders of Tasmania (and indeed Australia). Just as the Aborigines were for so long, the convicts are largely remembered as victims; passive prisoners in a world created by their masters. They are seen to be without 'culture' – that was something made, as Alan Shaw has claimed, only by the 'Colonial Office' and 'sometimes private sources – the gentry or the so called bourgeoisie'. Such an interpretation leaves no space for environmentally-induced cultural change, as free settlers and government officials were too buttressed from the new land by capital and privilege to be much changed by it, no matter how much many of them appreciated its beauty and novelty. Given this class bias, Shaw's conclusion is inevitable: 'it was primarily because of the British connection that in 1855 colonial society had attained the shape and stature that it had'.<sup>3</sup> This is a widely shared assumption and it has deeply affected Tasmanian and national identity.

#### HOSTILE GEOGRAPHY OR RETURN TO EDEN?

The great Australian historian, Manning Clark, believed that the 'subject on which every historian of this country should have something to say', was 'the influence of the spirit of place in the fashioning of Australians'. Clark argued that a hostile geography was central to the spiritual darkness at the heart of Australian life, suggesting that from: 'that first cry of horror and disappointment of the Dutch seamen ... Here, indeed, was a country where the Creator had not finished his work. Here nature was so hostile, so brutish that men in time believed God had cursed both man and the country itself, and hence its barrenness, its sterility, its unsuitability for the arts of civilized human beings ...'.<sup>4</sup>

Clark is not alone in his synopsis of the cultural impact of Australian geography. Tim Flannery argues that 'many of the great differences between American and Australian cultures' can be sourced to the fact that 'the Australians found themselves facing adversity almost from the moment they entered the continent'.<sup>5</sup> And William Lines believes that, unlike North America: 'no antipodean invader ever entertained a sentimental vision of Australia as nature's garden, a prelapsarian Eden – quite the opposite. To the British, Australia stood in need of redemption.'<sup>6</sup>

Karl Jacoby has recently argued that North American environmental history has failed to acknowledge the extent to which socio-economic background shaped environmental experience. He suggests that 'we need a social history that is attuned to rural life and the ecological relationships that shape and sustain it. And we need an environmental history that takes into account social differences and the distribution of power within human society'.<sup>7</sup> The need for this

historical perspective is even more urgent in Australia, where environmental history is only beginning to move beyond narratives of conquest in which the invaders are assumed to be both omnipotent and immutable.

The British conquest of Van Diemen's Land, as Tasmania was known until 1856, challenges us to hear an alternative settler experience of Australia. At least as far as the land was concerned (perceptions of the transplanted society were another matter), there were no cries of 'horror' or 'disappointment' from new arrivals. The island was not experienced as 'harsh' or 'barbaric' – indeed its beauty and benevolence was frequently contrasted with the degraded humanity of the 'great civilisation' transported to it. For the majority of the population the land was not a cursed place of darkness but a refuge from the horror imposed by 'civilised human beings'. For convicts and their families the land became their hope, a place of redemption from the servitude and subservience that characterised a penal colony. Moreover, no where else in the New World, including North America, did Britons adapt so quickly or so comprehensively to the demands of a new environment. The story of the convict settlers of Van Diemen's Land is, then, dramatically different from that which still defines our history books and debates about national identity. And it not just a story from the fringe.

#### A BOUNTIFUL ISLAND

It is too easily forgotten in Australian history, as in national politics and culture, that Australia is made up of two principal land masses – separated as recently as 12,000 years ago. In the nineteenth century, as Alan Atkinson has recently pointed out, 'the usage of "Tasmania" and "Australia" to refer to two mutually exclusive places was common ... Tasmania was not part of Australia... there were two types of soil and two types of landscape, both of them sea-girt.'<sup>8</sup> But in the twentieth century, Tasmania – now with a small and ever-declining proportion of national population – was increasingly absorbed into the post-federation national narrative. So marginal did Tasmanian history become as a result of this homogenising process that the obvious contradictions that resulted have never been recognised. For example, Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* has generated an enormous body of historical research and debate since its publication nearly fifty years ago. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Ward argued that the essentials of the Australian character 'were already fixed before 1851', had emerged primarily from nomadic convicts and pastoral workers, and that 'among the influences which shaped the life of the outback community the brute facts of Australian geography were probably most important' (particularly 'scanty rainfall and great distances'), the obvious difficulties for his thesis of the very different environmental conditions experienced by some 42 per cent of all the convicts to come to Australia have never been discussed.<sup>9</sup> Of course many, probably most, Van Diemen's Land convicts eventually left the island

for the mainland – particularly Port Phillip – but surely this makes the different environmental experience of Van Diemonian convict colonisers more relevant to the national narrative, not less.

Nor, it needs to be remembered, is Tasmania ‘small’. While it only represents about one per cent of the nation’s total area, at 67,800 square kilometres Tasmania is a large island from a global perspective – about the same size as Ireland or Sri Lanka, and nearly twice as big as Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> Certainly from the perspective of nineteenth century Britons, Van Diemen’s Land was, as the first immigrant guidebook put it in 1820, ‘an island of considerable extent’.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless it was not its size, but its environment that ensured Van Diemen’s Land importance before the gold rushes transformed Australia in the 1850s. The contrasts with New South Wales remain obvious enough now, but in the early nineteenth century they were life-changing.

#### VAN DIEMEN’S LAND AND NEW SOUTH WALES

Until the crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813, the British in New South Wales were confined to poor coastal country, where both introduced and indigenous foods were hard to access, and pastoral pursuits were limited. For a people adapted to fertile open grasslands, as the British had long been, Port Jackson was a difficult place to settle.

The British struggle to survive in early New South Wales is well documented. Surgeon White famously summarised the colonists’ predicament in April 1790, writing that: ‘much cannot now be done, limited in food and reduced as the people are, who have not had one ounce of fresh animal food since first in the country; a country and place so forbidding and so hateful as only to merit execration and curses ...’.<sup>12</sup> David Collins, the Judge Advocate and second in command at Port Jackson until 1796, gave, in his *Account of the Colony of New South Wales*, a vivid description of the ‘great despair’ in Sydney during the 1790s that resulted from the increasingly desperate food shortages. In July 1790 there were 488 on the sick list and 143 deaths. In 1791 another 163 died and, as even the nutritionally inadequate imported supplies of salted provisions ran out, by 1792 the death toll had passed 450 people and a partial evacuation to Norfolk Island occurred.<sup>13</sup> Nor was the problem quickly solved. As late as 1795 Collins could report that ‘the quantity of fish taken ... was not often much more than equal to supplying the people employed in the boats with one pound of fish per man ... Neither was much advantage gained employing people to shoot for the settlement’, and by 1 July there was no salt or fresh meat in the ration at all.<sup>14</sup>

Although farming was difficult, the more immediate cause of the failure to procure fresh food was the lack of success with hunting and fishing. Eric Rolls has argued that the reason relatively few kangaroos were killed was because the animal was relatively uncommon at the time of European settlement.<sup>15</sup> The

other likely explanation for the British failure to kill much fresh meat was that the main British hunting technology, the gun, had a very limited application. Gun inaccuracy was such that up to the mid nineteenth century, 'firing at ranges much over 100 yards was usually a waste of shot and powder. Even at this range the musket was unreliable: its only effective use was to pour volleys into massed troops at very short range.'<sup>16</sup> Given the inaccuracy of the firearms, it was extremely difficult for Britons to get sufficiently close to shoot kangaroo, wallaby or emu. David Burn reported of the kangaroo as late as 1840 that, 'so watchful is that gentle, inoffensive creature, that it is almost impossible to get within gun-shot of it'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, guns were heavy to transport in the bush by foot, and, as the Danish adventurer who took part in the first settlement of Van Diemen's Land (and who later returned as a convict), Jorgen Jorgenson, noted, 'muskets and powder very frequently get wet'.<sup>18</sup>

This inability to obtain food, as well as the lack of appropriate clothing and shelter, meant that moving beyond the immediate environs of the settlement was still a very difficult matter for the British in the early nineteenth century, with travel hampered by the need to carry everything needed to survive.

The general level of bush knowledge in Sydney on the eve of Van Diemonian settlement in 1803, is revealed in the record of the Barrallier expedition of November the previous year. Glen McLaren, in *Beyond Leichhardt: Bushcraft and the Exploration of Australia*, notes that this party travelled furthest and remained out the longest of any expedition conducted to that time. Some indigenous foods could now be obtained, and tents – hot, leaky and too heavy to carry without horses – had finally been abandoned. Barrallier still had to take Aborigines with him to build effective temporary shelters, but after several weeks' practice he could state that the Aborigines were not 'absolutely necessary to me in making the huts for myself, my people and the provisions at night'.<sup>19</sup> Despite such innovations, Barrallier's expedition was still a military style operation, involving frequent returns to supply depots. Under these circumstances travel in the bush remained a highly organised, clumsy and limited affair, with the environment seen as an obstacle to overcome, rather than a potential resource on which to depend. Although this was a time of rapid change, the New South Wales bush remained, in late 1802, an alien and dangerous place for Britons.

By contrast Van Diemen's Land, even by comparison with the home island, proved to be a veritable Eden. Here was the land where Clark's Creator seemed to have finally been able to rest, his work fulfilled by Indigenous people who had watched over a land of over-flowing plenty for at least 30,000 years and created through sophisticated fire management some of the richest pasture-lands on earth. The abundance of fresh water, temperate climate, reliable rainfall, density of game and hospitable, largely uninhabited, offshore islands were obvious contrasts with the harsh environment around Sydney. But none of these factors was as significant as the proximity of open grasslands to the ports and estuaries of first settlement. It was the native pastures, especially those known today as

grassy woodlands – which were adjacent to both Hobart Town and Launceston, and present in much of the land between – that were most central to the British experience of the southern island.<sup>20</sup>

Of equal importance, at least before 1830, were the implications of the previous absence of the dingo from the island. Van Diemen's Land was one of the very few places of human habitation on earth in 1803 where the dog was unknown. The implications of this were twofold. First, native herbivores were present in larger numbers than on the mainland, and, second, the kangaroo and wallaby were not adapted to the new predator that was much faster than the thylacine in open country. Such was the impact of the powerful 'kangaroo dogs' (usually a cross between the traditional British hunting dog, the wolf hound, and the faster greyhound), that from the commencement of the invasion in September 1803, the British had fresh meat in abundance, and within two years of settlement, convict hunters, who largely fed the colony during the long French wars when supply ships were few and far between, were living year round in the bush.<sup>21</sup>

The convict hunters of the Van Diemen's Land frontier, who lived right through the 200 kilometre long midlands region stretching between the northern and southern settlements by about 1808 (five years before the Blue Mountains were finally crossed), also became Australia's first pastoralists. These men were of a very different class from the elite landowners and squatters synonymous with pastoral expansion in the mother colony, but it is these somewhat disreputable Van Diemonians who more legitimately deserve the honour of being remembered as the pioneers of the Australian pastoral industry. Sheep and cattle multiplied so rapidly on the well watered grassland plains in the absence of native predators (the thylacine seems to have retreated in the face of the threat posed by the dog to less open country) that from 1812, mutton and beef replaced kangaroo in the government ration and meat was regularly exported (there was as yet very little demand for wool). The Bengal-cross cattle and tough traditional sheep meat breeds were let loose to wander largely where they willed, and for the stock-keepers and shepherds who loosely watched over them, pastoralism did not replace hunting but supplemented it. So successful was this early farming that by 1819 Van Diemen's Land had over twice the number of sheep and cattle as New South Wales – about 172,000 compared to 80,000. As late as 1822 what the *Sydney Gazette* described in 1822 as 'our sister island'<sup>22</sup> was home to twice the number of sheep as New South Wales, and by the end of that decade boasted an economy that was almost two-thirds the size of the mother colony.<sup>23</sup>

The land and resource claims of the semi-nomadic hunter-pastoralists of Van Diemen's Land were not exclusive and, combined with comparative military weakness (formal British control did not extend far beyond the main settlements until well into the 1820s), fostered shared land use with the Aborigines. For most of the relatively powerless residents of the frontier before 1820, both self-interest and self-preservation favoured negotiation rather than confrontation with the indigenous owners, and flour, sugar, tea and, above all, dogs (which



Tasmanian Aborigines adopted with extraordinary speed) were regularly handed over. While intermittent violence was always present, the fierce fighting of the infamous 'Black War' only broke out after 1824, and was contemporaneous with the Government handing exclusive ownership of the grassy woodlands to a new breed of British resident, the free settler land grantees.

The arrival of a small number of wealthy free settlers in the years after the ending of the French Wars in 1815, which accelerated with the adoption of the recommendation of an 1820 Commission of Inquiry chaired by Thomas Bigge to give these immigrants land grants in proportion to their starting capital, had a dramatic impact on both the white and black residents of the grassy woodlands. Though not in great numbers relative to the convicts, free-settler claims over land and labour were absolute and war with the Aborigines was but one, though the most momentous, consequence. The midlands and east coast became an arena of contest – in which the colonial gentry, and their vision of reproducing eighteenth-century rural England's economic and social order, eventually emerged triumphant. By the early 1830s the penal system had been refined, the best hunting grounds converted to 'gentlemen's estates', and itinerant stock thieves locked up in the many gaols that were built across the island, eventually underpinned by the fortress of Port Arthur. Aborigines were captured or killed, and the survivors forced into exile on islands in Bass Strait.

On the other hand, what remained distinctive about the economic and social relations of the island is that its geographical realities continued to pose a challenge to hegemonic claims. Even when the open grasslands of the mainland were belatedly settled, Tasmanian topography, in which hills and dense scrub are never far from the comparatively flat plains, made for a different environmental experience. The adjacent hills and thick scrub not only ensured the much-contested pasturelands were initially more difficult to monopolise by the elite because they reduced the power of both the gun and the horse, but subsequently provided a refuge for the poor where a degree of independence and dignity could be maintained.

As the Land Commissioners noted in 1827: 'land, composed of no particles but miserable sand and gravel, unfit for any purpose, and covered with wood, which can never be of any value, is extremely difficult to put a price on' (and consequently privatise),<sup>24</sup> ensuring that the frontier existed as a perpetual patchwork, rather than a continuous line retreating to ever more remote and far-off places. In the disturbingly close mountains, thick scrub, threatening forests, windswept coasts and the multitude of offshore islands, the common always beckoned, posing a challenge to the pretensions of those who would prematurely celebrate the creation of an antipodean 'Little England'. In the 1840s, Louisa Meredith recorded that in the hills inland from the east coast 'many idle vagabonds' were 'in the constant habit of roaming about with packs of 20 or 30 dogs each'.<sup>25</sup> One of Meredith's neighbours, James Cotton, also complained

that 'the wild uninhabited land' behind his property was a threat to order and profit, affording 'great facilities for sheep stealers'.<sup>26</sup>

Similar patterns of land settlement and community formation were evident in tiers<sup>27</sup> adjacent to other 'Little England' strongholds. The 'large numbers of loose squatters ostensibly employed in wood cutting and collection on the flanks of the neighbouring ranges' recorded by Charles Latrobe in the Jordan Valley in 1846 lived alongside one of the oldest sheep districts of the colony just north of Hobart<sup>28</sup>, and Peter MacFie has documented how the Meehan Range framing the capital's eastern shore had a diverse society throughout the nineteenth century:

fringe-farmers were established on marginal land on the mud-stone slopes of the Meehan Range along small permanent creeks. Arable land on these holdings was often under five acres ... Archival records indicate that the majority of permanent residents at these fringe farms were the descendants of emancipists.

MacFie described how the traditional pre-industrial way of life associated with this form of land tenure was long sustained: 'their homes were built from local materials – split slab, and paling, wattle and daub with thatch or shingle roof' and extra cash income was obtained from hunting birds, black wattle tanning, and selling firewood and timber until well into the twentieth century. The unalienated crown lands, as the English commons had traditionally done, also provided a refuge for the landless: 'The two communities at Culcot and Malcolm Hut Road were also homes for itinerant workers and nomads ... The tracker-men and women – tramps – camped among the wattles near Billy Drew's water-hole at the Back Tea Tree Road junction.'<sup>29</sup>

Such country, and culture, reached almost into the capital itself, where even today bush is easily visible in most directions from the CBD. Mt Wellington may be, as Trollope put it later, 'just enough of a mountain to give excitement to ladies and gentlemen in middle life'<sup>30</sup>, but its very moderation, its near-perfect balance between accessibility and remoteness, made it invaluable to the poor. Like other mountain ranges, sheltered waterways, islands, and forests, it was, for a long period, too harsh and unprofitable an environment to be lived in or exploited by the rich, while being sufficiently accessible to provide free resources and sanctuary to ordinary folk. And, with its sister hills, the Eastern and Western Tiers that framed the midland plains, it ensured that human wildlife corridors penetrated across the gentry's main domains.

## VAN DIEMONIAN BRITONS

The cultural implications of the very different geography in the southern colony did not only reflect the sheer quantity of the island's bounty. It was the continu-

ing accessibility of Van Diemen's Land's resources to those without capital that had such life-changing consequences for the majority population.

The distinct society spawned by the ready accessibility of the island's natural resources to the poor has important implications for how we understand early Australian history. The confluence of convict settlers – some of the poorest and most reviled Britons anywhere in the empire – with a bountiful land produced a distinctive environmental experience that cannot be easily subsumed into the dominant national narrative. Van Diemen's Land did not prefigure 'the ruthless conquest of nature on the Australian mainland', but represents a challenge to the paradigm of development posited by environmental and progress historians alike.<sup>31</sup> Among ordinary folk at least, a distinctive culture arose in the back-blocks of Van Diemen's Land that directly reflected their experience of the new land, and where the technology of the industrial revolution and the rational values of the Enlightenment had little impact.

The first generation of Van Diemonians remained of course Britons, and it is not surprising that continuity with the home culture is as evident as environmentally induced change. British immigrants brought with them British technology and a British world view. But what did it mean to be British in the early nineteenth century?

It is not only misleading generalisations about environment that have distorted Australian history. The economic and cultural background of the immigrants themselves have also been far too neatly pigeon-holed by most environmental historians, with early nineteenth-century Britons homogenised in ways that prevent even the possibility of a life-changing encounter with the new land. D.N. Jeans suggests that Australia's late settlement meant 'that the full power of the industrial revolution, lacking any sense of ecology, was brought to bear on the land'.<sup>32</sup> Tom Griffiths also claims that 'Australia, unlike most other parts of the New World, experienced colonisation and industrialisation almost coincidentally, a compressed, double revolution'.<sup>33</sup> That settlement occurred post-Enlightenment is seen to be almost equally significant. William Lines concludes that 'Australian settlement advanced under the guidance of the modern outlook, a uniform way of thinking devoted to the simplification of life and thought and to the formulation of efficacious techniques for the conquest of nature. Reason and violence built, on Australian soil, a new empire'.<sup>34</sup> A paradox of much environmental history is that the legitimate emphasis on the impact of British economy and society has not translated into serious consideration of the implications of the diversity of Britain itself during this period. While it had achieved political unity and a greater degree of economic integration than any other European nation, in the early nineteenth century Britain's heterogeneous regions and peoples had far from completed the transition from a pre-industrial economy and society, and many of the poor still had a world view little influenced by either the Industrial Revolution or the Enlightenment. Moreover, a profound gap had opened up

between the classes in this respect. E.P. Thompson, in *Customs in Common*, has argued that:

customary consciousness and customary usages were especially robust in the eighteenth century... The people were subject to pressures to 'reform' popular culture from above, literacy was displacing oral transmission, and enlightenment (it is supposed) was seeping down from the superior to the subordinate orders. But the pressures of reform were stubbornly resisted, and the eighteenth century saw a profound distance opened, a profound alienation between the culture of patricians and plebs.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, while it is obvious and indisputable that British culture was transplanted to Australia in the early nineteenth century, there was more than one Britain. This was most evident in Ireland, which may have been politically unified with the rest of the United Kingdom, but was in most rural regions (from where most Irish convicts came) a pre-industrial society in which, until the famine of the 1840s, even the Catholic Church had little control over how ordinary people shaped their world.

The implications of the resilience of pre-industrial custom are many. Take, for example, the notion of absolute private property rights, a central tenet of the transplanted society that undeniably transformed Australia. In the early nineteenth century, just prior to the last great wave of English land enclosures, this relatively novel notion remained contested in England. Many smallholders, agricultural labourers and farm servants, as well as the itinerant poor, remained reliant on common land and communal rights over private lands to graze animals and gather food and fuel.<sup>36</sup> And in much of Ireland the 'produce of the infields and outfields was primarily for home consumption', with livestock – grazed on common lands often a considerable distance away in the hills – the main commercial activity. Stock were watched over by summer herders who lived in basic huts, with each community utilising a designated territory.<sup>37</sup> Similar pastoral and land use systems existed in parts of Scotland and Wales. In this context, one can understand the broader significance of Van Diemonian convicts and small land owners accessing the grasslands beyond the settlement for pasture without seeking exclusive possession, which facilitated two decades of largely shared land use, and the full implications of the later arrival of free settlers with their modern private property claims. The eviction of both black and white residents of the grassland plains in the late 1820s and 1830s becomes part of a broader imperial struggle, and not a 'taken for granted' inherent right associated with the possession of legal land title. As John West lamented in his *History of Tasmania* (1852), 'the English of modern times' did not comprehend 'joint ownership, notwithstanding the once 'common' property of the nation has only been lately distributed by law'. It was only because of this change, West suggests, that 'the gradual alienation' of the 'hunting grounds', implied for the Aborigines 'their expulsion and extinction'.<sup>38</sup>

The convict exiles to Van Diemen's Land thus provide a remarkable human raw material for the study of Australian colonisation. At a time in Australian politics when there is political pressure to emphasise the contribution of the Enlightenment and British civilisation to national identity, Van Diemen's Land reminds us of the lived reality and complexity of that culture. What does it mean to talk of the Enlightenment in the context of a society in which, as late as the 1850s, most people were prisoners or former prisoners, and many were exiles from the most 'primitive' country in Europe where a million people were dying from starvation? Irish famine refugees to Van Diemen's Land in the 1840s (transportation to New South Wales had ceased in 1840 so that the larger colony took none of these arrivals) were the poorest group of immigrants to leave from anywhere in Europe in the nineteenth century: they came from those who couldn't afford even the cheapest passage or access even the most degrading forms of charity to save themselves and their families.

The desperation of the famine convicts was extreme, but the lives of the labouring classes of England in the 1820s and 1830s, the background of convict immigrants generally, do not lend support to the argument that Van Diemen's Land settlement was shaped by the twin influences of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. Tasmania was largely settled by about 72,000 sentenced criminals (42 per cent of all the convicts to come to Australia) and, for the vast majority, criminality was inextricably connected with desperate poverty. It has often been pointed out that convicts were unwilling invaders. They were also exiles – they had forfeited even the dream of going home – and they had largely pre-industrial mores and expectations. The possibility of material accumulation was not part of most convicts' cultural heritage and the evidence suggests that, for all but a small (but much publicised) minority, was little sought by them. Van Diemen's Land itself was their receptacle of hope, and the independent provision of the essentials of life from the resources the new land freely provided, the main motivation of their enterprise.

Tasmania's experience of being founded by convict-settlers is not unique, but it is rare. Convicts were sent to other parts of the empire, but only in New South Wales did numbers correspond to Van Diemen's Land. And nowhere else, including New South Wales, did convicts and their descendants constitute the majority of the population over such a long period of time. Convicts, former convicts and their descendants comprised the large majority of the population long after transportation ceased in 1853 and the small elite of free settlers had the colony's name formally changed to Tasmania (the name they had long preferred) with self-government in 1856.

## HOME-MAKING IN A PENAL COLONY

Convicts found in Van Diemen's Land an environment that offered refuge from the brutality of their servitude. Their chance to make a new home came not from any benevolence of the civilisation that transported them, but from the generosity of the land itself. The humility of the home-making undertaken by these men and women does not mean, of course, that it was without consequence. Their impact on the land and its people was immense, and the suffering and brutality associated with invasion and conquest, must ever remain central themes of any honest account of life in Van Diemen's Land. The fact that by the early 1830s only a few hundred Aborigines survived, and almost all of these had been placed in their own exile in Bass Strait, must always haunt the history of Tasmania. The point that the invasion had implications for the invaders as well as the invaded does not qualify the story of conquest, but deepens it.

The fact that Van Diemen's Land changed convict settlers did not reflect a greater sensitivity to the island or its people, but the immediacy of their environmental experience. The convict settler encounter with the environment was far more direct, and consequently life-changing, than the wealthy free settler elite who were significantly quarantined by the technology of the Industrial Revolution and the culture of the Enlightenment. The widespread view that 'almost everything the settler did was a recreation of the world which had been left behind',<sup>39</sup> reflects the experience of a relatively small minority of the population. The fact that this articulate and literate group produced most of the written accounts of Van Diemen's Land explains, but does not excuse, the assumption that their experience was shared by the majority of the settler population. These documents themselves attest that the economy and culture of the free settlers was not shared by most current or former convicts, and that a very different way of life from that familiar in rural or urban England had been born in Van Diemen's Land.

In 1824 Edward Curr wrote that 'our highest aim is to exhibit on a small scale something like the beauties which rise at every step in the land to which we have bade adieu'.<sup>40</sup> These and similar sentiments have often been used to summarise the aspirations of British immigrants to Van Diemen's Land. But statements like Curr's need context. The period in which he wrote constituted watershed years in the history of Van Diemen's Land, when a new class of immigrant was arriving, men who were granted private property title over the grassy woodlands, and self-consciously aspired to recreate a Little England. But Curr was writing about what he hoped Van Diemen's Land would now become, not what it was. As he lamented: 'alas!, with all its inviting beauties, its riches and verdure, it is still Van Diemen's Land, – still the abode of felons; a moral evil, which, in spite of other advantages, will compel many to forgo the little less than paradise which it presents'.<sup>41</sup>

The aspirations of most residents of this 'abode of felons' were a world apart from those of Curr. As E.P. Thompson reminds us, the biggest change that came with industrialisation was in 'needs' and 'expectations'. Ordinary Britons in the early nineteenth century did not expect to have much in the way of possessions, and meeting the essentials of life on a day to day basis was still their primary motivation. In Van Diemen's Land, where environmental imperatives meant that many imported products (clothes, tents, tools, guns and salted foods, for example) were commonly discarded, needs were simplified still further. The transporting of this raw human material to a land that offered a degree of free access to the essentials of life that was unknown in Britain (where even wild animals were private property), ensured most Van Diemonian Britons were open to the radical lifestyle changes needed to take advantage of the island's natural bounty.

For a surprising number of current and former convicts, food, clothing and shelter was to come not from the payment of wages, prescribed rations or charity, but be the gift of the land itself. As the distinguished economic historian, Noel Butlin, has concluded: 'Van Diemen's Land was an attractive, and for a time an increasingly attractive, place in which convicts and ex-convicts might be self supporting'. Moreover, given their backgrounds in Britain and the alternatives on offer in Van Diemen's Land, these men and women would surely have rejected Butlin's judgment that this 'was a limited merit'.<sup>42</sup> For those escaping grinding poverty, harsh penal discipline, and autocratic regulation, self sufficiency was not to be judged by its success in accumulating capital or possessions, but the extent to which it preserved life and freedom.

## CONVICT SETTLERS AND AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

The convict settlers of Van Diemen's Land pose a challenge to the dominant assumptions of much Australian environmental history. While nineteenth century observers testify that the poor did not behave as their social 'superiors' (or twentieth century economic models) assumed they should, most historians, including those critical of the impacts of European settlement, remain guilty of what E.P. Thompson has termed a 'crass economic reductionism'. Too little acknowledgement has been given to the 'complexities of motive, behaviour and function'. In doing so, it is not only the truth of the past, but the possibilities for the present that have been curtailed. Thompson points out that while it is not possible (or even desirable) to 'return to pre-capitalist human nature', in the context of the contemporary ecological crisis 'a reminder of its alternative needs, expectations and codes may renew our sense of nature's range of possibilities'.<sup>43</sup> Simon Schama also points to the hope that may be found in forgotten memories:

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though it may sometimes seem that our impatient appetite for produce has ground the earth to thin and shifting dust, we need only poke below the subsoil of its surface to discover an obstinately rich loam of memory. It is not that we are any more virtuous or wiser than the most pessimistic environmentalist supposes. It is just that we are more retentive. The sum of our pasts, generation laid over generation, like the slow mould of the seasons, forms the compost of our future. We live off it.<sup>44</sup>

Van Diemen's Land surely provides particularly fertile ground for contemplation. If it is remarkable that convicted felons were its founders, it is even more startling to find how quickly these imperial rejects made their place of exile a home. And in a nation that seems driven by the accumulation of material possessions, it is worth remembering that, for the vast majority, Van Diemen's Land was never a place where much money was sought or made. Home-making for former convicts was motivated by factors far more elementary than the pound or the 'holey' dollar – access, with dignity, to the essentials of life, and a life free from the controls and subservience of servitude.

The central paradox at the heart of the multifarious environmental experiences of Van Diemen's Land is that the penal apparatus of a mighty empire happened to be transplanted to a land that provided so well for those without capital or technology. In Van Diemen's Land there was no need to subdue the earth, invest capital or improve farms, to live with decency and dignity. The ready access to cleared grasslands, fresh water, rich coastal resources, and fresh meat and skins in a land that had never known the dingo, ensured that the grassy woodlands of Van Diemen's Land were the first Australian environment that Britons made home, with a speed perhaps unmatched anywhere in the New World.

Furthermore, so far did these hunter-pastoralists move from imperial power, that their migration was effectively a move beyond the boundaries of British territory into that of Aboriginal nations, precipitating two decades of largely (although not totally) peaceful shared land use. If Anne Buttimer is even partly correct in claiming that 'the criteria of rationality and truth in every culture have always been derived from its foundational myths',<sup>45</sup> then, given the novelty and wonder of this environmental and cultural encounter, the story of what happened to the convict founders of Van Diemen's Land can only enrich contemporary reflection and debate.

The way of life of the poor came to pose a potent challenge to the elite, and this was crucial to the construction of Tasmanian history. The many complaints of the land grantees and the colonial government about current and former convicts, living in their bark huts, combining hunting with farming, reluctant to work beyond the minimum hours or grow more than they needed, and drinking to the moment rather than saving for tomorrow, must no longer be reproduced as if these privileged observers were free from self-interest or their own cultural strait-jackets. The great challenge of the free settlers and colonial authorities in the 1820s was not to subdue the environment but to subdue competitors for the



native pastures, and to develop a subservient labour force that would work the land and respect and defend the property of their masters. This conflict within the ranks of the British invaders, as with the struggle to dispossess the Aborigines from their traditional lands, was for a long time far more equal and unresolved than appears from the perspective of the twenty-first century, where tangible icons of the victors' spoils, from Georgian houses to Port Arthur, remain such visible features of Tasmania's landscape.

## CONCLUSION

Our nation's history is much diminished by its neglect of the extraordinary convict settlers of Van Diemen's Land. Their life-changing experiences in the new land can help qualify sweeping national claims, and point to the diversity of Australian settlement across time, class, and region. Moreover, in the light of contemporary environmental and social challenges, their experiences provide an alternative to the competing metaphors of development/progress versus destruction/conquest that still shape both Australian environmental history and environmental debates. Qualifying the imperial paradigm of monolithic immutable Europeans sweeping all before them as they spread out across the continent, opens up the possibility of an engagement with the past that could widen our culture's capacity to imagine contemporary change. Resistance to the dominant economic and social order has a long tradition in Australia, and has not been primarily an occupation of a middle class educated elite, as many who belittle its contemporary manifestations would have us believe.

When Anthony Trollope visited Tasmania in the 1870s, he found Van Diemonians to have 'a spirit of their own which could not be at ease within a prison, even though they themselves were the master and the warden'.<sup>46</sup> This rebellious Van Diemonian spirit has been disguised by the limited extent of direct convict resistance. But the understandable reluctance of most convicts to directly confront their gaolers led to quieter but, in some ways, more potent forms of protest. Many convicts sought lives of freedom, independence and dignity away from the oppressive and degrading gaze of the elite; turning their back, when they could, on submissive labour relations and the social hierarchy, even when it involved lives of comparative material deprivation. Surely this was, and remains, a powerful expression of resistance to the dominant social and economic order.

Asserting the importance of an alternative environmental experience among convict settlers, is not meant to suggest, however, a Van Diemonian antecedent to modern environmental or cross-cultural sensibility. Van Diemonian connection to the land, and the complex cultural encounter associated with it, do not equate directly with any contemporary cause. Expressed appreciation of fauna, flora and landscape, and concerns about the ethics and legality of invasion, were

in fact widespread in Van Diemen's Land, but this was a discourse carried on largely within the elite. It is usually impossible to know what convict settlers thought of such matters, and difficult to identify what difference these sentiments ultimately made anyway.

What is clear that the convicts and their descendants were transformed by their home-making in this bountiful land, the home of an ancient and distinct people. For this group of early Australian settlers, rapid environmental adaptation provided the best hope of establishing a sustainable refuge from a 'hostile' and 'brutish' British civilisation, and freedom, not plunder, provided the motivation for their enterprise.<sup>47</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery only has 'an egg and some bones from the Tasmanian species'. Dr Andrew Rozefelds, Deputy Director Collections and Research TMAG, personal communication 9 September 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Nicholls, ed., *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood, 1803–1838: First Chaplain of Van Diemen's Land* (Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1977), entry for 31 December 1804. Translation of the Latin is by Nicholls. Brendan Lennard, Cultural Heritage Officer of the Hobart City Council, advises that 'the motto was first used by Council at the outset (ie from the 1850s), though the first "coat of arms" was an unofficial crest ... The motto is featured on both the coat of arms and the earlier crest.' Lennard points out that Knopwood 'has adapted the famous line from Virgil's Georgics, where it is used in relation to Etruria – an important area of central Italy inhabited and governed by the Etruscans'. Personal communication 3 September 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Shaw, 'The British Contribution', in Michael Roe (ed.), *The Flow of Culture: Tasmanian Studies* (Canberra, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1981): 74–5, 86.

<sup>4</sup> It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, Clark argues, that settlers began to discover 'compensating virtues'. C.M.H. Clark, *Occasional Writing and Speeches* (Melbourne, 1980), pp. 32, 43–5.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Flannery, *The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and Its Peoples* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001): 291.

<sup>6</sup> William Lines, *Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991): 48.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Atkinson, 'Tasmania and the Multiplicity of Nations', *THRA Papers and Proceedings*, 52,4 (2005), 189–200: 191.

<sup>9</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1977): 11. Ward's only attempt to address his neglect of Van Diemen's Land is the argument that the 'concentration of Irish convicts in the mother colony was one more factor tending to make New South Wales the major seed-bed of the emerging Australian ethos. It also helps to explain the traditional feeling that Tasmania, which still has a lower percentage of Catholics in its population than any other state except South Australia, is "more Eng-

lish" than the rest of Australia.' Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 56. But this legitimate point scarcely justifies the general neglect, and is also only true before 1840, as from this date until 1853 Van Diemen's Land received all the Irish convicts coming to Australia – exiled in large numbers in crime associated with the Irish famine. During this period Van Diemen's Land also received few free settlers at a time when the convict influence in New South Wales was being rapidly diluted by free immigration.

<sup>10</sup> The island of Ireland comprises 68,895 sq. km, and Taiwan 35,990 sq. km.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Jeffreys, *Van Diemen's Land: Geographical and Descriptive Delineations of the Island of Van Diemen's Land* (London: J.M. Richardson 1820): 1.

<sup>12</sup> Alec Chisholm, *Land of Wonder: The Best of Australian Nature Writing* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1964).

<sup>13</sup> David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, 1788–1801* (London, 1910): 77, 169.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: 78, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2000): 133.

<sup>16</sup> Glen McLaren, *Beyond Leichhardt: Bushcraft and the Exploration of Australia* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996): 46.

<sup>17</sup> David Burn, *A Picture of Van Diemen's Land*, facsimile edn (Hobart, 1973): 134.

<sup>18</sup> N.J.B. Plomley, *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land: Being a Reconstruction of His 'Lost' Book on Their Customs and Habits, and on His Role in the Roving Parties and the Black Line* (Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 1991): 56–7.

<sup>19</sup> McLaren, *Beyond Leichhardt*: 46, 33, 36–7.

<sup>20</sup> For a description of the various types of grassy woodland in Tasmania, including the now rare *Eucalyptus ovata* (black gum) grassy woodland 'so favoured by the graziers and agriculturalists', see James Reid et al. (eds.), *Vegetation of Tasmania: Flora of Australia Supplementary Series Number 8* (Canberra, Australian Biological Resources Survey, 1999): 274–82.

<sup>21</sup> For an analysis of the role played by hunting dogs in the early settlement of Van Diemen's Land, including their contribution to cross-cultural relations, see James Boyce, 'Canine Revolution: The Social and Environmental Impact of the Introduction of the Dog to Tasmania', *Environmental History* 11(1) (2006): 102–39; and Boyce, 'A Dog's Breakfast ... Lunch and Dinner: Canine Dependency in Early Van Diemen's Land', *THRA Papers and Proceedings* 51,4 (2004): 194–214.

<sup>22</sup> *Sydney Gazette* 17 May 1822.

<sup>23</sup> N.G. Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy: Australia 1810–1850* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994): 98.

<sup>24</sup> Anne McKay ed., *Journals of the Land Commissioners for Van Diemen's Land, 1826–28* (Hobart, 1962): 27.

<sup>25</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania* (New York, Bunce and Britain, 1883): 172.

<sup>26</sup> *Reports on the Historical Manuscripts of Tasmania: Numbers 1–7*, (Hobart, 1964): 173.

<sup>27</sup> Tier is the word long used in Tasmania to describe a large hill or small mountain, usually employed in the plural to describe a mountain range. The word has mainly been adopted in regions that were frequented last century.

- <sup>28</sup> Ian Brand, *The Convict Probation System: Van Diemen's Land, 1839–1854* (Hobart, Blubber Head Press, 1990): 88–9.
- <sup>29</sup> Peter MacFie, 'Oral History and the Demise of Folk Culture in the Richmond District, Tasmania', *THRA Papers and Proceedings* 29,3 (1982): 99, 101.
- <sup>30</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Australia* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1967 [originally published 1873]): 530.
- <sup>31</sup> Lines, *Taming the Great South Land*: 48. There are remarkable thematic similarities between celebratory progress and critical environmental histories. Both concentrate on economic development, with arguably the main difference between them, the judgments made about this.
- <sup>32</sup> D.N. Jeans, ed., *Space and Society* (Sydney, University of Sydney Press, 1987): 6.
- <sup>33</sup> Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, eds., *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Edinburgh: University of Keele Press, 1997): 4. The same point is also made in Tom Griffiths, 'The Nature of Culture and the Culture of Nature', in Teo Hsu-Ming and Richard White, eds., *Cultural History in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2003): 70.
- <sup>34</sup> Lines, *Taming the Great South Land*: 26
- <sup>35</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin, 1993): 1.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: 127, 64.
- <sup>37</sup> John Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974): 56.
- <sup>38</sup> John West, *The History of Tasmania* (Sydney, 1971): 272–3.
- <sup>39</sup> Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England* (Cambridge, 1992): 2.
- <sup>40</sup> Edward Curr, *An Account of the Colony of Van Diemen's Land: Principally Designed for the Use of Emigrants* (Hobart: Platypus Publications, 1967): 11–12.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*: 29.
- <sup>42</sup> Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy*: 205.
- <sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Customs in Common*: 14–15.
- <sup>44</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1996): 574.
- <sup>45</sup> Anne Buttimer, *Geography and the Human Spirit* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p.3.
- <sup>46</sup> Alex Castles, 'The Van Diemonian Spirit and the Law', *THRA Papers and Proceedings* 38, 3&4 (1991): 105–18, esp. 105–6.
- <sup>47</sup> This theme is explored in detail in Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2008).

