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OYSTER COVE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRACES OF THE LAST TASMANIANS AND NOTES
ON THE CRITERIA FOR THE AUTHENTICATION OF FLAKED GLASS ARTEFACTS

by Jim Allen and Rhys Jones
Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies,
Australian National University, Canberra

(with one text figure)

ABSTRACT

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Stone, bottle glass and pottery artefacts occur at the Oyster Cove Aboriginal Station, occupied from 1847 to 1869. Criteria are advanced for recognition as artefacts of bottle glass fragments. (Editor)

INTRODUCTION

In October 1847, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Establishment at Wybalenna on Flinders Island in Bass Strait was abandoned, bringing to a close a 15 year chapter of Tasmanian history which marked the effective demise of the Tasmanians and their culture. For at least the previous 10,000 years, within the envelope of Tasmania and its near off-shore islands, a human society had maintained itself in isolation. At the end of the nineteenth century the Tasmanians were once again joined to the world, an embrace across a social and cultural gap so wide that within a scant half-century, what had been a functioning society of perhaps 4,000 people was reduced to a disparate group of 35 adults and 10 children racked with disease and the ennui of the dispossessed. For the Europeans, Wybalenna was the prototype of Aboriginal reserves later to be established on the mainland, a safe place to contain a nuisance impeding colonial progress, a carpet under which to sweep a poorly understood social problem which was a by-product of colonial expansion.

A full account of the history of Wybalenna presented by Ryan (1975, 231-71) revealed predictable patterns. For its succession of European administrators, initial confidence of success in leading the Aborigines into the light of 'civilised' and Christian ways gradually foundered on a lack of government interest and dwindling financial support. For the Aborigines, transported to a country not their own, struck down by sickness, especially pulmonary diseases, poorly fed and housed, forced to labour for their keep, and taught moral precepts which clearly did not apply to many of their European keepers, any spirit of co-operation with which they might have begun the venture gradually changed to stubborn resistance. By 1847 Wybalenna was something between a cheap ration station and a gaol.

In October of that year the remnants of the Tasmanian Aborigines¹ were moved for the last time to Oyster Cove, some 40 km south of Hobart, on the mainland side of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, and a lesser distance from where the first significant meeting between Tasmanians and Europeans had taken place some 55 years before (Labillardière 1880). (NOTE 1— A few Tasmanian Aboriginal women were of course living with sealers on various islands of Bass Strait and thus outside this Government net. They helped to found a vigorous population, the descendants of whom now number several thousands (Murray Smith 1973)). It is not our purpose here to pursue the history of Oyster Cove in any detail since this is available elsewhere (Bonwick 1870; Calder 1875; Crowther 1934, 1972; Ryan 1975). It is sufficient to relate that the patterns of Wybalenna

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were repeated and that despite initial high hopes on both sides, Oyster Cove proved less satisfactory than Flinders Island. The Aborigines were housed in buildings which had previously served as a convict penal station, but which had been abandoned three years earlier because they had failed to meet convict health standards (Ryan 1975, 272). Situated for the most part on low swampy ground, the houses remained damp for most of the year and vermin flourished. Sickness increased, the gathering of traditional foods in the area diminished, rations and other government assistance decreased, and alcoholism among the Aborigines soared. By the end of 1854 the population at Oyster Cove had been reduced to 17, and by 1859 Bonwick reported that the station had become a miserable collection of huts, dirty and swarming with fleas, with broken windows and leaking roofs and all the furniture gone (1870, 276-78). By 1869 only two Aborigines, Truganini and Mary Ann Arthur, remained alive and were removed into the direct care of Superintendent Dandridge and his family. Mary Ann died two years later, and two years after that, Truganini moved to Hobart with the Dandridge family. Thus the Oyster Cove station was effectively abandoned in 1869, although some subsequent occupation of the site did take place, as Crowther relates that the superintendent's house was occupied by a local dairy farmer in the 1890s (1972, 1).

THE PRESENT DAY SITE

In the course of filming *The Last Tasmanian* (Documentary film *The Last Tasmanian*, 1978, made by Artis Films in conjunction with the Tasmanian Film Corporation, the Australian Film Commission, Cadbury of Claremont and Le Société Française de Production; directed by Tom Haydon, script written by T. Haydon and R. Jones), we were able to visit Oyster Cove in March 1977. The area remains largely undeveloped, and its present tranquility belies the suffering represented in its history. To the south of the settlement in Little Oyster Cove we inspected a shell midden and an area where out-cropping silcrete had in prehistoric times been extensively exploited for implement manufacture, and the immediate surroundings revealed a dense scattering of flakes which extended well below the present low tide mark (Winter 1976).

The settlement site itself today is largely overgrown with long grass and black-berry bushes but the general area of the settlement square is identifiable from the mounds of earth and brick, presumably from fireplaces, which dot the landscape. The northern and eastern flanks of the square are particularly difficult to define for not only are these on lower and more swampy ground, but also because a sketch plan of the settlement (State Archives of Tasmania, reproduced in Crowther, 1972) indicates that there were fewer fireplaces in these areas. Here the timber buildings (Ryan 1975, 272) have left no trace above the surface. The southwestern area, being on higher, firmer ground is more discernible, and is criss-crossed by a number of dirt tracks which increase visibility.

THE COLLECTION

With the permission of the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service which administers the Act pertaining to the protection of Tasmanian Aboriginal sites, a small collection of surface artefacts was made, consisting of 34 pieces of stone, 20 pieces of bottle glass, and 12 pieces of European pottery. With the exception of three pieces of glass and two pieces of pottery which were picked up from the house mounds, all the pieces in the collection came from the cleared roadways, in the southwestern area of the site. The artefacts described here are held in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, under the accession numbers: (a) M 4810/1 and M 4810/2 Bottle glass tools on fig. I/1 and fig. I/2; (b) M 4811/1 and M 4811/2 silcrete tools on fig. I/3 and fig. I/4; (c) All other finds described here - M 4812.

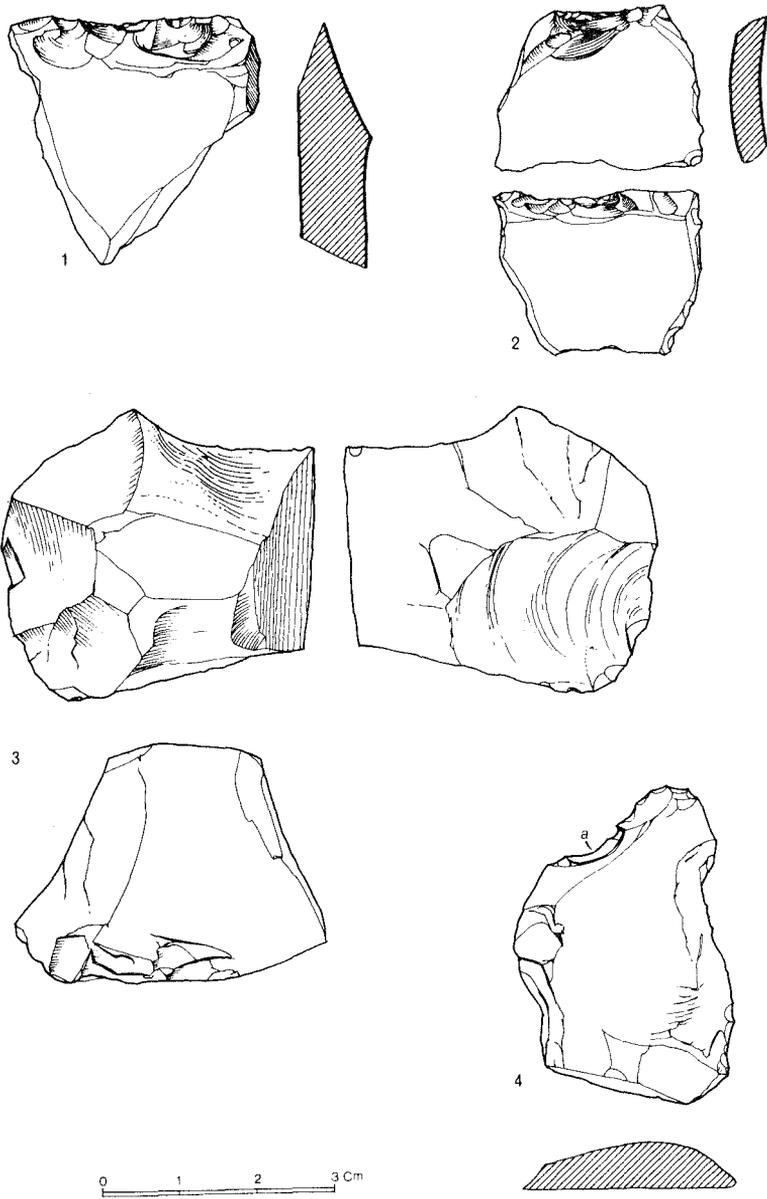


FIG. 1.- Glass tools nos. 1 and 2; and silcrete tools, nos. 3 and 4 found on the surface of the Aboriginal Settlement at Oyster Cove.

Stone

The majority of the stone pieces are small amorphous chips. Thirty-two of the pieces comprise a variety of fine grained silcretes, one piece is a fine grained chert and another is a tiny fragment of quartz (identifications kindly provided by Marjory Sullivan). The fracture patterns on the silcrete, coupled with the very small size of the pieces collected, make positive identification of 24 of the 34 pieces as Aboriginal artefacts impossible. Of the remaining ten pieces, bulbs of percussion are visible on four, and the negative flake scars on these and the remainder are consistent with their being man-made artefacts.

Two items are finished implements (M 4811). The first (fig.1:3) is a typical Tasmanian bipyramid disc core made from silcrete, with flakes taken off a zig-zag edge right around its perimeter. One side forming the steeper of the two 'pyramids' has five negative flake scars, and the other flatter 'pyramid' has two definite scars. Such cores are common in Tasmanian assemblage such as Rocky Cape North and West Point dated to within the past 2,000 years (e.g. Jones 1966, fig. 2, nos. 1,2,7 and 8). A part of the zig-zagging edge has been utilised as the base from which to work a subsequent steep edge scraper, such multiple uses being typical of Tasmanian stone tools. This steep edge has the following dimensions:

Length of edge = 25 mm; height (A) of initial flaking of the edge = 31 mm; height (B) of the subsequent step flaking = 6 mm; maximum angle = 90°; weight of the tool = 63 gm.

This compares well with the dimensions of Jones' 'steep edge scraper' (Type 2A in the typology of Rocky Cape (Jones 1971, 349-51 and table 60)). The second piece (fig. 1:4) is made on a silcrete flake with a clear bulb of percussion (length = 30 mm using the striking platform as the base line, breadth = 43 mm). Its general shape and marginal retouch suggests a flat version of a 'concave and nosed scraper' (Jones 1971, 425-26). One notch marked -a on fig. 1:4 has a lighter surface colour than the rest of the secondary flaking indicating recent damage.

Glass

The 20 pieces of glass all appear to come from liquor bottles, although only one piece is clearly recognisable - the lower wall and part of the base of a bottle blown into a metal mould (fig. 1:1). The exterior wall has the characteristic dimpled surface smooth apart from several large air bubbles. The base has a high omphalos or kick, but it is not noticeably thicker than the body wall. There is an insufficient amount of the base remaining to determine whether the piece had been knocked out of the mould using a pontil or whether the whole base was moulded, but the surface texture of the base, together with the angle of the kick would suggest the former. If this is indeed the case, that the base has not been formed in a mould but the body has, then it would be reasonable to place the manufacture of this piece somewhere before 1850 because, although moulded bases were produced before this date, in a large collection of similar bottles excavated from the Northern Territory site of Port Essington (1838-49) this form occurred in 83 out of 85 cases (the remaining two bases being moulded) (Allen 1969, 256-57).

This piece is one of eight pieces of 'black' glass in the collection, the remaining dozen pieces being a dark olive green colour. There is, therefore, no evidence in the glass collection to suggest a date later than the period of Aboriginal occupation at Oyster Cove.

Almost every piece of glass carries flake scars, produced after initial breaking, along one or more margins. The possibility that some at least of these margins have been deliberately modified by Aborigines needs to be considered and fig. 1:1 and 2 illustrates the two most convincing possibilities (M 4810). The problem is considered more fully below.

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The piece in fig. 1:1 has an edge 30 mm long and 6 mm high, with a maximum edge angle of 79°. The piece in fig. 1:2 has two edges, one being 19 mm long and 5 mm high with a maximum edge angle of 77°; and the other 12 mm long, 3 mm high with a maximum edge angle of 70°.

Pottery

One of the 12 pieces of pottery (M 4812) is a fragment of a brown salt-glaze stoneware vessel, three are white earthenware pieces usually referred to as 'china' and the remainder are 'bone chine', the earthenware imitation of porcelain. Of the earthenwares four pieces are plain white, one which appears to be the lip of a cup is covered internally and externally in a light grey/blue glaze and the remaining six pieces are decorated with transfer printed floral decorations. Of these six pieces two which appear to come from the same vessel exhibit multicolour printing in five colours, three (from two vessels) are printed in green, and the last is an example of 'flowing blue'. This last piece bears on the reverse the name 'CARLTO(N)' which is presumably the design name and this cannot be identified further.

Unfortunately none of the ceramics provide any close dating evidence. The 'flowing blue' piece could date anywhere from about 1825 onwards, and one of the green transfer printed pieces from about the same time. The two multicolour printed pieces could not date before the Aboriginal occupation at Oyster Cove, and to judge from the delicacy of the design, which is in contrast to the heavy and even garish decoration of pottery found on other Australian mid-nineteenth century colonial sites, is like to be very much later.

DISCUSSION

It is clear from the foregoing description of the artefacts in the collection that a central problem is positively tying them into the period of Aboriginal occupation at Oyster Cove and on the basis of the evidence available to us the only real conclusion that we can reach at this time is that scientific excavation of the site would be the only appropriate method of isolating the separate occupations there. However it seems reasonable to attribute the stone artefacts to the Aboriginal occupation and further to consider the likelihood that some of the 'retouched' glass is a product of Aboriginal work.

Elsewhere one of us (Jones 1971, 454-72) has described at some length the stone technology of ethnographically observed Tasmanians and concluded on the basis of a radiocarbon date 0.15 m below the surface that the stone assemblage in the top levels of the North Cave at Rocky Cape is representative of the tool kit used by Tasmanians immediately prior to the time of European contact. Regional differences in recent stone tool assemblages do not appear great within Tasmania, and it is thus reassuring to find that the two recognisable tools in the present collection are types which are quantitatively well represented in the upper assemblage of the North Cave at Rocky Cape.

That stone tools were made at Oyster Cove is of interest as one facet of the continued use of traditional skills under the pressure of Europeanisation. This is no real surprise however, for Tindale has described stone tools from Kangaroo Island in South Australia which derive from two sites where four Tasmanian women were taken by sealers during the nineteenth century (1937, 29-37) and stone tools are reported also from excavations at Wybalenna (Birmingham 1976, 314). The illustrations of the Kangaroo Island implements show them again to be round and nosed scrapers (Tindale 1937, Plate III), in the terminology used to describe the Rock Cape assemblages. Although women formed the majority of the Tasmanians at Oyster Cove, some men were also present. We cannot say which sex was making or using these tools.

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The presence of stone tools conforms well to the abundant evidence that at Wybalenna and Oyster Cove the Tasmanians continued to gather and hunt traditional foods. Birmingham (1976, 414-15) noted that the documentary evidence indicates that in addition to European livestock, vegetables and cereals, 'kangaroos', swans and Cape Barren geese were hunted, and that this list is supplemented by the archaeological evidence of a variety of shellfish, marsupial bones and a few mutton bird bones. Ryan (1975, 273) noted that there was during the early years at Oyster Cove an abundance of shellfish supplemented by wallaby and wombat, and a whimsical detailed drawing of the settlement by Annie Benbow, whose father had been sergeant in charge of a detail of British soldiers stationed in Oyster Cove, shows a number of traditional activities being practised. On one side, a figure identified as Truganini climbs a tree, while on the other a man clubs a marsupial (identified tentatively as a thylogale by Dr. Jeanette Hope, Department of Prehistory, ANU). In the foreground a group of women carrying traditional baskets accompany two men with guns out of the settlement. The illustration has been published by Dutton (1974, plate 63).

That the Tasmanians used bottle glass for a variety of cutting activities during the contact period is also well documented, e.g. by G.A. Robinson (Plomley 1966, 59, 61, 67, 384), James Backhouse (1843, 103) and Mrs. Hughes in Westlake (n.d.) and the uses to which glass was put have been summarised by Jones (1971, 457-59). Amongst the Tasmanian implements from Kangaroo Island, Tindale reported the finding of bottle glass 'fragments' and illustrated a retouched implement made on the base of a glass bottle (1937, 33 and plate III). He also described an implement of 'well-defined Tasmanian type' (a notched scraper) found at Kempton and fashioned on the base of a glass bottle (Tindale 1941, 1-2 and plate 1). At the time of writing, Tindale was unsure whether 'the glass is such as was used in English bottles of the early nineteenth century or whether it could be attributed to Dutch or other voyages of still earlier times', but from the clear illustrations it is possible to say that the piece is the base of a 'black' glass bottle with moulded base which could not date before the 1820s and is probably somewhat later than this. Finally, glass flakes were recovered from the excavations at Wybalenna (Birmingham 1976, 314). It would appear no accident that the implements reported by Tindale are made on the bases of bottles as the commonsense tendency to exploit the thicker parts of the bottle, usually the base, has previously been reported in different parts of the world, for example among the Aborigines who frequented the Port Essington settlement (Allen 1969, 240), among the Andaman Islanders (Man 1932, 160-61), and among the Bushmen of South Africa who purchased cheap German scent solely because the bottles were particularly suitable for flaking arrowheads from the thickened base portions (Beaumont 1961, 161).

The problem of identifying flaked glass implements

A priori it would be more surprising if Aboriginal artefacts fashioned on bottle glass did not occur at Oyster Cove than if they did, given the undisputed evidence for the use of this material in other Tasmanian contexts and the presence of bottles at the site. However it is well known that trimming, identical in every respect to the skilful modification of stone implements, may be produced fortuitously on broken glass, and in particular any curved section of bottle glass placed on a hard surface and having pressure applied against the curve will produce objects which superficially look like 'scrapers'. Such 'artefacts' can frequently be recovered from ploughed fields, cattle pastures and in particular, roadways.

To our knowledge only one serious attempt has been made to authenticate a collection of probable Aboriginal glass implements in Australia. At Port Essington in the Northern Territory the excavation of the military establishment and two nearby and contemporaneous Aboriginal middens produced over 15,000 pieces of glass of which nearly 20% were considered to be possible Aboriginal artefacts. Unlike Kimberley points made on glass (and possibly Tindale's Kempton scraper) none of these were of a form so

refined that their authenticity could not be doubted. It did not seem possible then, nor does it now, to produce a set of criteria which would positively identify any single genuine artefact from a fortuitously flaked and shaped non-artefact. However the careful analysis of that collection (Allen 1969, 213-43) did suggest some guidelines which may be summarised here.

In the large collection from Port Essington, quantitative and qualitative differences did emerge between the group suspected to have been modified by Aborigines and that which clearly had not been. For example, there was a significant difference between the amount of the wall attached to bases which were not tools and those thought to be possible tools. Also, as was stated earlier, a strong tendency towards the use of thicker parts of bottles for implements was detected by comparing the average weight of the implement group against the non-implement group, even when small struck flakes were included with the former group. The presence in the collection of a high percentage of struck flakes with bulbs of percussion also emerged as a valuable possible indicator of Aboriginal modification, as did a detailed analysis of bifacial versus internal and external unifacial flaking on the lower parts of the wall, where this was attached to a base or part of a base. Examples of glass implements stratified in the nearby middens provided a valuable comparative collection against which to judge pieces from more equivocal locations, but it also underlined a further important point, that the location of the objects coupled with commonsense still provided the best guide to validity. The environment at Port Essington, having been virtually deserted since 1849, remaining uncleared and having no roads, provides few natural agencies to explain fortuitous production.

By comparison, a large collection of glass 'implements' from Singleton in New South Wales (McCarthy and Davidson 1943, 226-27) comprising a variety of 'side, end, concave and nosed scrapers', came from a cleared field which had apparently been heavily ploughed in the past, and a further collection made there in 1967 by Davidson and one of us (Allen) produced 269 pieces of glass of which only eight could be considered as implements in terms of flaking. Both collections were made near the remains of early European buildings and were associated with European pottery and clay pipe fragments as well as Aboriginal stone implements. The latter, however, can be found eroding out of the gravel layer a few centimetres below the topsoil for some km along the banks of the Hunter River at this point, while the glass is confined to a few hundred square metres. No struck flakes were recovered at Singleton on either occasion, and if this is to be explained as being the result of manufacture elsewhere, then the implements could be expected to be distributed more widely, as are the stone tools, rather than being confined to the immediate area of European buildings - their probable origin. Finally, of the eight possible implements collected in 1967 the most convincing was the flaked base of a brown glass beer bottle, with a moulded date underneath of 1938. Thus the distribution and specialisation of the glass 'tools' coupled with what is known of the immediate environment in which they were found, combines to throw doubt on the authenticity of the entire Singleton collection.

Returning to the Oyster Cove collection, the application of such guidelines leaves us with conflicting opinions. On the positive side, the evidence that Tasmanians utilised bottle glass, and in particular that this same group of people did so at Wybalenna, lends credence to the idea that some of these pieces might be implements. As well, the illustrated piece in fig. 1:2 is flaked at opposite ends from opposite sides, a difficult configuration to achieve by accident, and both illustrated pieces are relatively thick pieces of glass. On the negative side the collection is too small to allow any quantitative analysis, it contains no struck flakes and finally the majority of the pieces come from the worst possible location on the site, the dirt roadways which cross it. The validation of these pieces as Tasmanian artefacts will ultimately depend upon the proper excavation of the site.

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CONCLUSION

The value of the collection of artefacts from Oyster Cove is that it indicates that future excavations will establish the importance of the site for the archaeological documentation of the final phase of Aboriginal and European confrontation in Tasmania. As such it will join the small group of sites and collections which presently provide us with a material picture of the ethnographic or immediately precontact Tasmanians - the sites on Kangaroo Island, Wybalenna, the North Cave at Rocky Cape and the hut site being excavated by D. Ranson at Sundown Point on the west coast (Ranson personal communication). Hopefully it will contribute to the picture of technological and economic changes made in the face of an externally imposed foreign cultural dominance, and assist in an understanding of the material processes of such events elsewhere in the world, past and present.

At the same time, the scientific value of the Oyster Cove collection is at least matched by its symbolic significance. These few stone flakes and pieces of broken liquor bottles encapsulate a tragedy which in a single century had obliterated a lifestyle which, left alone, had survived the previous 400 generations. It is gratifying that the Oyster Cove site has recently received the recognition, protection and conservation it deserves as part of the Australian heritage.

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