

IS HISTORY ENOUGH? PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE USE OF THE RESOURCES OF TASMAN PENINSULA

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The possibilities for future development of the resources of Tasman Peninsula are diverse. In the cultural landscape of the peninsula, Tasmania has a priceless heritage. With careful management and sensitive administration, the past could co-exist harmoniously with the present, in such a way that the contrast between them enhances both.

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INTRODUCTION

The summaries of the numerous papers to be presented make clear the organisation of this symposium as a forum for presenting information and, I hope, ideas on the resources of Tasman Peninsula and the ways in which they have been used and are being deployed. It is also an opportunity to consider the future use of its diverse possibilities, and the future development of the region. Thus there is being brought together here a wealth of information.

I feel an empathy with the peninsula for a number of reasons. As an historian I am professionally concerned with historical scholarship and seeking to explain how Australia — or Tasmania — came to be what it is. That is to say, the historian's business is not merely to try to set the record straight but to isolate and trace significant events in our past. There is a parallel with any of our number writing his or her own "history" of themselves. In so doing we certainly try to get the facts right. But which facts? It is this selection and arranging of material with which historians are concerned. They cannot conduct scientific experiments and manipulate variables in the form of an experiment. In seeking to explain how we came to be what we are, we would clearly be confronted with the task of singling out important or significant events in our lives. It will not do to record indiscriminately. Unlike the scientist, the historian is bound to engage imaginatively with the subject; the writing of history is both a craft and an art ... and of course there are different sorts of history, such as cultural, political or economic.

The other reason why I feel an association with this spot is personal — my great-grandfather was transported to Van Diemen's Land and spent a very eventful part of his strange life at Port Puer.

THE PAST

The main historical facts are fairly clear in terms of the discovery of the peninsula, as we may gather from the paper on geology and geomorphology. Later principal transactions are also not in dispute: I mean the settlement of the area as a penal station and its establishment during the regime of Governor Arthur, one of the great proconsuls of the British Empire as it had emerged by the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign. The official announcement of settlement may be found in a despatch from Arthur to Sir George Murray, Secretary of State for the Colonies, dated 3 March 1831 (Arthur-Murray, 3 March 1831, C.O.280/281). There the governor stated that, in establishing a penal station, he intended to combine the objects of a secondary penal settlement and a sawing establishment at which prisoners to be removed from Macquarie Harbour would undergo treatment before they were again allowed to be assigned. The new place for punishment, Arthur went on, was admirably calculated both for the production of sawn timber and for the security of the prisoners. He had succeeded in securing Mr J.T. Gellibrand's 300 acres there, concluded the governor in this despatch to his masters in London, on which Gellibrand ran cattle, in exchange for 4000 acres.

Here we see, incidentally, the characteristic combination of penological and commercial motives which dictated the manner in which the early colonies of Australia were established. Further, the new establishment was much closer to the seat of government than was isolated Macquarie Harbour, so that an express messenger could leave and return in the space of 24 hours and troops be speedily withdrawn or reinforced. By 1833 there were 475 prisoners at Port Arthur, and nearly double that number two years later (Heard 1981).

From this time, the historiography of the Port Arthur penal settlement is very extensive, at least in terms of accounts by visitors. Many will be familiar with the illustrations of the principal settlement, not least the famous one of a unique man-powered railway.

In 1840 transportation to New South Wales was abolished and the assignment system of convict labour was abolished in Van Diemen's Land. In its place there was instituted the "probation" system. Here the idea was to concentrate convicts at various probation stations where they were to be put to work and reformed, if possible, prior to being issued with passes in order to secure private employment. The several probation stations on the peninsula date from this time till the ending of the transportation system to Van Diemen's Land in 1853.

Port Arthur and environs on Tasman Peninsula have come to figure in the numerous works on the penal system in colonial Australia which began to emerge in the 1960s, when serious study of the convicts got under way as access to the rich documentation became possible, though not without certain difficulties. In other words, until only 20 or so years ago, the records were virtually embargoed.

In 1970, however, Decie Denholm reminded us that the several places of secondary punishment had not been the subject of serious assessment in Australian convict history (Denholm 1970). In terms of the number of convicts removed to Australia in the period from 1788 to 1868 (when transportation to Western Australia ceased) this was astonishing, for more than 160 000 persons were transported to the colonies, far more than to British North America. Norfolk Island, Macquarie Harbour, Moreton Bay and Port Arthur were the principal places of secondary punishment in Australia; of these Port Arthur was and is far the largest, and historians were fortunate in 1979, when Margaret Glover wrote an excellent article on Port Arthur Experiments (Glover 1979), and in 1981, when the Tasmanian Historical Research Association published Dora Heard's *Journal of Charles O'Hara Booth: Commandant of the Port Arthur Penal Settlement*. There we may read,

especially in Glover's article, the numerous uses made of the peninsula for meteorological observations, experimental horticulture, and experiments with various crops. In May 1870, indeed, Baron Ferdinand von Mueller evidently tried some "industrial plants", but their progress or otherwise is unknown. Deer were introduced, as were pure Angora goats, an elk (which created havoc) and, on another front, a plan to use gas lighting. A steam sawmill was also tried out and even steam-driven lathes. All these experiments and more may be followed up in Glover's interesting article.

Port Arthur was retained as a gaol till 1877. The period was characterised by lengthy and involved arguments with the Home government concerning costs of upkeep of those known as "imperial paupers", the fag-end, as it were, of the convict system. On this point and on many others relating to the history of the peninsula, Maggie Weidenhofer's *Port Arthur: a Place of Misery* is invaluable as a result of the author's perceptions and fine use of primary sources and well-chosen illustrations (Weidenhofer 1981).

The Tasmanian Historical Research Association (1985) recently devoted an entire issue to Port Arthur, with articles by Peter Boyer, J.C. Horner, Margaret Glover, Merrilyn Graham and David Bamford, and now, to bring us up to date, the Royal Society has also interested itself in the area.

Substantial bushfires in the summer of 1897–98 led to some sections of the buildings at Port Arthur being damaged by fire, and there were those who were said to regret that the entire settlement was not consumed by flames, thus obliterating a shameful reminder of the island's violent history. Others, let it be said, regretted that the government was not caring for the structures.

It is difficult to say when the convict ruins on the peninsula became a firm tourist attraction — perhaps the settlement always had been — but certainly in the course of time a visit to Port Arthur, difficult to get to as it was, became part of the visitor's itinerary, and a sort of "museum" was offered to the tourists. Replete with instruments of restraint and some documents (where did they come from and were they "official"?), it was calculated to induce in the observer a mixture of horror, curiosity and thankfulness that the "bad old days" had passed away. There was an ambivalence of response: here was a money-spinner in terms of tourism but also a sense of fear that the search for respectability stood in danger while such a relic or artefact remained *in situ*, a disturbing memorial in the physical and mental landscape.

Marcus Clark's classic gothic novel *For the Term of His Natural Life* (originally serialised as *His*

Natural Life) probably did more than anything else to focus attention on Port Arthur and the physical features of the peninsula such as The Blowhole. This novel, described by Stephen Murray-Smith in the Penguin centenary edition of 1970 as one which has refused to die, has seldom been out of print, despite all its imperfections. It is most unusual in having attached a list of sources from which the author secured a good deal of his material. It may indeed be seen as a nineteenth-century example of the modern work termed "faction". Clark's strangely compelling work, observed Murray-Smith, has associations with two great novels of the 1860s, Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, novels which placed the treatment of evil, its punishment and its redemption on an entirely new social and artistic plane. It may be suggested, then, that the public Australian perception of Port Arthur and Tasman Peninsula owes a great deal to Clark's novel, in its sheer narrative and descriptive capacity. Murray-Smith noted that there are many descriptive passages which remain memorable for imagery that draws power from observation rather than studied effect:

"At the bottom of one of these valleys of water lay the mutineers' boat, looking with its outspread oars, like some six-legged insect floating in a pool of ink. The great cliff, whose every scar and crag was as distinct as though its huge bulk was but a yard distant, seemed to shoot from its base towards the struggling insect, a broad, flat straw, that was a strip of dry land. The next instant the rushing water, carrying the six-legged atom with it, creamed up over this strip of beach ..."

Clark's perception of his mis-en-scene is crucial. He is concerned with an island and, as Murray-Smith stated, was always fascinated by the wildness and loneliness of the Australian bush and sea, and few who have stood horrified yet compelled on the edge of a cliff against which the Southern Ocean is beating will fail to respond to Clark's own response. His account of The Blowhole or Eaglehawk Neck, and of John Rex's terrifying sojourn there, has in Australia achieved legendary stature even among those who have not read the book.

There were, however, other accounts in literature of Tasman Peninsula, the most popular probably being Martin Cash's *The Bushranger of Van Diemen's Land* (first published as *The Adventures of Martin Cash*). It is also possible that the famous and still rather mysterious "Frank the Poet" was responsible for oral transmission of Port Arthur's character and repute.

Clark's picture of the dark side of Australia, and Tasmania's history, intrigued the film makers (Pike & Cooper 1981). In 1908 and 1911 it had been

transferred to the new medium of moving pictures in Australia. The former version was based in turn on a popular stage version.

"The film begins in England with a murder on Hampstead Heath for which Rufus Dawes is wrongly arrested and sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land. The bitter life of the convicts is depicted, culminating in Dawes's escape. In disguise, he joins a boat to sail to freedom, and on board meets his long-lost love, Sylvia. In a raging storm, the boat founders, and as it sinks, Dawes and Sylvia are united in an eternal embrace."

"For all its brevity, no expense was spared in the production, and the cost rose to an enormous sum of £7000. Cameramen and cast travelled to Port Arthur in Tasmania to shoot scenes in the ruins of convict settlement" (Pike & Cooper 1981).

The film was a great success. What part did it play in the public perception of Tasman Peninsula?

In 1911, *The Life of Rufus Dawes* was filmed, but this was shot in and around Sydney, with the famous Raymond Longford playing the convict cannibal, Gabbett. I do not know whether it was successful or not.

The most famous production of *For the Term of His Natural Life* was that by Norman Dawn in 1927 and there are no doubt numerous people who recall the making of this film or who may have had "bit" parts as extras, or helped in other ways. As news about the production spread, a wave of public opposition arose because it threatened to expose the "shameful" origins of Australia. So sensitive were we then about our history. Even the trade paper *Everyone's* editorialised (14 July 1926) that "those who were seeking to make capital out of the drab and sordid days of Australia" should be exposed and denounced. The matter was taken up at the highest levels of government. In parliament there were questions (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates 1926, vol. 114:4538, 4588, 5095-5096). The film would portray, thundered Senator Guthrie, the very worst in Australian and British history and be most misleading and detrimental to Australia, and the Senator sought prohibition of the product, as one might legislate against a noxious weed. In the House of Representatives, H.E. Pratten, Minister for Trade and Customs in the Bruce-Page Government, stated that the film would be an undesirable export unless the subject were very carefully treated. It was further stated that pictures of the capital cities could be shown, however, as a type of counter-measure, so that picture patrons would see Australia as it was and how it had developed. No doubt delighted with the

publicity, the producers (Australasian Films) responded to this criticism by mounting a defensive publicity campaign, and the film emerged with an opening title that stressed that the story was “purely a work of fiction” and that, in reminding the public of a “sordid phase of Man’s social life”, it provided inspiring evidence of progress and the ultimate millenium.

In recent years this scene of secondary punishment and minor factory enterprise has come under wide notice through the work of the Port Arthur Conservation and Development Project.

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

So what is Port Arthur’s place, and that of the associated probation stations, on Tasman Peninsula, in Tasmania itself and in Australia? Is it a memorial and, if so, a memorial to what — progress and the ultimate millenium? Is it an artefact in the landscape? In what ways is it related to, say, National Trust ideology and properties? Are we able with any precision to place Tasman Peninsula’s “contents” in our cultural past?

The present inevitably resonates with the impulses of the past. The peninsula, unknown I believe to many who came to Port Arthur as tourists, is far richer in historical terms than they may conclude. I venture to say that the past neglect of the area must be checked much more than is currently the case, even though excellent work has been done.

I have suggested already that one of the problems has been the deep sense of shame with which numerous Tasmanians have perceived the peninsula. They see it refracted through those years when it was shameful and degrading to own to a convict ancestor — and we are now beginning to discover that many more Australians than we thought are descended from convicts. One factor is that our nineteenth and twentieth-century predecessors were unremitting transmitters of disinformation about their origins. Determined to become respectable ladies and gentlemen, they swept their personal pasts under the carpet as the clouds of Victorian respectability descended. The convict past of Van Diemen’s Land was seen as belonging to some long-gone barbaric and bloody age. Attempts were made to mutilate convict documentary records; “respectable” historians by-passed the true origins of people and zeroed in on pioneers and gold seekers. Australia’s history was white-washed; the shameful stain of convictism was obliterated as far as it was possible. Visitors to Tasmania in the course of the later nineteenth century quickly learnt that it did not do to mention or discuss

the convict system for fear of upsetting colonists sensitive on the subject.

When the convict system was reluctantly faced, it was in terms of brave and upstanding Britons who kicked out against the harsh penal laws of England and were far more sinned against than sinning. This led to the perception that all convicts were transported for poaching and stealing to feed starving families. In this version of history, all was well; any tiny social traces of the “system” had been obliterated by cleansing streams of immigrants and thus Australians could hold up their heads in any company. This was despite the fact that obviously convicts transported in the early 1850s in their twenties were still alive and well at the time of federation.

But of course there were effects of the convict system, not least in the strength and role of the central government and the weakness of local government; the muted role of religion whose clerics had served as magistrates handing out savage punishment to malefactors; the rootlessness of people who were obliged to find their cultural being and identity in terms of imperialism and not nationalism.

There survived, especially in Tasmania and Tasman Peninsula, artefacts of the convict days which had been so well constructed that they crumbled only slowly if at all. Certainly little effort was made to prevent man aiding nature in removing these vestiges. Convict buildings were pillaged and looted for their bricks and timber so that settlers might construct respectable conventional dwellings. All this is perfectly understandable, but the question remains of what is to be done with the physical reminders of the convict system. Certainly their preservation and reconstruction may serve as a salutary reminder of man’s inhumanity to man (and there was inhumanity in anyone’s terms from time to time) but in relation to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, that inhumanity was more than a little tempered by thoughtful attempts to rehabilitate the convict and at the same time put him or her to employment which would forward the grand work of colonial exploitation.

We have come to concentrate too much on the dramatic highlights of the convict period, but now a time has come when, thanks in part to the genealogical boom, the origin and careers of the convicts are being seen in a different context. Truly each generation rewrites history. There is truth in the conclusion that the convicts in fact received a great chance to do well in Van Diemen’s Land, and many of them did. Or at least they certainly did a lot better than they would have done had they not been transported. A sentence to the colonies presented the opportunity for a fresh start, and many made a fresh start.

At the risk of being overly judgemental, I suggest that in the cultural landscape of the peninsula, Tasmania has a priceless heritage. It needs careful management and tactful administration. It is probably unrealistic to seek to preserve every vestige of the past, ranging from the bush itself through the great extent of convict buildings at Port Arthur, to the coal mines and so on. Ideally examples should be preserved, for the purpose of enriching our present and for future contemplation of the past. What examples? Here money and the will are necessary, but where there's a will there's a way. Personally I would like to see a Probation Station reconstructed in its landscape. I believe that certain areas of the environment embodying buildings both old and new should be further earmarked for preservation. Visitors should be able to feel in touch with the past. Perhaps museums should be embodied in the area, and certainly work needs to be done on the Aborigines who occupied part of the peninsula or at least camped there. We should be able to consider the replacement of one culture by another. I can glimpse, then, a future for the peninsula as a living example of past and present, in both tension and harmony with each other.

This is not the place to offer a clear-cut blueprint, but sometime in the future, it would be

superb if the visitor could sense a true empathy with the past, and how we came to be what we are: areas of bush and wildlife as they had developed over thousands of years; landscapes of old and new structures. There is an opportunity for a grand and visionary design which would make the peninsula world-famous.

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