

Notes on Writers on Tas. Aborigines

GA Robinson who brought in the blacks, 1831-1836, probably knew more about them than any other European. He devoted himself to the task of conciliating and trying to civilize them. He studied the various dialects of their language, & had a number of natives living with him on Bruny Island for some time. Several of these (eg. Mooreddy & Sraganini) became devotedly attached to him. They accompanied him on his expeditions, & it was by their help that he succeeded in inducing the tribes to come in. He wrote voluminous reports & letters to the Government, both while on his expeditions & when Superintendent at Flinders Island. Calder drew much of his information from Robinson's letters & reports. Robinson died at Bath, England, many years ago, leaving a widow. It is probable that he left behind him a large quantity of MSS relating to the Aborigines but unfortunately it is not known what has become of his papers.

Thirkell was a very early settler & saw much of the blacks, being on very friendly terms with them. He lived in a remote part of the colony where they had seen but little of the whites. Any information he gives is valuable.

Robt Davies & James Scott had good opportunities of observation, & may be relied on for accurately stating what they observed. Lloyd's opportunities were not so great, & he is somewhat given to embellishment and loose statements.

Milligan knew nothing of the blacks in their wild state. He was a medical man (I think had been a navy surgeon) & was appointed Superintendent of the Flinders Island Settlement. He had some scientific knowledge, & did good work in collecting the most extensive vocabulary that has been made of the language, & also writing down a few legends &c. He took great pains with the vocabulary but

it is disfigured by a vicious system of spelling, which leaves the accent & pronunciation of the words exceedingly uncertain. It must be remembered that his only knowledge of the blacks was long after they had been in contact with Europeans & under instruction. He died a few years since in England. Probably left papers behind him.

Dove was religious instructor at Huideers Island. He was a good man, but without ability & possessed small power of discrimination. His account of the religious ideas of the natives is quite unreliable. He was not capable of distinguishing between original native ideas and the confused notions which they had picked up from the whites & particularly from the religious instructors. There is little doubt that their answers to his questions largely re-echoed what he suggested to them, no doubt unconsciously. The "jump up white fellow" idea of a future state was probably developed after intercourse with Europeans.

Calder is very valuable. His account of the relations of the blacks with the whites is fair & temperate, & holds the balance very evenly between the exaggerations of both sides. It is by far the best, indeed I may say the only studiously just, account of the strife between the races down to the surrender of the blacks in 1831-36. His information is largely derived from Robinson's official reports. But he also obtained much from Ales McKay & others, who however got most of their knowledge as members of the "roving parties" sent out by Gov. Arthur before the Black War. He is sometimes biased by strong personal prejudices (eg. against Arthur & Milligan). It should be noted, too, that one of his chief informants was McKay, who was bitterly hostile to Robinson. However he knew Robinson himself.

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Calder employed himself for many years in collecting information at first hand from settlers & others respecting the aborigines & other subjects connected with the history of the Colony. He himself came to Tasmania soon after the Black War & had ready access to all the best sources of information, official & personal. Helong held the office of Surveyor General.

Kelly - Boat voyage of 1815 &c. This paper (of which I sent you a copy) contains an account of meeting with blacks on the West Coast who had never seen a white man. Also particulars respecting natives on the N^o coast where they had long been in contact with Sealers - Is reliable.

Backhouse. A shrewd & accurate observer. He only saw the blacks after their removal to Flinders Island, but in the course of his many journeys to all parts of Tasmania he had abundant opportunity of learning facts about the natives from old settlers &c. He may be relied on for exact accuracy in describing what he saw, & in reporting what he heard; and also for weighing the value of statements made to him. Perhaps as a member of the Society of Friends, deeply interested in the protection of the black races, he may have been disposed to rate their good qualities & their intelligence a little too high.

Borwick. In his 'Last of the Tasmanians' he has collected a large mass of information respecting the relations of the Blacks with the English Colonists. A great deal of his matter is taken from official papers. Probably no man has anything like Mr Borwick's knowledge of the early official records of

the Australian colonies. For a number of years he has been engaged in examining Colonial records in the State Record Office, London, & superintending transcriptions for various Australian Governments. His weak point is a ~~read~~ too great readiness to accept statements without sufficient examination of the authority for them, so that some of his stories of the treatment of the blacks must be received with caution.

H. M. Hull. Very inaccurate. Any story that he was told, or any statement that he met with in print, no matter where, he was ready to write down without question as absolute fact. His lecture on the Aborigines (of which I sent you a copy) contains the most utterly absurd stories, for which he does not profess to produce any proof or authority.

French Navigators. Labillardiere & Peron the historians of Océanographie. Bougain's expeditions respectively were strongly saturated with the then fashionable fancies of the Rousseau school as to the primitive innocence of Savages. They invested the blacks, especially the women, with charms & graces which existed chiefly in their own lively imaginations. Still they are valuable as giving the sole detailed accounts we have of the Aborigines prior to the influence of the whites.

The figures of natives in Labillardiere have little or no value. The three quarter portrait of a black woman is especially absurd. It is nothing but a fancy sketch, drawn according to academical notions of what the female figure should be. The figures (some coloured) in Peron are much better. I think the colours are fairly correct.

The sketches of implements, arms &c. have value as showing them before outside influence could have affected them!

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note particularly the "Canoe" (if it can be called so) of tea tree bark. The only known remaining specimen of the canoe is in a Paris Museum, taken home by Baudin's expedition most probably. The Tasmanian Museum has only a small model, made by a black.

Thos Bock, an artist of considerable merit, formerly resident in Hobart, made water colour drawings of a number of aborigines. They were made at the request of Lady Franklin who took them to England with her. It is probable that these are the drawings described by Cull in his paper in the Proceedings of the British Association for 1855. The Tasmanian Museum possesses a duplicate set. Two or three of the drawings were reproduced in Stzelecki's work. Also most of them in colours in Tenton's History, but these are wholly wrong in colour, being much lighter & yellower than the drawings. I think the originals are too light but this is probably due to the fading of the water colour.

Duterrean painted a number of the blacks in oils. These paintings are in Hobart. They are very poor productions in every respect. The drawing is bad & without character, & all are painted of the same uniform sooty black. My recollection of the natives is that they varied considerably in colour and that none were absolutely black. King Billy was nearly black, but Tuccani was of a much browner hue. See G. Walker's life for remarks on colour.