Notes on Wrties on Tas. Aborigines

C.A. 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, and a number of natives living with him on Bruny Island, for some tribe. Several of these (e.g. Moondy & Luroo-mine) became devotedly attached to him. They accompanied him on his expeditions, and 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 of when Superintendent at Flinders Island. Calden 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 MS relating to the Aborigines but unfortunately it is not known what has become of his papers.

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

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

William knew nothing of the blacks in their wild state. He was a medical man (which had been a navy surgeon) and was appointed Superintendent of the Flinders Island Settlement. He had some scientific knowledge and did good work in collecting the most extensive vocabulary that has been made of the language, taking down a few legends.

He took great pains with the vocabulary but
it is disfigured by a vicious system of spelling, which leaves
the accent and 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 before in

Rowe was religious instructor at Huiders Island.
He was a good man, but without ability to possess the all
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 “jeune, exalte, fello” idea of a
future state was probably developd after intercourse
with Europeans.

Calder is very valuable. His account of the relations
of the blacks with the whites is fair temperate.
He holds the balance very evenly between the exaggerations
of both sides. It is by far the best, indeed hourly say
the only judiciously 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 Alex
McKay, who however got most of their knowledge
as members of the “loving parties” sent out by Gov.
Arthur before the Black War. He is sometimes
biased by strong personal prejudices (e.g. against
Arthur Tullis). It should be noted, too, that one
of his chief informants was McKay, who was bitterly
hostile to Robinson. However, he knew Robinson's work.
Calder employed himself for many years in collecting information at first hand from letters to them respecting the aborigines to the subject 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. He long held the office of Surveyor General.

Kelly - boat voyage of 1815 &c. This paper (of which I lent 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 NE 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 letters &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 of 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 his 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, for superintending transcriptions for foreign
Australian Governments. His weak point is a 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. Bell. 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 facts. His lectures 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 Recherche. Madame'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 charmes et 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 an aborigine
is especially absurd. It is nothing but a fancy sketch,
drawn according to academical notions of what the
female figure should be. The figures (true coloured)
in Peron are much better. Though the colours are
fairly correct.

The sketches of implements, arrows & have value as showing
them before outside influence could have affected them.
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 no doubt. The Tasmanian Museum has only a small model, made by a black.

Thorbeck, 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 Queen's Museum possesses a duplicate set. Two or three of these drawings were reproduced in Strzelecki's work. Also most of them in colours in Tenter's History, but these are wholly wrong in colour, being much lighter yellow than the drawings. I think the originals are too light but this is probably due to the fading of the water colour.

Auvergne 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 Bunyuni was of a much bronze hue.

See Whaler's Life for remarks on colour.