

TYERELORE AND STRAITSMEN: THE TRUE STORY OF TASMANIAN ABORIGINAL SURVIVAL

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(with six plates)

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Much has been written, theorised and assumed about Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples and histories, but few representations of their life and culture have been recorded by the subjects themselves. This paper reiterates and expands on the conclusions drawn in previous work that tells the little-known history of the genesis of Tasmania's contemporary Aboriginal communities. The lifeworld and identity of the unique cultural group formed by the *Straitsmen* and their female Aboriginal partners, the *Tyereelore*, on the small islands of eastern Bass Strait, has remained virtually undisclosed in colonial narratives. They were entrepreneurs and shrewd traders of the surplus from the sea and land and in partnership they thrived despite the harsh environment and their precarious position in the socio-economic landscape. Against all odds, their joint skillsets, adaptability and resilience ensured the survival of their descendants today.

Key Words: *Straitsmen*, *Tyereelore*, Tasmanian Aboriginal history, Bass Strait islands, George Augustus Robinson.

INTRODUCTION

The first peoples of Tasmania and their descendants have been popular subjects of literary reportage and imagination from colonial times to the present day, and the oral histories about these people and places have been my legacy. However, while a plethora of historical narratives have been written about our precious old people – our founding mothers and fathers – their own voices have been largely absent from these accounts. As a proud Tasmanian Aboriginal woman directly related to the Pairrebeene/Trawlwoolway clan of northeast Tasmania I have dedicated many decades to redressing this oversight. There are, of course, many revisionary non-Aboriginal authors whose scholarship I respect. These include Stephen Murray-Smith, Henry Reynolds, Lynette Russell, Rebe Taylor, James Boyce and Lyndall Ryan, and I sincerely acknowledge their contribution to Tasmanian Aboriginal history in modern times. What this paper provides, which is perhaps more uncommon in the Tasmanian context, is the cultural lens through which the visual materials, stories and peoples are examined. As one of many descendants of the *Straitsmen* and their Aboriginal wives, I hope to do their remarkable story justice.

I am passionate about the Bass Strait islands and the history that has shaped those of us who are descended from the people who lived in these homelands. I grew up on Flinders Island within a strong extended community of relatives made up of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The old people called themselves *Islanders* and those

who were not part of the Aboriginal diaspora, were known as *Outsiders*, who in turn called the Islanders *halfcastes*, *darkies* and *niggers* (Greeno 1984, p. 13). My grandfather Silas Milton Mansell was born on Cape Barren Island just a few kilometres from the main settlement known as *The Corner* (pl. 1). He was in his early teens when his mother, father and siblings moved to live at Trousers Point on Flinders Island. My mother Dulcie was born at Prickly Bottom on Cape Barren Island during the tin mining season of 1932. Grandfather Silas and his brother Uncle Fred worked a small tin mine at Lee River on the northern side of the island (pl. 2).

My grandparents talked about those early years when racial discrimination and prejudice were rife on Flinders Island. They also recalled stories collected during their lifetime, of the old people who lived and muttonbirded on the outer islands – their family connections, boat building and navigation skills. They told of seasonal activities continued over generations, including collecting Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*), red bill (Oystercatchers, *Haematopus* sp.) and muttonbird (Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris*) eggs, harvesting muttonbirds, hunting wallabies for skins, making shell necklaces and mining for tin (Greeno 1984, pp. 5–14). These stories, and the rich historical and cultural heritage they contained, have been passed to me just as I have passed them on to my children and grandchildren.

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ISLANDER COMMUNITY

In *Grease and Ochre: the blending of two cultures at the colonial sea frontier* (Cameron 2011), the multifaceted dynamics are revealed that shaped cultural, social and economic relationships between the men who called themselves '*Straitsmen*' and the Aboriginal women who, of their own

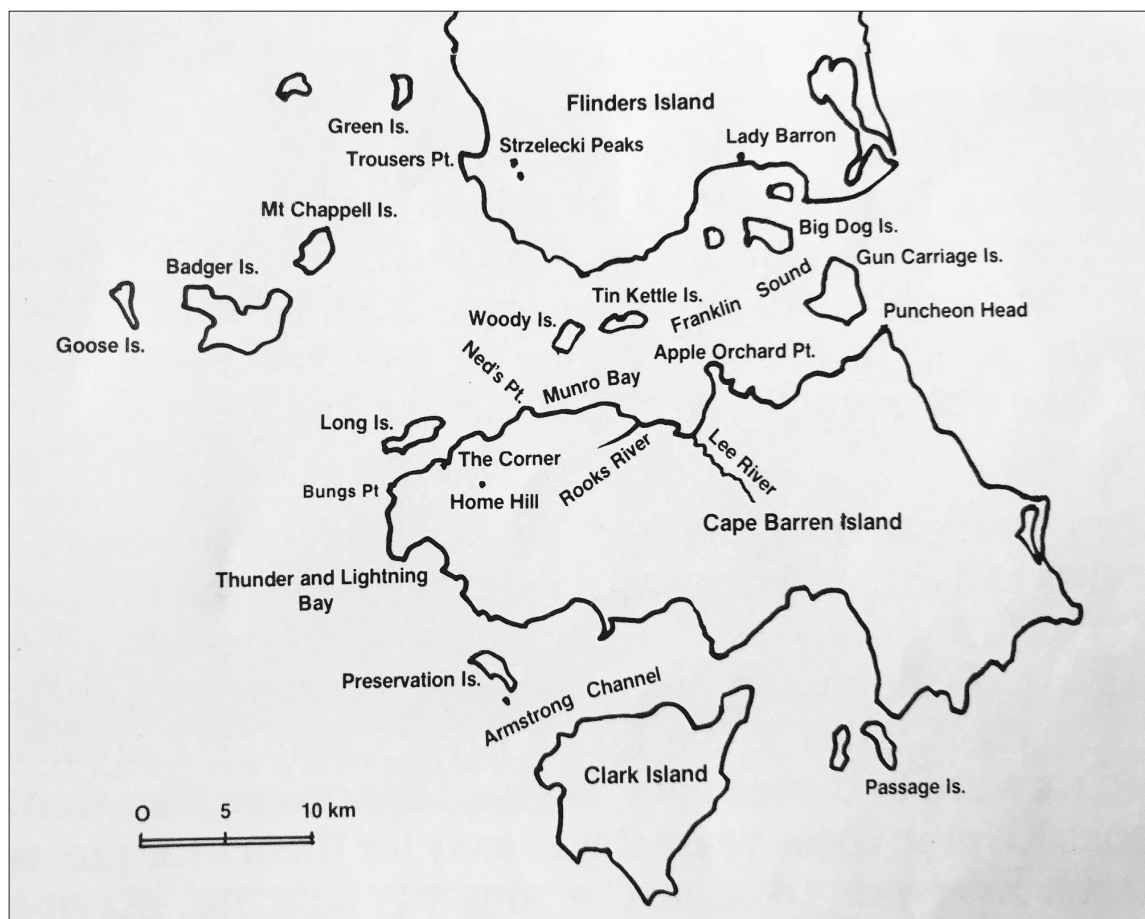


PLATE 1 — Map of the small islands of eastern Bass Strait referred to in this narrative including Preservation Island, Gun Carriage Island, Woody Island, Tin Kettle Island, Cape Barren Island and the southern part of Flinders Island. (Image from Greeno 1984, p. 9)

accord, called themselves '*Tyereelore*'. The title *Tyereelore* translates to *women of the islands* or *island wives*, which is insightful as it reveals how they saw themselves in the islander lifeworld. *Grease and Ochre* tells the story of these unique people and their lives on the Bass Strait islands during the first three decades of the 1800s. In it, several persistent assumptions/notions are interrogated and these are: that the group of men that identified as *Straitsmen* was a homogenous group of 'sealers'; that these men obtained Aboriginal women by kidnapping them from the Tasmanian mainland; that they treated them cruelly and brutally; and that these Aboriginal women were predominantly held against their will, having lost all cultural agency once taken to the islands.

Common knowledge is that *Straitsmen* were part of a larger group of mariners plying their trade in southern Australia during the early nineteenth century. They were labelled as lazy, drunken lawless miscreants, slave traders and abductors of Aboriginal women (Cameron 2011, pp. 71–111). Indeed, the *Straitsmen* were among these mariners on the sea frontier who filled a void after the professional sealers from Port Jackson left the straits for richer seal rookeries during colonial times. Some of these mariners continued to be engaged by wealthy fur traders in the colonial towns of Launceston and Hobart to undertake seasonal hunting of seals (*Arctocephalus* sp.)

for skins and oil. Some were sinister hunters of Elephant Seals (*Mirounga leonine*) for their tongues and oil, while others were assisting convicts to escape the colony. While some were seasonal fur traders only a small group of men, the *Straitsmen*, chose to settle and make their permanent homes on islands in Bass Strait.

As for the Aboriginal women with whom the *Straitsmen* lived and worked, some had accompanied the men to the islands of their own free will, others were bartered by their clans for valuable commodities such as hunting dogs, and a few were taken against their will. If the portrayal that these women were subjected to such punishing savagery as concubines and slaves is accurate, it is hard to explain how, despite the harsh remoteness of living on the Bass Strait islands, many *Tyereelore*, including Pleenperenner, Pollerelbrener, Wyerlooberer, Teekoolterme (Nimeranna), Woretemoeteyenner, Tangerootairer, Emmerenna and Wotticowidger, had numerous children and raised them successfully on their island homes. These women and their families mastered the dual necessities of cultural change and continuity on the colonial sea frontier, and an examination of their lives is crucial to a more accurate understanding of Tasmanian Aboriginal history and survival.



PLATE 2 — Looking across from the site of the Old Township at the northwestern edge of Cape Barren Island to the Mt Strzelecki Peaks of Flinders Island. Long Island can be seen in the foreground. (Photo: Patsy Cameron)

RELATIONSHIPS NEGOTIATED

So much of Tasmanian Aboriginal historiography is connected to colonial government agent George Augustus Robinson's journal entries, transcribed and edited by N.J.B. Plomley in the mid-twentieth century (Plomley 1966). While there is no doubt that this volume is a very valuable source, the search for the voices of the ancestors is not dependent upon George Augustus Robinson alone, as there are many personal stories, reliable eye-witness accounts and clues embedded within colonial maps, paintings and sketches that illuminate scenes from the past. Using a combination of these sources, it is possible to delve forensically into this period in colonial contact history in Tasmania. However, in a departure from most well-known accounts, by approaching the *Straitsmen* and *Tyereelore* as emotional and social beings, rather than impassive historical figures, it is possible to provide a more sensitive and nuanced portrayal of their lifeworld. Through this same lens, the character, motivation and mission of George Augustus Robinson is also reassessed, with interesting results.

The story of Robinson begins when he was posted to Bruny Island by Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur in 1829 to take charge of the stores at the first Aboriginal Station established in Van Diemen's Land. Soon after Robinson took up his role on Bruny Island he received

into his charge two *Tyereelore* who had arrived in Hobart on board the government brig *Prince Leopold* from Launceston. It was on 10 October when, at his house in Hobart, Robinson interrogated the two women, Mary and Fanny, to gather information about their lived experiences with the *Straitsmen* on the Bass Strait islands. In particular, he was interested in the 'slave traffic' in Bass Strait for he was convinced that:

"...this slave traffic is very common at the straits, and that the women so bartered or sold are subjected to every hardship which their merciless tyrants can think of and that from the time their slavery commences they are habituated to all the fatiguing drudgery which their profitable trade imposes. Surely this is the African slave trade in miniature, and the voice of reason as well as humanity loudly calls for its abolition. This information is further confirmed by the man Baker, who was himself a sealer in Bass's Straits and had for a considerable length of time cohabitated with the female Fanny". (Plomley 1966, p. 82)

While interviewing Fanny Robinson, he noted that she spoke English fluently, had been baptised in Launceston by the Reverend Youl, and since moving to the islands had learnt from her husband, a Straitsman named Baker, the skills to navigate and steer a schooner and to row a boat. Fanny also told Robinson that there were about fifty women

in the islands and plenty of children. Robinson was aware that Baker had been charged for allegedly taking three women forcibly from Bruny Island, but the charge was dismissed because it could not be proven. In his appraisal of Fanny, Robinson judged her to be of middle stature, strong, very robust and of quick intellect. He also judged that both women had been subjected to hardship and drudgery as an indication of them being slaves (Plomley 1966, p. 82). Robinson failed to comprehend what life on the islands required from the men and women in order for their families to survive and thrive and mistook the markers of hard work and life battling harsh elements with those of slavery.

In response to Robinson's question about the slave trade the other *Tyereelore* woman he encountered in Hobart, Mary, also described her experience of clan negotiations with the *Straitsmen*. Mary stated that it was her people who agreed to the bartering of women with the *Straitsmen* in exchange for flour and potatoes. She had obviously resisted this exchange, for the *Straitsmen* had bound her hands and feet and took her away in a boat to the islands and that no attempt was made by her countrymen to 'rescue' her.

The barter or exchange of women in marriage was a traditional cultural practice of the clans. It was customary for young women to be taken away into the bush by a potential 'husband' and after a time if all went well, they returned as a couple (Plomley 1966, p. 83). Likewise, these traditional practices of exchange were practised on the northeast coast between the local clanspeople and the *Straitsmen*, who negotiated for women along customary lines. Agreements were made between the *Straitsmen* and local clansmen, including a clan headman Mannalargenna, who had bartered four of his daughters and a sister (Cameron 2011, p. 89). Meanwhile, in late 1829 Robinson prepared to leave Bruny Island to commence the trek into the remote regions of the island that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had recently commissioned him to undertake.

ISLANDER LIFEWORLDS

Robinson started out from Bruny Island via the rugged west coast on the first of his so-called Friendly Missions. He would eventually make personal contact with the *Straitsmen* and *Tyereelore* at a number of locations. Robinson's arrival at several western Bass Strait camps offers valuable insights into the lives of the *Straitsmen* and their wives and provides evidence that certainly rebuts the myths that the men were a pack of drunken, lawless thugs and uncivilised brutes. Instead, what Robinson found would demonstrate irrefutably that the *Straitsmen* and their wives lived a sophisticated and civilised existence, and in doing so not only survived, but thrived on these remote Bass Strait islands.

The *Straitsmen* divided their seasonal hunting grounds, in which to harvest seal skins and oil, into geographical areas of western and eastern Bass Strait. When Robinson arrived on the northwest coast on the first leg of his Friendly Mission, he recorded being impressed by the scene of a *Straitsmen's* camp on Hunter Island. Three neat

cottages thatched with grass were, according to Robinson, 'delightfully situated in a valley in which runs a stream of fine water' (Plomley 1966, p. 176). Robinson's sketch depicts a safe harbour, fenced gardens where he saw potatoes, turnips and cabbages growing, and a large puncheon full of seal skins, all of which should have been evidence enough of both hard work and a comfortable lifestyle (pl. 3). On the mainland opposite Robbins Island, Robinson described another camp with several cabins thatched with grass and a large number of kangaroo skins pegged out to dry. Here he met the headman John Witieye who was from New Zealand and whom Robinson considered to be 'very civil'. At this second site there were several *Straitsmen*, six *Tyereelore* and one Aboriginal lad, Tunnerminerwait, accompanied by about thirty hunting dogs, the use of which was adopted by Aboriginal people from the very early period of colonisation. Robinson was told by the *Tyereelore* that they had not been forced to live with these *Straitsmen*. Furthermore, in an ironic and embarrassing twist of fate, he was later rescued by them from drowning and taken to a camp opposite Robbins Island where he was fed, and provided with a change of dry clothes and a dry bed to sleep on (Plomley 1966, p. 176–181).

Robinson had a lot to be grateful for in terms of being rescued, and their generous hospitality, which included being given a much-needed supply of fresh potatoes and turnips from Hunter Island. On his departure from the camp the *Tyereelore* also presented Robinson with significant cultural gifts of shell necklaces and he in return gave them items of colonial society including glass beads, pincushions and buttons. However, in what might have been mistaken by those at the camp for a sign of mutual respect, Robinson seems not to have been simpatico, for his prejudiced view of the *Straitsmen* had blinded him from acknowledging their generosity, let alone their resilience to hardships and the abundant lifestyle they led. All the while Robinson was making 'observations' through prejudiced eyes and looking for every opportunity to confirm his belief that the women had been forced to live with them as slaves, and he continued to interrogate the *Straitsmen*, their wives and workers wherever he met them.

BANISHMENT FROM THE HOMELANDS

Another falsity common in public awareness of early colonial history relates to the form and circumstances of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples' removal from their homelands on mainland Tasmania. Robinson had been commissioned by Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to circumambulate Van Diemen's Land and, through his 'tame Aborigines' or Aboriginal guides, make contact with the clans in the bush and convince them to place themselves under his care. This was a way that Arthur could appease the colonists by ridding the lands of the clans and thus allowing the colony to expand its economic intrusions onto the homelands without being attacked. As noted, Robinson referred to these endeavours as the 'Friendly Mission'. What follows highlights the lengths to which Robinson would go to achieve his aims.



PLATE 3 — Hunter Island *Straitsmen* camp sketched by G.A.R. Robinson in 1830. (Image from Plomley 1966, p. 163)

By October 1830, when Robinson's Friendly Mission arrived in Launceston, the colony was preparing for a military-style operation on the Aboriginal clans in the bush. In response to this, Robinson proceeded quickly to the northeast coast to make contact with the clans in that area. This incursion into clan country is very important to the narrative for it will explain more about Robinson's deceptive strategies to coerce the people into going with him and to understand why the people left their homelands. It will also raise the alarm for the security of the *Tyereelore* as they were put at risk by Robinson's intervention into their lives with the *Straitsmen*.

On 1 November 1830, with the help of his Aboriginal guides, Robinson located a small number of confederated clans inland from the Bay of Fires on Ansons Plain in the northeast of mainland Tasmania. This was a time when the military operation called the 'Grand Army' by Robinson (also known as 'The Line', and later coined the 'Black Line') was well underway. Robinson took advantage of the confederated clans' concern about unexpected encounters with armed parties in the bush, by telling them that if they did not accompany him, they would all be shot by the soldiers (Plomley 1966, p. 261). This was a deceitful move by Robinson for he knew that the military operation was far to their south, but his remarks caused the two clanswomen and five clansmen, including my ancestral grandfather Mannalargenna, to place themselves under his protection. This group became the first of the clans who were still free in the bush to leave their homelands and go to Swan Island under the assumption that their lives were in immediate peril instilled by Robinson.

Robinson needed to relocate the exiles further afield than Swan Island to prevent them from escaping back to their homelands. Robinson's deception was not simply opportunistic, it was pragmatic. He depended on his mission succeeding for it meant personal rewards in grants of land and money. Success would raise his status above that of a bricklayer, and wealth would bring social advantage to himself and his family. In seeking a more remote place for his exiles to be relocated from Swan Island, Robinson set out on a voyage of reconnaissance to the eastern Bass Strait islands. This voyage to the island homes of the *Straitsmen* was not only necessary in terms of finding the ideal location for his Aboriginal 'mission', but would give Robinson the opportunity to further interrogate the *Tyereelore* about their lived experience and for him to collect information on the character and economic situation of the *Straitsmen*.

ISLANDS OF PLENTY ON THE SEA FRONTIER

Robinson's voyage took him to Preservation Island, where he was greeted by old James Munro who had lived on the island for a decade. Munro was the same man Mary had earlier referred to as a good man who had provided the women and children with milk, vegetables, meat and bathing facilities. Mary had also said that Preservation Island was a good place and that it was better than what she had experienced during her short stay at the Aboriginal Station on Bruny Island. In response to Robinson's question about what he was seeking on this remote island, Munro stated that he had found

contentment living on Preservation Island (Plomley 1966, p. 269). Munro had obviously gained some respect from colonial authorities as he was appointed to the position of Constable as early as October 1825 so that law and order could be established in the straits. Munro was also respected by his fellow *Straitsmen* to whom he provided wise counsel when asked, although Robinson's view of him, revealed in his dispatches to the Governor, was at total counterpoint. The impacts of Robinson's arrival in the Bass Strait would soon become clear to the *Straitsmen* and their families and unsettle the serene lifeworld Munro described.

Munro had been among a number of professional sealers from Port Jackson working in Bass Strait in the late eighteenth century. When the majority left for richer sealing grounds around 1810, he and a small number of mariners settled on several islands in the Furneaux Group to carve out a living away from the colonial towns. Many of the *Straitsmen* resented being indentured to wealthy merchants in towns like Launceston and Hobart and had decided to shun colonial society for a life of freedom on the islands (Russell 2012, p. 105). As it would soon become clear, *Straitsmen* were not just hunters of seal but were also agriculturalists, seasonal wallaby hunters, boat builders, fishermen, miners of precious gemstones and traders of skins and surplus produce (Cameron 2011, p. 110, p. 121).

Henry Laing's sketch of Preservation Island evokes the memory of Mary and her portrayal of an abundant life on the island (pl. 4). The sketch reveals several neat homesteads snuggled among Casuarina trees located a short distance

inland from a sheltered boat harbour. There are large fenced garden areas near the homesteads surrounded by grassy fields although the image does not include details of what vegetables and animals were present. Robinson identified animals in the fields including goats, rabbits, pigs and sheep, along with wheat, barley and potatoes growing in the gardens. At the time of Robinson's visit, Munro had three Aboriginal children in his care, all of whom were receiving instruction in the scriptures and learning to read and write. Although there was little acknowledgement of the significance of Munro progressing the children's literacy skills, Robinson could not deny it for he later witnessed a package of testaments and spelling books that had arrived on board a cutter from Hobart Town (Plomley 1966, p. 273). It is important to note that teachers of their children should be added to the list of skills of the *Straitsmen*.

On Woody Island, Robinson met old Gordy Robinson (no relation of G.A. Robinson), who was incapacitated after losing sight in one eye, along with two clanswomen, a child, and several domesticated dogs and cats. Gordy could not be accused of being lazy for he raised fowls, pigs, grew crops of grain and vegetables and prospected for precious gemstones. Between the numerous granitic outcrops on this small island, Gordy grew wheat as 'high as a man's head', as well as potatoes, onions and cabbages that covered about two acres of land. There was also an immense muttonbird rookery on the west side and an assortment of other bird species such as quail, magpies and moorhens which were in abundance, along with many large snakes. The old man Gordy had made good use of



PLATE 4 — A close-up view of Preservation Island sketched by Henry Laing in March 1831 that shows James Munro's cottages and large fenced gardens. (Image from Plomley 1987, pp. 98–99)

the carcass when butchering his pigs, boasting that he was the first in the islands to make bacon. While on Woody Island, Robinson took the opportunity to threaten the old *Straitsmen* stating 'The government was not going to treat with them (the *Straitsmen*) and it was well for him I came here or he would be cleared off the island' (Plomley 1966, p. 271). His wife Ploorernelle had a small boy and Gordy was concerned for her to stay and care for him in his old age, a point that probably led Robinson to allow her to stay with him. However, he removed the other woman who he discovered to be Mannalargenna's sister, Toogernuppertootenner (Plomley 1966, p. 270).

The removal of Toogernuppertootenner may be seen as an opportunity for her to reunite with her kin who were with Robinson and that she would also be able to join her brother and other family members on Swan Island. Whatever her circumstances, she may not have had a choice. Robinson's motivation appears to be to remove as many of the *Tyereelore* from the *Straitsmen* as he can to appease his male exiles who were increasing in number on Swan Island. The following day Robinson set off for Gun Carriage Island where a large group of *Straitsmen* and their families lived.

In Plate 5, the colonial artist Henry Laing depicted Robinson's boat with sails still set anchored in Gun Carriage Island Bay seaward of the *Straitsmen's* boats. This island was much bigger than Preservation Island and Woody Island, and like the other two islands, contained a large

muttonbird rookery. According to Robinson, there were eight cottages and several outbuildings with large fenced gardens where potatoes and peas were growing and goats, pigs and chickens roamed the grassy fields. Thomas Tucker was the headman and he lived there with his wife Worererkanner, whose nickname was Dumpe, and their young son, along with a number of other *Straitsmen* and their families. Robinson described this island as 'a delightful place' (Plomley 1966, p. 272).

The existence of Laing's careful depictions of these small island homes is extremely important as it enables us to visually critique the islands' lifeworld and, along with Robinson's descriptions, allows the voices of the ancestors to be heard. On close inspection of these drawings and paintings the islands can be seen as orderly and productive. Robinson himself presented the same visual descriptions of the *Straitsmen* and *Tyereelore* in his sketch of their campsite on Hunter Island and the mainland camp opposite Robbins Island. In that case, Robinson described a bountiful life with grazing livestock, fenced gardens, wooden huts neatly thatched with grass, thriving crops of wheat along with the production of up to twenty-five tons of potatoes and surplus supplies of cabbages and peas.

While, Robinson could not fail to be impressed by the mixed economy operating on the colonial sea frontier, he could not, or would not, acknowledge the economic partnership of the *Straitsmen* and their Aboriginal common law wives. His blindness to *Tyereelore* skill and agency is



PLATE 5 — Painting by Henry Laing in 1831 from the hill on Gun Carriage Island looking west down Franklin Sound. Cape Barren Island is on the left with Woody Island and Tin Kettle Island in the distance. (Image from Plomley 1987, pp. 34–35)

evident in his assertion that 'The men cannot live by sealing alone and that they are dependent upon these slaves for their subsistence' (Plomley 1966, p. 295, p. 303). In fact, the *Tjereelore's* contribution was selective and instrumental. They did not tend European animals other than their many dogs, nor did they care for the vegetable gardens. They probably did not cook inside on kitchen stoves or clean the house for they were described as terrible cooks and dreadful housekeepers (Plomley 1966, p. 107). The *Tjereelore* contributed to the food supply by diving for crayfish and mutton-fish (abalone) on the rocky reefs. They looked after the muttonbird rookeries, collected eggs during the egg season and plucked hundreds of birds for their feathers and other products that were exported as an important commodity. They walked the beaches for favoured tiny shells, gathered mairreeners from the kelp at low tide, and cleaned and sorted them to thread into beautiful necklaces which they sent to colonial towns for sale. Robinson was given many strings of shells during his island visits but it is doubtful that he appreciated the effort of collecting and making these exquisite cultural treasures. As well as making shell necklaces the *Tjereelore* hunted wallabies for their skins, to sell in the colonial towns and gathered supplies of wild fruits to supplement the island diet. There was a division of labour between the women and the men although together they worked to harvest a surplus (Cameron, 2011, pp. 119–123).

ROBINSON'S CHARACTER EXPOSED

When Robinson left Gun Carriage Island, he took with him two more women. They exchanged presents and tokens with each other before their sad departure. In addition, when he returned to Swan Island in mid-November he sent his coxswain James Parish back to the islands to obtain more *Tjereelore*. As Plomley noted 'he must have realized that his settlement would not function successfully with too few women, even if he thought of them as housekeepers rather than wives. The idea of Aboriginal women as consensual sexual partners seemed to unnerve Robinson. According to Plomley he 'was a prude; he did not approve of the natives showing their sexual desires...' (Plomley 1987, p. 29). Whatever Robinson's reasoning, Parish took away eleven more women in December 1830. One can only imagine that the opportunity to join other family members on Swan Island sweetened the bitter pill.

Although I argue through this paper that the *Tjereelore* had agency over their lives with their *Straitsmen* husbands, Robinson's aspiration was to remove as many women as he could during this voyage, and his position as a government official gave him enormous leverage. His threats to evict families from their island homes if they did not comply were not idle ones. A few months after Robinson's reconnoiter to Gun Carriage Island, without any regard for the men, women and children who lived there, he sent in armed men to evict the families from the island. The cottages, sheds, paddocks and gardens were annexed for the second attempt to establish a suitable place for his increasing

number of clanspeople who were accommodated on the smaller Swan Island.

Tragically, within a few months several of the people died from fever and dysentery including four women, Lucenermictic Wockerner, Ghoneyanener, Noendapper and her sister Walyer, and three males, Tarnebunner, Terlanderreener and Cowertenninner (Plomley 1987, p. 938). Furthermore, it was not long before Gun Carriage Island was found unsuitable to support the increasing number of people arriving there. A search for a more suitable location was undertaken and a place at The Lagoons, surrounded by wetlands and located above the beach on the west coast of Flinders Island, was chosen. The Lagoons, however, was also found to be unsuitable as the people were exposed to the westerly gales and drinking water was contaminated with salt. Eventually, in February 1833 the establishment was moved to Pea Jacket Point, later renamed Wybalenna (Plomley 1987, pp. 21–22).

When Gun Carriage Island was abandoned for The Lagoons in late November 1831, the *Straitsmen* and their families returned to their homes after nine months, but Robinson would not leave them in peace and his persistent interference in their lives continued to put the island families under stress. He eventually removed about seventeen *Tjereelore* from their husbands and children, which caused alarm among the island families. As a result of Robinson's actions, James Munro and Edward Sydney Mansell sailed their boat to Hobart and requested an audience with Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to put their case for the return of their wives. Arthur agreed that the *Straitsmen* and their children relied on the women for survival and he instructed Robinson that their wives should be returned (Calder 1972, p. 15). This decision by Arthur would have infuriated Robinson, and he continued to discredit the *Straitsmen* whenever he could. As a man who supposedly followed religious instruction, Robinson lacked empathy with the *Straitsmen*. He had no regard for the health and wellbeing of families on the islands, nor for their economic independence and survival. His main objective was to gain acclaim, increase his wealth and secure land that would come from his success with 'civilising' the people at the Wybalenna Aboriginal Establishment.

FIFTEEN YEARS OF COEXISTANCE

Over a period of fifteen years between 1832 and 1847 the Wybalenna exiles lived alongside the *Straitsmen* and *Tjereelore* families. During times of seasonal harvesting the people from Wybalenna walked around the base of Mt *Strzelecki* to Yellow Beach. They would light signal fires for the *Straitsmen* to bring the women and children to meet them to go muttonbirding on the islands in Franklin Sound. They also went on treks together along the east coast of Flinders Island to gather swan eggs during the laying season. Evidence can be found when viewing a map of Flinders Island drawn in 1832 by surveyor George Woodward who identified two sites located beside Camerons Inlet and Logans Lagoon where traditional (native) huts were built (pl. 6). These huts were



PLATE 6 — Map of Flinders Island drawn by surveyor George Woodward in 1832 depicts the location of traditional huts close to Camerons Inlet and Logans Lagoon (Image from Plomley 1987, p. facing 83)

built to shelter families from the outer islands during the period they came to Flinders Island to gather swan eggs and harvest wild ducks that bred and foraged on the wetlands.

It is important to acknowledge that seasonal hunting provided opportunities for gatherings where connection and reconnection between the Wybalenna exiles and Islander families took place. It is not difficult to imagine that stories and traditional practices would have been shared and passed on around the campfires as they sat under the stars. In 1833 during a trek to the east coast of Flinders Island, Robinson noted seeing evidence of hunting activity. Beside the lagoons he came across 'pegs sticking in the ground [in a place which] must have been ...[a] favourite resort of the sealing women. Those pegs had been used for stretching out the wallaby skins' (Plomley 1987 p. 510). In concert, the evidence provided on Woodward's map, along with Robinson's records, is extremely important, as the close connections between *Straitsmen* and *Tjereelore*

families and the people at Wybalenna is not one that has been proliferated in other versions, and its revelation adds a new layer of complexity to the colonial Aboriginal identity politics.

LOVING RELATIONSHIPS AND HEALTHY FAMILIES

In addition to the sketches, maps, paintings and written descriptions by Robinson there are two further accounts recorded by Europeans who had personal contact with the island families, that offer new insights into the remote lifeworld of the *Straitsmen* and *Tjereelore*. The first account was written six years before Robinson arrived in the straits. It was 1824 and John Boulton had exhausted his finances while in Hobart Town. When offered a trip on a sealing vessel to Bass Strait he took up the opportunity of free food

and lodgings and the promise of adventure on the high seas. After spending several weeks riding out a storm off the northeast coast, the crew of the *Sally* dropped anchor in calm waters of Kent Bay on the southern side of Cape Barren Island. The sealing ketch was later joined by two whale-boats that pulled up alongside with about twelve men and a number of women and their dogs, on board. One boat was captained by Thomas Tucker from Gun Carriage Island and the other boat came from Preservation Island. Boulton described the men and women all looking the same and smelling like foxes. The women were dressed in kangaroo skin frocks that were stitched together with the fur on the inside. The men wore kangaroo skin great coats with capes attached and they wore sandals on their feet also made of the skin of kangaroo. Boulton wrote in his journal that the men looked like barbarians and they had boarded the *Sally* with confidence 'as if they owned it' (Cameron 2011, p. 107). Although their appearance was rough with their disheveled hair and bushy beards, Boulton referred to the men as 'worthies' (Cameron 2011, p. 107).

The second account was written by John Lort Stokes during the years between 1839 and 1842 when Robinson was living in Melbourne and his influence in the islands had waned. Stokes was commissioned by the colonial governor to locate suitable sites for the construction of lighthouses that would ensure safe maritime navigation around the islands. Towards the end of his voyage, Stokes had the opportunity to spend time with the families living on the small islands. He observed that the men referred to their wives as their 'sweethearts' (Cameron 2011, p. 106). He found that the children were fine looking and healthy and the young boys were dexterous at throwing spears, adding that they would make fine harpooners on whaling ships (Cameron 2011, p. 110). The reports of Stokes and Boulton are insightful. Boulton saw beyond wild appearances, judging the men to be 'men of substance'. Stokes was impressed by the health and vigour of the children and his exposure of the fondness felt by the men towards their *Tyereelore* helpmates is both illuminating and extremely touching.

CONCLUSION

What my alternative reading of this crucial phase in Tasmania's colonial history reveals is a much more complex and insightful story than previous narratives have articulated. While some other historians, past and present, fail to emphasise or understand is the establishment of Aboriginal homelands on the small islands of Bass Strait and the true characters of those who built lives and economies there. These people, the *Tyereelore* and the *Straitsmen*, are tragically misunderstood.

The *Straitsmen* were not predominantly slave traders or miscreants as so often portrayed to be. Most were

hardworking men and, despite their rough barbaric appearance, were entrepreneurs and shrewd traders of skins, feathers and surplus produce from the sea and land. The Aboriginal women who chose to work alongside them called themselves *Tyereelore* (*island woman or island wife*). They contributed to the island economy by harvesting muttonbirds and swan for feathers, eggs and meat, and collecting shells to make exquisite necklaces for sale and cultural purposes.

Together in partnership, the *Straitsmen* and the *Tyereelore* not only survived but thrived. They did so despite the harsh environment, their precarious position in the socio-economic landscape and the colonial government's campaign to steal the island women and evict the island families from their homes. Had Robinson succeeded, the present-day Tasmanian Aboriginal diaspora would not exist. This narrative honours the strength, tenacity, courage and resilience of those people – our ancestors.

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