

The Royal Society of Tasmania

APOLOGY TO TASMANIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLE 2021

On Monday, 15 February 2021, the Royal Society of Tasmania (RST) and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) delivered paired Apologies to the Aboriginal people of Tasmania. The event was held in the Courtyard of TMAG, Hobart, and attended in person by about one hundred invited guests including members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, members of the Council of the RST and members of the Board of Trustees of TMAG. A large number of invited guests also witnessed the event by livestream. It was also the first time the Aboriginal flag had been flown at Customs House to commemorate the significance of this event.

The delivery of RST's Apology was the culmination of efforts that began in earnest at the end of 2019 when a first draft of the Apology was considered by RST Council. Co-Chairs of the Aboriginal Engagement Committee (AEC), Professor Greg Lehman and Professor Matt King, sought feedback on the draft Apology from the Aboriginal Advisory Council of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Aboriginal Reference Group of the Queen Victoria Museum

and Art Gallery as well as the Council of the RST. The draft Apology was revised many times by members of the AEC until the final version crystallised in January 2021, a few weeks before the Apology was delivered.

TMAG was engaged in framing its Apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal people more-or-less at the same time, so the two organisations agreed to deliver paired apologies. A Joint Working Group comprising representatives from TMAG and RST was established in August 2020 and met almost weekly to put in place the plans required for the event. On the day of delivery, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions regulated the number of people who could attend in person, with all others being accommodated via livestream.

The event began with Professor Matt King, Chair of the RST Aboriginal Engagement Committee, and Janet Carding, Director of TMAG, welcoming guests, presenting the Acknowledgment of Country on behalf of each of the two organisations and introducing the speakers. No media or government officials were invited, however, the Governor of Tasmania, Her Excellency the Honourable Professor Kate Warner AC, attended in her capacity as Patron of the RST and TMAG and was the first invited speaker.

For both the RST and TMAG, offering an Apology was a means of publicly acknowledging past actions and practices that have caused immense hurt and suffering to Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The Apologies signify the commitment of the two organisations to building strong and respectful relationships with Tasmanian Aboriginal people now and in the future.



Professor Matt King, Chair of the RST Aboriginal Engagement Committee, welcoming attendees. Photograph courtesy of Simon Cuthbert.



RST President, Mrs Mary Koolhof, delivering RST's Apology. Photograph courtesy of Jillian Mundy.

The RST and TMAG Apologies were paired in recognition of the shared history of the two organisations. That shared history began with the formation of the RST in 1843 and was explained in the Preamble presented by Her Excellency.

The second speaker was the President of RST, Mrs Mary Koolhof, who delivered RST's Apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The Apology identified past negative practices including mistreatment and exhumation of Aboriginal ancestral remains and promised the beginning of a new era in the Society's relationship with Aboriginal people.

The Chair of the Board of Trustees of TMAG, Ms Brett Torossi, delivered TMAG's Apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal people. This Apology recognised the long history of profoundly hurtful practices including removal of cultural artifacts, and a commitment to re-dress past wrongs.



Director of TMAG, Ms Janet Carding (left) and Chair of TMAG Board of Trustees, Ms Brett Torossi, following the delivery of the TMAG Apology.



In the audience, left to right foreground, Chair of TMAG Board of Trustees, Ms Brett Torossi, Nala Mansell, Rodney Gibbins and Michael Mansell. In the background are members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community holding historical photographs of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Rodney Gibbins and Michael Mansell responded to the Apologies on behalf of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Photograph courtesy of Jillian Mundy.

Mr Rodney Gibbins, the first Chair of TMAG's Aboriginal Advisory Council, and Mr Michael Mansell, Chair of the Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania, responded on behalf of Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Rodney Gibbins began by mentioning some of the actions central to the discrimination and ill-treatment suffered by Tasmanian Aboriginal people following invasion, including the atrocities involving Aboriginal ancestral remains. He went on to explain that despite the obstacles, Tasmanian Aboriginal people have successfully campaigned for recognition, acceptance and autonomy. Attitudes and actions have gradually changed, including advances such as the recognition of land rights (1995) and the Apology to the 'stolen generation' (2004). He described the delivery of the Apologies as a significant step towards equality, justice and recognition of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and welcomed the opportunity to work in partnership with RST and TMAG.

Mr Michael Mansell brought to life the significance of the Preminghana petroglyphs in the lives of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people who created them. He regards the recent agreement reached with TMAG for the return of the petroglyphs as evidence of a new willingness to take responsibility for and acknowledge past mistakes, not just the modern mistakes but those made by all previous generations. Michael drew attention to the photographs of some Tasmanian Aboriginal 'Old People' on display, explaining that although the Apologies are being offered to the current generation, we must include the 'Old People' who suffered grievously. In his final words, Michael spoke for the 'Old People': "I stand here before you, on behalf of all those people, and readily accept with pride, the Apology that was given in the spirit in which it was stated".



Mr Michael Mansell delivering his reply flanked by historical photographs held by members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Photograph courtesy of Sally Bryant.

The formalities closed with a smoking ceremony, presided over by Jamie Graham-Blair and Auntie Wendal Pitchford. All attendees had the opportunity to be marked by ochre as a sign of belonging, and to be enveloped by the healing and cleansing smoke of the peppermint gum. Indigenous and traditional foods were then shared by all.

The Apology event can be viewed on <https://youtube/ZRVwcS6DQW8> and a framed copy of the RST Apology is on display in the RST Lecture Room, TMAG. Permission has been given by the five key speakers for the transcripts of their speeches to follow this article.

Professor Jocelyn McPhie

RST Vice President 2021



During the smoking ceremony, Auntie Wendal Pitchford applying ochre to Her Excellency, the Honourable Professor Kate Warner AC, and Mr Richard Warner AM looking on. Photograph courtesy of Jillian Mundy.

Preamble

THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF TASMANIA AND TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY APOLOGY TO TASMANIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

delivered by Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC, Governor of Tasmania

Thank you for inviting me to deliver a Preamble to the Apologies from the Royal Society of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

There is important symbolism, I think, in the invitation to the Governor to perform this role today given the long association of this position with both organisations. Lieutenant Governors and then, after self-government, Governors have always been the Royal Society's President and more recently Patron. And from the earliest days the Governor has had a close relationship with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. For these reasons the island's Vice-Regal representative has been at least complicit in the Society's and the Museum's omissions and misdeeds and their consequences.

I will briefly explain the historical ties which makes it appropriate to pair these two Apologies.

The Royal Society of Tasmania (then of Van Diemen's Land) was founded in 1843 by Lieutenant Governor Sir John Eardley Wilmot with the aim of increasing knowledge, in particular knowledge about the island, and promoting research. For much of its history, the Governor, as President, attended and chaired its meetings. From the earliest days, the Society began building up collections of art and natural history specimens including Aboriginal artefacts and ancestral remains, all of which were housed in the Royal Society's Museum, the foundation stone of which was laid by Governor Sir Henry Fox Young in 1861.

In 1885 the Society relinquished the building and most of the collections to the people of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Museum was born, to become known as the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery after it opened a gallery wing four years later. Until 2017 the trustees of the Museum were required to present an annual report

of the proceedings and progress of the Institution to the Governor and these reports included acquisitions.

The two organisations, while maintaining connections and some common membership of governing bodies – indeed the Museum's first Curator after it was transferred from the Royal Society was also the Secretary of the Royal Society, positions he held until 1907 – have had separate Acts of Parliament and separate boards of governance since 1885. The Royal Society is still based at TMAG, with an entrance in Davey Street.

It is important to note that these Apologies are not simply an apology for past actions, important as truth-telling is to acknowledge the devaluing of a culture that dates back at least 40,000 years, the acts of desecration and disrespect in relation to ancestral remains and cultural artefacts and the assertions of extinction and denial of survival of the Aboriginal people of lutruwita Tasmania.

These Apologies also look to the future with undertakings to change the narrative, to play an important role in communicating the cultural and spiritual significance of Country in the lives of our First Peoples of lutruwita/Tasmania and in fostering the continuity of their culture; to make the respective institutions inclusive, respectful, equitable and welcoming to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and the Apologies embrace a commitment to playing a part in redressing the inequalities experienced by our First Peoples that the two organisations have contributed to.

And finally, as both organisations acknowledge, these Apologies are not given in the expectation of acceptance or receiving anything in return from the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. But they are intended to signal a commitment to a different and better future.

THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF TASMANIA APOLOGY TO TASMANIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

delivered by Mary Koolhof, President of The Royal Society of Tasmania

Today the Royal Society of Tasmania apologises unreservedly to the Aboriginal people of lutruwita (Tasmania).

This apology is long overdue.

The Royal Society of Tasmania recognises that it has been responsible for negative impacts on Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the past, and that these impacts contribute to the disadvantage, injustice and intergenerational trauma suffered today.

The Council of the Royal Society of Tasmania, on behalf of its membership, offers this sincere and formal apology to the Aboriginal people of lutruwita (Tasmania).

We acknowledge that:

The Society acted to exhume and to purchase the ancestral remains of Tasmanian Aboriginal people for scientific study. In some cases these remains were sent to collecting institutions outside of Tasmania.

Exhumation and mistreatment of ancestral remains occurred with a lack of regard for their deep cultural and spiritual significance. In at least one case, exhumation was against the expressed wish of the individual concerned.

These remains were held by the Society in the Royal Society Museum without care or respect, and without discussion or permission from Aboriginal community members.

For this, we are sorry.

Research and interpretation of Tasmanian Aboriginal material culture, language and cultural knowledge were undertaken without consultation or due respect.

For this, we are sorry.

While sometimes advocating for the recognition of the importance of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, the Society at times failed to challenge prevailing attitudes that denied recognition and respect for Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Past practices of collection, description and representation of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their material culture by the Society contributed to beliefs that continue to be misleading and destructive.

For this, we are sorry.

The Society failed to respond to a past request to support a proposal for a treaty with Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Actions of some members of the Society, who were also leaders in the Tasmanian community, legitimised and facilitated the mistreatment of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their material culture.

Some members of the Society actively opposed requests for the return of ancestral remains to Aboriginal people.

For all this, we are sorry. We are unreservedly sorry.

Now we look to the future.

The Royal Society of Tasmania understands that this apology must influence all aspects of its undertakings in seeking the advancement of knowledge.

We intend to work co-operatively and respectfully with Tasmanian Aboriginal people on meaningful and lasting initiatives.

We will work to respect the values and perspectives of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and understand and acknowledge protocols and processes determined by Aboriginal people.

We will seek a truthful and full account of the actions of the Society and its members that fully recognises impacts on Aboriginal people for which we take responsibility.

We will promote ethical research-related scholarly activities in consultation with, and of benefit to Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

We will support Tasmanian Aboriginal people in seeking the repatriation of their ancestral remains and material culture.

Finally, we hope that the delivery of this apology today will mark the beginning of a new era, and a relationship that recognises the histories, cultures, knowledge and aspirations of Tasmanian Aboriginal people as fundamental to the future of Tasmanian society.

Resolution of the Council of the Royal Society of Tasmania
22 September 2020

Mary Koolhof, President
15 February 2021

TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY APOLOGY TO TASMANIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

delivered by Brett Torossi
Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

We are here today on the lands of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, the traditional owners and custodians of the land and waterways of *lutruwita* (Tasmania). We wish to pay our deepest respects to Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and Elders past and present. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery sits on the land of the *Muwinina* and *Mumirimina* people, who once lived in the Hobart region. We wish to pay our respects to all of these people, and acknowledge their sovereignties in land and sea, never ceded.

To belong to a place for tens of thousands of years is something non-Aboriginal Tasmanians are only beginning to comprehend. We acknowledge the beauty of this land and the way the river upon which we live, and *kunanyi* that watches over us here in Hobart, have shaped our lives and the lives of all who have come before us. We see that belonging lives at the heart of responsibility and connection.

Today we find the courage to take responsibility for the past. Today we own our actions and culture that have caused such pain to Aboriginal Tasmanians. This is a moment long overdue.

Today is therefore a day of enormous importance and gravity. Today we, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, apologise to Tasmanian Aboriginal people for nearly 200 years of practices that we acknowledge were morally wrong.

For many years Tasmanian Aboriginal people have called for the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to tell the truth about its part in a difficult and traumatic past. We cannot move forward together without truth telling, without addressing the past, and the previous museum practices that have caused profound suffering for Aboriginal people and their community.

On behalf of the whole organisation, the Board wants to acknowledge openly, permanently record, and apologise for the institution's actions and declare that such behaviour will never happen again.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, its precursor the Royal Society Museum and people in a variety of roles associated with these institutions, were part of, and sometimes were deeply implicated in, acts which were heedless of, or knowingly contrary to, the wishes and cultural practices of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. These injustices, and the consequences for Tasmanian Aboriginal people must be owned and acknowledged not simply as facts of history but with our hearts and our minds.

Beginning in 1803, the violence of European invasion and colonisation began a process of loss and dispossession for Tasmanian Aboriginal people across *lutruwita*. During this time, from the very beginnings of colonisation, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and its former entity

The Royal Society Museum, participated in practices, including the digging up and removal, the collection, and the trade of, ancestral remains of Tasmanian Aboriginal people (or respectfully, the Old People.) This was done largely in the name of racial sciences – practices of ethnography and anthropology which were racist, discriminatory, and have long been entirely discredited.

These practices showed profound disrespect for Aboriginal people, their families and communities, and their vital spiritual and cultural practices. The remains of Aboriginal people were exploited as artefacts and objects of research, their burial sites were violated, and the importance of Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage were ignored, trivialised and dismissed. There is ample, undisputed evidence of this. Aboriginal people have known this. Members of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, its former directors, and staff have known this. The evidence is in the minutes of the institution itself, in reports, in letters, diaries, and in newspapers – it is on the public record. But it has also been hidden and forgotten, and too often denied. We know Tasmanian Aboriginal people do not forget that this is what has occurred.

It is well documented that staff, and those associated with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, solicited and paid for the removal of Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestral remains for collection and trade, and used ancestral remains and material culture in museum and scientific exchanges across the nation and around the globe.

It is beyond dispute that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery disrespected the remains of *Trukanini*. It created public displays and interpretation of her remains. Her wish to be buried in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, so her body could not be cut up, was disregarded. If we imagine such a practise being enacted on our own grandmother, if we imagine the burial sites of our loved ones being dug up, and their bones being traded and used for scientific research, or put on show in museums and galleries across the world, we begin to understand the appalling hurt our predecessors caused the Aboriginal people.

There was also resistance to the repatriation of Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestral remains back to *lutruwita* so that the Old People might rest again in the earth of their homeland. It is amply clear that the Board of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery did not fully respect the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community's wishes to actively engage and find appropriate ways to repatriate the remains of loved ones. There was a lack of active engagement to enable community requests, and legal codes and bureaucracy were too often used as a shield and an excuse.

Ancient cultural artefacts of spiritual and ceremonial value were removed without consultation with Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The removal of the *Preminghana* petroglyphs from the West Coast in the 1960s is a key example of such past practices.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery created inappropriate displays and exhibitions concerning Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and promulgated false ideas of 'extinction'; that is, that there were no Aborigines in Tasmania after *Trukanini*.

For much of its history, the institution did not recognise or respect the deep, continuing knowledge of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and did not ask them to be the curators of their cultural material held in the collections, or to tell their stories.

We acknowledge that all of these actions have been damaging to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and to the Community. We acknowledge and own the pain we have caused.

As a museum in the European tradition, we also traded in the remains of the ancestors of other nations, and brought them to this Country. We acknowledge the insensitivity and disrespect shown by these practices to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and to the peoples of other cultures and lands.

It is heartbreaking to consider the trauma inflicted on Aboriginal people by all these practices, trauma that echoes down through time, and cannot begin to be healed without full and fearless recognition.

For all of these actions and for your pain, suffering and ongoing trauma, we, the Board of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, are truly and completely sorry. Although words can never erase the actions of the past, they have a permanence and potency. We know we have caused heartbreak, and we acknowledge this honestly.

We understand that some Tasmanian Aboriginal people may not wish to accept our apology; indeed some may reject it.

We want to build trust with you – without ever forgetting the past. We want to find a future way of being together that is open-minded and whole-hearted. We understand that this may be hard, and difficult emotional business for Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and it requires trust where there has been none.

We offer and hope that this apology will be received in the spirit that it is given. We give it unreservedly without asking for anything. We know and mourn that it is so belated.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery commits to changing our practices. We commit to creating a shared and consultative vision – based on respect and good faith – to tell the rich, varied and difficult story of this island. While new ways of working do not make up for the past, we want this to be the beginning of a new relationship. We want the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to be a safe place for Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the future.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery has supported repatriation programs over the last thirty years and, through knowledge shared by Aboriginal people, we have learned

to better respect Tasmanian ancestral remains, and secret-sacred heritage materials.

Through participation in the creation and development of the Aboriginal Advisory Council, Aboriginal people have engaged with us and have helped guide the organisation. We wish to acknowledge the bravery and trust of the earliest members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Advisory Council who paved the way for a new direction, giving us a keen awareness of what could be possible for the future.

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have been appointed to roles within the museum, which has helped to improve truth telling and respectful treatment, display and interpretation of cultural heritage.

Since 2003, learning and exchange have deepened. Through Aboriginal-led exhibitions and projects, such as *ningina tunapri* and, later, *parrawa, tayenebe* and *kanalaritja*, we have taken positive steps and have jointly fostered and supported new and more respectful ways of working.

These positive steps do not in any way offset, or make-up for, the injustices and practices of the past.

We have made the decision to repatriate the *Preminghana* petroglyphs, and we will continue to work with the Community to complete that process.

We have committed to working alongside museums and galleries around Australia to enhance engagement with all First Peoples by implementing the Australian Museums and Galleries Association Indigenous Roadmap.

We want today, and every day forward, to do better. Through speaking the truth, we wish to make visible and real the past that haunts this institution so that a new way of seeing and living in community together is possible.

On 29 May 2017, over three years ago, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was delivered by the First Nations National Constitutional Convention to the Australian people. The Aboriginal writers of the statement placed matters of history and truth telling, of Aboriginal sovereignty and power, at the very forefront of agreement making. All over this nation, and on this island of *lutruwita*, Aboriginal people have called for truth telling about the difficult past and its ongoing damaging legacies that continue today.

We commit to a different future working with you to ensure we:

- Recognise the right to self-determination of all First Peoples
- Recognise that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery is the custodian of art and cultural material that are owned and stewarded in perpetuity by First Peoples around the world
- Recognise that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery is the custodian of contemporary art and cultural materials purchased from First Peoples around the world
- Acknowledge Country at all Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery sites and online, and ensure Tasmanian Aboriginal Community presence is always and obviously manifest
- Listen deeply to, and learn with, Tasmanian Aboriginal people, respecting the cultural knowledge and spiritual values of the Aboriginal Community

- Work as a facilitator with the Aboriginal Community in Tasmania on projects and initiatives that tell First Peoples' stories
- Work in partnership with the Community in all our work, and using our exhibitions, programs, research capacity and the resources of the State Collection to tell the truth about Tasmania's history of colonisation and the contemporary resilience of Tasmanian Aboriginal people
- Ensure cultural safety for First Peoples staff, volunteers and visitors by improving cultural competence of the Board, staff and volunteers
- Review and revise Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery policies so they are culturally appropriate, and implement new protocols for how First Peoples are welcomed and included
- Work to share access to First Peoples material(s) held at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery with communities across Australia and overseas, and support repatriation when return is requested
- Take a leadership role, as the State museum and gallery, in encouraging the adoption of culturally appropriate policies and practices by museums and galleries across Tasmania and Australia
- Embed these practices in the governance and leadership of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

- Never forget our shared past or the long history of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and *lutruwita* (Tasmania).

In conclusion, in the year of 2021, the Board of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery on behalf of the whole organisation, wants to openly and whole heartedly acknowledge, permanently record, and deeply apologise for the institution's past actions relating to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

This Apology will be displayed, here and online, as a permanent record to reinforce this commitment.

In offering these words today, we take full responsibility for all that has kept us apart. I am sorry. We are sorry.

We seek a new way of cultivating engagement, enriching understanding, and warmly embracing respectful partnership with Tasmanian Aboriginal people. We commit, now and always, to a future that defends, sustains and illuminates Tasmanian Aboriginal culture here at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and throughout Tasmanian life.

We mark this occasion, and the enduring nature of our apology and our commitment, with this public statement and hope that today marks a more honest way of being with the past and a new sense of responsibility and belonging to this beautiful island for all who call it home.

Thank you everyone for your attendance on this important occasion.