

## **The Cross-Cultural Relationships Between the Sealers and the Tasmanian Aboriginal Women at Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island in the Early Nineteenth Century**

**Kay Merry**

*Department of History*

### **Abstract**

The discovery of vast numbers of the highly prized fur seal in Bass Strait in 1797 attracted many international and local ships into the area. Sealing became a highly profitable enterprise and Australia's first staple export commodity. The islands of Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island had been unoccupied for thousands of years, were yet to be explored and mapped, and were beyond the jurisdiction of the colonial administration in Sydney. Anarchy prevailed and countless Tasmanian Aboriginal women were kidnapped as slaves and concubines by the sealers who pillaged, raped and murdered, unchecked, for more than three decades. These sites became places where the normal social and cultural borders were transgressed and gave rise to a unique, hybrid way of life.

Despite the prevailing myth that the Tasmanian Aborigines did not survive the invasion of the British, in the mid 1970s, historians, such as Lyndall Ryan and Anne McMahon, wrote about the emergence of a new Aboriginal community in Bass Strait, descendants of predominantly white sealers and the Tasmanian Aboriginal women whom they abducted and forced to work as slaves.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, historians Bain Attwood, Henry Reynolds and Jan Kociumbus began to re-evaluate frontier relationships between black and white Australians.<sup>2</sup> Further, Maria Money Penny, Stephen Murray-Smith, Iain Stuart and Rebe Taylor concurrently re-visited the early accounts of interactions between the two disparate cultures in the Tasmanian context, in particular, the relationship between the sealers and the indigenous women.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, archaeologists excavating contact sites on the Bass Strait Islands and Kangaroo Island found material evidence of both indigenous and European origins that imply a blending and adaptation of cultures. By re-examining the historical records, an exciting new picture of cross-cultural relationships emerged to challenge previous perceptions of contact or frontier history in Australia.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Ryan, 'The Struggle for Recognition: Part-Aborigines in Bass Strait in the Nineteenth Century', *Aboriginal History*, Vol 1-2, 1977, pp. 27-51. A. McMahon, 'Tasmanian Aboriginal Women as Slaves', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, Vol 23, No 2, June 1976, pp. 44-49. McMahon drew heavily on N.J.B. Plomley's *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834*, Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> See H. Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1995; B. Attwood, *The Making of Aborigines*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989; J. Kociumbus, 'Mary Ann, Joseph Fleming and "Gentleman Dick": Aboriginal-Convict Relationships in Colonial History', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol 3, No 1, 2001, pp. 28-54.

<sup>3</sup> M. Money Penny, "'Going Out and Coming In": Cooperation and Collaboration between Aborigines and Europeans in Early Tasmania', *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, Vol 5, No 1, 1995-6, pp. 64-75; S. Murray-Smith, 'Beyond the Pale: The Islander Community of Bass Strait in the Nineteenth Century', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, Vol 20, No 4, 1973, pp. 167-200; I. Stuart, 'Sea Rats, Bandits and Roistering Buccaneers: What Were the Bass Strait Sealers Really Like?' *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol 83, Part 1, 1997, pp. 47-58'; R. Taylor, "'Savages or Saviours" – The Australian Sealers and Tasmanian Survival', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No 66, 2000, pp. 73-84.

<sup>4</sup> For example, J. Birmingham, 'The Archaeology of Cultural Accommodation in Nineteenth Century Tasmania', *Australian Society for Historical Archaeology Inc*, 1992; C. De Leuien, *The Power of Gender*, BA Hons Thesis,

The aim of this paper is to examine the ways in which 'place' has informed and affected historical constructions of gender, race and class while influencing the development of cross-cultural relationships between the sealers and Tasmanian Aboriginal women of Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island in the early nineteenth century. As a result, the crossing of various social and cultural borders assisted in producing a unique hybrid community that survived, in spite of Aboriginal Protector, George Robinson's 'final solution', at a time when white colonial society believed (and probably hoped) that the Tasmanian Aborigines were finally extinct.<sup>5</sup>

The first sealing parties reached Bass Strait by 1798, after the survivors of the shipwreck of the Sydney Cove on Preservation Island on the east of Bass Strait reached Sydney and reported vast numbers of the highly prized fur seal along its coastline. At this stage, however, the existence of a strait between Tasmania and mainland Australia had not yet been determined.<sup>6</sup> According to Murray-Smith, the 'organised' sealing industry can be divided into two phases. The first, or 'transitory' phase, from 1800 until 1810, was the 'heyday' of the industry in Bass Strait. Colonial and international vessels operated from Sydney, dumping sealing gangs, small dinghies, inadequate shelters and meagre rations onto many of the islands.<sup>7</sup> The sealing companies from Sydney, Britain, America and, to a lesser extent, France, were fiercely competitive and according to Geoffrey Bolton, in the first six years, 133,000 seal-skins passed through Sydney, which represented 'only a portion of the total kill'.<sup>8</sup> By 1802, so many seals had been slaughtered that Nicholas Baudin was prompted to warn Governor King that the species would soon be in danger of extinction on King Island.<sup>9</sup>

From its highpoint in 1803-4, the sealing industry gradually declined as over-exploitation made it uneconomical for the entrepreneurs to keep their vessels in the straits.<sup>10</sup> It remained profitable, however, for 'small capitalists and...individual adventurers' to continue sealing on a smaller scale over the next two decades. In the second phase, from 1810-1830, the sealers became permanent residents, working as individuals and exchanged kangaroo and seal skins for provisions from passing ships. This led to changes that were beyond the capabilities of colonial authorities to control. Kangaroo Island and the islands of Bass Strait were regarded as 'a frontier inhabited by unsavoury characters, such as the 'bolters' or escaped convicts' who had fled to the area.<sup>11</sup> Murray-Smith also noted that the most important commodity that made it possible for the sealers to exist indefinitely on the islands was the forced labour of the Tasmanian women.<sup>12</sup>

Initially, Aboriginal men would barter the services of native women for hunting dogs, seal carcasses, flour and potatoes but, as J. E. Calder observed, '[t]hese unfortunate women became so useful to their masters that when they could not get enough of them by purchase, they kidnapped them' and by 1830, there were at least fifty Aboriginal women who were

---

Flinders University, 1998; L. Matthews, *The Cross-Cultural Hunter-Gatherers of Kangaroo Island*, B. Archaeology Hons Thesis, Flinders University, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> N. J. B. Plomley, *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement, 1835-1839*, Blubberhead Press, Hobart, 1987, 2.

<sup>6</sup> A report in the *Sydney Gazette*, 15 May, 1803 by sealer, J. Chance, cited in I. Stuart, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Murray-Smith, p. 168.

<sup>8</sup> G. Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Murray-Smith, pp. 168-9. He also wrote that, occasionally, misfortune intervened and tales of 'starving, filthy men, marooned on barren rocks or remote islets' who sometimes found their way back to civilisation 'after years in the wilderness' were not uncommon.

<sup>11</sup> T. Jetson, 'An Island of Contentment? A History of Preservation Island', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, Vol 43, No 1, 1996, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Murray-Smith, p. 172.

'kept in slavery' on the Bass Strait islands.<sup>13</sup> Sealing captain, James Kelly, wrote in 1816, that 'the custom of the sealers in the Straits was that every man should have from two to five of these native women for their own use and benefit, to select any of them they thought proper to cohabit with as their wives...'<sup>14</sup> This statement totally misrepresents the usual method of abduction and brutal treatment by the sealers of their female captives. In 1830, a native woman named Bul.rer, described her personal experience of abduction and enslavement to George Robinson: 'Munro and others rushed them at their fires and took six, that she was a little girl and could just crawl; said she had been with him ever since. Said the white men tie them and then they flog them very much, plenty much blood, plenty cry...'<sup>15</sup>

### Crossing Social Borders

The sealing camps in southern Australia in the early nineteenth century were places where social divides, such as race, gender and class intersected. Sealing and whaling were global enterprises that attracted seamen of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Plomley and Henley compiled detailed profiles of the sealers living in Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island, based largely on information in George Robinson's journals and papers from 1830-39. Robinson's records indicate that thirteen per cent of the sealers were coloured, including some 'half-caste' Tasmanians.<sup>16</sup> They also show that coloured sealers were living and working as equals with white sealers and also 'cohabited' with Aboriginal women, illustrating that traditional racial and class boundaries prevalent in white societies did not exist in this particular space. Nevertheless, both coloured and white sealers had a common propensity to abuse and subjugate women.

When the sealers were questioned why they preferred to live with black women, one replied that the white women would not work and the men would have to work for them instead.<sup>17</sup> Another felt that white women 'would not answer their purpose for they could not do with them as they did with black women'.<sup>18</sup> In 1832, when Quakers, James Backhouse and George Walker visited Preservation Island in Bass Strait and attempted to convince sealer James Munro of 'the evil of living with black women out of wedlock', Backhouse later reported that 'from the admission of these men, we learned that their reason for not choosing to marry the women with whom they cohabit is that in the event of leaving the straits they would feel them an encumbrance'.<sup>19</sup> This also suggests that the cross-cultural relationships would not be acceptable elsewhere and that life on the Bass Strait Islands was considered a temporary rather than permanent arrangement. More recently, historian Anne McGrath reflected that Aboriginal women filled the gap left by the lack of white women on the frontier: '[t]heir "availability", willingness to perform arduous work, and the advantage of using them in the dual roles of worker and sexual partner made them an extremely lucrative prospect for white men, especially those...away from the eyes of white society'.<sup>20</sup> Sexual adventures with

---

<sup>13</sup> J.E. Calder, *The Native Tribes of Tasmania: Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits etc of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Cox Kay Pty Ltd, Hobart, 1972, p. 15. (Facsimile edition, 1875).

<sup>14</sup> Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 240.

<sup>16</sup> B. Plomley and K. Henley, 'The Sealers of Bass Strait and the Cape Barren Community', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, Vol 37, Nos 2 and 3, June-September, 1990, Appendix A, pp. 69-106.

<sup>17</sup> McMahan, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 613.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in H. O'May, *Hobart River Craft and Sealers of Bass Strait*, L. G. Shea, Govt. Printer, Tasmania, 1930s.

<sup>20</sup> A. McGrath, 'Black Velvet: Aboriginal Women and their Relations with White Men in the Northern Territory, 1910-40', in K. Daniels (ed) *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, Fontana

indigenous women were seen as ‘part of the male adventure of ocean travel and, usually, of establishing colonies’ and had long been seen as ‘a fringe benefit of men’s maritime occupations’.<sup>21</sup>

An article in the Sydney Gazette in 1819 by Captain Sutherland, described some Kangaroo Island sealers as:

...complete savages, living in bark huts like the natives, not cultivating anything but living entirely on kangaroos, emus, and small porcupines [sic], and getting spirits and tobacco in barter for the skins which they lay up during the sealing season. They dress in kangaroo skins without linen, and wear sandals made of sealskin. They smell like foxes.<sup>22</sup>

A similar report by Major Lockyer (who was given the task of establishing a settlement at King George Sound, Western Australia) in 1826 mentioned the ‘nauseous food these people make and the miserable life they lead’ that led him to conclude that ‘it is no wonder that they become actually savages’.<sup>23</sup> As Rebe Taylor pointed out, these reports were seen through colonial eyes as evidence of regression rather than positive cultural adaptation. Neither was it perceived as transgressing a social, or racial boundary by looking, smelling and behaving like the natives. Another example relating to crossing the racial divide was told by Bonwick concerning an Irish sealer named Brien, who spared the life of the baby son of a native woman he had recently abducted, commenting that ‘as he had stolen the dam he would keep the cub’. The child, Bill, became a very able assistant to Brien over the ensuing years and spoke English with a rich Irish ‘brogue’. He could also:

...handle an oar, help to capture a seal, discharge a rifle with precision, and execute any manual labour with the efficiency of a European youth. His habits became those of his teacher, and the few ideas he managed to acquire were derived from the same source. In the occasional absence of the old sealer, he was not a bad hand at bartering skins and melons for garments, tobacco, or spirits, with the crew of some whale ship cruising in the neighbourhood. His own language he never knew...<sup>24</sup>

To his own countrymen, Bill was considered neither a white nor a black man, but simply ‘no good’, and when asked what he thought of his (black) countrymen, he replied, ‘Oh! They are dirty brutes’, and added, ‘I don’t like Blackfellows, they are a dirty, lazy set’.<sup>25</sup> There were many other instances of crossing racial borders on the Bass Strait islands and Kangaroo Island, particularly that of miscegenation, which resulted in the birth of many half-caste children.

The domination and subjugation of native women by the sealers produced a crossing of class borders that occurred on several levels. The sealers were the outcasts or the ‘riff-raff’ of white society – at best, working class. They were condemned by some as ‘lounging in idleness’ while inflicting a brutal system of slavery upon the new underclass, the Aboriginal women.<sup>26</sup>

Collins, Sydney, 1984, p. 235.

<sup>21</sup> McGrath, 1990, cited in De Leiuon, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> C. Smith, *Tales of Old Tasmania: the First Fifty Years*, Rigby, Melbourne, 1978, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Major Lockyer, ‘Expedition Sent from Sydney in 1826 to Found a Settlement at King George’s Sound Western Australia’, in H. P. Moore, ‘Notes on the Early Settlers in South Australia Prior to 1836’, *Royal Geographical Society of Australia, South Australian Branch*, Vol 25, 1923, p. 125, cited in Taylor, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Bonwick, p. 289.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Jetson, p. 35.

Both, however, were considered part of the underclass of colonial society. Severe punishments for relatively trifling offences were an accepted part of the colonial seafaring and convict experience and perhaps, as Robert Hughes argues, many sealers were also 'galled by exile and humiliated by poor status and, therefore, hated and ill-treated Aboriginal people because they desperately needed to believe in a class inferior to themselves'.<sup>27</sup> And, although traditional Aboriginal society was considered relatively classless, George Robinson observed that some Aboriginal 'chiefs' had absolute power 'to put to death any whom he chooses and can take away any of the young women of the tribe'.<sup>28</sup> Their liberation by George Robinson in the early 1830s, after enduring years of slavery, brutality, subservience and accumulated grief, however, caused something in the psyche of several of the Tasmanian sealing women to 'snap'. Robinson relates an incident in Bass Strait in which a group of Aboriginal women were actively preventing a sealer from rescuing his mates who had been stranded on a reef for eight days. One of the women, Walyer, wanted to kill the sealer, seize the boat and go to the Tasmanian mainland, but the other women 'would not join her in her murderous work'. Robinson intervened and assisted in the rescue of the three survivors.<sup>29</sup> The few Aboriginal women who survived exile on both Flinders Island and, later, at Oyster Cove, near Hobart, became rebels against white authority and refused to 'become submissive participants in the re-making of Aboriginal society'.<sup>30</sup>

Although, according to Calder, it was an ancient custom that the Aboriginal women of Tasmania were not permitted to take part in active wars, some, who had been either coercively taken by sealers or had been sold or bartered by husbands and fathers, occasionally escaped to rejoin their tribes after which, Calder claimed, they could not be restrained from joining in, 'sometimes leading the attack'.<sup>31</sup> Walyer was one such leader, who crossed all social borders, as Jebb and Haebich explained:

Her individual resistance campaign in north-west Tasmania shows that she deserves epic status. Escaping abduction from Port Sorell by sealers, she returned eventually to her people...of Emu Bay, armed with a knowledge of firearms, leading them in last-ditch assaults against the officials and servants of the Van Diemen's Land Company. Again captured by sealers, she refused to work for them. Banished to Penguin Island by her exasperated captors, she attempted to kill them on route. Finally...on Swan Island, she tried to foment further rebellions among the hapless inmates.<sup>32</sup>

Several years later, at the Aboriginal Establishment on Flinders Island, Robinson organised weddings for four Aboriginal couples because he considered that 'they had procrastinated for an unreasonable length of time'. One of the women had, apparently, been the cause of much contention among the Aborigines for preferring 'a life of celibacy to that of connubial happiness'. The nuptials went ahead but, within a week, all of the women had left their husbands, taken their dogs and gone into the bush. When Robinson refused them their rations, they simply robbed the camp at night. He commented that 'these four women have been

---

<sup>27</sup> R. Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987, pp. 94-5.

<sup>28</sup> Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 257.

<sup>29</sup> Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 295.

<sup>30</sup> L. Ryan, 'Patterns of Migration in Tasmania: The Aboriginal Experience', *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Studies*, Vol 11, No 2, 1989-90, p. 14. Ryan also noted that the Aboriginal men, by contrast, were 'given positions of quasi-power and authority which placed them in direct conflict' with the women.

<sup>31</sup> Calder, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> M.A. Jebb and A. Haebich, 'Across the Great Divide: Gender Relations on Australian Frontiers', in K. Saunders and R. Evans (eds) *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, Harcourt Brace, Sydney, 1994, p. 40.

living these years with the sealers and are incorrigible'.<sup>33</sup> And while, initially, as Kociumbus suggests, the Aboriginal women may well have been 'desperate refugees' with little choice but to link themselves to the sealers, by doing so, they saw an opportunity 'not so much of personally evading the full consequences of invasion or assisting in cultural "adaptation", but of aiding and sustaining political resistance'.<sup>34</sup>

According to Lyndall Ryan, by the end of 1837, the sealing women had emerged as 'a significant dissident group'.<sup>35</sup> The women were finally asserting their independence and signalled their rejection of Robinson's paternalistic, peasant society on Flinders Island, and resisted both his authority and that of the Aboriginal men, thus crossing both class and gender borders. Ryan points out that it was the Aboriginal women's skill at hunting seals that, initially, made them chattels of an exchange system devised by the sealers in collaboration with Aboriginal men. These skills were later used to bargain for greater independence and, in fact, the strong, resilient sealing women, she concluded, became the social guardians and economic exponents of a new society.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, the new hybrid community of the Bass Strait islands was to emerge as a predominantly matriarchal society.<sup>37</sup>

### Cultural Adaptation

The decline of sealing in the 1820s forced the Bass Strait sealing communities to change their way of life and explore alternative commercial ventures to ensure their economic survival. Mutton birds had been traditionally hunted by indigenous people of both age and sex, was seasonally more reliable and, as Ryan noted, was more integral to Tasmanian Aboriginal society than sealing, while retaining its ritual significance.<sup>38</sup> The women adapted their traditional digging sticks and used them as 'spits' to carry the catch, and wore gloves to grab hold of the birds.<sup>39</sup> Sealer James Munro was quick to recognise its economic importance and potential. The oil and fat of these birds was used for fuel, the feathers sold for down and the meat was salted and traded or stored for consumption over winter. It also provided seasonal employment for many people of both sexes and combined traditional hunter-gatherer and European technologies.<sup>40</sup>

On Kangaroo Island, meanwhile, the sealing industry was supplemented with kangaroo and wallaby hunting whereas mutton birds were exploited for their feathers only. In 1844, the South Australian Register reported a cross-cultural innovation being used for catching wallaby in which the Aboriginal women made nooses from canvas thread, thus incorporating traditional methods and European materials.<sup>41</sup> Salt of outstanding quality was found there and was used for drying skins and preserving meat.<sup>42</sup> Aboriginal women had also been abducted from the tribes along the southern coast of mainland Australia and subsequently incorporated some of their own traditional skills into the sealing camps on Kangaroo Island and in Bass

---

<sup>33</sup> Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, pp. 469-73.

<sup>34</sup> Kociumbus, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Ryan, 'The Struggle for Recognition', p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> L. Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, UQP, St Lucia, 1982, pp. 66-72.

<sup>37</sup> P. Cameron, 'Pallawah Women: Their Historic Contribution to Our Survival', Part 1, 'A Matriarchal Heritage', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, Vol 41, No 2, 1994, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> Ryan, 'Patterns of Migration', p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 273.

<sup>40</sup> Ryan, 'Patterns of Migration', p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> *South Australian Register*, 25 September, 1844, cited in Matthews, p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Matthews, p. 14.

Strait. In the 1820s, James Kelly noted the diverse range of activities employed by Aboriginal women in the sealing camps in the 'off-season', such as:

...drying and curing seal and kangaroo skins, catching wallabies and possums with dogs, diving for kelp and shellfish, building tent-like huts covered with grass, making baskets and necklaces, and performing ceremonial dances'.<sup>43</sup>

Dogs became a much valued and traded commodity and were rapidly assimilated into the Aboriginal economy for hunting kangaroo and 'as a form of gift and exchange'.<sup>44</sup> Flint tools of Tasmanian origin have been found on sealing sites on Kangaroo Island where, in 1836, a sealer was observed grinding wheat he had grown between two flat stones – in the Aboriginal manner – and, then, made into damper.<sup>45</sup> There is much documented evidence of the wide range of native animals consumed by the sealers and the Aboriginal women, such as termites, grubs, goanna and eggs, emus, possums, as well as a variety of bush foods, including native currants and tea which supplemented the European animals and vegetables.<sup>46</sup> A journalist noted, in 1853, following a visit to Kangaroo Island, that ex-sealer Nat Thomas 'eats everything from a frying pan of young ants to a dish of "wakeries" (grubs). Nat never lets food go amiss, as he believes you don't know what you will eat until you have tried it. He is described as possessing "all the resources of the sailor, combined with the instinct of the Aboriginal native".<sup>47</sup>

The Aboriginal women hunted for the sealers, tended the vegetable gardens, collected bush foods, built the huts and showed them how to make clothing and footwear out of skins. Moccasins were sewn together from kangaroo tails and fur cloaks were stitched together and ornamented.<sup>48</sup> While early literary sources clearly indicate cross-cultural innovations and adaptations between the sealers and the Aboriginal women, these reports also represent the sealers as dominant and violent towards the Aboriginal women and the women as completely subservient to the sealers. Matthews reminds us, however, that 'the men relied on the women for survival, and hence were completely dependent [on them]. This may have given the women more power than has previously been suggested'.<sup>49</sup>

As we have seen, on Kangaroo Island and the Bass Strait islands, the Aboriginal women continued to practise their traditional culture while continually incorporating and adapting new technologies into their increasingly complex economies. It is probable that the common practice of polygamy actually facilitated the continuity of cultural customs of singing, dancing, weaving baskets and stringing shell necklaces. Robinson extensively recorded in his journals how the Aborigines created new dances and also incorporated new experiences into corroborees, in particular the 'horse dance' and the famous 'devil dance'. He described the latter as 'the most obscene that can be conceived' and claimed it was peculiar to the women of the islands and 'not known by the natives on the main'.<sup>50</sup> In his notes, he calls the song the women sing whilst dancing, 'the TYRE.LORE song, 'ie song of the women held in bondage by the sealers' and also recorded the response of the women when he asked them the meaning of this dance:

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>45</sup> Matthews, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 22-5.

<sup>47</sup> *The South Australian Register*, 13 January, 1853, cited in Matthews, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25. *Sydney Gazette*, 1 July, 1824.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p. 295.

The rite of the Tyre.Lore women consist in devil worship. They affirm that the devil comes to the women when they are hunting on Flinders and has connection with them, and that they are with child by this spirit and which they kill in the bush. They say they sing to please the devil, that the devil tells them to sing plenty. These devotees of the devil are excessive in their devotions. They continue to chant their devil song and perform their rites at every opportunity.<sup>51</sup>

A few months later, Robinson wrote that the songs of the natives 'consist of expression of circumstances'. The women who invented the 'devil's dance' and song had been living with sealers for quite a long time and it is patently obvious that they were attempting to make sense of their traumatic, collective experiences by integrating the 'obscene' words and actions into their culture, while using the apt euphemism of 'the devil' to represent the sealers. Robinson's devout Christian sensibility was so offended that he failed to see the symbolic value of the dance as yet another survival mechanism or cultural adaptation.

## Conclusion

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the islands of Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island were pristine sanctuaries for fur seals, where a multicultural capitalist industry intersected with the simple hunter-gatherer economy of the mono-cultural Tasmanian Aborigine. It was a place where the multinational sealers converged with the tribal Aborigines on a colonial frontier, producing a unique historical opportunity in time and place for subsequent events to unfold and where it was possible for the outrages of the sealers and the enslavement of the Tasmanian women to occur unabated for an entire generation. In these places, the crossing of racial, class and gender borders frequently occurred and, paradoxically, both white and black cultural adaptation and accommodation ensured the ultimate survival of the Tasmanian Aborigine, albeit in a hybrid form.

## References

- Attwood, B. *The Making of Aborigines*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989.
- Birmingham, J. 'The Archaeology of Cultural Accommodation in Nineteenth Century Tasmania', *Australian Society for Historical Archaeology Inc.*, 1992, pp 175-196.
- Bolton, G. *Spoils and Spoilers*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981.
- Bonwick, J. *The Last of the Tasmanians*, Sampson Low, Son and Marston, 1869, Facsimile Edition, 1969.
- Calder, J.E. *The Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Cox Kay Pty Ltd, Hobart, 1875, Facsimile Edition, 1972.
- Cameron, P. 'Pallawah Women: Their Historic Contribution to Our Survival', Part 1, 'A Matriarchal Heritage', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, Vol 41, No 2, 1994, pp 65-67.
- De Leiuem, C. *The Power of Gender*, BA Honours Thesis, Flinders University, 1998.
- Hughes, R. *The Fatal Shore*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987.
- Jebb, M.A. and A. Haebich, 'Across the Great Divide: Gender Relations on Australian Frontiers', in K. Saunders and R. Evans (eds) *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, Harcourt Brace, Sydney, 1994.
- Jetson, T. 'An Island of Contentment? A History of Preservation Island', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, Vol 43, No 1, 1996, pp 29-46.

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pp. 444, 301. This response refers to the practise of infanticide that, according to Robinson's notes, was common at the sealing camps.

- Kociumbus, J. “‘Mary Ann’, Joseph Fleming and ‘Gentleman Dick’”: Aboriginal-Convict Relationships in Colonial History’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol 3, No 1, 2001, pp 28-54.
- McGrath, A. ‘Black Velvet: Aboriginal Women and their Relations with White Men in the Northern Territory, 1910-40’, in K. Daniels (ed) *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, Fontana Collins, Sydney, 1984, pp 233-297.
- McMahon, A. ‘Tasmanian Aboriginal Women as Slaves’, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, Vol 23, No 2, June 1976, pp 44-49.
- Matthews, L. *The Cross-Cultural Hunter-Gatherers of Kangaroo Island*, B. Archaeology Honours Thesis, Flinders University, 1999.
- Money Penny, M. “‘Going Out and Coming In’”: Cooperation and Collaboration Between the Aborigines and Europeans in Early Tasmania’, *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, Vol 5.1 1995-6, pp 64-75.
- Moore, H.P., ‘Notes on the Early Settlers in South Australia Prior to 1836’, *Royal Geographical Society of Australia, South Australian Branch*, Vol 25, 1923, cited in Taylor, p. 78.
- Murray-Smith, S. ‘Beyond the Pale: The Islander Community of Bass Strait in the Nineteenth Century’, *Tasmanian Historical Research Association*, Vol 20, No 4, 1973, pp 167-200.
- O’May, H. *Hobart River Craft and Sealers of Bass Strait*, L. G. Shea, Govt Printer, Hobart, mid-1930s.
- Plomley, N.J.B. *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966.
- *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement, 1835-1839*, Blubberhead Press, Hobart, 1987.
- Plomley, B. and K. Henley, ‘*The Sealers of Bass Strait and the Cape Barren Community*’, Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings, Vol 37, Nos 2 and 3, June-September, 1990, Appendix A, pp 69-106.
- Reynolds, H. *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1995.
- Ryan, L. ‘The Struggle For Recognition: Part-Aborigines in Bass Strait in the Nineteenth Century’, *Aboriginal History*, Vol 1-2, 1977, pp 27-51.
- *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1982.
- ‘Patterns of Migration in Tasmania: The Aboriginal Experience’, *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Studies*, Vol 11, No 2, 1989-90, pp 3-14.
- Smith, C. *Tales of Old Tasmania: The First Fifty Years*, Rigby, Melbourne, 1978.
- Stuart, I. ‘Sea Rats, Bandits and Roistering Buccaneers: What Were the Bass Strait Sealers Really Like?’ *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol 83, Part 1, 1997, pp 47-58.
- Taylor, R. “‘Savages or Saviours?’ – The Australian Sealers and Aboriginal Tasmanian Survival’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No 66, 2000, pp 73-84.