

VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

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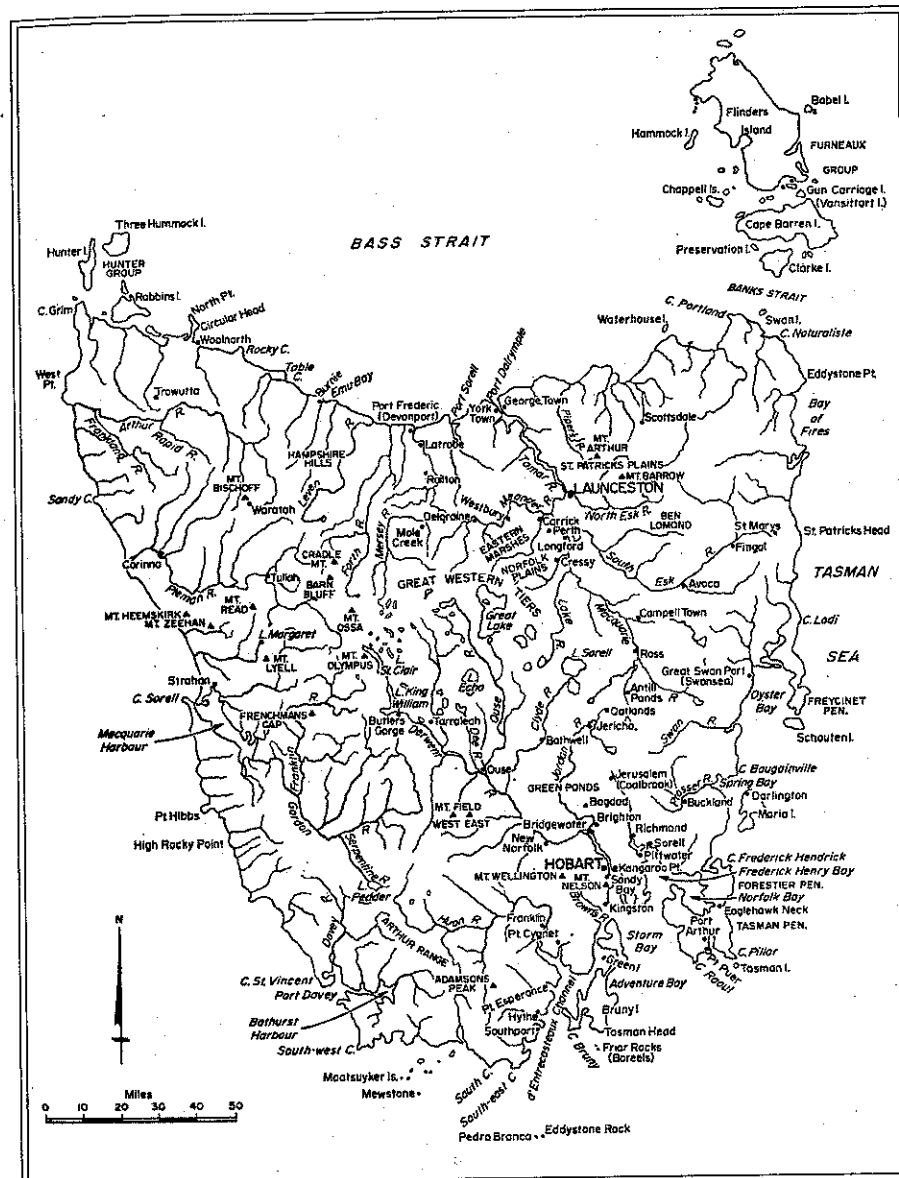
*To Emma who, with love, made
Van Diemen's Land home*

∞

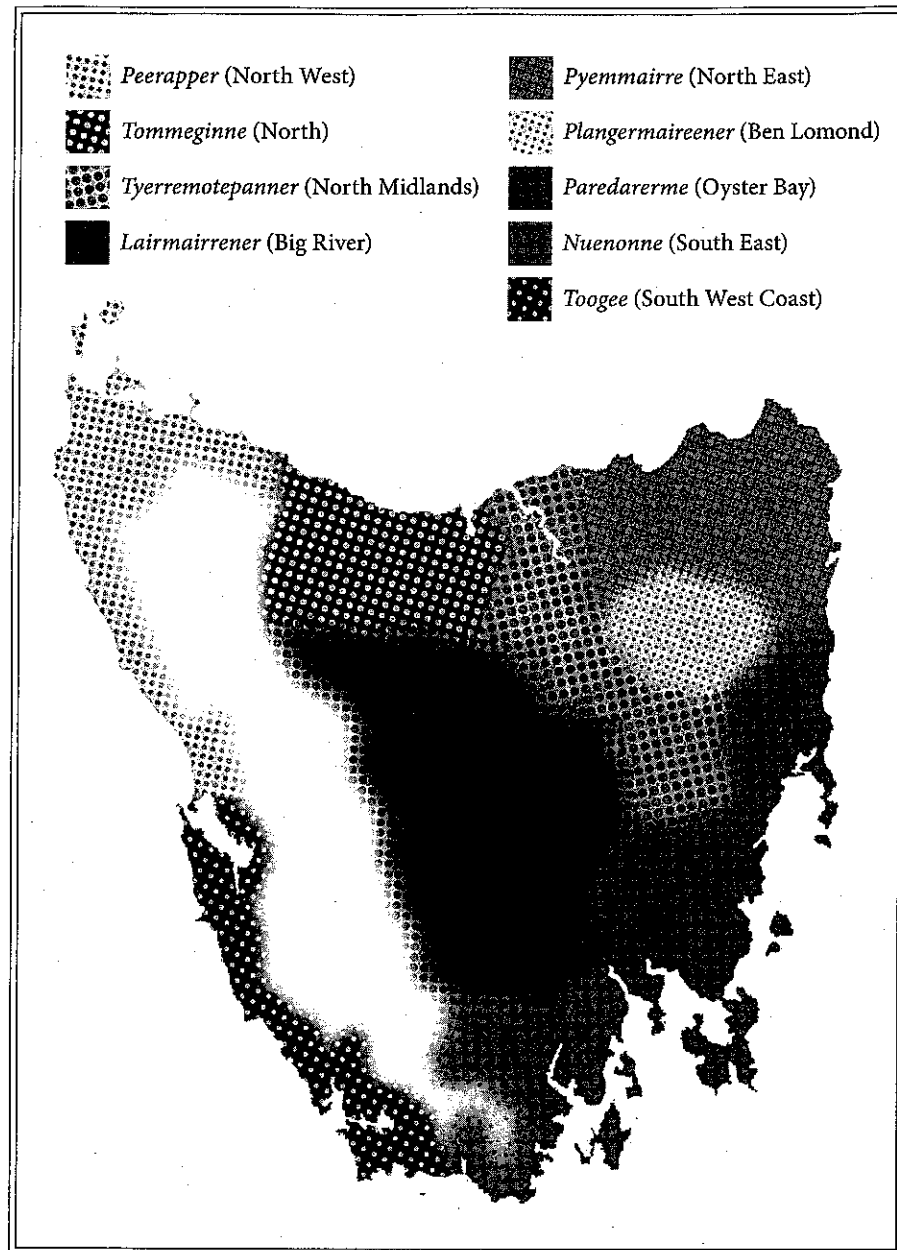
MAP 1. Van Diemen's Land



MAP 2. Tasmania in the 1850s



MAP 3. Tribal boundaries of the Tasmanian Aborigines



*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.*

—PSALM 118

INTRODUCTION

TASMANIA WAS ONCE KNOWN AS Van Diemen's Land. It was given this name by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in 1642, but it was only after the island became a penal colony in 1803 that the words attained wide notoriety. For 50 years Australia's southern isle was the dumping ground for convicted criminals from the largest empire the world has seen.

In 1856, less than three years after the final convict ship berthed in Hobart Town, the colony's name was changed to Tasmania. As Lieutenant Governor William Denison noted to London with polite understatement: "There is a feeling here that to the name Van Diemen's Land a certain stigma attaches."¹ Tasmania and Van Diemen's Land are the same place – this was a new name, not a new island – but even today it is easy to forget this. It remains hard to connect the abode of felons with the respectable, reserved and relatively crime-free "Tasmania" that it seemed spontaneously to metamorphise into. Yet, other than the cementing of the political power of a small group of large landowners, remarkably little changed after 1856 and self-government. At the same time that Victoria and New South Wales were reinventing themselves through the mass immigration brought about by the gold rushes, and England itself was experiencing massive cultural and economic change due to the accelerating industrial revolution, Tasmania became stagnant, a living economic and cultural museum of the pre-industrial era where convicts and their children were to remain the large majority of the population for decades to come. Van Diemen's Land never

vanished, but by edict of an embarrassed ruling class, it went underground.

Popular images of Van Diemen's Land today largely reflect fiction, or more accurately, a single work of fiction. One nineteenth-century novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, has done more than any history book to shape perceptions of convict life.² Marcus Clarke claimed that the "tragic and terrible" events he narrated were all based on "events which have actually occurred."³ This was true even of the infamous scene in which escaped convicts, driven beyond hunger to near madness by the harsh and inhospitable land, begin to eat their companions. The account was directly based on the confession of the convict cannibal Alexander Pearce, who escaped from Macquarie Harbour Penal Station on the isolated west coast of Van Diemen's Land in 1822.

There is one important difference, however, between real life and fiction. Pearce's journey was through country even the local Aborigines generally avoided, and that today only experienced bushwalkers, their packs heavily laden with supplies, occasionally traverse. Pearce's fictional substitute, Gabbett, escaped from Port Arthur in the south east of Tasmania and headed north up the east coast, journeying through one of the most hospitable and benign environments for human habitation anywhere in Australia. Clarke was a Melbourne journalist who only fleetingly visited Tasmania in 1870. He did not know the island, and it showed. But does the environmental mistake matter in what was after all a human drama? What if nature and empire were seen to work in harmony to crush the human spirit? Surely the all-powerful penal system, so vividly portrayed by Clarke, would ensure that the convicts' sorry fate was ultimately the same?

The hypothesis of this book is that the character of the island which became the enforced home of over 72,000 sentenced criminals (42 per cent of the convicts transported to Australia) *does* matter. The fact that protein-rich shellfish were there for the taking, that wallaby and kangaroo could be killed with nothing more than a hunting dog, and that abundant fresh water and a mild climate made travel by foot relatively easy, does change the story. The convicts' hell was, thank God, a human creation alone.

This book is about the tension produced by siting the principal gaol of the empire in what proved to be a remarkably benevolent land. It sees this paradox to be at the heart of early Tasmanian history, and to have important implications for the nation as a whole.⁴ The dominant national narrative, which begins with the struggle of British settlers to come to terms with a "harsh and forbidding"⁵ land, needs to be substantially qualified.

The environmental contrasts between Tasmania and the other place of early British settlement, New South Wales, remain obvious enough now, but in the early nineteenth century they were life-changing. Until the crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813, the British in New South Wales were confined to poor coastal country where both introduced and indigenous foods were hard to obtain and pastoral pursuits were limited. John White, surgeon-general with the First Fleet, famously summarised the first settlers' predicament in April 1790: "much cannot now be done, limited in food and reduced as the people are, who have not had one ounce of fresh animal food since first in the country; a country and place so forbidding and so hateful as only to merit execration and curses ..."⁶ Long after the immediate crisis was overcome, both hunting and farming remained difficult. The leading economic historian of early British settlement in Australia, Noel Butlin, has pointed out that "the colonists in New South Wales had chosen one of the worst locations in which to attempt to grow sheep and they continued to do so while they remained in a coastal environment."⁷ The country around Port Jackson was equally deficient in game, and what there was proved very difficult to kill.

Unable to obtain food, and indeed clothing and shelter, from the new land, colonists found moving beyond the settlement a major undertaking. Except where rivers or sea aided travel, supplies had to be carried by horse or foot, restricting the time that could be spent away from supply depots. The Barrallier expedition travelled furthest and remained out the longest of any expedition conducted to that time, yet, as its November 1802 records show, the explorers still saw the environment as an obstacle to overcome rather than a potential resource on which to depend.⁸

Less than 12 months after that expedition, with the first settlement of Van Diemen's Land, a dramatically different encounter with the Australian bush began. Van Diemen's Land, even by comparison with the British Isles, proved to be a veritable Eden. Here was an abundance of fresh water, a temperate climate, reliable rainfall, density of game and many hospitable, largely uninhabited offshore islands. Most crucially, there were open grasslands – Aboriginal hunting grounds – close to the ports and estuaries of first settlement. It was the proximity of these rich pastures, adjacent to both Hobart Town and Launceston, and present in much of the land between, that long defined the British experience of the southern island.⁹

There was another factor of central importance. In 1803 Van Diemen's Land was one of the very few places of human habitation on earth where dogs were unknown. This conferred two major advantages on the new settlers. First, native herbivores were present in larger numbers than on the mainland, and second, the kangaroo and wallaby were not adapted to the imported hunting dogs, which were much faster than the indigenous thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) in open country. In an era when guns were of little use for hunting anything but birds – they did not become accurate enough for reliable killing of the wary nocturnal Australian marsupials until the middle of the nineteenth century – hunting proved a far more successful pursuit in Van Diemen's Land than in New South Wales or almost any other site of British colonisation.¹⁰ What David Collins, second in command at Port Jackson until 1796 and from 1804 lieutenant governor of Van Diemen's Land, termed the years of "great despair" in Sydney were never replicated on the southern island.¹¹ From the commencement of settlement in September 1803 the British had fresh meat in abundance and the health of the population was far superior to that of the labouring classes of England.

The well-watered, almost predator-free grasslands (unlike in New South Wales, sheep were not even penned at night) allowed for a rapid increase in stock numbers. Meat was exported within a decade of first settlement, and by 1817 what the *Sydney Gazette* came to describe as "our sister island"¹² was home to more than twice as many sheep as New South Wales.

How the early British settlers of Van Diemen's Land experienced the Australian continent is thus greatly at variance with the standard opening of the national story. The hardships endured in Sydney were a local rather than a universal experience. Moreover, the widely assumed failure of early settlers to adapt to the new environment also needs to be re-examined in light of the rapid changes soon evident in the way of life of most of the population of the southern colony. The critical environmental difference was not the quantity of the bounty, but its availability to those without capital. Even when the open grasslands of New South Wales were belatedly settled, control was soon monopolised by a small elite. But in Tasmania two decades elapsed before free settlers occupied the lands first settled by convict hunters and shepherds, and even after this time Tasmanian topography, in which hills and mountain ranges invariably fringe the comparatively flat plains, ensured a sanctuary for the poor where a degree of independence and freedom could long be maintained. The back-blocks of Van Diemen's Land became the unexpected setting for an environmentally induced cultural evolution that was aided by the immigrants' too-often-caricatured British heritage.

Who were British Australia's first successful hunters, pastoralists and colonisers of the bush? Just as the natural world the convicts encountered has been overlooked, so too has the world-view the convicts brought with them. Their economic and cultural backgrounds have been pigeon-holed and homogenised in a way that precludes the possibility of a transformative encounter with the new land. Thus, D.N. Jeans suggests that Australia's late settlement meant "that the full power of the industrial revolution, lacking any sense of ecology, was brought to bear on the land."¹³ Tom Griffiths claims that "Australia, unlike most other parts of the New World, experienced colonisation and industrialisation almost co-incidentally, a compressed, double revolution."¹⁴ The fact that settlement occurred after the Enlightenment is seen to be almost equally significant. William Lines concludes that "Australian settlement advanced under the guidance of the modern outlook, a uniform way of thinking devoted to the simplification of life and thought and to the formulation of

efficacious techniques for the conquest of nature. Reason and violence built, on Australian soil, a new empire."¹⁵

This is too simple. While Britain had achieved political unity and a greater degree of economic integration than any other European nation, many of its regions and peoples were, in the early nineteenth century, still only in the early stages of transition from a pre-industrial economy and society. Even London and other major urban centres remained very different from the industrialised cities of later mid-Victorian England. A profound gap had opened up between the classes in this respect. E.P. Thompson, in *Customs in Common*, argues that

customary consciousness and customary usages were especially robust in the eighteenth century ... Historians ... have tended to see the eighteenth century as a time when these customary usages were in decline, along with magic, witchcraft, and kindred superstitions. The people were subject to pressures to "reform" popular culture from above, literacy was displacing oral transmission, and enlightenment (it is supposed) was seeping down from the superior to the subordinate orders. But the pressures of reform were stubbornly resisted, and the eighteenth century saw a profound distance opened, a profound alienation between the culture of patricians and plebs.¹⁶

Thus, while it is obvious and indisputable that British immigrants brought their economic and cultural background with them to Australia, it needs to be remembered that there was more than one Britain.

The resilience of pre-industrial society has many implications. Take, for example, the notion of absolute private property rights, a central tenet of the transplanted society that would eventually transform Australia. In the early nineteenth century, many smallholders, agricultural labourers and farm servants in Britain, as well as the itinerant poor, were still reliant on common land and communal rights over "private" lands to graze animals and gather food and fuel.¹⁷ And in much of Ireland the "produce of the infields and outfields was primarily for home consumption," while livestock – grazed

on more distant common lands – was the main commercial activity. The stock was watched over by summer herders who lived in basic huts, with each community utilising a designated territory.¹⁸ Similar pastoral and land-use systems existed in parts of Scotland, Wales and Van Diemen's Land.

Early Van Diemen's Land saw two decades of largely shared land use, with convicts and small landowners using grasslands for pasture without seeking exclusive possession. Smallholders grew what they could consume and the little they could sell, but the major economic activity occurred in the unowned (according to British law) grasslands, where kangaroo was hunted and sheep and cattle thrived under the loose supervision of convict stockmen. With the arrival of free settlers with their modern private property claims in the 1820s, the progressive eviction of both black and white residents of the grassland plains commenced as part of a broader imperial struggle, the attempt to impose what are now "taken for granted" rights associated with the possession of land title. As John West lamented in his *History of Tasmania* (1852), "the English of modern times" did not comprehend "joint ownership, notwithstanding the once 'common' property of the nation has only been lately distributed by law." It was only because of this change, West suggests, that "the gradual alienation" of the hunting grounds of the Aborigines also meant "their expulsion and extinction."¹⁹

It has often been pointed out that the first settlers of Tasmania were unwilling invaders. Of greater significance, however, is that they were exiles – even the dream of going home was forfeit – and that most, including the urban majority, still held pre-industrial mores. Van Diemen's Land was not only the convicts' prison, it was their one source of hope. In this context, to gain freedom by obtaining the essentials of life directly from the new land became the chief motivation of their enterprise, and convicts showed themselves willing and able to make changes in clothing, diet, housing and social norms to achieve this.

The readiness of convict settlers to adapt was not a matter of heightened sensitivity, but rather a reflection of the fact that they were little buffered by either capital or privilege from a direct encounter

with the demands of the new environment. As a consequence, their experience of the country was far more transformative than that of the wealthy free-settler minority, who were significantly quarantined by the technology of the Industrial Revolution and their very different needs and expectations. The common apprehension that "almost everything the settler did was a re-creation of the world which had been left behind"²⁰ reflects the experience of a relatively small elite. The fact that this articulate and literate group produced most of the written accounts of Van Diemen's Land explains, but does not justify, the assumption that their history was shared by the majority of the settlers. Indeed, the written accounts share a pervading concern: that in the convict districts a way of life very different from that in rural or urban England had emerged.

The convict exiles to Van Diemen's Land thus provide a remarkable human raw material for the study of Australian colonisation. At a time in Australian politics when there is political pressure to emphasise the contribution of the Enlightenment and British civilisation to the formation of national identity, Van Diemen's Land reminds us what a complex historical task this actually is. What does it mean to talk of the Enlightenment in the context of a society in which, as late as the 1850s, the majority of the population were convicted criminals, many thousands of whom had come from the most "primitive" country in Europe, where a million people were dying from starvation? Those convicts who were refugees from the Irish famine in the 1840s were the poorest group of immigrants to leave from anywhere in Europe in the nineteenth century, representing those who couldn't afford even the cheapest passage or call on even the most degrading forms of charity to save themselves and their families. But even for English convicts, criminality was usually closely connected with desperate poverty (the comparatively low level of serious crime in both Van Diemen's Land and Tasmania should be sufficient to quell finally the still-lingering nineteenth-century belief that convicts represented an inherently criminal underclass).

Tasmania's experience of being founded by convict settlers is not unique, but it is close to being so. Convicts were sent to other parts of the empire, but only in New South Wales did their numbers equal

those transported to Van Diemen's Land. And nowhere else, including in New South Wales, did convicts, former convicts and their descendants constitute the majority of the population over such a long period of time.

Van Diemen's Land thus needs to be understood as a convict *society*. It is not best exemplified by the well-known penal apparatus – chain gangs, Port Arthur and hard labour – but by the everyday lives of the ordinary people of the colony. Convicts were simply, as David Collins used to say, "the people," and convictism the society they made. The penal system, intended to ensure subservience in all convicts, was an important part of the context in which this society evolved, but contrary to the picture presented by Marcus Clarke, and essentially reproduced by Robert Hughes in *The Fatal Shore*,²¹ it did not determine its form.

The point has been made by a number of historians that, contrary to the popular perception, most convicts did not spend the majority, if any, of their sentence behind bars or in chains, an experience reserved for secondary offenders. Convicts are more accurately seen as servants (or unfree workers) than prisoners.²² Nevertheless, the number that received various forms of harsh punishment was still very large, and the imminent possibility of joining them influenced, as it was intended to, the behaviour of every convict and former convict. It is not the horror of the penal system (at least as it operated from the late 1820s) that has been distorted, but its social impact. Demonstrations of submission (or the rarer acts of overt resistance) were not the only result of a culture of fear. Material security and, in the early years, existence itself, were frequently risked in pursuing a life of comparative freedom far from the degrading institutions of authority. Even under the comparatively relaxed early penal system, freedom proved to be a powerful motivator to "go bush." Surely this was, and remains, a powerful expression of resistance to the dominant social and economic order. These convicts and their descendants were not merely passive victims of imperial design, and if we are to understand the alternative way of life they forged, it is the land, more than Port Arthur, that holds the key.

The home-making undertaken by Van Diemonian Britons, and the achievement this represents, does not mean, of course, that there

were not negative consequences. The impact on the environment and on the land's first people was immense, and the suffering and brutality associated with invasion and conquest must forever remain central themes of any truthful account of life in Van Diemen's Land.

In 2003 the publication of Keith Windschuttle's *Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847* gave national prominence to the topic of Aboriginal-settler relations in Van Diemen's Land. The irony of this was that the chosen locale for debate happened to be the one place in Australia where the work of contemporary historians had actually moderated, not increased, previous estimates of violence. In *Fate of a Free People*, Henry Reynolds had argued that the massacre of Aborigines, far from being ignored as in many other regions of Australia, had previously been *exaggerated* because earlier historians underestimated Aboriginal advantages in the conflict.

In assessing the level of violence (the only question most of the politically motivated commentators in the so-called history wars seemed to take an interest in), this book essentially defends the conclusions of nineteenth-century writers such as James Bonwick and John West, whose work was based on a considerable body of settler testimony. It argues that Reynolds, and even Lyndall Ryan in *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, have, far from exaggerating the number of Aborigines killed by the British, probably underestimated fatalities. Their analysis, and most debate to date, has been distorted by the unusual abundance of documentary sources relating to the final stages of the war between 1828 and 1831. This rich collection of documents, first put together by Lieutenant Governor George Arthur, records small groups of survivors engaged in a guerrilla-style resistance in which they proved highly adept. By the time these documents were written, however, most of the Aborigines were already dead. What of the years before, when whole communities, not small bands of warriors, were Britain's enemy?

The argument that massacres were limited, now almost universally accepted, is closely tied to the assumption that settlers were strangers to the new land and thus unable readily to kill the indigenous people in an environment where the horse and gun did not

confer the same advantages as in much of mainland Australia. But this analysis ignores the two decades of comparatively peaceful shared land use that preceded the free-settler land-grab, and the extent to which this equipped Van Diemonian bushmen to undertake the expulsion and mass killing of Aborigines on behalf of their masters in the years immediately before the final guerrilla war. Massacres were, as most nineteenth-century historians believed, likely to have been commonplace. Equally horrific, and almost unscrutinised, were the government-sponsored ethnic clearances conducted on the west coast *after* the fighting was over.

These and other aspects of Aboriginal-settler relations are important subjects of this book (and are considered in some detail in the appendix), but nevertheless this is not Aboriginal history, nor even general history. It does not pretend to describe Aboriginal culture, strategy or political organisation. Furthermore, unlike in previous histories of Van Diemen's Land, notably those by John West in the nineteenth century and Lloyd Robson in the twentieth, government policy and actions, along with free-settler concerns, provide the context for the discussion, not its primary object.²³ The focus is on the convicts and the life they made in the southern isle of Australia in the first half of the nineteenth century. The book can thus best be described as environmental history, not because it explores how convict settlers changed the environment but because its primary interest is how the environment changed *them*. In exploring this question, I have sought to put to one side an oddly resilient obsession with passing moral judgment on convicts and their society. Of course convict culture was usually rough, and it could be brutal. More seriously, it is undeniable that convicts and their descendants were implicated in environmental destruction and a human tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions. The argument made here is not intended to qualify this, but rather to demonstrate that the implications of the invasion were not only one-way. Southern Australia's convict founders were changed by their exile to a bountiful but defended land, the home of an ancient and distinct people. They too were changed by conquest. This book is intended to be their history, the history of Van Diemen's Land.