



Risdon Cove and the Massacre of 3 May 1804: Their Place in Tasmanian History

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On 3 May 2004, about 200 members of the Aboriginal Community in Tasmania and their friends, including politicians from all parties, gathered in a bitter wind on a hilltop overlooking Risdon Cove, on the east bank of the River Derwent opposite the city of Hobart. Their purpose was to commemorate the bicentenary of the Risdon Cove massacre. According to a reporter from the *Melbourne Age* who attended the ceremony:

The massacre was the most violent conflict between black and white recorded in the first year of British settlement and began the destruction of the island's Aboriginal society. It took place on May 3, 1804, as Aboriginal families gathered in a food hunting party in wooded hills around the cove.¹

While there was a sad tone to the day, speakers told of Aboriginal traditions going back thousands of years, a wallaby hunting dance was performed, Teresa Saintry from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) read a message in the Aboriginal language of her ancestors, and the events of that day were reconstructed, with an actor reading out the most extensive eyewitness account from the colonial sources.

The secretary of the TAC had a defiant message: 'They [the colonisers] killed us off in this place 200 years ago, stole our land, took away our people and imposed their religion on us. But our presence here today shows they have not destroyed us.' The president of the TAC was more conciliatory: 'We remember what we've lost, but we look back to the future to show we have survived and even retained our language.' Bob Brown, the Australian Greens senator, told the crowd it was one of the most significant days in Tasmania's history. 'We need to face the awful truth,' he said. 'Our history is written in blood.'²

One hundred years earlier, on 22 February 1904, several thousand spectators including the premier had gathered at Risdon Cove to celebrate the centenary of the first British settlement in Tasmania. The governor unveiled a monument to Lieutenant John Bowen, the founder of the settlement, and paid tribute to the pioneers who had worked so hard to make Tasmania a successful colony, an important state in the new nation of Australia and a proud corner of the British empire. No Aboriginal people were known to have been present and no mention was made of the massacre.³

A century later, no formal ceremony was held to mark the Bowen landing, and at the ceremony on 3 May 2004, the 'Bowen monument' was covered with

¹ *Melbourne Age*, 4 May 2004.

² *Hobart Mercury* and *Melbourne Age*, 4 May 2004.

³ *Mercury*, 23 May 1904.

a white sheet splattered with blood, as a mark of respect to the Aboriginal people who lost their lives in the massacre.⁴

The transformation of Risdon Cove from the site of first British settlement to that of the first massacre of the Aborigines underscores the major shift that has been taking place in Tasmanian historiography in recent years. For most of Tasmania's history, settler narratives of exile and possession dominated our understanding of the past. Now Indigenous discourses of dispossession, segregation and survival have forced historians to reconceptualise the colonial encounter and to assess its impact on Aborigines as well as colonists. But this shift has not yet been entirely accepted. In this context, Risdon Cove holds a unique position in Tasmanian history.

As the site of first British settlement and the first recorded massacre, it stands as a stark reminder that the colonial encounter in Tasmania was violent from the outset. However, unlike other settler narratives which erased many such encounters from popular memory, the massacre at Risdon quickly became a founding story—I have located 17 accounts—and part of national and international literature on the colonial encounter.⁵ And it is also one of the few massacre sites in Australia to have been returned to the victims' present day custodians, in this case, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council.

These unique features make Risdon Cove, in the bicentennial year of the massacre, of critical interest to the historian of the colonial encounter. In this article I will address the following questions: How did Risdon Cove become the site of first settlement? How did the massacre happen? How many Aborigines were killed? How was it recorded at the time? How did settler historians make it a founding story? How did the Aboriginal community claim the story and the site? How are the stories of Risdon Cove represented today? How can they be told in the future?

A useful way to explore these questions is to locate them within the framework of settler narratives first set out in Australia by Kay Schaffer in her pioneering study, *In the Wake of First Contact*, which explored the Eliza Fraser narratives in their colonial and postcolonial contexts and provided new insights into understanding the colonial encounter.⁶ Since then Ann Curthoys has reframed the settler narrative for particular use by historians.⁷ She argues that white Australian historical consciousness is permeated with the Biblical story of exile and exodus, in which convicts and pioneers are portrayed as victims cast out into the Australian wilderness where they forge, after a long period of abandonment, deprivation and despair, a new Australian identity of egalitari-

⁴ *Mercury*, 4 May 2004.

⁵ See Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle. Massacres and the Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788*, Child & Associates, Frenchs Forest, NSW, 1988; Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples*, Jonathon Cape, London, 1998.

⁶ Kay Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact. The Eliza Fraser Narratives*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995.

⁷ Ann Curthoys, 'Mythologies', in Richard Nile (ed.), *The Australian Legend and its Discontents*, University of Queensland Press with the API Network, St Lucia, Qld, 2000, pp. 11-41.

anism, based on exclusion of the 'other'—who in this case, are Indigenous peoples. In the colonial period, Curthoys locates four kinds of settler narratives.

At first, some nineteenth-century settler narratives did contain expressions of moral concern about the implications of frontier conflict, but 'defended colonisation itself, as ordained by God and necessary for the advance of humanity'.⁸ In the case of Risdon Cove, I would argue that these narratives permeated the colonial story from the outset.

By the end of the century, however, Curthoys argues that narratives of reversal dominate, in which the colonist regarded himself as the original inhabitant of the land where the Indigenous people had either already died out or were destined to do so.⁹ Here, I would argue that in the case of Risdon Cove, the story was saturated by discourses of scientific racism, which placed the Indigenous peoples at the bottom of the human evolutionary ladder.¹⁰ This extreme view led to a humanitarian settler reaction in Tasmania in the post-1945 period. The Aborigines were re-humanised and the massacre was represented as a minor incident in the overall conflict with the settlers.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Curthoys argues that just as it seemed that prior Aboriginal occupation of the land had all but disappeared from Australian consciousness, Indigenous people and their issues with the past resurfaced and reframed the narrative to acknowledge that the settler's battle with the land included the dispossession of the Aborigines.¹¹ I would argue that this story resonates with the Aboriginal campaign for the return of Risdon Cove.

In the mid-1990s, however, Curthoys argues that prior Aboriginal land ownership was rejected by new white settler narratives of fear of losing the land they have won and of being displaced by people they had defeated a century before. 'So keenly aware of being themselves displaced, many non-indigenous Australians have fiercely taken on their new country as home. Theirs is an attachment born not of centuries of occupation and attachment, but of relatively recent feelings of being securely located, safe, centred, belonging. The feeling is *I have no other home, I have nowhere else to go*.¹² In this phenomenology of expulsion, exodus and exile, the fear is, 'if we fully recognize indigenous claims to land, if we have a sense of living in someone else's country, we are, in a metaphorical if not literal sense, perhaps in danger of homelessness again, of having to suffer yet again the original expulsion'.¹³

According to Curthoys, 'the trauma of expulsion, exodus, and exile obscures empathetic recognition of indigenous perspectives, of the trauma of invasion, institutionalisation, and dispersal. The self-chosen white victim finds it extremely difficult to recognize what he or she has done to others'.¹⁴ This most

⁸ Curthoys, p. 30.

⁹ Curthoys, p. 33.

¹⁰ See Shayne Breen, 'Re-inventing Social Evolution', in Robert Manne (ed.), *Whitewash. On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Black Inc. Agenda, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 139-59.

¹¹ Curthoys, pp. 33-34.

¹² Curthoys, p. 35.

¹³ Curthoys, p. 36.

¹⁴ Curthoys, pp. 36-37.

recent phase, I would argue, has particular resonance with contemporary narratives of Risdon Cove, as I will later demonstrate.

In applying Curthoys' framework to an analysis of the settler narratives of the Risdon Cove massacre I will argue for its pivotal position as a founding story of Tasmania, and show how at the bicentenary of the settlement and the massacre, new kinds of narratives have emerged that could suggest new directions in Tasmanian history.

Let us now consider the origins of the Risdon Cove settlement, the first reports of the affray of 3 May 1804, and how, despite official efforts to dismiss it, it quickly became a founding settler narrative. The Risdon Cove settlement was established in September 1803 as a military outpost of the colony of New South Wales, to forestall French explorers in the area from claiming Tasmania for Napoleon.¹⁵ Situated on the east bank of the River Derwent, about thirty kilometres from its mouth, by May 1804 it consisted of about 80 people, including the commandant, a young naval officer, Lieutenant John Bowen, aged 23, and his mistress Martha Hayes and their baby daughter; a surgeon, Jacob Mountgarret, aged thirty, who was also a magistrate; a detachment of the New South Wales Corps led by Lieutenant William Moore; two settlers and their families; and about fifty convicts. By then friction between Bowen and Moore had permanently soured the day-to-day running of the settlement.¹⁶

Four months earlier, in February 1804, Risdon Cove had been superseded by the establishment by Lieutenant-Governor David Collins of a much larger settlement on the other side of the Derwent River at Sullivans Cove, now known as Hobart. When Risdon was formally abandoned in July, its claim as the founding British settlement may have been forgotten had not an encounter with the Aborigines taken place on 3 May.

The first published account of the affray appeared among other items of business in a despatch that Lieutenant-Governor Collins sent to Governor King on 15 May 1804:

the inclosed Copy of a Letter from Lieut: Moore (who had been left in Charge of the people at Risdon Cove during a few days that Captn. Bowen was absent on an Excursion to the River Huon) will inform your Excellency of a visit from the Natives, which from its hostile Appearance, as stated in the Letter, was rendered fatal to them, three of them having been Killed upon the Spot. Not having been present myself, I must take it for granted that the measures which were pursued were unavoidable; but I have reason to fear that, from the vindictive Spirit of these People, I may hereafter feel the unfortunate Effects of them.¹⁷

Moore's report to Collins was from Risdon Cove and dated 7 May 1804, four days after the affray:

¹⁵ Phillip Tardif, *John Bowen's Hobart: The Beginning of European Settlement in Tasmania*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 2003, p. 1.

¹⁶ Tardif, pp. 138-41.

¹⁷ Collins to King, 15 May 1804, *HRA*, III, I, pp. 237-38.

Sir,

Agreeable to your desire I have the honour of acquainting you with the Circumstances that led to the attack on the Natives, which you will perceive was the consequence of their own hostile Appearance.

It would appear from the numbers of them and the Spears etc. with which they were armed, that their design was to attack us, however it was not till they had thoroughly convinced me of their Intentions by using violence to a Settler's wife and my own Servant who was returning into Camp with some Kangaroos, One of which they took from him, that they were fired upon on their coming into Camp, and Surrounding it. I went towards them with five Soldiers, their appearance and numbers I thought very far from friendly; during this time I was informed that a part of them was beating Birt, the Settler, at his farm. I then dispatched Two Soldiers to his assistance, with orders not to fire if they could avoid it; however, they found it necessary, and one was killed on the Spot, and another was found Dead in the Valley.

But at this time a great party was in Camp, and on a proposal from Mr. Mountgarrett to fire one of the Carronades to intimidate them they dispersed.

Mr. Mountgarrett with Some Soldiers and Prisoners [Convicts] followed them Some distance up the Valley, and had reason to Suppose more were wounded, as one was seen to be taken away bleeding; during the Time they were in Camp a number of old men were perceived at the foot of the Hill near the Valley employed in preparing spears.

I have now Sir, as near as I can recollect given you the leading particulars and hope there has nothing been done but what you approve of.¹⁸

Collins noted that a few days later a party of sailors had been attacked 'by a numerous Party of Natives' on the opposite shore to Risdon, and that a 'Native Boy' about three years old, 'who had been taken in the late Business' had been baptized by the Chaplain, Robert Knopwood, without the lieutenant-governor's knowledge or consent. Collins directed that he be returned to his people as soon as possible. He also took command of Risdon Cove and ordered its immediate closure.¹⁹

Collins' despatch and the abandonment of Risdon two months later were designed to remove the affray from public scrutiny, but it did not fade from popular memory. Clearly more had happened at Risdon Cove than Collins was prepared to acknowledge. The fact that he did not hold an official inquiry into 'the late Business' enabled a different account to emerge in the first settler narratives of Tasmania, published between 1819 and 1822.

The most detailed account was provided by William Charles Wentworth, who had presumably heard stories of the affray in Hobart en route to England in April 1816:

At first the natives evinced the most friendly disposition towards the new comers [in Tasmania]; and would probably have been actuated by the same amicable feeling to this day, had not the military officer entrusted with the

¹⁸ Lt. William Moore to Collins, 7 May 1804, Enclosure in Collins to King, 15 May 1804, *HRA*, III, I, pp. 242-43.

¹⁹ Collins to King, *HRA*, III, I, p. 238.

command, directed a discharge of grape and canister shot to be made among a large body who were approaching, as he imagined, with hostile designs; but, as has since been believed, with much greater probability, merely from motives of curiosity and friendship. The havoc occasioned among them by this murderous discharge was dreadful; and since that time all communication with them has ceased, and a spirit of animosity and revenge which this unmerited and atrocious act of barbarity engendered, has been fostered and aggravated to the highest pitch by the incessant rencontres which have taken place between them and the settlers. The latter, whenever an occasion offers, destroy as many of them as possible, and they, in their turn, never neglect an opportunity of retaliating on their blood-thirsty neighbours. Fortunately, however, for the colonists, they have seldom or never been known to act on the offensive, unless when they have met with some of their persecutors singly. Two persons armed with muskets may traverse the island from one extremity to the other with perfect safety.²⁰

GW Evans, a surveyor who had arrived in New South Wales in 1803 and served as Deputy Surveyor of Lands in Van Diemen's Land from 1812, talked to many colonists about the affray, to produce the most interesting account:

towards noon ...a considerable number of the natives were seen descending from the neighbouring hills: as they approached they were distinctly heard to sing, each man having in his hand a green bough, a well-known emblem of peace among savage tribes. Either their signals of amity were not well-understood, or their numbers too great to be trusted: it is otherwise impossible to conceive that a British officer would have had recourse to so harsh and cruel a measure.²¹

The third account, by Lieutenant Jeffreys, a British naval officer who made several visits to Tasmania between 1817 and 1822, represented the Aborigines at Risdon Cove as 'innocent and well-disposed creatures' whose 'tokens of friendship were returned by a heavy firing of musquetry from three military detachments which was drawn up for the purpose'.²²

These accounts let the cat out of the bag, so to speak. The affray at Risdon Cove was no longer 'the late Business', as Collins had called it, but a founding story in which the military, not the Aborigines, were the villains. This account became so popular that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur repeated it in a despatch to Viscount Goderich in 1828:

On my succeeding to the Government, I found the quarrel of the Natives with the Europeans, occasioned by an unfortunate step of the officer in command of the Garrison, on the first founding of the Settlement, was daily aggravated by every kind of injury committed against the defenceless natives, by the Stockkeepers and Sealers; with whom it was a constant

²⁰ William Charles Wentworth, *Statistical, Historical and Political Description of the colony of New South Wales ...*, Whittaker, London, 1819, pp. 116-17.

²¹ George William Evans, *A Geographical, Historical and Topographical Description of Van Diemen's Land ...*, John Suter, London, 1822, facsimile reprint, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1967, p. 14-15.

²² Charles Jeffreys, *Van Diemen's Land. Geographical and Descriptive Delineations of the Island of Van Diemen's Land*, JM Richardson, Cornhill, London, 1820, pp. 114-15.

practice to fire upon them whenever they approached, and to deprive them of their women whenever the opportunity offered.²³

It certainly informed his thinking two years later, in the midst of the Black War, when he invited the Archdeacon of Australia, the Reverend William Grant Broughton, to chair a committee of inquiry, 'to inquire into the origin of the hostility displayed by the Black Natives of this Island against the Settlers, and to consider the measures expedient to be adopted with a view of checking the devastation of property and the destruction of human lives occasioned by the state of warfare which has so extensively prevailed'.²⁴ While the inquiry had no legal status, the testimonies it received, and its report, became the second official version of the affray.

The Committee heard testimonies from five men, who were either at Risdon Cove or at Hobart on 3 May 1804. They were the Reverend Robert Knopwood, who was at Hobart on 3 May 1804; two former convicts, Edward White, who was at Risdon Cove on 3 May, and William Stocker, who was at Hobart on 3 May; James Kelly, who was a twelve-year-old boy at Hobart in 1804 and was now the harbour master at Hobart; and Robert Evans, a former marine, who was at Hobart on 3 May.²⁵ Each brought his own version of the truth to the Committee.

Robert Knopwood produced his diary for 3 May 1804, which noted that he heard the roar of the cannon at Risdon at 2pm. He then produced for the first time the note from surgeon Mountgarret:

Dear Sir,

I beg to refer you to Mr. Moore for the particulars of an attack the natives made on the camp today, and I have every reason to think it was premeditated, as their number far exceeded any that we have ever heard of. As you express a wish to be acquainted with some of the natives, if you will dine with me to-morrow you will oblige me by christening a fine native boy who I have. Unfortunately, poor boy, his father and mother were both killed. He is about two years old. I have likewise the body of a man that was killed. If Mr. Bowden wishes to see him desected I will be happy to see him with you tomorrow. I would have wrote to him, but Mr. Moore waits.

Your friend

J. Mountgarret, Hobart, six-o'clock.

The number of natives I think was not less than 5 or 6 hundred—J.M.²⁶

²³ Arthur to Goderich, 10 January 1828, *HRA*, III, VII, p. 27.

²⁴ Report of the Aborigines Committee, 19 March 1830. Enclosure No. 2 in Arthur to Murray, 15 April 1830, *Van Diemen's Land. Copies of all Correspondence between Lieutenant-Governor Arthur and His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, on the Subject of the Military Operations Lately carried on against the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1971, p. 35. (Hereafter referred to as *Military Operations*.)

²⁵ Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee for the Affairs of the Aborigines, 10, 11 March and 16 March 1830, *Military Operations*, pp. 51-54.

²⁶ *The Diary of the Reverend Robert Knopwood 1803-1838*, edited by Mary Nicholls, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1977, p. 51 (Hereafter referred to as Knopwood.)

Knopwood then read out the rest of his diary entry for 3 May 1804:

At 8, Lt. Moore came to my marquee and stayd sometime; he informed me of the natives being very numerous, and that they had wounded one of the settlers, Burke, and was going to burn his house down and ill treat his wife etc. etc.²⁷

Knopwood may also have told them that he had toured the site at Risdon Cove a week later and christened the two-year-old boy, Robert Hobart May. Under further cross-examination Knopwood supposed that five or six Aborigines had been killed in the affray.²⁸

The former Irish convict Edward White, who was a witness to the affray, provided the most detailed account:

Was one of the first men who landed Twenty seven years ago—built Lieutenant Bowen's house at Risdon—was then servant to a man named Clark—on the third of May 1804 was hoeing new ground near a creek—Saw three hundred of the Natives come down in a circular form and a flock of Kangaroos hemmed in between them—they were men, women and children—"they looked at me with all their eyes," I went down the Creek and reported them to some Soldiers and then went back to my work—the Natives did not threaten me. I was not afraid of them—Clark's house was near to where I was at work and Burke's [Birt's] house near Clark's house—the Natives were never within half a quarter of a mile of Burke's house—the Natives did not attack the Soldiers—they would not have molested them—the firing commenced about 11 o'clock—there were a great many of the Natives slaughtered and wounded—I don't know how many—some of their bones were sent in two casks to Port Jackson by Dr. Mountgarrett—they went in the "Ocean"—a boy was taken from them—this was three or four months after we landed—they never came so close again afterwards—they had no spears with them—only waddies—they were hunting and came down into a Bottom—there were hundreds and hundreds of Kangaroo about Risdon then the Soldiers came down from their own Camp to the Creek to attack the Natives—I could shew all the ground—Mr. Clark was there—the Natives were close to his house—they were not on Burke's side of the creek—never heard that any of them went to Burke's house. Is sure they did not know there was a white man in the Country when they came down to Risdon.²⁹

The three other men gave hearsay testimony. James Kelly said that forty or fifty Aborigines were killed at Risdon; William Stocker 'heard that the Natives came to Risdon to hold a Corroberry'; and Robert Evans said he 'heard that they [the Aborigines] came down in a great body not that they made any attack—that they brought a great number of Kangaroo with them for a Corroberry—never heard they interrupted any one but that they were fired on—does not know who ordered them to be fired on, or how many of them were said to have been killed—heard there were men women and children—that some were killed and some children taken away'.³⁰ It is disappointing that William Stocker, Martha

²⁷ Knopwood, 3 May 1804, p. 51.

²⁸ See Knopwood, 11 May 1804, p. 51; *Military Operations*, p. 53.

²⁹ *Military Operations*, pp. 53-54.

³⁰ *Military Operations*, pp. 53, 54.

Hayes' stepfather, was not invited to present her account of the affray, for, according to the unpublished reminiscences of John Pascoe Fawkner, it was Martha Hayes who, terrified of the blacks, begged Dr Mountgarret to take measures to protect her 'in the condition she was'.³¹ It was only a month since the birth of her daughter, and according to Alison Alexander, who has conducted the most detailed research into the life of Martha Hayes, possibly 'the young mother still felt delicate'.³² A few days later, Archdeacon Broughton and the everend William Bedford toured the Risdon Cove site with Knopwood and White.³³

The Committee's report could not make any clear conclusion about who was responsible for the affray, the Aborigines or the colonists, but it did acknowledge that it was 'the first act of declared hostility':

the Committee have some difficulty in deciding whether it is to be considered as originating in an aggression by the Natives, calling forth measures of self defence, or in an attack upon them commenced by the Settlers and Military, under an impression that an attempt was about to be made upon the position by the unusually augmented number of Natives who had made their appearance in the neighbourhood. It appears unquestionable that a person named Burke, whose habitation was considerably advanced beyond the rest, was driven from it by the Natives, whose number was estimated at upwards of Five hundred, and much violence was threatened by them towards this Man and his Wife and Dwelling—But it is the opinion of some persons who were then in the Colony that the displeasure of these people was excited only by finding this hut erected upon ground to which, as being favourably situated for water and hunting, they were in the habit of resorting, and on which they were preparing at this time to hold a general assembly, and that they had no more hostile intention than to remove this obstacle to their proceedings; while it is deposed to by one, who was an eye witness, that they did not proceed even to this point of aggression. Their having been accompanied by their Women and Children, whom, when engaged in expeditions of danger, they are known to be in the habit of leaving in a place of security, is a circumstance strongly in favour of the opinion, that they had in view no other than a peaceful purpose, and that they were not the first Assailants. But whatever may have been the actual course of previous events, it is indisputable that a most lamentable encounter did at this time ensue, in which the numbers slain, of Men, Women and Children, have been estimated as high as fifty—although the Committee, from the experience they have had, in the course of this inquiry, of the facility with which the numbers are magnified, as well as from other statements, contradictory of the above, are induced to hope that the above, are induced to hope that estimate is greatly overrated.³⁴

From this report, from the testimonies made to the Committee and from the earlier accounts, we can deduce the following took place at Risdon Cove on 3 May 1804: that at least 300 Aborigines, men, women and children, appeared without warning on the hills overlooking Risdon Cove in a kangaroo drive; that

¹ Alison Alexander, *Governors' Ladies. The Wives and Mistresses of Van Diemen's Land* (Governors, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1987), p. 5.

² Alexander, p. 5.

³ Knopwood, 19 March 1830, p. 552.

⁴ *Military Operations*, p. 37.

Moore and the soldiers began hostilities; that the affray lasted about three hours from late morning until 2 pm, during which two groups of soldiers, one consisting of five men and the other, two soldiers assisted by some convicts, fired on the Aborigines in two separate engagements; that a settler, Birt, and his wife, fled from their hut; that the affray ended with the firing of the carronade into a large group of Aborigines; that at least five or six Aborigines were killed, double the number stated by Moore, possibly more, as stated by White and Evans, and up to fifty as stated by Kelly; that at least one Aboriginal woman was killed and an Aboriginal boy orphaned; and that at least one barrel of Aboriginal remains, perhaps the body dissected by Mountgarret, was sent to Sydney on the ship, *Ocean*, in early August 1804. This information, apart from some later embellishments, would form the basis of all succeeding accounts.

How was this 'lamentable encounter' considered by the leading nineteenth-century colonial historians, who exhibited moral concern about conflict with the Tasmanian Aborigines but were in no doubt that British colonisation brought civilisation to Tasmania? They barely differed from their three predecessors. They all agreed that the Aborigines were innocent victims of an attack led by an incompetent soldier, Lieutenant Moore, who was personally responsible. The major difference was they claimed it caused the irretrievable breakdown in relations between the two groups and ended in the Black War.

In locating a single incident and one person as the root cause of the Black War, they could argue that the colony of Tasmania was established by men without honour who, in a single act of perfidy, destroyed the possibility of harmonious relations with the Aborigines. When the gentry settlers arrived twenty years later, they were unable to reverse the tide of history and were thus absolved from responsibility for the shocking slaughter that followed.

Their accounts, however, differed in deciding how many Aborigines were killed at Risdon Cove. John West reported that 'it is conjectured that fifty fell' and called it 'the slaughter of Risdon'.³⁵ James Bonwick, who was the first to use the word 'massacre' to describe the affray, did not post a tally of Aborigines killed but confided that one of his informants said that Moore was drunk and 'the whole was the effect of a half-drunken spree, and the firing arose from a brutal desire to see the *Niggers* run'.³⁶ Calder resurrected Wentworth's words, to call the affray a *rencontre* between the soldiers and the blacks, and noted the discrepancy in the death toll between five or six and fifty.³⁷ JB Walker refrained from offering a tally but was very clear that Lieutenant Moore had lost his head and should have exercised 'tact and forbearance'. He also conjectured that perhaps the

³⁵ John West, *The History of Tasmania*, first published 1852, reprinted Angus & Robertson in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, 1971, pp. 262, 263.

³⁶ James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians or, the Black War of Van Diemen's Land*, Sampson Low, Son & Marston, London, 1870, facsimile edition, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1969, p. 35.

³⁷ JE Calder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c., of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Henn and Co. Hobart Town, 1875, facsimile edition, Cox Kay, Hobart, 1972, p. 7.

carronade fired blanks rather than shot.³⁸ James Fenton's account sums up this phase of the settler narrative:

That [the] inhuman slaughter on the slopes of Risdon was the prelude of countless troubles while the blacks remained at large on the island. It produced retaliation, and retaliation provoked revenge, until both parties were actuated by the bitterest feelings and hatred towards each other. Seeing how susceptible were the blacks to kindly influences when strangers visited their shores, it can hardly be supposed that in the first attack of the English the blacks were aggressors.³⁹

Curthoys' second settler narrative phase—which I call scientific racism—from 1901 to 1939, either excluded the Aborigines from the Risdon Cove story or declared that they were doomed to extinction. I will touch on two representations of this period.

The centenary of the Risdon Cove settlement was a celebration of the pioneer settlers in Tasmania. At a gala event in February 1904, attended by several thousand spectators and the premier, the governor of Tasmania unveiled a monument to John Bowen, the founder of Risdon Cove. The monument contained no mention of the Risdon Cove massacre, or of the convicts and soldiers whose labour had enabled the settlement to survive.⁴⁰

Thirty-five years later, the story had only slightly changed. The historian RW Giblin, in the second volume of *The Early History of Tasmania*, addressed the following question:

Was Risdon Cove the root cause of all subsequent troubles between whites and blacks? Little can be said in favour of this theory ... it was inevitable that the native people should fade away before the more vigorous race.⁴¹

This phase was dominated, not by new histories of Tasmania, but by a barrage of research carried out by the international scientific community to argue that the Tasmanian Aborigines were the missing link between ape and man.⁴² In this environment, Risdon Cove was the site of first British settlement dominated settler narratives, with a plaque and a memorial gate erected in 1953 to mark its sesqui-centenary.⁴³

By then, humanitarian settler narratives, from 1948 to 1985, had emerged in response to the attempted genocide of the Jews in the Second World War and its resonance with the extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines; the discovery of

³⁸ James Backhouse Walker, *Early Tasmania. Papers Read Before the Royal Society of Tasmania During the Years 1888 to 1899*, fourth Impression TJ Hughes Government Printer, Hobart, 1973, p. 54.

³⁹ James Fenton, *A History of Tasmania From its Discovery in 1792 to the Present Time* Hobart, J Walch & Sons, 1884, facsimile reprint, Hobart, 1978, pp. 35-37.

⁴⁰ *Mercury*, 23 February 1904.

⁴¹ RW Giblin, *The Early History of Tasmania* Vol. II, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1939, p. 20.

⁴² See NJB Plomley, *An Annotated Bibliography of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Occasional Paper No. 28, London, 1969. He lists at least 40 articles on this issue.

⁴³ *Mercury*, 11 September 1953.

new sources like the journals of George Augustus Robinson, the government agent who worked with the Tasmanian Aborigines in the 1830s; new archeological research that offered more solid evidence about the social and political organisation of the Tasmanian Aborigines in the early colonial period; new research on the resistance of Indigenous peoples to pastoral settlement; and the re-emergence of the Tasmanian Aborigines as a political group, after a long period of apparent extinction.

The best known narratives of the first part of this phase, by Clive Turnbull and NJB Plomley, relegated the Risdon Cove massacre to a lesser place in the overall conflict between settlers and Aborigines. While they held Lieutenant Moore responsible for the Risdon Cove massacre—Turnbull considered Moore's account 'a thin story'—they dismissed it as the cause of the Black War twenty years later. In their view the spread of pastoral settlement and the determination by the settlers to remove the Aborigines from their land, if necessary by force, were the key reasons for the extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines.⁴⁴

In the second part of this phase, the narratives of Lloyd Robson and myself considered Risdon Cove a small moment in the larger canvas of Aboriginal resistance, dispossession and survival. My purpose was to place the massacre in the context of how the Moormairremener used the land where the British were the intruders.⁴⁵ Lloyd Robson, however, was still convinced that Tasmania had been colonised by men without honour, and so repeated Bonwick's claim that Moore was said to have been intoxicated when he ordered the attack, and that some thought the massacre was the effect of a half-drunken spree and that the firing arose from a brutal desire 'to see the Niggers run'.⁴⁶

This phase concluded in 1985 when the archeologist Angela McGowan published her excavation report of Risdon Cove, as part of preparations for a major interpretation of the area as a historic site of first settlement. McGowan's report, however, not only found traces of the original buildings, erected by the settlers at Risdon Cove in 1803–04, but also evidence of Aboriginal occupation of 8,000 years, including an Aboriginal tool-making site.⁴⁷ Risdon Cove was once again a site of both Aboriginal and settler occupation.

These findings heralded Curthoys' resurgent Aboriginal phase. Over the next ten years a struggle ensued between Aborigines and settlers about ownership of the site and how its story should be presented. The struggle began when the Tasmanian government, as part of its plan to recreate Risdon as a historic site of first settlement, constructed two pyramids as an information

⁴⁴ Clive Turnbull, *Black War. The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, first published 1948, reprinted Cheshire-Landsowne, Melbourne, 1965, p. 34; NJB Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission. The Tasmanian Journals of George Augustus Robinson, 1829–1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p. 46.

⁴⁷ Angela McGowan, *Archaeological Investigations at Risdon Cove Historic Site 1978–1980*, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Occasional Paper No.10, Sandy Bay, Tasmania, 1985.

centre to attract tourists, but included no mention of the massacre. During the Australian bicentenary in 1988 tensions escalated when a local drama group organised a re-enactment of the Bowen landing. According to the *Hobart Mercury*, a crowd of a hundred Aborigines protested at the re-enactment and threw flour bombs and eggs at the actors, who were singing 'Land of Hope and Glory'. Michael Mansell, the Aborigines' spokesman, claimed that over two hundred Aborigines, men, women and children, had been slaughtered at Risdon Cove in the first months after white settlement.⁴⁸

Four years later, in April 1992, the young Indigenous scholar, Greg Lehman, published an Indigenous narrative of Risdon Cove:

Close to a hundred were killed that day, whole families; the exact number will never be known. Bodies were dragged back to the settlement, butchered and boiled down so that the bones could be packed in lime and sent back to Sydney. When the Moormairremener returned to bury the dead many could not be found.⁴⁹

On the anniversary of the massacre a month later, members and supporters of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) occupied the Pyramids visitors centre, declaring that as Risdon Cove was the site of the first massacre of the Tasmanian Aborigines, the area should be returned to the Aborigines.⁵⁰ In September, it established a new category of Aboriginal land claims—massacre sites, which included Risdon Cove—and on Tasmania Day on 24 November it again occupied the site, arousing considerable publicity.⁵¹

At this point the State Liberal government entered the story from a new direction of reconciliation. For in the post-Mabo environment, it was not unsympathetic to Aboriginal claims to land. In early January 1993, the premier, Ray Groom, confirmed that discussions were taking place with the Aboriginal community whereby they could be given control over land, but not title.⁵² At the end of the year he issued a 'reconciliation document' in which he set out the process of consultation with Aboriginal communities in Tasmania for the transfer of Crown Land sites that had specific meaning to them. He declared the document a 'turning point in Tasmanian history'.⁵³

Following consultation meetings with more than twenty Aboriginal organisations in 1994, the government recognized that particular places in of Tasmania, including Risdon Cove, were historically significant to the Aboriginal community. In November 1995, Risdon Cove was proclaimed as an Aboriginal Historic Site, as part of a transfer of 3800 hectares of land across the state to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council. As Michael Mansell said at the time, it was symbolic of the change taking place in Tasmania.⁵⁴ The outcome was a

⁴⁸ *Mercury*, 12 September 1988.

⁴⁹ Greg Lehman, 'Our story at Risdon Cove', *Puggana News*, 34, April 1992, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, second edition, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, Sydney, 1996, p. 290. See also Kaylene Allen, 'Aboriginal community reoccupies Risdon Cove', *Green Left Weekly*, May 1992.

⁵¹ Ryan, p. 295.

⁵² *Examiner*, 9 January 1993.

⁵³ *Examiner*, 17 December 1993.

remarkable achievement by the Tasmanian government and the Aboriginal community.

The return of the site to the Indigenous people, however, led to the next phase of Curthoys' settler narrative—fear and displacement on the part of the settler population. It came from two different directions and bore remarkably similar characteristics. The first came from splits within Aboriginal community about control of the Risdon Cove site, which surfaced during the ATSIC regional elections in the mid-1990s over claims of Aboriginality. This led the TAC to mount a case in the Federal Court, challenging the Aboriginality of a number of people listed on the ATSIC electoral roll. The court found that it was impossible to determine who was an Aboriginal person in Tasmania.⁵⁵

This judgement appeared to legitimise breakaway groups from the TAC, the oldest and largest Aboriginal organisation in Tasmania. One group, the Lia Pootah, led by Kaye McPherson, claimed, without a shred of evidence, descent from Aboriginal women from the Moormairenner people associated with Risdon Cove. She further claimed that the Lia Pootah were the Indigenous custodians of the site and potentially legitimate owners. Her research into the massacre led her to contend that eighty Aborigines had been killed.⁵⁶

More recently McPherson has promoted reconciliation at Risdon Cove by working with Reg Watson, a leading member of the Anglo-Keltic society in Tasmania. He advocates the return of the site to 'white Tasmanians', and believes that in ignoring the bicentenary of the Bowen landing, the government is rewriting history to appease Aboriginal pressure groups.⁵⁷ McPherson's real aim, however, is to destabilise the TAC, on the grounds that it is an elite Indigenous organisation which acquired Risdon Cove at the expense of her own group.⁵⁸ Her fear of the TAC resonates with the attacks by Pauline Hanson on leading Aboriginal organisations in other parts of Australia.

The second form of fear and displacement came from the Sydney journalist Keith Windschuttle, who posed as a champion of the white settlers in his self-published text, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*.⁵⁹ His purpose was to erase Risdon Cove as a massacre site from the historical record as part of a wider campaign to deny Aboriginal rights to land.

He represented the Risdon Cove massacre as 'a defensive action by the colonists in which three Aborigines were shot dead and at least one, though

⁵⁴ Ryan, p. 310.

⁵⁵ W Sanders, *The Tasmanian electoral roll trial in the 2002 ATSIC elections*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. Discussion Paper No. 245, Australian National University, Canberra, 2003, pp. 1-4.

⁵⁶ Kaye McPherson, *Risdon Cove: From the Dreamtime to Now the Centenary of Federation, 2001*, Manuta Tunapee Puggaluggalia Publishers, PO Box 1437 Lindisfarne, 2001, p. 34.

⁵⁷ 'Official bicentenary date of European settlement in Tasmania under dispute', *The World Today*, ABC Radio, 5 September 2003. Transcript; Reg A Watson, *John Bowen and the Founding of Tasmania*, TAK Society, Lindisfarne, 2003.

⁵⁸ The Lia Pootah Aboriginal Community of Tasmania. See website <http://tasaboriginal.blogspot.com>.

⁵⁹ Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History Volume I: Van Diemen's land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.

possibly more, wounded'.⁶⁰ He arrived at this finding by accepting the statements by Moore and Mountgarret at face value and dismissing that by White. He supported his claim by arguing that no more than two or three Aborigines could have been killed because the soldiers only carried single shot muskets; that the carronade could not have fired grapeshot because it was only used for ceremonial purposes; that White could not have seen all the action because Bowen's map of the settlement in September 1803 indicated that Clark's hut, where White was working, was out of sight; that Bonwick's story that Moore was drunk at the time could not be true because every settler or official associated with Risdon Cove had either died or left the colony when he was alleged to have conducted the interview; and that White's account was implausible because it was recorded 26 years after the event. Nor he argued, could some bodies have been sent to Sydney in two casks, because there was no lime available in which to pack them.⁶¹

Phillip Tardif who was preparing a history of the Risdon Cove settlement for its bicentenary in 2003, was quick to respond. He challenged Windschuttle to defend his reliance on 'the word of two of the three eyewitnesses whose memories of that day are recorded', when he had gone 'to extraordinary lengths to wish away and discredit the testimony of the third', Edward White. He pointed out that, contrary to Windschuttle's claim, neither Moore nor Mountgarret saw any Aboriginal attack on any settler's hut; Bowen's map of Risdon of November 1803 was well out of date by May 1804; that White had full view of the action; and that the carronade could not have fired blanks because it was the settlement's only defence against a possible attack from the French.⁶²

In reviewing the massacre again a few months later, he concluded:

Windschuttle has erred by weighting the facts to suit his thesis about what happened at Risdon Cove on 3 May 1804. ... We will never know for sure how many were killed or wounded that day. Certainly it was more than two or three. Probably it was fewer than fifty. Somewhere in between lies the 'great many' spoken of by Edward White, whose poignant testimony remains for me the credible description of this sorry episode.⁶³

Two other aspects of Windschuttle's account can also be refuted. First is his claim that Bonwick could not have spoken to a settler who was present at Risdon Cove on the day, because none had survived to his time. Martha Hayes, Bowen's mistress and the mother of his two children, was present at Risdon Cove on 3 May. According to Alison Alexander, Hayes remained in Tasmania after Bowen departed, became a settler in her own right and died in 1871 at the age of 84. She could well have been the 'settler' who provided the information about Moore's intoxicated state to Bonwick in the 1840s.⁶⁴ Windschuttle, it seems, is unaware that in Tasmania a number of women became settlers in their own right.

⁶⁰ Windschuttle, p. 26.

⁶¹ Windschuttle, p. 24.

⁶² Phillip Tardif, 'So who's fabricating the history of the Aborigines?', *Age*, 6 April 2003.

⁶³ Phillip Tardif, 'Risdon Cove', in Robert Manne (ed.) *Whitewash. On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Black Inc Press, Melbourne, 2003, p. 222.

⁶⁴ Alexander, 1987, p. 15.

Second is his claim that no bodies of the Aborigines could have been packed in barrels and sent to Sydney because there was no lime available. Apart from the fact that lime was readily available at Ralphs Bay, Paul Turnbull, the acknowledged expert on the disposal of Aboriginal bones in the nineteenth century, points out that the more usual method of storage of human bodies in barrels at that time was in alcohol, probably rum, of which there was no shortage at Risdon or at Hobart, or on the *Ocean*, which transported them with their 'owner', surgeon Mountgarret, to Sydney. According to Turnbull the real question is: what happened to the bones? He is confident that they can be located.⁶⁵

As with so many other massacres he has denied, Windschuttle's account of the Risdon Cove massacre fails to stand up to scrutiny.⁶⁶ The point about Windschuttle, however, is not so much his project to question the 'plausibility' of particular massacres, but his refusal to engage with what Ann Curthoys calls a 'pluralist inclusive account' of Australia's past that 'might form the basis for a coherent national community'.⁶⁷ In refusing reconciliation, Windschuttle practices *ressentiment* by desperately seeking to hold on to foundational myths and sentiment which find little support elsewhere.

Paradoxically however, McPherson and Windschuttle have opened up new kinds of work by historians about Risdon Cove and refocused its importance to Tasmanian history. Recent works by Phillip Tardif and James Boyce are two interesting and exciting examples.

In his book, *John Bowen's Hobart. The Beginning of European Settlement in Tasmania*, launched on the bicentenary of Bowen's landing, Phillip Tardif calls for a new interpretation of the Risdon Cove settlement.⁶⁸ Bowen's party, he points out, consisted of key people who would make their mark on Tasmania—the surveyors, the political prisoners and the convicts who stayed. Nor does he resile from the enormity of the massacre. Rather he argues that it should be understood as part of the violence that always accompanies the colonial encounter, and as an example of how the early colonists simply did not know how to read the Aborigines. He suggests, however, that some convicts like Edward White learned from the experience and later developed a relationship of trust with the Aborigines. For example, he never carried a gun in the bush, nor did he take their game. Tardif implies that there is a hidden history of significant interaction between convicts and Aborigines that remains to be uncovered.

Similarly, James Boyce, in what must be one of the most insightful excursions into early colonial history, points out in his chapter in *Whitewash*,

⁶⁵ Paul Turnbull, in response to a question on this matter at the Australian Historical Association conference, Newcastle, 9 July 2004.

⁶⁶ See chapters by James Boyce, Neville Green, Cathie Clement and Ian McFarlane in Robert Manne (ed), *Whitewash. On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. See also Lyndall Ryan, 'Waterloo Creek, northern New South Wales, 1838' in Bain Attwood & Stephen Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict. The Australian Experience* National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003, pp. 33-43.

⁶⁷ Curthoys, p. 37.

⁶⁸ Phillip Tardif, *John Bowen's Hobart. The Beginnings of European Settlement in Tasmania*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 2003.

'Fantasy Island', that Aborigines and 'white Van Diemonians' have been excluded from the early history of Tasmania.⁶⁹ While 'the Aboriginal issue was so central to life on the island from 1803 to 1833, so interrelated with the realities of frontier life that occurred largely beyond the official gaze', so too were most of the 'white Van Diemonians', the convicts, stockkeepers, shepherds and small farmers, who formed the backbone of the early colonial community.⁷⁰ He argues for 'a greater awareness of the nature and richness of this unique tradition which chronicled the horrors of invasion, dispossession and war, will now bring opportunities for an equally distinctive but radically new Van Diemonian story'.⁷¹

In 2004, Risdon Cove remains a site of contested narratives of possession and dispossession. Are we any closer to the truth of what happened on 3 May 1804? We will never know. As Boyce points out: 'Even the whites present did not know, as most of the injured (and possibly dying) were removed. The impact of firing muskets and a cannon into a large mob of people must have been chaos—as the leaving behind of a small boy suggests'.⁷²

The return of Risdon Cove to Indigenous ownership, however, raises new sets of questions. How can Risdon Cove be represented as a site of reconciliation and renewal as well as of violent dispossession? This is the challenge for historians in the twenty-first century.

⁶⁹ James Boyce, 'Fantasy Island' in Robert Manne (ed.), p. 68.

⁷⁰ Boyce, p. 17.

⁷¹ Boyce, p. 70.

⁷² Boyce, p. 40.