INTRODUCTION

Introductions are normally read first, but they are usually written last, as was this one. This is necessary because it is only when the bulk of the book is written that it is possible to reflect on the experience of writing it.

A general history of a state has a number of challenges that are not necessarily obvious when the venture is first undertaken. Given the mismatch between the length of the book and the size of the undertaking, the first problem facing the historian is not so much what to include but what must be left out. Over a period of 230 years a great deal happened, even in a place as small as Tasmania, so every event included in the story has been given preference over many more that were left out. I decided quite early in the writing that this book could not possibly be a comprehensive work of reference where the reader could look up any aspect of Tasmanian history and find a neat informative summary. Where there was a choice between factual detail and thematic coherence and narrative flow, I chose the second option. As a result many themes and events are scouted and important individuals passed over.

I apologise in advance to any reader who finds that there are aspects of the past that have not received the attention they certainly deserve. Religion is one theme that escaped the notice it warrants, given the importance it played in the lives of most 19th century Tasmanians and many of their descendants in the 20th century. Education is another subject that should, ideally, have received more attention. The same is true of the high culture, with the artists,

musicians and writers who have graced the life of the island. So, with those topics scouted, the main themes are political development, along with economic and social change.

Even with a constricted agenda the general historian runs the risk of trespassing into the many small territories policed by specialists and attentive antiquarians. Tasmania has many scholars who have studied particular periods or distinctive themes and who will find the treatment of their field of interest superficial and inadequate. There are also many amateur enthusiasts with a deep understanding of specific subjects. No general historian can ever match their particular local knowledge. The problem is compounded by the history of events within living memory that are still alive in many minds. As part of the Tasmanian diaspora for 30 years I am sharply aware of my lack of personal acquaintance with people and events of the recent past. In that sense I write as both an insider and an outsider, a situation that has advantages and disadvantages.

One major problem with any general history of Australia is the question of when the story should begin. In the past historians could adopt the easy assumption that history only began with the arrival of the Europeans, which leaves out the tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal ownership and sovereignty. We now know from the work of archaeologists and linguists that there were a number of migrations into Tasmania before that final flooding of Bass Strait and that the different nations adapted to their home territories and shaped the landscape in ways that are still apparent today. But the Tasmanians were distinct in that they were among the most isolated groups of human beings, who, for over 300 generations, knew nothing but the island and its peoples. This long and ancient history has a unique appeal to many people but my interest has always been focused on the meeting between the Indigenous peoples and the invaders. It was a theme that I explored in my book *The Other Side of the Frontier*, which was published 30 years ago. So I decided to start the story with the arrival of the European maritime expeditions that occurred between 1772 and 1802 to try to explain what these unprecedented, unexpected events meant for the Tasmanians. It seemed appropriate that this theme should be near the centre of the narrative in the early chapters of the book.

There are many developments that are common to the histories of European settler colonialism which are obviously also true of the Australian states. The separate histories overlap in many ways and this was doubly so after federation in 1901. When writing the history of one of the federated states there is always a tension between emphasising the distinctive features of the particular society in question and of looking at what it had in common with the other ones. We need to keep in mind that Australia is a federation and not a unitary state. Local state politics remained important throughout the 20th century and although the major parties were national in their reach each state had its own characteristics and distinctive electoral cycles. This was certainly true of Tasmania.

There are other inimitable features of Tasmanian history that can be detailed without distorting either the national or the local story. The inescapable fact of being a small offshore island has been a constant influence on the hard facts of economics and on people's sense of themselves as being Tasmanians first and Australians second. Islanders have usually felt no sense of identity with the vast inland plains, the red centre or the wide brown land. Nowhere else in Australia does geography conspire so closely with political sentiment: in one way or another the island has had varying forms of autonomy since 1824. The convict system was of profound importance in Tasmania, much more so than in New South Wales and Western Australia, the other colonies that received British convicts. Tasmania's economic development was also distinctive. A period of spectacular growth, stimulated by convict labour and imperial government investment, was followed by long bouts of economic depression. The island missed out on that long summer of growth from 1850 to 1890, which did so much to shape the Australian's sense of buoyant optimism.

At the centre of the island story is the tradition of out migration. For most of the time since the middle of the 19th century Tasmanians leaving the island have outnumbered incoming migrants. The tradition of often unwilling exile has deep roots. Population growth has been slow and normally below the Australian average. This has had a number of noticeable consequences. Economic stagnation has enabled the survival of a rich heritage of colonial architecture unique in Australia. It has also made it possible for the resident population

to put down deep roots and to live within a complex, generations old, web of kinship undisturbed by mass migration.

One final problem facing the historian of any one of the states is to determine to whom the book should be addressed. I have not written it for fellow historians or for academics more generally but for the average educated reader. My assumption was that my task was to explain island history to outsiders as much as to Tasmanians, to other Australians and to visitors who wanted to learn something about the island and to hear what people had achieved, learn how they dealt with hardship and adversity since the European ships sailed like sinister sea birds into the ancestral lands of Tasmania's Indigenous nations.

1

First Meetings, Extraordinary Encounters

What extraordinary encounters they were. Few human beings can have known the awe and wonder experienced by the Tasmanians living on the island's southeast coast during the last quarter of the 18th century. In common with other Tasmanians, they had lived in isolation from the rest of the world, since the time when Bass Strait flooded at least 8000 years earlier. Some memory of migration from the distant mainland may have survived as legend but for over 300 generations Tasmania was their all-embracing world, fellow islanders the only known inhabitants of the universe, their ways the time honoured pattern for the whole of humankind.

Suddenly, dramatically, it all changed. Nothing would ever be the same again. The brief visit of Tasman's two ships in 1642 had no sequel, although, between 1772 and 1802, 11 expeditions visited, explored and charted the much indented and complex coastline between Recherche Bay in the far south and the Freycinet Peninsula on the mid east coast. For European sailors Tasmania was a welcome haven, shelter from the prevailing westerly winds, with secure anchorages. It had a mild climate, broad beaches and access to timber and fresh water. Earnest navigators slipped lyrical passages about the island into otherwise prosaic log books and diaries. Even the unimaginative realised what an extraordinary impact their presence had on the coastal clans and understood how utterly exotic ordinary objects and everyday behaviour must have seemed to the Tasmanians. George Augustus Robinson was one of the few people to record the Tasmanians' stories.

Image 1.1: George Augustus Robinson.
(*Source:* Archives Office of Tasmania.)

While out in the bush his associate Kickerterpoller, or Black Tom, told him that he saw the first ship that came to Maria Island when he was a boy. His clan members were all frightened and ran away from the coast. The ship looked like a small island but they could not tell what it was. He added that his contemporaries could not

'conceive how the white men came here first'.[1] Another of Robinson's companions, Woorrady, recalled that when his Bruny Island clansmen first saw a European ship 'coming at sea' they said that it was *wrageowrapper*, the devil, and ran away in fear.[2]

Flight and hiding were common – and totally comprehensible – reactions to the arrival of Europeans. Many such occasions were reported in diaries and log books, though there must have been many more of which the white men were unaware. Wary surveillance was widely practised. Employing those two skills of life-long hunters – patient observation and silent stalking – the Tasmanians patiently watched the Europeans. Much of the time the white men were unaware that they were the object of spying operations. French scientist Labillardière reported that one of the Tasmanians had explained by unequivocal signs that he had 'come to reconnoitre us during the night',[3] while on Maria Island 10 years later Francois Peron observed: 'They redouble their vigilance against us, and they surround themselves with sentries in advanced positions who, from the tops of hills and even in very tall trees, keep watch on all that takes place in the vicinity.'[4]

For every time the Tasmanians ran from the white men there were other occasions when intense curiosity drew them towards the strangers. Woorrady explained to Robinson that when the Europeans set up camp on the shore his fellow clansmen 'went and looked at what the white people did, went and told other natives and they came and looked also'.[5] The curiosity the Europeans recorded in their books and journals was mirrored by the Tasmanians. 'We were so novel to one another,' Peron noted on Maria Island. He wrote that

> We are seeing these men at a time when all the faculties of their being are magnified. Our ships, the noise of our guns and their terrible effect, the colour of our skin, our clothing, our form, our gifts, everything we possess, everything that surrounds us, our gait, our actions, all are such marvels to them.[6]

At his first meeting with the Tasmanians in 1793 D'Hesmivy d'Auribeau tried to learn some of the words of their language but felt thwarted by what he termed their 'constant agitation at the sight of so many different objects that were so new to them'.[7] The

sheer quantity of things the Europeans had in their possession must have amazed the Tasmanians. Almost everything was new to them – shapes, colours, textures. The large numbers of men who came forth from the ships must have been surprising, as were the domestic animals carried on board. And there were the fundamental mysteries of where the white men had come from and why they had suddenly appeared. These questions must have been the subject of endless, anxious debate around 100 campfires, as Peron appreciated:

> Moreover, they do not know what our intentions may be towards them or what perhaps is the object of our visit, and they can form no idea of these matters. They can only think that our intentions are hostile. Our presents, our kindness towards them, our protestations of friendship, all are suspect for them. They seek to interpret our looks. They observe us closely. Everything they see us do they suppose to be something mysterious, and always their suspicions of us are unfavourable.[8]

Of all the white men's innumerable possessions guns were the most frightening and perplexing. Their power and destructiveness were apparent from the arrival of Marion du Fresne's expedition in March 1772. As so often happened conflict was born of misunderstanding. There was a brief meeting on the beach at Marion Bay between the local clan and a party from the French ships. All went well until du Fresne himself landed from a second longboat. What followed was recorded by Julien Crozet, who wrote:

> One savage left the group and presented him, as the others had, with a firebrand to light a small pile of wood. The captain, imagining this was a ceremony necessary to prove that he had come with pacific intentions, [did not] hesitate to light the pile, but immediately it seemed that this was quite to the contrary, and that the acceptance of the brand was an acceptance of defiance, or a declaration of war. As soon as the pile was lighted, the savages withdrew hastily onto a hillock, from which they threw a shower of stones, by which M. Marion, as well as an officer who was with him, was wounded. We immediately fired several shots and everyone re-embarked.

When the Frenchmen tried to land farther along the bay they were met by a shower of spears, one of which slightly wounded an African servant. They responded with a 'fusillade', which wounded several and killed one. The Tasmanians fled into the trees 'howling fearfully' carrying their wounded countrymen.[9]

News of the encounter and of the white men's weapons spread quickly and soon became common knowledge among the Tasmanian clans. Fear of guns influenced every aspect of future encounters around the Tasmanian coast. The sight, and more especially the sound, of them often precipitated panicked flight. Such a reaction was observed by James Cook at Adventure Bay in January 1777. During an apparently friendly encounter Cook asked one of the Tasmanians to show him how he threw his spears. Eventually, the Polynesian Omai fired his musket 'to show them how superior our weapons were to theirs'. With that, despite the best endeavours of Cook's party to persuade them to stay, all the Tasmanians ran into the bush, dropping all their recently acquired presents. The same thing happened a short time later when a watering party, surprised by the appearance of 'the Indians', fired into the air. The Tasmanians fled 'holding their fingers in their ears'.[10]

In 1793 d'Auribeau recorded a similar incident in Recherche Bay. To the intense interest of a group of Tasmanians he had been lighting gunpowder in shells to produce explosions. But the mood changed dramatically when a gun was produced. 'I had a double-barrelled gun brought to me', the Frenchman wrote:

> But the moment they saw it, they fearfully gave me to understand that they were afraid of it. They lay down with their eyes shut, wishing to show me that this weapon caused death. However, I remained in their midst and had two shots fired a little way off in the opposite direction. The noise frightened them greatly, and I perceived that I should be offending them if I did it again.[11]

The Europeans' use of guns was monitored more closely by the watchful Tasmanians than any other aspect of the strangers' behaviour. The presence of firearms among a party was immediately noted. A slight movement of the weapons could raise alarm. The constant noise of guns being used for hunting and for collecting specimens kept tensions high. It wasn't just that guns were known to kill and injure; the mystery of how they actually worked intensified the terror. The problem for the Tasmanians, as for their counterparts on mainland Australia, was that it was impossible to see the death-dealing projectile. It was obvious that the white men pointed their guns towards their chosen targets, that there was a flash of

light followed soon after by a loud noise and that a bird, animal or a man could, almost instantly, fall down dead. And although the resulting external wound would be obvious, the offending ball would, in all probability, remain hidden deep in the damaged body.

So many facts about guns remained mysterious until the Tasmanians began to live in close proximity with resident settlers. Only then were their secrets slowly revealed. Initially, it was impossible to know the limitations of the muskets: that they had only a limited range, that they were inaccurate, often misfired and took some time to reload.

Until these things were appreciated the white men appeared to have weapons with magical powers against which there was no defence. Discovery of the secrets of the white men's guns was one of the great intellectual achievements of Aborigines everywhere.

European clothing was another source of wonder and curiosity. Initially, it was not obvious where the covering ended and the body began. The strangers carried about with them so many things, which to the Tasmanians seemed superfluous. When uncovered the whiteness of their skin was another cause for surprise and exclamation. Peron described the reaction of the first Tasmanian he met in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel:

> What seemed to impress him at first was the whiteness of our skins, and perhaps wishing to make sure this colour was the same all over our bodies he opened in turn our waistcoats and our shirts; and he showed his astonishment with loud cries of surprise, and above all by stamping his feet very briskly.[12]

As if to show the strangers that their colour was seen as a distinct handicap the Tasmanian women remedied the situation by blackening the Frenchmen's faces with powdered charcoal. Peron observed that he and his equally blackened colleague 'seemed to become the subject of great admiration to the women' and they appeared to congratulate them on the new charms they had acquired. 'This European Whiteness,' Peron wrote, 'of which people were so proud, was in distant regions, no more than an actual deficiency, a sort of deformity.'[13]

Another puzzle presented by the European explorers was the absence of women, despite each ship containing as many as 100