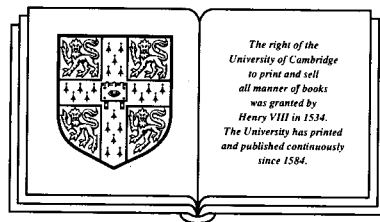


Land Settlement in Early Tasmania

CREATING AN ANTIPODEAN ENGLAND

Sharon Morgan

SELWYN COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge

New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1992

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data

Morgan, Sharon.

Land settlement in early Tasmania.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 39031 1.

1. Land settlement – Tasmania – History.

2. Tasmania – History – To 1803. 3. Tasmania –

History – 1803–1851. 4. Tasmania – Social

life and customs – 1803–1851. I. Title.

994.602

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Morgan, Sharon, 1961–

Land settlement in early Tasmania: creating an antipodean England

Sharon Morgan.

Includes biographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 39031 1 (HC)

1. Land Settlement – Australia – Tasmania – History. 2. Tasmania
– History. I. Title.

HD1039.T37M67 1991

333.3'1946–dc20

ISBN 0 521 39031 1 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52296 X paperback

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Introduction

'The alienation of land', wrote R. M. Hartwell in 1954, 'is the first stage of exploitation'.¹ In Van Diemen's Land, the alienation of land and the consequent use which was made of that land, are vital aspects of the island's history. In colonial Tasmania land settlement influenced, and was influenced by, almost every other aspect of its history. Most spectacularly, we see this in looking at the conflict between the European settlers and the Aborigines, and at environmental destruction. It can also be seen in the colony's social history. The amount of land a settler was granted, and the use he made of that land, affected his relationships with fellow settlers.

It is surprising, then, that this problem has received little attention in the past. Certainly, land settlement has been discussed in general histories of the colony,² and there have been short accounts of the problem,³ but no detailed, specialised study has hitherto been published. As in any pioneering study, a number of problems have been encountered in investigating and writing this report. Some, but by no means all, have been overcome.

The study covers the period from first settlement until 1830, but only grants made up to and including 1823 have been examined. The main reason for this is that the actual deeds for grants made after 1823 could not be found.⁴ Finding the original locations and dates of grants after this time would therefore have been prohibitively time-consuming. Nevertheless it was thought appropriate to continue the study as a whole up to the year 1830, for it was largely in the late 1820s that many of the problems associated with land settlement — conflict with the Aboriginal population being the most significant — became clear. Farming practices and problems of the late 1820s are therefore discussed in some detail.

In the first chapter, the regulations imposed by the British government for the disposal of their newly acquired land, and the gradual spread of settlement, are discussed. An attempt is made to chart the movement of Europeans throughout the colony as accurately as possible. This discussion is supported by a series of maps and tables. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that it is impossible to be exact. There are two main

reasons for this. Firstly, the date given in the actual grant deed — which in most cases is our only clue to the period of settlement — and the time at which the settler actually moved onto his land often do not coincide. In many cases the official alienation of land came months or even years after the settler had actually begun farming his land. In a few cases the land was granted before the settler had even set foot in the colony. Furthermore, land was often occupied illegally or unofficially. Settlers grazed their sheep and cattle in the interior with or without the knowledge of the administration.

Only private settlers have been examined; the pastoral companies — the Van Diemen's Land Company and the Cressy Company — have been omitted. These companies came to the colony only in the late 1820s and, as stated above, only grants made before 1824 have been examined. Moreover, a venture such as the Van Diemen's Land Company deserves a detailed study in its own right. The importance of such companies in rural settlement as a whole is not great enough to warrant the research and discussion which would be required to do them justice in a study such as this. It is to be hoped that their history will be tackled in the future.

It should be noted here that the use of the male gender in referring to the settlers is intentional. The people granted land in colonial Australia were overwhelmingly male, a fact which should be emphasised. Regulations were drawn up specifically with men in mind: women were discriminated against in this as in so many other areas.

After giving consideration to the way in which grants were made by the Crown, and the origin of the differences in time between actual occupation of the land and the formalities of granting it, what may be termed the social history of settling Tasmania is considered. An examination is made of the sort of people who became settlers in Van Diemen's Land. Again the picture presented can be no more than impressionistic. Most settlers left few records, many not even appearing in civil registers. Naturally enough, more is known about those who were successful than about the many who failed. In general, those who succeeded were young or middle-aged family men, free settlers from good families in England and Scotland. We should not be surprised that they were the most successful: the odds of patronage were stacked in their favour. We must admire the determination of convict settlers who overcame prejudice and economic hardship to join the upper echelons of colonial society.

The relationships between these settlers and the leisure activities they pursued are then discussed. It will be seen that these pursuits were imported from Britain; they were followed not only to alleviate boredom, but also to remind the settlers of the homes they had left to travel to the antipodes. Almost everything the settler did was a re-creation of the world which had been left behind. This is not to say that settlers spent their whole lives deliberately creating an antipodean England, but everything they did was shaped by their past experiences and beliefs. Not surprisingly, many considered England the yardstick of civilisation and beauty. Consequently — and also because they knew little else — British or European sports, such as horse-racing and boxing, were taken up in the colony. In the same spirit, the administrative districts and villages of Van Diemen's Land were given English and Scottish names. Travellers were at times amused to see how little the colonial Richmonds and Cambridges resembled the originals. Nevertheless, with the implementation of European farming practices and the planting of imported trees and shrubs, the colonial landscape gradually came to look more like that of England than did any other part of Australia.

Farming practices are considered in three chapters, dealing with pastoralism, agriculture and horticulture. Sheep were the most important animals in the colony's early history, largely because they were so easily maintained and there was a good market for their produce. The propagation of grains and vegetables entailed far more work than did the raising of animals. As a result, agriculture was initially carried on for subsistence more than for marketing. Nevertheless, between 1803 and 1830 great improvements were made in the extent of land under cultivation and the quality and variety of crops produced. Again, horticultural activity was initially carried on for subsistence, but gradually changed. The first attempts at gardening were concerned with the production of greatly needed fruit and vegetables, but flowers and shrubs were later added, so that colonial gardens performed the dual function of supplying fresh food and adding 'beauty' to the landscape.

The effects of European farming and grazing on the environment are then discussed. It is not true to say that the environment which the colonists found in Van Diemen's Land was completely pristine: the Aborigines had already changed it to some extent. Nevertheless, the Natives had been sympathetic in their use of the land. The newcomers sought to change it completely; ecological destruction was inevitable with the introduction of pastoralism and agriculture.

Two chapters are then devoted to the problems experienced in beginning to farm in a natural countryside; that is, one which had not previously been farmed with European methods and one where the choice between pastoralism and agriculture depended on the nature of the wild environment. All farmers, including those who remained in Britain, faced a myriad of difficulties. Yet colonial farmers, many of whom had little or no previous agricultural experience, faced additional problems. As well as having to come to terms with an unfamiliar climate, they faced threats which an English farmer would never know. Bushfires regularly threatened their lives and property. Other natural phenomena also presented problems, but perhaps the greatest troubles came in human form. Bushrangers were a problem almost from the foundation of the colony until the late 1820s. They drove a number of settlers from their land and into the towns. With the owners gone, stock rustlers — in particular sheep stealers — moved in. There were problems, too, with the convict labour force.

European bandits and refractory workers were not, however, the only human 'enemies' of the white settlers of Van Diemen's Land. From 1824 there was increasing conflict with the Aborigines. The gradual alienation of the land, and the way in which that land was used, was central to the conflict. The two systems of land use — rural and nomadic — could not coexist. The Aborigines seem to have been prepared in the first years of European settlement to share their land with the newcomers, but the British were determined at all costs to have the land for their own exclusive use. As settlement spread and the Natives were pushed further and further from their traditional hunting grounds, conflict soared.

It could be argued that the existence of a native people on the island precludes the use of the word 'settlement': that invasion is the correct term. Discussing the arrival of Europeans in north America, Francis Jennings argued:

The implications of this use of the word *settlement* are worth notice. First, it vaguely implies that preexisting populations did not classify as humanity, for it is not used to apply to Indians; only Europeans 'settle.' It also dismisses the Indians' ability to wrest a generally satisfactory living from

the 'wilderness' and to travel over established trails to known destinations. Most inaccurate is the word's bland misdirection about the Europeans' intentions, for their common purpose was to exploit rather than to settle.⁵

This argument could just as easily apply to Australia. It is important, however, that all history be written within the context of its period. Although it should be plain to anyone in the late twentieth century that the men and women who came to Van Diemen's Land in the early nineteenth century were mercenary, racist and exploitative, their society's view of them was far more kind. They called themselves settlers and believed they had a holy mission to tame the land and render it productive. On the very rare occasion that a more enlightened contemporary pointed out that they were indeed invaders, they were aghast.

This is not to excuse the actions of Europeans in Van Diemen's Land. Nevertheless, the word 'settlement' has been used throughout most of this book. Invasion it was, but once here the newcomers attempted to settle the land, and settle they did. The discussion of farming in the island requires the use of a word such as settlement. Whatever its shortcomings, whatever its cultural implications, it is the best we have.