

Into the Heart of Tasmania: A Search for Human Antiquity

by Rebe Taylor

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Review by Lyndall Ryan
University of Newcastle

Rebe Taylor is no stranger to the complex debate about Tasmanian Aboriginal extinction. In her first book, *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island* (2002), she explored the history of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community on Kangaroo Island and how it was forced to 'disappear' into the wider white community. In her latest book, she focuses on two leading British extinction theorists of the Tasmanian Aborigines in the twentieth century, Ernest Westlake (1855–1922) and Rhys Jones (1941–2001). She not only explores their collection of evidence for the antiquity of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, she also shows how they overlooked other aspects of their findings that indicated that far from becoming extinct, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people had survived into the present.

Ernest Westlake was an amateur scientist who, in keeping with the then prevailing doctrine of the hierarchy of human evolution, was obsessed by the belief that the stone artefacts produced by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the past were similar to the 'coliths' of the Indigenous people of France. He considered that the tools were evidence that at the beginnings of human time the French and the Tasmanians shared similar cultural practices, but since then the French had progressed culturally to become the most advanced civilisation on earth whereas the Tasmanians had remained culturally static, which led to their extinction in 1876. He sought to prove his hypothesis by visiting Tasmania between 1908 and 1910 and collecting more than 13,000 stone tools. It never occurred to him that he was engaging in a major case of theft of Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural property.

In his collecting process, Westlake visited several people of Tasmanian Aboriginal descent for information about stone artefact sites, and carefully recorded their recollections of the past. Unaware that he was producing evidence of Aboriginal survival, after his death in 1922 his entire collection of Tasmanian stone artefacts together with his notebooks was bequeathed to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. There they remained untouched until anatomist Brian Plomley published a 'severely edited' edition of the notebooks in 1982,¹ although he was largely disparaging of their value. Like Westlake, he believed that the Tasmanian Aborigines had become extinct in 1876 and that their 'impure' descendants could only have 'contaminated' knowledge of their ancestors. Poignantly, the stone artefacts were never accessioned, and were later returned and used to construct a rubble driveway at a Westlake family property (p. 171).

Today, the survival of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people is now accepted and, in this post-extinction environment, Taylor has read the notebooks afresh and connected their contents to the recent finding of Tasmanian Aboriginal sites along the Jordan River Valley, north-west of Hobart, dating to more than 40,000 years ago. She realises that Westlake contributed to an act of cultural genocide in removing the evidence of Tasmanian Aboriginal presence in the past. Had the stone artefact assemblage remained intact, it is possible that carbon dating taken in situ could have confirmed the dates decades ago. Yet, paradoxically, she also finds that the interviews Westlake conducted with Tasmanian Aboriginal people reveal a community filled with 'Aboriginal knowledge: words, methods, medicines, and spiritual practices and beliefs' (p. 10). Recognising their significance to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, in 2013 Taylor, together with Mike Jones and Gavin McCarthy, published the notebooks in digital form.² Westlake may have removed physical evidence of the deep past, but his interviews with the survivors are an important source of information about the recent past. The irony is not lost on the reader.

Taylor's interest in Westlake's life after he returns to England in 1910 places him firmly among the amateur collectors who were the subject of Tom Griffiths's ground-breaking text, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (1996). As she points out, the search for human antiquity in Tasmania 'has long been a looking inwards, or downwards, from Britain' (p. 205). However, I would have liked to see a clearer connection between Westlake's obsession with Tasmanian antiquity as an amateur and Rhys Jones's engagement with the subject, coming from Britain as the first professionally trained archaeologist to continue the search in the 1960s.

1 Plomley 1991.

2 Taylor, Jones and McCarthy 2017.

The section of the book on Rhys Jones is based on the interviews Taylor conducted with him in 2000. Jones readily admits that in his search for Tasmanian Aboriginal antiquity, he tended to overlook the significance of his finding that their population at the outset of the British invasion of 1803 was at least 4,000; that is, more than double the maximum estimate of 2,000 that extinction theorists had promulgated in 1859. Rather than considering the extinction theory afresh as the estimate suggested he could do, Jones remained firmly committed to it by dismissing evidence that the Tasmanian Aborigines could make fire and focusing instead on other evidence that suggested they probably ceased to consume scale fish 4,000 years ago. Such evidence, he asserted, matched the wider evolutionary view that, after rising seas separated Tasmania from mainland Australia more than 10,000 years ago, the Tasmanian Aborigines experienced ‘a slow strangulation of the mind’, which led to their extinction in 1876.

Taylor’s book is a fascinating account of how extinction theory drove scientific research on the Tasmanian Aborigines in the first part of the twentieth century. I would have liked, however, some explanation of how it was replaced in the 1970s by new approaches to human evolution. Brian Plomley, the other professionally trained scientist and leading extinction theorist of the Tasmanian Aborigines in the mid-1960s, in his monumental edition of the journals of G.A. Robinson, also overlooked the mounting evidence that their dramatic population decline of the 1820s and 1830s was not due to human evolutionary decline but due to settler violence. Overturning the theory that dominated scientific discourse for more than a century may have been a bridge too far for Jones and Plomley in the 1960s, but their meticulous scholarship along with the campaigns of the resurgent Tasmanian Aboriginal community in the 1970s provided the catalyst that enabled a new generation of scholars – including Taylor – to finally put extinction theory to rest after it dominated scientific discourse for more than a century.

References

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