

'Me Write Myself': The Free Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land at Wybalenna, 1832–47

by Leonie Stevens

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Review by Gaye Sculthorpe
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I read this book with great interest as many of my ancestors make an appearance in it: Fanny Cochrane Smith, who was born at Wybalenna in 1834; her mother, Tanganutura (Sarah); Eugene (Nicermenic), husband of Tanganutura; and Fanny's siblings Mary Ann and Adam. What new light would it shed on their lives and that of their compatriots?

This is not the first history to examine the lives of Tasmanian Aborigines whilst exiled at Wybalenna: pioneering scholars of Tasmanian Aboriginal history Reynolds (2005) and Ryan (2012) as well as Van Toorn (2006) have discussed many of these issues before. This is, however, the first book to attempt to provide a comprehensive history of Aboriginal life during the period of the Wybalenna settlement.

After an introduction to Tasmania and its history to 1830 ('40,000 Years to Exile'), Stevens focuses on texts written by Aborigines on Flinders Island to analyse the concerns, daily life and political strategies of the Aborigines living there. The author's analysis is based on a conscious reversion of sources, using 'a hierarchy of credibility' that places texts by Aboriginal people at the top of the pyramid, texts that record Aboriginal voices second and European sources third. The 'VDL texts' (mainly newspapers written by Aborigines at Wybalenna) are principally authored by teenagers Walter George Arthur and Thomas Brune in the *Flinders Island Chronicle*; other records examined are sermons, delivered by men at prayer meetings, personal testimonies and records of the results of school examinations. The author's aim is 'with gaining a sense of the *lives people led* during their exile at Wybalenna, in their own words' (p. xxiii). This is its greatest strength. With the exception of Mary Ann Arthur, whose activism is emphasised, the written sources privilege the male voices

of the key authors; yet Stevens uses these sources to illuminate the ongoing activism and agency of others – notably the Aboriginal sealing women and the testimonies that highlight the horrible mistreatment of several children by various settlement officials.

The author argues that instead of being a place of isolation, Wybalenna was well-connected into a wider colonial network of information and concerns. Indeed, as Auty and Russell (2016) and others have discussed, a group of Tasmanian Aborigines spent several years in the Port Phillip district with Protector George Augustus Robinson, where two men were executed after being convicted of murder. The Aboriginal residents on Flinders Island were thus attuned to events in Melbourne, Sydney, Hobart, Launceston and New Zealand, as well as London, where a petition was directed in 1846.

While deliberately emphasising the written or recorded words of the Aboriginal residents, less attention is given to some important cultural events and practices, such as the funeral ceremony for the esteemed leader Manalakina (Mannarlargenna). The author references in a footnote the visit of naturalist John Gould to Flinders Island in 1839, but his expedition with a large group of Aborigines on a natural history–collecting expedition across Flinders Island is not discussed. Gould relied on the eyesight and skills of the young boy Timemenedic (Adophus) in finding eggs, and this reliance of Aboriginal expertise was a formative experience for his future collecting on mainland Australia. Such time away from the settlement at Wybalenna was important for the continuation of Aboriginal customary traditions during their time in exile. The rich pictorial record of Aboriginal portraits by John Skinner Prout who visited there in 1845 is also not drawn into discussion.

The available archival sources tend to draw attention to the problems of administration of the settlement, and the book places less emphasis on the issue of sexual violence directed against women and children, which included Fanny Cochrane. Of the lives of other Europeans living on or visiting Flinders Island, such as the sealers and military men and their relationships with Aboriginal people, we learn less. Although the author clearly outlines her reasons for using the European names given to the Aboriginal residents, without a table for reference of the European and Aboriginal names, it is at times difficult to follow the trajectory of the individual lives discussed.

This book has its origins in a PhD thesis at La Trobe University. It is meticulously referenced and indexed and the footnotes also correct some small errors in prior texts. Only a few errors were spotted – for example, the reference to ‘Edmunds’ not ‘Edmonds’. The publication would have been enhanced by the addition of some images such as a sample of the handwriting of the authors, copy of some text from the *Chronicle* or images of Aborigines at Flinders Island such as by Prout, of which one decorates the cover.

I read most of this book at one sitting. Combining the strengths of an accomplished writer of fiction with detailed historical research, the author provides a compelling narrative of the events in which the Aborigines in exile at Flinders Island played an active part. From a detailed study of extensive archives sources emerges much new detail on individual lives and events. The author's introduction anticipates there will be a mantra: 'We do not need yet another European history of VDL people'. The 'Black War' in Van Diemen's Land continues to fascinate many scholars such as recent histories by Brodie (2017) and Clements (2014). In moving beyond the Black War, this book contributes significantly to our understanding of the motivations and daily concerns of Tasmanian Aborigines whilst exiled at Wybalenna and, most importantly, their perceptions of their rights and place in the world.

References

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