

Jennifer Bird review of Cassandra Pybus, *Truganini: Journey through the Apocalypse*

(Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2020), 336 pp., PB \$32.99, ISBN 9781760529222

My 18-year-old daughter, on seeing Cassandra Pybus's *Truganini* lying on my bedside table, immediately picked it up and stroked its cover sighing, 'what a beautiful book'. Indeed, it is. Inside and out. The cover photograph of Peter Dombrovskis's 'Giant kelp' taken at Hasselborough Bay, Macquarie Island, Tasmania, gives an emotive, textural feeling to a beautifully written book.

The narrative is immediately set in time and place by its emphasis on Aboriginal sovereignty, an element that is sadly lacking in traditional colonial histories. Not only does this allow Pybus to more clearly depict the devastating displacement of the traditional owners during colonisation, but it also educates the reader to understand the complexity of the land and the colonised peoples.

Pybus declares her interest in Truganini at the outset.¹ She reveals she is the great-great-granddaughter of the recipient of the biggest free land grant on Bruny Island, Truganini's traditional country of Lunawanna Alonnah. The dispossession and destruction of the original people, and its aftermath, Pybus explains, is the foundation narrative of her family (p. xvi). It is through this lens that she follows the life of Truganini.

The author's ancestor Richard Pybus, with his wife and two children, arrived in the colony in 1829 and was granted a large portion of land in the north of Bruny Island, where Truganini and her family lived, and later another in the south of the island, totalling over 2,000 hectares of traditional country. She says Truganini and her people 'were paid with anguish and exile' (p. xvi). Fatefully, Richard's neighbour and good friend George Augustus Robinson, 'the self-styled missionary', plays a pivotal part in Truganini's life (p. xvii). His diaries, which Pybus has studied comprehensively, record his close relationship with Truganini over 13 years, making her the most documented First Nations person in colonial Australia, albeit from a missionary coloniser's perspective.

1 Truganini is also known as Trugernanner in Lyndall Ryan and Neil Smith, 'Trugernanner (Truganini) (1812–1876)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/trugernanner-truganini-4752/text7895, published first in hardcopy 1976, accessed online 30 August 2020; and other variants such as Trugannini, Trugernena, Truganina, Trucanini and Trucaninny. Pybus also notes that she was known as Lydgugee and Lalla Rookh (p. 281).

Pybus's research is extensive. Along with Robinson's diaries, she draws on the oral history and eyewitness accounts from her great-grandfather and his brothers of Truganini's life on 'Pybus land', which Ernest Westlake, geologist, prehistorian and spiritualist, collected in the early 1900s (pp. xvi–xvii). She consults other eyewitness accounts, diaries, journal letters, official correspondence, newspapers and court records. Interestingly, she avoids using a number of books written in the last years of Truganini's life because they feed the mythologising of Truganini, which she deems to be untrustworthy. As with any history of an oppressed people, there is little documentary evidence from Truganini herself. Pybus, therefore, confines herself to first-person accounts, although they are limited and written from a male, paternalistic viewpoint that often disregarded the contribution of women. Pybus affirms Truganini was a full actor in these encounters. She points out that she has no way to know what Truganini thought or felt, nor any way to imagine her experiences, and rightly says it would be inappropriate to attempt to invent some understanding (p. xviii). Another quirk of this book is that there are no footnotes or index. Pybus deliberately presents a narrative nonfiction without 'restrictive' duplicative footnotes.² This may frustrate the historian but she is deliberately writing for the general reader who does not care for such details. Pybus helpfully includes short biographies of the main Aboriginal characters in the back of the book. She also explains naming conventions and provides maps with place names both in English and traditional language. Even so, these are based on settler-colonial sources, the only ones documented.

There are four parts to the book. The first part, 'Friendly Mission', covers the period from 1829 to 1831. Opening with the disastrous impact of colonial invasion on the traditional life of the Nuenonne sets the scene for Truganini's life: the influx of men for sealing and whaling; the subsequent loss of food sources and land; the violence; the abuse of their women; and the murder of Truganini's mother and kidnap of her sisters. It is not surprising, therefore, that Truganini adopted strategies necessary to cope in this new, strange world. She first meets Robinson in April 1829, when she was aged about 16 or 17 and living with a group of convict woodcutters on the mainland of Van Dieman's Land. Although it did not appear that she was there under duress, he decided to return her to Bruny Island and her father. It was years before she divulged the abuse she endured from the woodcutters to Robinson.

Robinson was intent on creating a Christian mission for the Nuenonne people on his property. He enticed the senior man, Manganerer, there through his daughter, Truganini, and coerced them to be reliant on his daily rations. Although he was ridiculed for living among the Nuenonne, Robinson decided to build a mission with a church, school house, houses and a farm, and approached the governor to

2 Robbie Mason, 'Cassandra Pybus, Truganini and the Role of Public History,' *Honi Soit*. 6 April 2020, accessed 13 April 2021, honisoit.com/2020/04/cassandra-pybus-truganini-and-the-role-of-public-history/.

fund it. Here began the ‘civilising’ of the Nuenonne, yet Robinson underestimated the passive resistance of the people. It was not that they openly retaliated, but they refused to give up their traditional practices. By the beginning of 1830, Truganini’s father was dead, and even though she had reluctantly married Wooredy, a warrior and cleverman, she turned to Robinson as a father figure.

Robinson and a party variously made up of Wooredy, Truganini, and other Aboriginal people to act as guides, and a small party of convicts to transport goods and hold base camp, set out to trek 600 miles to Launceston across the hostile country. What is clear is if it were not for Truganini and two other women, the party would have been unable to traverse the waterways, as most of the men could not swim. The men would sit upon a makeshift raft and the women would move them one at a time as they swam across the waterway. The party’s engagement with the original inhabitants, convicts and the Van Diemen’s Land Company saw them variously welcomed and invited to perform in ceremonies, being avoided at all costs, being ridiculed and being aggressively warned away. On reaching their destination, the exhausted and emaciated party arrived not to a welcoming reception, but to the governor’s decree of martial law against Aboriginal people. The formation of the so-called ‘Black Line’ sought to push all the First Peoples south into the Tasman Peninsula to be captured and removed from the colony. Robinson quickly set out northwards to find as many Aboriginal people as he could for the mission before the Black Line swept through.

The second part of the book covers the period from 1831 to 1838, aptly titled ‘Extirpation and Exile’. After finally reaching and convincing the Big River people to join the group, Robinson negotiated with the governor to be appointed as commandant of the Flinders Island establishment where he intended to relocate every one of the original people of the colony to live out their days. It was a self-serving ambition. Pybus quotes Robinson, who wrote in his journal: ‘By taking the whole I gain not only the reward but the celebrity’ (p. 127). Yet Robinson was still vulnerable. In meeting with a large group who intended to kill Robinson and any unrelated kin (except Truganini), it fell to Truganini to decide whether to save Robinson, by swimming him across a fast-flowing river upon a makeshift raft, or collaborate with the group in the hope of obtaining freedom. She chose Robinson. But this was not the only time she saved his life. On another occasion she leapt into a swollen river and fought the strong current to rescue him and a convict as their raft was swept towards the river’s mouth; ‘a testament to her unwavering loyalty’, Pybus explains (p. 157).

The third part of the book covers ‘Kulin Country’ between the years 1839 and 1841, when Robinson took Truganini, Wooredy and a few others to accompany him as one family to the site of his new role as Chief Protector of Aborigines of the Port Phillip District. More followed with Robinson’s wife. In total, 14 people were moved to Port Phillip. Met with a lukewarm reception from the local colonial

administration and newspapers, Robinson set about enticing the Kulin people to cooperate, ostensibly with the assistance of Truganini and the others. Upwards of 600 people were in a deplorable and desperate state. Soon Truganini led a transient lifestyle, living with various men and returning intermittently to Robinson's house. The others from the party of 14 became similarly dispersed. In 1841 Robinson was instructed to deliver them to the Protectorate Station at Nerre Nerre Warren so that they could come under the responsibility of the Assistant Protector William Thomas. They could not be compelled, Robinson insisted. By now Truganini had abandoned Wooreddy and was cohabitating with Maulboyheener of the Pipers River Pyemairenerpairnener people. Leaving Melbourne, they inadvertently came across Assistant Protector Thomas who insisted they return with him. They absconded and headed to live along the coastline. Later, implicated with three others in the murder of two whalers, they were apprehended. Maulboyheener and another Aboriginal man were hung in the first execution at Port Phillip. Truganini and two women were released into Robinson's care. From this point Truganini was no longer endearing to Robinson.

The fourth and final part of the book, 'The Way the World Ends', covers the final decades of Truganini's life from 1842 to 1876. Returning to Van Diemen's Land and Flinders Island, Truganini remarried, resumed her traditional ways as much as she could, and visited her homelands. But the land was irrevocably changed by the presence of the colonisers and their alcohol. She, like many, struggled. In her later life, characterised as one of the last original inhabitants, she became a novelty and her image was exploited. Her death in 1876 merely exacerbated the expropriation of her life. She became mythologised and her remains desecrated as objects of curiosity.

What is noteworthy about this book is that Pybus has been able to reveal Aboriginal Tasmanians' agency in their dealings with colonisers. It was their decision whether to participate with Robinson or not. They slide in and out of the narrative as silently as they slide in and out of the landscape. Her descriptions of traditional hunting lands, of practices and of culture illustrate the richness and magnificence of Aboriginal life. She expertly weaves the sources into a powerful narrative. Although relying heavily on Robinson's accounts, she empathises with Truganini and the First Peoples. Robinson self-aggrandises and is duplicitous while Truganini is intelligent, strong and capable. Most significantly, Pybus brings light to the dreadful exploitation and violence against women, yet also indicates the nuanced nature of women's transactional relationships when negotiating with men.

It is clear Pybus feels a responsibility to Truganini, to liberate her and her people's stories. She says it is 'a moral necessity—these are people whose lives were extinguished to make way for mine' (p. xvii). We should contemplate that thought for a moment. All people living on unceded Aboriginal land carry that legacy.

Having grown up in Tasmania and being unaware of her family connection to Truganini until her adult years, Pybus sets out to dispel the myths and fabrications that have evolved since Truganini's death in 1876. What she has achieved is a truly remarkable book. Truganini was an integral figure in Tasmania's colonial occupation. She was a resister, a negotiator and a diplomat. As Pybus declares, Truganini 'is a hugely significant figure in Australian history' and her life 'was much more than a regrettable tragedy' (p. xvi). I think Pybus has achieved what she set out to do: she moves Truganini from the colonial imperative 'as the last tragic victim of an inexorable historical process' to a 'living, breathing woman' (p. xviii). In some way, the dispossessed has been returned home to country, at least by this Pybus descendant.

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