

'Hanging no good for blackfellow': looking into the life of Musquito

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On the morning of 25 February 1825 in the Hobart Town Gaol, two Aboriginal men were hanged, alongside six white bushrangers. The Aboriginal men were known only by the nicknames of Musquito and Black Jack. Musquito had been convicted of aiding and abetting the wilful murder of a stock-keeper at Grindstone Bay on Tasmania's east coast in 1823, and Black Jack faced the gallows for a second murder. In 1826 two more Aborigines, Jack and Dick, were convicted of murder and hanged. These four hangings took place after a surge of Aboriginal violence. The newly-arrived Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur declared they were intended to set an example.¹ All they achieved was to demonstrate the partiality of British law, for no colonist was ever tried, let alone executed, for killing an Aborigine in Tasmania. After the executions Aboriginal attacks on settlers escalated, and the four hangings have, rightly, been seen as a turning point in what was to become known as the Black War.²

While the lives of Jack, Dick and Black Jack are largely inaccessible to the historian, much can be known about Musquito, whose activities were recorded in New South Wales and Tasmania for 20 years before his death. Governors wrote despatches about him and the press reported his 'outrages' in the Hawkesbury River area in 1805 and in Tasmania in 1824. Between those restless times his life amongst settlers and convicts was recorded in colonial documents.³ For historians interested in Aboriginal accommodation and adaptation in the early colonial period,⁴ the life of Musquito offers many opportunities for contemplation. But historians have, thus far, focused on his violent escapades. Some twentieth-century writers have celebrated Musquito as a resistance leader, presenting him as a valiant guerilla, fighting for the freedom of the Indigenous Tasmanians.⁵ Others, both antiquarian and modern, have portrayed Musquito as an outlaw against both black and white mores, a desperate leader, a criminal, an evil influence on the formerly peaceable Tasmanians.⁶ Such views exaggerate his influence over the Tasmanians, and, whether by accident or design, diminish their agency. This minimises the historical importance of Musquito's life, and prevents evaluation of the choices he made as an Aboriginal man in troubled times. The depiction of Musquito as an outlaw is a trope that obscures the transgressions of the white colonists, who had dispossessed the Tasmanians then abused their own laws to make an example of Musquito.

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Because most writers have been preoccupied by the violent events in Musquito's life, they have concentrated on his 'outrages'. Yet we can know much more of him, and it is necessary that we do before trying to understand the ways Musquito's life has been fashioned through history. Musquito's earliest years are lost to public record, and we cannot be sure when he was born. He was a man when we first hear of him, and died before he became old, so was probably born around 1780. In the historical record Musquito was always described as a Broken Bay man, generally considered Gu-ring-gai country, but living descendants refine this to Gai-Mariagal. Musquito's ancestral country was therefore around Middle Harbour and Manly, reaching north to Broken Bay and north-west to vital sites on the Hawkesbury River.⁷

The colonists' habit of bestowing nicknames on Aborigines presents another complication. In the early 1800s there were two men known by the name of 'Musquito' at Port Jackson. One of them was part of Bennelong and Nanbaree's circle, and fought numerous battles before crowds in Sydney.⁸ A striking portrait of 'Mousquéda' (Y-Erran-Gou-La-Ga), painted by Nicolas-Martin Petit of the Baudin expedition in 1802, is also thought by many commentators to depict the subject of this paper.⁹ However appealing that might be, it is equally possible the sitter was Nanbaree's friend. That man remained in Sydney for the duration of the Hawkesbury conflict, and died in February 1806, after being speared in retaliation for a drunken attack on the boy Pigeon.¹⁰

While that Musquito was staging mock fights in Sydney, another Musquito was readying himself for a real fight on the banks of the Hawkesbury River. The riverbanks offered fine alluvial soil, unmatched on the Cumberland Plain and irresistible to hungry colonists, at a time when Aboriginal people could no longer move out of the way of white settlement. As Alan Ward argues, the Hawkesbury River was a highway for many Aboriginal groups,¹¹ and its peoples depended upon it for everything. Yams grew along its banks and its waters provided fish, crustaceans, and sustenance — nurturing life and ceremony. It was inevitable that the lower Hawkesbury River would become a battleground. The area was also perfectly suited to Aboriginal styles of warfare. The western reaches of the lower Hawkesbury wind through a sandstone valley, depositing soil on the bends but also cutting cliffs that are surrounded by thick bush. These cliffs and spurs repelled European horses but provided the Aborigines with sanctuary and staging points for ambush. Profiting from the terrain, the Aborigines had repelled settlement from the lower Hawkesbury between 1796 and 1804.¹²

In 1804 settlers made another attempt to occupy the riverbanks. By April 1805 colonists at South Creek, near Windsor, were suffering a series of Aboriginal attacks on their houses and their ripening crops. Governor King at first thought the Aborigines' corn raids, firing of crops and houses and thefts of rations and clothing were responses to starvation. He encouraged settlers to offer food to

the Aborigines, but after several horrifying murders of whites, became exasperated. King decided the Aborigines were treacherous, and unforgiving of 'real or imaginary Evils'.¹³ He sent in the formidable NSW Corps, and issued General Orders that natives should not be suffered to approach any settler's property or person until the murderers were given up.¹⁴

The conflict was worrying to the residents of Sydney. In May 1805 the *Sydney Gazette* published an account of a party of settlers and constables that had gone out to 'disperse' natives in the 'Pendant [Pennant] Hills' area. They captured Tedbury, who had by 'horrible tuition and example ... imbibed propensities of the most diabolical complexion' from his father, 'the assassin' Pemulwuy. The Parramatta Magistrate, Reverend Samuel Marsden, then persuaded Tedbury to take another expedition out to find stolen corn. This second party fell in with a small group of Aborigines, one of whom 'saluted [the party] in good English', and, with not a little audacity, declared 'a determination to continue their rapacities', before melting into the bush.¹⁵ This man was named by the *Sydney Gazette* as 'Bush Muschetta'. Muschetta is an old spelling of mosquito,¹⁶ and 'bush' differentiated him from the man already known to its Sydney readers. This was 'our' Musquito.

By the end of June, the NSW Corps had captured nine Aborigines and gaoled them at Parramatta. Some agreed to guide parties 'in quest of their infatuated kinsmen', an action the *Gazette* interpreted as gratitude for fair treatment¹⁷ and which Governor King interpreted as voluntary surrender.¹⁸ These explanations are improbable. The prisoners were bargaining for their freedom, and that of Tedbury. They may also have been trying to enlist the support of their captors against their enemies. Rival groups in the Hawkesbury had continued their traditional warfare and enmities, in spite of the presence of strangers. There had even been local alliances between Aborigines and settlers, such as between the Burraberongal group of the Darug and settlers at Richmond.¹⁹ However there was no love lost between the various groups of the Darug and Musquito's people, the Gai-Mariagal.²⁰ As winter set in, faced with the unrelenting NSW Corps, some of the Aborigines evidently decided to trade Musquito in the name of peace. They told the British that it was he who 'still keeps the flame alive'. Marsden liberated two of the captured Aborigines to find Musquito, and they lodged him in Parramatta Gaol on July 6, 1805. The next day Governor King announced that those who had given up 'the Principal in the late Outrages' desired to come in to Parramatta, and should not be molested. He optimistically proclaimed that a 'RECONCILIATION will take place with the Natives generally' (original emphasis).²¹ Tedbury was released, and the 'outrages' were thus terminated. The *Gazette* expressed relief and the hope that 'the lenity shown to them at all times when the spirit of destruction ceases to predominate' would

convince the Aborigines that their safety depended not upon their own ability, but on the clemency of the Government.²²

Musquito and his comrade 'Bull Dog' were not acquiescent. They maintained their 'spirit of destruction' in Parramatta Gaol, threatening to set it on fire and destroy every white man in it. Their attempt to loosen the mortar of the stonework and escape was only foiled when a white prisoner informed the turnkey.²³ Meanwhile, Governor King was unsure how to proceed. He felt the captives were implicated in the murders of four settlers, but was sufficiently fair-minded to consider that settlers had killed six Aborigines during the 'coercive measures' and to forego further retaliation. King believed that the fact that the Aborigines had given up Musquito showed their collective sorrow for what had passed. He decided to exile the prisoners to another settlement, revealing his inability to comprehend the local political situation when he remarked that the plan was 'much approved of by the rest'.²⁴

Judge-Advocate Richard Atkins, who advised that the Aborigines were 'not bound by any moral or religious tye' and so could not give evidence or bear charging, confirmed the legality of King's decision.²⁵ The two Aborigines were sent to Norfolk Island, to be victualled at government expense and brought to labour if possible.²⁶ Isolated on a tiny island penal colony in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Musquito and Bull Dog had no choice but to live peacefully. They worked as charcoal burners, and at some stage Bull Dog was allowed to return home.²⁷ After eight years, the settlement on Norfolk Island was evacuated to save costs, so Musquito travelled to Port Dalrymple (Launceston) on board the last transport, *Minstrel II*, arriving in March 1813.²⁸

At Port Dalrymple, Musquito was technically free, and his brother Phillip at Port Jackson asked Governor Macquarie if Musquito could be repatriated. In August 1814 Macquarie agreed, and instructed Davey, the Tasmanian Lieutenant Governor, to comply.²⁹ It was not to be. Musquito, who had lived in the white world for so long, had become valuable because of his Aboriginal skills, and was sent to track convict 'freebooters' who were plaguing the colony with their bushranging. In October 1817 Lieutenant-Governor Sorell informed Macquarie that Musquito still desired to return home, after giving constant service guiding parties in search of bushrangers. He was to be sent to Sydney via *The Pilot*, with a convict named McGill, whose diligent assistance against the bushrangers had made him 'odious amongst the prisoners', and Black Mary, mistress of the feared bushranger Michael Howe.³⁰ Once more the promise was broken, and Musquito and McGill stayed. Musquito then began work for Edward Lord, a flamboyant and wealthy entrepreneur who intended to take Musquito to Mauritius in February 1818.³¹ Again, Musquito appears to have been prevented from leaving. Lord took two other servants,³² and McGill and Musquito resumed tracking.

They found and killed Michael Howe, in dramatic circumstances, on 4 October 1818.³³

Despite Musquito's evident heroism, all thoughts of returning him to Sydney were forgotten. Early accounts report that Musquito was ostracised by convicts who resented his work at recapturing bushrangers, and felt keenly his betrayal by the governors. Musquito walked into the bush, heading south where he joined a 'tame gang' that was affiliated with the Oyster Bay people. 'Tame gangs' were bands of Aborigines who had become disconnected from their own people, including some who had spent their childhoods in white households. They lived on the fringes of white settlement and were considered 'inoffensive', unlike the 'wild' Aborigines in the interior. In June 1823 a visiting Wesleyan missionary, Reverend William Horton, met 'Muskitoo's tribe' at Pitt Water in Sorell, between Hobart and the Tasman Peninsula. Reverend Horton believed, erroneously, that Musquito was a convict who had been transported for the murder of a woman. Musquito conversed at length with Horton, and interpreted the customs of the Aborigines to their bewildered observer. Although Horton had a very low opinion of Tasmanian Aborigines, he could not help but be impressed by the charismatic Sydney man, and Horton's is the only account that gives us any corporeal sense of Musquito. Horton gathered that Musquito's 'superior skill and muscular strength' had raised him to his 'present station' as 'leader' of this 'tame gang'.

Keith Windschuttle has suggested that Musquito and the tame gangs were 'detrified', an awkward word implying they were less than Aboriginal.³⁴ Yet Horton's account shows that Musquito's associates had adopted few white habits, apart from a liking for tobacco, liquor and roast potatoes and their willingness to accept benevolent handouts. The mob consisted of 20 or 30 men, women and children. Horton was disgusted by their diet, particularly the way they ate semi-cooked meat, and their social habits. He thought it deplorable that they never worked or settled, but wandered, subsisting on kangaroos, possums and oysters, 'lodging in all seasons around their fires in the open air'. Noting they suffered from a skin disease, Horton concluded it was a kind of scurvy exacerbated by their 'extreme filthiness' and habit of sitting too close to the fire. Horton was particularly disturbed that people who had been accustomed to clothing should choose to be completely naked and instead keep the winter cold at bay by smearing their tattooed skins with red gum and animal fat. Horrifying as it appeared to Horton, this was a visual manifestation of the strength with which the 'tame gang' held to a culture of their choosing. Even if the red gum and fat was a (re)invented tradition, the gang's preference for it over English clothes was a conscious display of Aboriginal ways.

Horton wrote that he asked Musquito 'if he was tired of his present mode of living, and if he was willing to till the ground and live as the English do'.

Musquito apparently replied that 'he should like it very well', but thought none of the rest would. Horton was appalled that these people were unwilling to advance 'one step from their original barbarism', despite having once beheld the 'superior comforts and pursuits of civilised man'.³⁵

By the time of Horton's visit in 1823, the spread of settlement in Tasmania approximated that of today, and the Aborigines had been pushed out of most of their natural range.³⁶ Although Horton had some hopes that the 'tame gang' might be used to open an intercourse with the Aborigines of the interior, he also knew that the 'wild' Aborigines had become 'very hostile' towards Europeans. The Oyster Bay people, who favoured the eastern coast and Midlands plains, had nowhere left to go. Musquito's interlude with Horton was to be one of the last peaceful moments of his life, for within a few short months his life was entwined with the Oyster Bay people, and the events at Grindstone Bay would make him a fugitive, and lead to his execution.

The story of the Grindstone Bay attack was told by the sole white survivor, an assigned convict stock-keeper called John Radford, who testified in the Supreme Court in 1824. He said that Musquito and Black Jack had arrived at his hut with 60 'wild' Oyster Bay Aborigines in November 1823. Radford did not say so, but the hut was new and built on a secluded portion of rough pasture that was, according to James Erskine Calder, who knew Radford in the 1870s, a favoured emu and kangaroo hunting ground.³⁷ As the band included women and children it could not have been a war party, and they may have been surprised to see the hut. Radford told the court that at the time the Aborigines arrived there were three convict stock-keepers at the hut: Radford, an Otaheitan called Mammaoa and William Hollyoak, who was an invalid traveller. The Aborigines camped near the hut for three days, playing games and hunting, while Musquito sat inside with the uneasy stock-keepers, eating heartily of their provisions and reassuring them there was no likelihood of attack. However something happened to alter this nervous coexistence. Possibly it was the manner in which the stock-keepers dealt with women that Musquito had taken to the hut, although Radford denied any impropriety when later questioned in court. At break of day on 15 November 1823 the Aborigines called the stock-keepers out of their hut. The trio were confronted with a forest of spears and realised, too late, that they had left their firearms unattended. Musquito, who carried just a waddy and spoke not a word, took their dogs away, despite the white men's protests. When the Aborigines raised their spears the men ran for their lives. Radford was speared, but managed to escape. He ran so fast he could not see who speared his hapless companions, though he heard their screams.³⁸

This dramatic tale sealed Musquito's fate, but it is difficult to assess his role in the attack. His visits to the hut show nothing more sinister than a taste for English food, tea and conversation. Radford never saw who speared Hollyoak,

and did not witness Mammoa's death. Musquito could not take the blame for the actual murders, and it is not clear whether he 'aided and abetted' the Aborigines. It is especially doubtful whether Musquito had any leadership role, as many scholars think. It was the 'wild' Aborigines who approached the hut with spears bristling, while Musquito was only lightly armed with a waddy, and remained silent. Nevertheless, as news of the murders spread, Musquito and Black Jack were named as protagonists.

The events at Grindstone Bay were the first of a number of violent attacks against settlers that continued into 1824, but there is little evidence of Musquito's direct involvement in later incidents. In March 1824, Aborigines burnt down a hut at Blue Hills³⁹ and a stock-keeper was speared the next month. Musquito and Black Jack were not present on either occasion, but the *Gazette* thought they might have been nearby 'from the circumstances of the Natives having been with one or two instances only excepted, entirely harmless until these two blacks have lately appeared among them'.⁴⁰

A local tradition that attributed the sudden outbreak of violence to the influence of Musquito and other Aborigines who had spent time with white people was developing.⁴¹ Musquito was well known in the colony, having lived amongst convicts and worked for the notable and notorious Edward Lord. He attracted attention, being tall, charismatic and fluent in English, and he had been present at one of the most frightening murders in Tasmanian history. It was far easier to blame him than contemplate the nightmare that the other Aborigines had themselves resorted to warfare. If Musquito had caused the violence, there was hope that his capture might restore peace, and no need to question the colonial enterprise. It was a myth that offered some consolations. Their fear was real, and not without foundation. However, we must be mindful that Musquito's reputation in Tasmania was not enhanced by any knowledge of his past in the Hawkesbury. The Tasmanian colonists were ignorant of that, for terrifying stories circulated without any talk of it. Today we know that Musquito spent his youth fighting colonists, and it seems likely that he did inspire his Tasmanian associates to fight, although it does not appear that he did so at Grindstone Bay. However there were many causes of the conflict, and he could not have been the sole leader of the Aborigines. It is inconceivable that one man could have organised disparate bands of Tasmanians across such a large front. The attacks of 1824 occurred across most of southern Tasmania, from the east coast into the Midlands, taking in the territories of the Oyster Bay people, with whom Musquito was associated, and their neighbours, the Big River people. With hindsight, it is obvious that the attacks of 1824 represented an outbreak of generalised resistance to white settlement, and that numerous Tasmanian groups were launching their own attacks.

The evidence confirms this view. In June 1824 Matthew Osborne was killed and his wife severely wounded at their property at Jericho near New Norfolk in southern Tasmania. The *Gazette* reported Widow Osborne's recovery on 16 July 1824, and she told the paper that Black Tom (Kickerterpoller) had led the raid in company with 50 Aborigines. Later writers would link Tom and Musquito, but they appear to have lived with separate bands at this time. Although Mrs Osborne did not name Musquito, the *Gazette* was unwilling to abandon the view of Musquito's involvement, and said

The only tribe who have done any mischief, were corrupted by Musquito, who with much and perverted cunning, taught them a portion of his own villainy, and incited them time after time to join in his delinquencies.⁴²

By that time a certain hysteria about Musquito was apparent. On the day the *Gazette* reported Widow Osborne's recovery, the Oatlands Magistrate, Charles Rowcroft, wrote a letter to the Governor, pleading for military assistance because Musquito's band was 'infesting' the district of Murray. Rowcroft blamed Musquito for two murders at Abyssinia and one at Big River, for maltreating assigned convicts on an Oatlands property, and torching a stock hut at Great Lakes. He also accused Musquito of Osborne's murder and declared the widow's life was 'despaired of'.⁴³ The information provided by Rowcroft, who was very green in the colony,⁴⁴ demands scrutiny.⁴⁵ These incidents occurred in the lower Midlands, yet this was the country of the Big River (Ouse) people. The Oyster Bay people, with whom Musquito was living, had good relationships with the Big River people, but spent winter on the east coast, and were unlikely to be so far inland in June.⁴⁶ Rowcroft was undoubtedly frightened, but clearly Musquito's band was not the only Aboriginal group raiding at the time, and the letter cannot have been taken too seriously, since no military detachment was sent.

In the Oatlands area around this time there was also a rumour that Musquito had a gun and ammunition and had taught the Tasmanians that firearms were useless after one shot,⁴⁷ although the Tasmanians learned this from a variety of means.⁴⁸ In all, there were 12 attacks between November 1823 and August 1824,⁴⁹ but we can be sure Musquito was involved in just two of these. The first was Grindstone Bay, and the second was at Pitt Water (Sorell). In that instance Musquito enticed a settler from his hut with a cooe then speared him, but as he left the settler alive there is a possibility the attack was some personal retaliation. It was certainly not the work of a rampaging murderer. The *Gazette* knew it could not blame all the attacks on Musquito, so it argued that he had made the 'formerly harmless' Tasmanians 'sensible' of the unprovoked aggressions and 'mischievous conduct' of stock-keepers.⁵⁰ The local tradition, which held Musquito responsible for the violence by deed and influence, was

now firmly established. His apprehension became an 'overpowering psychological necessity'.⁵¹

Less than a week after the Pitt Water spearing, Musquito was captured, once more by an Aboriginal person. A boy called Tegg (or Teague) and two white servants found him unarmed with two women on the east coast, and Tegg shot and wounded Musquito as he tried to flee.⁵² Remarkably, Tegg had been raised in the household of the disreputable Surgeon Edward Luttrell. The Luttrells had owned land in the Hawkesbury district during Musquito's time there, and probably remembered him well. One Luttrell son had been killed by Aborigines in Sydney in 1811.⁵³ Another, Edward Jr, had been charged in 1810 with shooting and wounding Tedbury in Sydney, and would later claim for himself the credit for Musquito's capture in Tasmania.⁵⁴ These parallel lives highlight the peculiar narrowness of colonial society. Not only was Musquito unfortunate enough to find the same tensions in Tasmania that he had survived in the Hawkesbury, but he saw the very same people.

After his capture, Musquito was hospitalised and may have been visited by Governor Arthur, but their conversation was not recorded.⁵⁵ Black Jack was captured soon afterwards, and together they faced trial in the new Supreme Court in December 1824.⁵⁶ Contemporary reports do not mention Musquito's Hawkesbury years, so Hobart townspeople remained ignorant of his past. Unfortunately, it also seems that Governor Arthur was ignorant of the precedent set by King's fair-minded decision of 1805. Suffice to say, the principles expressed by Judge-Advocate Atkins, that Aborigines were incapable of being brought before a criminal court, either as criminals or witnesses, were not applied. Both Aboriginal men were tried for a capital offence; yet neither was allowed to speak in his own defence, call witnesses or brief counsel. There was doubt about the reliability of the convict Radford and the evidence was entirely circumstantial, yet Musquito was convicted. Melville acidly commented that the resulting executions were 'looked upon by many as a most extraordinary precedent'.⁵⁷ In light of King's humane remedy to a similar crisis, Arthur's assent to the trial and hangings looks brutal and arbitrary.

Musquito was said to have insisted his execution was useless as an example to the Aborigines, and to have told Gaoler Bisdee, 'Hanging no good for black fellow'. Bisdee asked 'Why not as good for black fellow as for white fellow, if he kills a man?' to which Musquito replied 'Very good for white fellow, for *he* used to it'.⁵⁸ In September of the next year Jack and Dick were also hanged. Arthur issued a government notice stating that the hangings were intended to provide an example to the Aborigines, and induce in them a more conciliatory line of conduct. This cruel example seems to have had the opposite effect. 'Incidents', as NJB Plomley politely describes them, increased dramatically and continued until 1831.⁵⁹ Gilbert Robertson, who led roving parties in search of

Aborigines, thought Musquito's execution only served to cause further murders.⁶⁰ As James Erskine Calder put it, 50 years later, after the hangings the Aborigines 'sullenly withdrew to the woods, and never more entered the settled districts, except as the deadly enemies of our people'.⁶¹ As attacks escalated in 1826 Arthur allowed settlers to apply force if they felt Aborigines showed any determination to attack, rob or murder, and to treat them as rioters if they assembled in numbers.⁶² The stage had been set for the Black War.

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Although dead, Musquito continued to have a role in the conflict in Tasmania, by providing a means to explain Tasmanian antagonism. Governor Arthur had to account to his masters for his failure to conciliate the Aborigines and protect the settlers. In April 1828 he reported that it would be 'in vain to trace the cause of the evil which exists; my duty is plainly to remove its effects'.⁶³ By January of the following year Arthur had despaired, and hoped for permission to unleash war. He now traced 'the evil'. To deflect blame from the colonists or the administration, he incriminated the lower orders of Tasmanian society — the sealers, convicts and bushrangers — and invoked the local tradition of Musquito's influence. He said that the Tasmanian Aborigines had been 'led on by a Sydney black' and by two other 'partially civilised men' (Black Tom and Black Jack). Black Tom's rejection of his adoptive white family was 'a circumstance which augurs ill for any endeavour to instruct these abject beings'.⁶⁴ This theory of outside influence served two purposes. It enabled Arthur to avoid criticism for his poor management and helped him to overcome any liberal feeling in the Colonial Office by establishing the hopelessness of the situation. The Colonial Office chided Arthur for his 'ineffectual efforts to establish a friendly intercourse' between the whites and the Aboriginal tribes, but it sanctioned his declaration of martial law in 1828.⁶⁵

The utility of the depiction of Musquito as an outsider and bad influence has been noted by Christine Wise in her 1983 article 'Black Rebel'.⁶⁶ However, not everyone in the Colony agreed with Arthur. An 1830 Committee into the Military Operations against Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land questioned respectable settlers about the origins of Aboriginal hostility. Clearly local traditions about Musquito were fading in the light of the continuing Aboriginal attacks. Although many of the witnesses had endured stock and property losses and the murder of their servants, only the briefest mentions of Musquito were made. One remembered Musquito had behaved ill to his wife and another noted that Tom and Musquito had 'been much with Europeans'.⁶⁷ The clearest testimony was from the former roving party leader Gilbert Robertson, a man of mixed race from the West Indies who had been friendly with Musquito and Tom. He said Musquito had been driven into the bush by the 'breach of faith on the part of the Government' and that Musquito's first murders had been committed in

self-defence. Robertson humanised Musquito, fondly narrating how he had helped around his property, and was so skilful that he could knock the head off a flying pigeon with a stick. Robertson also stressed the hangings had only caused further murders.⁶⁸

When the Committee prepared its summation it did not mention Musquito or any of the other Aborigines who had lived alongside whites as causes of the violence. It did say that the hangings of the four Aborigines in 1825-1826 had contributed to a permanent estrangement between the Aborigines and white society. However the overwhelming causes were the shooting of Aborigines at Risdon Cove in 1804, general lawlessness, abuse, the loss of land and food supplies and the thefts of women and children. It was the Committee's view that the dissolute and abandoned whites had caused the 'universal and permanent excitement' of the Aborigines' spirit of 'indiscriminate vengeance'.⁶⁹ It was however too late to halt the tragic war.

By 1835, a sort of peace was descending, but not everyone rested easily. Henry Melville, a strident critic of Governor Arthur, used a spell in gaol for contempt of court to pen a history of Van Diemen's Land. He argued that the Tasmanians had been a sovereign people, 'the proper, the legitimate owners of the soil', who owned it by virtue of their ancestors' bloody conquest. The Tasmanians had become aggravated by the loss of their hunting grounds, and their ill treatment.⁷⁰ Melville saw the 'war' as just — a "'Guerilla'"⁷¹ campaign of self-defence — and the trial as a travesty of justice, for Musquito had 'been made acquainted with English manners, but not with English laws'. In Melville's view Black Jack, as a Tasmanian, was a 'legitimate prisoner of war', and the attorney general ought not have pressed for 'the conviction of the offenders against laws brought by the invaders to the country'.⁷² Melville also thought Musquito's reputation was exaggerated. As he put it, 'many deeds of terror are laid to Musquito's charge, which it is impossible for him to have committed, but doubtlessly, several lives were sacrificed by him'. Although Musquito was 'a most daring leader of a hostile tribe' of 'the worst sort of Aborigines', he did not instigate the war.⁷³

In the footnotes to his history Melville also included a conversation Musquito was supposed to have had with an unnamed benefactor. Melville almost certainly drew on Robertson's 1830 deposition to put broken English into Musquito's mouth, but it is a poignant evocation of betrayal and lost country.

I stop wit white fellow, learn to like blanket, clothes, bakky, rum, bread, all same white fellow: white fellow giv'd me. By and by Gubernor send me catch bushrangers — promise me plenty clothes, and send me back Sydney, my own country: I catch him, Gubernor tell too much lie, never send me. I knockit about camp, prisoner no liket me then, givet me nothing, call me b—y hangman nose. I knock one fellow down, give waddie, constable take me. I then walk away in bush. I get along wid

mob, go all about beg some give it bread, blanket: some tak't away my "gin:" that make a fight: mob rob the hut: some one tell Gubernor: all white fellow want catch me, shoot me, 'pose he see. I want all same white fellow he never give, mob make a rush, stock-keeper shoot plenty, mob spear some. Dat de way me no come all same your house. Never like see Gubernor any more. White fellow soon kill all black fellow. You good fellow, mob no kill you.⁷⁴

After Melville, few writers were interested in Musquito's motivations. The war had ended with George Augustus Robinson's 'conciliation', in which the surviving Aborigines were coaxed into exile on Flinders Island. Robinson's diaries provide the only surviving Tasmanian Aboriginal recollections of Musquito. In October 1837, Lucy of the Big River tribe told Robinson that she had lived with 'Muskeeto the Sydney black' and that he had taken her from her people. Lucy said Musquito had taken other black women, had killed a Big River man and had shot a woman dead with a musket while she was gathering possum from a tree on Hobart's 'big hill' (Knocklofty). Another Aborigine, Frances, told Robinson that Musquito 'encouraged and excited the VDL aborigines to kill the white men, saying "kill DRYER, kill LUTERTWEIN"'. These wholly negative accounts should not be accepted without qualification. George Augustus Robinson viewed the Tasmanians as abused innocents, and worked tirelessly to persuade the Government that the Flinders Island Aborigines needed to be preserved and protected, at government expense. Musquito provided a means of excusing Tasmanian violence. As Robinson wrote:

This evidence strongly proves that the whites have occasioned the greatest misery to these poor people the aborigines to an unknown extent, not only by importing the depraved of their own species but also that of the Sydney aborigines who has tended to annihilate them [sic]. Such did Muskeeto. He had murdered several at Sydney and was sent here to be out of the way. What a policy!⁷⁵

Lucy and Frances may have told Robinson the truth, but in their words Robinson found a way to redeem the Tasmanian Aborigines in the eyes of the colonists and the government.

* * *

Around this time the first historians endeavoured to create narratives of the foundation of the colony of Van Diemen's Land. Some time in the late 1830s, the Norwegian adventurer Jorgen Jorgenson prepared a manuscript account about the Tasmanian Aborigines. A seaman who had been present at the foundation of Risdon Cove in 1803 and Port Dalrymple in 1804, Jorgenson had returned as a convict in 1826. He became a roving party leader and policeman, but was rendered unemployable by his drunkenness, so turned instead to journalism.⁷⁶

Like most early Tasmanian writers, Jorgenson wrote for a London market, and his accounts of Tasmanian Aboriginal customs were usually sympathetic. He explained the violence by depicting Musquito as a savage figure, a 'cunning and crafty knave', who 'stirred' the Tasmanian Aborigines 'up to all manner of mischief'. Jorgenson never knew Musquito, but unlike Melville or Robinson, was able to access colonial records. He knew the real reasons for Musquito's exile. Yet to dramatise the Aboriginal man's savagery Jorgenson embellished his biography. He introduced a curious and enduring myth that Musquito and Bull Dog's crime had been to 'cut a child out of the womb of the mother', although there is no record of any such horrific event occurring at Port Jackson. Jorgenson enhanced the imagery of Musquito's criminality by saying Musquito had been assigned as a convict stock-keeper at Antill's Ponds and had murdered his wife, Gooseberry, in the Government Paddock in Hobart. Again, there is no evidence to corroborate either of these claims, nor for Jorgenson's account that Musquito was a 'great drunkard' who would beg bread for the blacks, exchange it for tobacco and then sell the tobacco for rum.⁷⁷ These colourful tales added zest to Jorgenson's writing and increased its potential profitability, whilst underlining the depraved influence of Musquito. Jorgenson shaped Musquito into a form that later writers — both historians and hacks — would perfect.

Charles Rowcroft, who had been ruined after a disastrous affair with the wife of Musquito's old boss, Edward Lord, and had returned to London late in 1824,⁷⁸ also began writing for profit. In the 1840s he fictionalised his experiences as a Vandemonian magistrate, presenting Musquito as a child abductor, 'the cruellest savage that ever tormented a colony'.⁷⁹ The novel portrays the Tasmanians in derogatory terms:

I have often had occasion to observe the dull, listless and almost idiotic appearance of the natives of Van Diemen's Land, when not excited by hunger or some passionate desire ... in this respect they much resemble the unthinking beasts of the field, so inanimate and log-like is their usual manner.⁸⁰

Rowcroft's silly fiction expressed the stereotype that the Tasmanians were too stupid and sullen to engage in warfare without the influence of vigorous outsiders, such as Musquito, who was more bushranger than Aborigine.

The two notions, of Tasmanian innocence and incapacity and Musquito's evil influence, are evident in much historical material produced after the 1840s. Colonial writers carefully pondered the destruction of the Tasmanian Aborigines. It provided them with opportunities to write history that considered grand philosophical and literary themes about the progress and decay of societies. Hobart writers also worried how their island and its new people would be perceived. As Rebe Taylor has noted, they looked across 'a geography that maps morality and confines it to the colonised spaces'.⁸¹ The history of the Aboriginal

Tasmanians enabled writers to explore and define the gulf between 'savagery' and 'civilisation'. While Musquito necessarily had a small part in the history of Tasmania, the manner of his depiction is significant. He proved that Aborigines could not discard their 'savagery', and confirmed the 'civilisation' of the colonists.

The great early historian of Tasmania, John West, felt the civilisation of 'a barbarous people' was impossible in the presence of white men. 'The contrast is too great, and the points of contact too numerous and irritating ... the white man's shadow is, to men of every other hue, by law of Heaven, the shadow of death'.⁸² Nevertheless, he was still interested to trace the process of destruction. He began his account of the Tasmanian Aborigines with the 1804 massacre at Risdon Cove, reporting that 50 Aborigines had died there and musing how

The sorrows of a savage are transient: not so, his resentment. Every wrong is new, until it is revenged: and there is no reason to suppose these terrible sacrifices were ever forgotten.⁸³

While West documented settler abuses of Aborigines, he perceived the Aboriginal violence as a childlike response to white provocation. Musquito was placed first on West's list of the causes of 'that long and disastrous conflict', in which 'a people, all but a fading fragment, became extinct'.⁸⁴ West's Musquito is a statesmanlike figure, who would enter settlers' huts and sit down 'with great dignity' whilst mobs of one or two hundred Aborigines would patiently await his signal to approach. No contemporary record verifies such an extraordinary occurrence, although there are obvious resonances with Radford's account. West also depicts Musquito directing deeds of 'great enormity' as he 'propagated his spirit', commanding large bodies under a 'common impulse', with 'military unity and skill'.⁸⁵ But this leadership was not valorous, but self-aggrandising. West also claimed that Musquito had, before joining them, pursued the Tasmanian blacks and stormed their huts.⁸⁶ Like Jorgenson, West wrote that Musquito was transported for murdering a woman. The destruction of a woman, a symbol of innocence and vulnerability, is further evidence of Musquito's violation of the laws of man. West's Musquito is a threat to both black and white, truly an outsider.

Though West acknowledges contemporary concerns about the trial, he declares he will not extenuate the Aboriginal men's 'treachery' by questioning it. For West the tragedy of Musquito's story is not in his own life or death, but that his deeds 'justified hatred to the race, and finally systematic massacre'.⁸⁷ Under Musquito's 'pernicious' influence the Tasmanian Aborigine 'appeared to be a fiend full of mischief and spite, marked out by his crimes for utter extinction'.⁸⁸ West does write about the crimes of the colonists, but Musquito expiates those crimes by representing an evil so profound and so enduring that the only solution was to conquer the Tasmanians, and thus eradicate it.

Twenty years after West, James Bonwick also pondered the destruction of Tasmanian Aboriginal society. A great archivist, Bonwick spent years gathering colonial documentary sources, creating the Bonwick Transcripts, which are now housed in the Mitchell Library. He wrote two books on the subject of the Tasmanian Aborigines and their destruction, using colonial source material. His work is considered definitive, yet the archivist's selection of sources about Musquito raises questions about Bonwick's history. His Musquito was an amplified version of Jorgenson's⁸⁹ with some source material, along with spurious quotations from 'old hands' to put flesh on the bones of the story when needed. In his books Musquito is a degraded individual, whose experiences on the frontier had filled him with the vices of both Aboriginal and white society — a hyperbole of savagery. As Bonwick told it, Musquito was 'indebted to his acquirements in civilisation for his extra ability in working mischief', and 'an English scholar in our national vices of drinking and swearing, as well as in the employment of our tongue'. Bonwick made no mention of Governor King's exile, but uses Jorgenson's story that Musquito had murdered a pregnant woman. He makes it even more lurid, telling his readers that Musquito and Bull Dog, after 'gratifying their horrible propensities', ripped the woman open and destroyed the body of her child. Bonwick's Musquito murdered both Gooseberry and a new character, 'Black Hannah' and severed the breast of his 'gin' because she persisted in suckling her child, against his orders.⁹⁰ He is a bizarre hybrid who ruins the Tasmanian Aborigines. The members of the 'tame mob' too were cultural exiles, who had 'transgressed tribal laws in their own districts'. Later, Musquito governed the 'equality-loving' Tasmanians after 'the approved European model' — presumably, despotism. Although Bonwick acknowledged that Musquito was frequently absent from the conflict, he argued he 'kept the tethers', orchestrating attacks from afar and using his 'demoniacal arts' to spur further violence. Bonwick did believe that the atrocities of convicts and bushrangers contributed to the conflict, but his view of Musquito's malevolent influence is uncompromising. In Bonwick's Tasmania the 'Darkies were quiet as dogs before Musquito came'.⁹¹ As did West, Bonwick draws Musquito in such a way that the actions of the colonists are rendered natural. Musquito underpins West's and Bonwick's ideology that the destruction of the Tasmanian race was inevitable.

Not all early historians felt the same way. James Erskine Calder was a contemporary of Bonwick, with a similar command of colonial source material. A surveyor of long residence in Tasmania, he avidly collected information about Aboriginal languages and culture from black and white informants. Calder felt — though Tasmanians may not agree with him — 'the most interesting event in the history of Tasmania, after its discovery, seems to be the extinction of its ancient inhabitants'. Although Calder argued that respiratory disease was a major factor in the decline of the Aborigines, he did not see their destruction as either inevitable or necessary.

In *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits etc. of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Calder condemned the hangings for severing relationships between black and white. He endorsed many of Melville's views, including his point that the Aborigines were prisoners of war who ought not to have suffered for 'acts justified in war time by the usages of all nations'.⁹² Calder said that Musquito was a 'civilised black' who had been betrayed by the Governor, and while he did not shy from portraying him as a 'most desperate fellow', Calder felt there was not enough evidence to convict Musquito 'beyond presence at the hut with sixty or seventy or more', and that his atrocities were very much exaggerated.⁹³ Calder saw Musquito's hanging as a sacrifice 'to intimidate his surviving brethren into submission to the superior race', concluding that 'I don't believe justice, or anything like it, was always done here fifty years ago'.⁹⁴

The key to Calder's sympathetic depiction of Musquito was his high estimation of Aboriginal people. He repudiated Horton's assessment of the Tasmanians, on the basis that they were 'naturally very intellectual and highly susceptible of culture'. He appreciated their religious complexity and wrote elegantly of their skilful exploitation of the bounty of the Tasmanian environment.⁹⁵ Calder acknowledges that the Tasmanians learned something of European habits from Musquito and other 'half civilised' Aborigines, but once this brief association concluded, the Tasmanians 'cleverly' planned all their attacks 'in which they seldom failed of success'.⁹⁶ For Calder the Tasmanians were 'a most mischievous, determined, and deadly foe', who devastated property and 'took life about five times as often as it was inflicted upon themselves'.⁹⁷

Calder's work is frequently overlooked in favour of Bonwick, particularly today, when Calder's book is held by few libraries, whilst Bonwick's and West's have been frequently reprinted, in Australia and elsewhere. While Clive Turnbull used Calder and Melville to write *Black War*,⁹⁸ the West/Bonwick narrative of Musquito's transgressive influence percolated through historiography and literature until well into the twentieth century. An example is George Mackaness's 1944 *Lags and Legirons*, a series of tales of colonial bounders fictionalised to the point of fancy. In Mackaness Musquito was active in Governor Sorell's time, was defended in court by Gilbert Robertson, and declared on the gallows 'hanging no blurry good for blackfellow'.⁹⁹ Yet Mackaness was a serious antiquarian who edited Melville. To write such an account even in fiction was an abuse of history. These views were repeated in bestselling works such as A Grove Day's *Adventurers of the Pacific*, with a chapter called 'Demons of Van Diemen's Land' that began with the immortal line 'There were monsters in those days. One was named Musquito.'¹⁰⁰

In the 1970s authors who sought to recover a sense of Aboriginal agency in colonisation gave Musquito new prominence as a resistance leader. At this time the late Lin Onus painted his haunting images of Musquito's movements between

black and white worlds (*Quiet as Dogs, White Man's Burden*), drowning in white documents (*Wanted, One Rope Thrower*).¹⁰¹ While most modern writers explored the symmetry between Musquito's life in the Hawkesbury and in Tasmania, they frequently relied on Bonwick as a source. Willey paraphrased Bonwick by writing that Musquito 'directed' the Tasmanian Aborigines and organised 'large numbers of warriors with tactics aimed at emulating the military discipline and skills of the Europeans'. Knowing that Hawkesbury Aborigines had turned Musquito in, Willey decided that Musquito and Bulldog had been betrayed because the confected story of the rape and murder of women 'demanded vengeance under the tribe's own laws'.¹⁰² The late Al Grassby with co-author Marj Hill wrote that Musquito 'welded [the Tasmanians] into a fighting force and began a guerilla war such as he had pursued with considerable success in his native land', which he continued for 'several years'.¹⁰³ David Lowe also drew on Bonwick and presented Musquito as the leader of the resistance in Tasmania — the 'civilised native' who taught the Aborigines guerilla tactics.¹⁰⁴ These authors, whilst intending to promote the idea of Aboriginal resistance, overstated the level of organisation of the war in Tasmania, and Musquito's role in it. They inadvertently diminish the Tasmanians by denying their agency in the conflict. The narrative of the gentle Tasmanian infected with the wrath of a more vigorous Sydney Aborigine was continued.

A deliberate attempt to remove the historical agency of the Tasmanians is Keith Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. Windschuttle lays the blame for almost all Tasmanian Aboriginal violence at Musquito's feet, who, he claims, was not even an authentic Aborigine, but an interloper, a bushranger leading a violent crime spree in a foreign country. Having rebutted Windschuttle's views in other forums, I reiterate that it contains many factual and interpretive errors, including ignorance of Musquito's career in Sydney.¹⁰⁵ Windschuttle exaggerates Musquito's involvement in the attacks of 1823-1824 and ignores the questions around the legality of the convictions and executions. Without any apparent awareness of the ideologies of Bonwick and West, Windschuttle propagates the belief that Musquito inculcated violence in the Tasmanians, and took them down the path to destruction. This inflated view of Musquito's involvement in the Tasmanian campaign is the cornerstone of Windschuttle's arguments against the 'guerilla war thesis'. He sees Musquito's 'criminal' behaviour as inimical to resistance, and argues there was no genuine Tasmanian campaign. The assertion that the Tasmanians had no political or historical agency is central to Windschuttle's view of the benign nature of Tasmanian colonisation, and his challenge to the legitimacy of modern Tasmanian Aboriginal claims.

Windschuttle's 'discovery' of Musquito is a device to counter the views of Lyndall Ryan, among others. In telling the story of Tasmanian cultural survival,

Ryan (as did Christine Wise) placed Musquito alongside the Tasmanian Aborigines — the leader of one band, but not of a movement.¹⁰⁶ Ryan did not present a complete account of Musquito, and did not consider his motivations in depth. Neither did she cover his past in New South Wales. However Ryan's was a book about Tasmania, and while Musquito's life is worthy of detailed attention, it does not encapsulate the Tasmanian Aboriginal story, because Tasmanians were engaged in violent conflict independently of Musquito. Musquito's rage, if that is what it was, lasted but a few short months, and he was dead before the Black War really began. Though many historians have argued otherwise, in the theatre of the Black War the Tasmanians were the major actors, and Musquito had only a walk-on part.

* * *

Now that we have some understanding of what historians have made of Musquito's life, it is time to look again. Historians have fitted his life to their narratives. The focus on his 'outrages' has meant that we have missed much that was extraordinary about him and his times. Perhaps if we return to that moment at Pittwater, when Reverend Horton observed the 'tame gang' remaking themselves in the firelight with red gum and animal grease, we can look again at the ways both Musquito and the Tasmanians tried to navigate the tumultuous world of early colonial society.

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- 83 West 1852: 262-263.
- 84 West 1852: 267.
- 85 West 1852: 268.
- 86 West 1852: 267.
- 87 West 1852: 268-270.
- 88 West 1852: 277.
- 89 Plomley 1990-1991: 39.
- 90 Bonwick 1884: 93-94.
- 91 Bonwick 1884: 78.
- 92 Calder 1875: 45.
- 93 Calder 1875: 47.
- 94 Calder 1875: 54.
- 95 Calder 1874.
- 96 Calder 1875: 55.
- 97 Calder 1875: 55.
- 98 Turnbull 1948.
- 99 Mackaness 1944: 112-117.
- 100 Grove Day 1969: 235.
- 101 Onus' Musquito series was included in *Outlawed!*, a National Museum of Australia exhibition that toured to Melbourne and Queensland in 2003-2005. National Museum of Australia 2003.
- 102 Willey 1979: 180-182.
- 103 Grassby and Hill 1988: 54.
- 104 Lowe 1994: 9-14.
- 105 Parry 2003a, b; Windschuttle 2004; Parry 2004.
- 106 Ryan 1997: 87-88. Wise 1983.