

Reading Between the (colonial) Lines

Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson

Edited by N.J.B. Plomley

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Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to Friendly Mission

Edited by Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls

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In *Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to Friendly Mission*, Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls have compiled a collection of fifteen essays to commemorate the republication of N.J.B. Plomley's *Friendly Mission* containing George Augustus Robinson's journals in Van Diemen's Land between 1829-34. The new edition of *Friendly Mission* has an expanded index as well as material previously omitted from the 1966 edition including portions of the 'Bruny Island Mission 1829'.

Reading Robinson provides Indigenous and non-Indigenous responses to *Friendly Mission*, and asks for a reconsideration of it as a problematic but foundational colonial artefact. The essays draw attention to *Friendly Mission's* importance in the Australian and imperial archives as one of the few primary sources enabling insight into Indigenous culture and colonial administration in Van Diemen's Land. They also point to its troubling resonances with the 'painful and traumatic pasts' of Indigenous people in Tasmania (14).

Robinson's continuing but controversial relevance to scholarship is highlighted throughout *Reading Robinson*. In their introductory essay, Johnston and Rolls note that Robinson's journal was recognised by his contemporaries (16), something also identified by Patrick Brantlinger in his essay 'King Billy's Bones: Colonial Knowledge Production in Nineteenth-Century Tasmania', where he describes how James Bonwick, who also wrote extensively on colonial affairs and engagement with Indigenous people in the mid-nineteenth century, used Robinson's work as a reference point (47).

Essays by Rebe Taylor, Ian McFarlane, John Connor and Lyndall Ryan continue this theme. Taylor's critique of the influential mid-twentieth century archaeologist Rhys Jones identifies the interplay between archaeological evidence and changing social attitudes about Indigenous Tasmanians, and shows how Robinson's journal has been used selectively to support particular interpretations of Indigenous culture and history (117-18). McFarlane suggests *Friendly Mission* offers a counterpoint to other more limited source material from the early nineteenth century such as the records of the Van Diemen's Land Company (127). His reassessment of the Cape Grim massacre is supported by an analysis of witness and participant accounts in Robinson's journal (129-140). McFarlane draws attention to *Friendly Mission's* usefulness to researchers, arguing that it opens avenues of inquiry and points to potential archival documents that might otherwise remain unexamined (127-28). A similar position is adopted by Connor who contends that *Friendly Mission* is significant as a reference document for military historians interested in 'an understanding of the bravery, brutality and tragedy of the Tasmanian frontier war' (171). Ryan further explores the malleability of Robinson's journal as a source document for contemporary writers through her analysis of works by Vivienne Rae-Ellis, Cassandra Pybus, Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle. She concludes by expressing surprise that Robinson 'who risked his life to save Tasmanian Aborigines from extermination by the settlers and gave us so much information about their dispossession should be held in such contempt by historians today' (158).

Sharon Dennis, whose essay is one of three under the banner of 'Community Voices', offers a counterpoint to this view and draws attention to the discursive privilege afforded to Robinson's account of colonial history in Van Diemen's Land. She argues that while *Friendly Mission* is considered to be a 'benchmark' the work is offensive to Indigenous people because it diminishes their subjectivity, and 'should not be rewarded or heralded as the keeper of stories of Aboriginal people in Tasmania' (182). Rodney Dillon adopts a similar position, suggesting in his essay that Robinson's journal is 'a soft representation of history' used by 'white people' who wish to 'ignore the slaughter of families and race' (145). He questions the title *Friendly Mission*, since in his view, Robinson was part of the barbarity and violence of the 'invasion of Tasmania' and was in no way 'friendly' (145). Wendy Aitken addresses the question of identity in the context of her own Indigenous heritage. Her contemplative piece draws attention to the way discourses about Robinson and about Indigenous Tasmanians continue to be constructed, posing challenges to her lived experience. She writes about how confronting and humiliating it was to be told in her primary school history class that 'the story [about Indigenous Tasmanians] ended with the death of Trukanini, "the last Tasmanian"' (95). Similar conundrums have been highlighted by Gillian Cowlshaw, who noted the potential social anxiety experienced by young

Indigenous Australians in Bourke when they attempted to assert identities based on their own circumstances rather than the dominant culture's social constructions of them (Cowlshaw 5, 19-20), a finding underscored by Aitken's story of social dislocation and confusion in the classroom. Aitken rejects the interpretation of history she was taught, and the privilege afforded Robinson, in favour of her own experience and Indigenous identity. Aitken's alternative view of Indigenous Tasmanians enables her playfully to suggest that Robinson's journal may in fact have contained portions which were a 'first hand account' written by those Indigenous people who accompanied him (96).

Three essays in this collection seek to situate Robinson in an international context, locating his actions and writings within a global imperial framework. Alan Lester points to the British imperial endeavours in Cape Town and in the Caribbean as precedents for what he describes as Robinson's humanitarianism in Van Diemen's Land (29). He suggests that the ultimate failure of Robinson's protectorate in Van Diemen's Land was part of a wider failure of humanitarianism across the British Empire (41). Elizabeth Elbourne also compares the Cape Colony and Van Diemen's Land in the context of an economy of imperialism that permitted the growth of a colonial elite who defined the 'imagined purpose' of both colonies (78, 89-90). Like Lester, Elbourne points to the importance of the British House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) as a pivotal moment in imperial history that led to the establishment of the Van Diemen's Land Protectorate and ultimately to Robinson's ascendancy (90).

For some contributors Robinson's character and personality are integral to an appreciation of his work. Cassandra Pybus suggests that Robinson's predecessor, Gilbert Robertson, was deemed both problematic and controversial by the colonial governor, Arthur, whereas Robinson was viewed as more amenable and pragmatic (97). Pybus describes him as a self interested, ambitious, aggrandising, avaricious and complicated personality (103-107). In contrast, Henry Reynolds notes Robinson's curiosity and humanity, seeking to locate Robinson 'in his cultural milieu' and to 'see him as a man of his time', something he suggests other twentieth century writers have overlooked (162). Reynolds argues that Robinson was a free thinker, either unconcerned with, or philosophically opposed to, many of the social attitudes espoused by other settlers (162-63). Robinson's shortcomings are noted as well by Reynolds with an unflattering portrait of him as a thin-skinned, 'ambitious, self educated settler who travelled to the far antipodes to advance himself' and was more concerned with status than race (166-67). Despite this, Reynolds sees Robinson as both an actor and witness to events in colonial Tasmania (169).

Reading Robinson redresses the paucity of critical analysis given previously to *Friendly Mission* and identifies it as a significant document that continues to evoke both interest and emotion. According to Johnston and Rolls, *Friendly*

Mission stirs guilt, curiosity, anger, resistance, engagement and fascination in those who read it and as such remains a 'vibrant social artefact' (21). Although *Friendly Mission* is evidently partial, problematic, racially complex, and limited by the shortcomings of Robinson's character and social position, it remains, as the essays in *Reading Robinson* demonstrate, integral to contemporary debates across diverse areas of scholarship and society.

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Work cited

Cowlshaw, Gillian. *Blackfellas Whitefellas, and the Hidden Injuries of Race*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.