

Pleading Robinson

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

Edited by N.J.B. Plomley

Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and Quintus Publishing,
1180pp, \$99.00, 2008

ISBN 978-0-9775572-2-6

Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to Friendly Mission

Edited by Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls

Quintus Publishing, 238pp, \$34.95, 2008

ISBN 978-0-9775572-5-7

Review Essay by Greg Lehman

Christine McPaul's review in AHR's May 2010 edition¹ of two highly significant publications in Australia's colonial record highlights why Aboriginal people generally, and Aboriginal intellectuals in particular, continue to be unhappy with both the substance of Australian history and the method of its telling. But it is not the discontented Indigenous authors included in the collection of essays that speak most to this problem. Rather, it is the exclusion of any Indigenous Tasmanian writer not closely associated with the Riuwunna Centre for Aboriginal Studies at the University of Tasmania that has ensured these essays collectively fail to make an emancipatory contribution to a critical dialogue that is both necessary and overdue in the telling of Australian history.

If you are already familiar with N. J. B. Plomley's unique volume, then you will understand why a new edition of *Friendly Mission* is a momentous event. The first (and only) edition was becoming increasingly hard to obtain and expensive at over \$1000 for copies in excellent condition. For those who have yet to discover this enormous work, a new edition offers a fresh opportunity to enter a world that leaves most who encounter it profoundly moved by the experience. An edited collection of journals, correspondence and associated lists produced by the builder turned evangelist George Augustus Robinson

1 <<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-May-2010/mcpaul.html>>

(1791-1866), *Friendly Mission* is a record of one man's extraordinary (but by no means selfless) vocation to save my ancestors from almost certain annihilation on the lawless and mal-administered frontier of Van Diemen's Land.

Buried within Robinson's ostentatious prose and amateur naturalism is a patchwork of observation and interpretation that constitutes most of what is known of the cosmology and lifestyle of an ancient society in the midst of devastating change. Biblical in its volume and scale, *Friendly Mission* is replete with accounts of creation, slavery and exodus. The covenant offered to Tasmanian Aboriginal nations by Robinson comprised a series of empty promises, which delivered the generation that parleyed with him from a wilderness that was their home, to imprisonment and early death in an unpromised land. But unlike the Biblical mythology, this is a primary account. While there is no doubt that Robinson gilded his record to suit his ambitions, *Friendly Mission* is strongly grounded in the historical experience of those who faced a carefully executed 'final solution' to the Aboriginal problem in Van Diemen's Land. It is a volume that provides the basis for contemporary mythologies every bit as poignant for today's Tasmanian Aboriginal community as for those who study them and their origins.

Since its first publication in 1966, *Friendly Mission* has been the principal source of both authoritative fact and romantic imagining about Indigenous Tasmania. Republished in 2008 by Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (of which Plomley was the Director in 1946) and Quintus Publishing, *Friendly Mission* now gains from the inclusion of later work published separately by Plomley, as well as a comprehensive index—sorely missed in the first edition. In it can be found an enigmatic historical narrative of a people in the midst of a war and from it are derived many of the cultural articles of faith for Aboriginal families who survived the Tasmanian holocaust. Through his pious and ethnocentric account, Robinson positions himself as their saviour, delivering them to a sanctuary on Flinders Island that ultimately proved to be a death sentence for most who were sent there. Plomley, while never threatening Robinson's lofty identity, elucidates its flaws and builds a story of monumental heroism and brutality, advocacy and injustice, vision and folly.

Resulting from painstaking work by Plomley during the period 1959 to 1965 at University College, London, *Friendly Mission* constitutes one of the most extensive collections of first-hand information on the impact of British invasion on Indigenous people ever published. The book, more than any other, has profoundly influenced the scholarly understanding of a decisive period of Tasmanian history. This influence is explored in *Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to Friendly Mission*. Edited by Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls, the collection includes essays by a range of established authors on Tasmanian Aboriginal history. Cassandra Pybus, who published her romantic historical

narrative *Community of Thieves* in 1991, introduces Gilbert Robertson, a little-known challenger to Robinson for the role of Aboriginal Conciliator. Henry Reynolds is well-known for his seminal publications reflecting on Tasmanian Aboriginal history, including *Fate of a Free People* (1995) and the more personal *Why Weren't We Told?* (2000). In the *Companion*, Reynolds offers a concise perspective on Robinson's character and impulse. Lyndall Ryan, who published one of the most comprehensive recent histories with *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (1996) is also included, and documents the need for a critical understanding of Robinson as much more than the sum of his failings.

While Plomley published a range of monographs and books during the later part of his scholarly career that specifically examined Aborigines and their culture, *Friendly Mission* is his most profound legacy. Primarily an account of Robinson's quest to 'conciliate' the Aboriginal nations of the British colony of Van Diemen's Land, it is also an inadvertent ethnography of Tasmanian Aborigines, which emerges almost accidentally as Robinson attempts to underline the harsh vicissitudes he faced in his travels across the island. This layering of intention and consequence poses a complex challenge for the reader in an almost irresistible challenge to decipher Robinson's project. There are tantalising glimpses of a unique Indigenous culture, embedded within a narrative driven by humanitarian zeal that, as Alan Lester points out in the *Companion*, coincided with a broader campaign across the British Empire during the period.

Robinson's intention was to evidence his own 'good works' for both posterity and for the satisfaction of the colonial governor, who rewarded his efforts to remove Aborigines from the island with an annual endowment and grants of land. However, in so doing, as Patrick Brantlinger points out in the *Companion*, Robinson contributed to the growing body of humanitarian, abolitionist and Darwinist discourse at a time when the majority of colonists were intent on Aboriginal 'extirpation'. *Friendly Mission* presents numerous accounts of attacks by Aborigines in response to brutality by settlers and documents responsibility for widespread and frequent massacres occurring at the time.² John Connor's *Companion* essay highlights that *Friendly Mission* therefore constitutes an essential chapter of Australia's military history—detailing, for example, the effect of martial law in providing immunity from prosecution for murder to those who killed Aborigines, whether it be for revenge, malice or sport (270). Ian McFarlane exemplifies this with an essay reprising his 2008 book *Beyond Awakening*, a re-examination of the intense period of conflict between the Van Diemen's Land Company and Aborigines in the north-west of the island.

² For example, at Robbins Island (p.226); Western Marshes (p.254); Cape Grim (pp.207, 266); various locations (pp.584-586); Emu Bay (p.629); and Launceston (p.721).

For readers like myself, *Friendly Mission* provides an almost unique canon of knowledge about the tradition and practice of ancestral tribal culture.³ In this way, Robinson's records have informed much of the revitalisation of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture in the twentieth century and continue to provide the basis for investigations of identity and deep relationships to land by Aboriginal scholars such as Patsy Cameron.⁴ Brief, matter-of-fact journal entries by Robinson offer sometimes lyrical and often enigmatic glimpses of a complex cosmology—powerful touchstones for today's Aboriginal community in reflecting on their own relationships to land.

Those (tribes) of Oyster Bay ... the gum trees they claim as theirs and call them countrymen. The stringybark trees the Brune call theirs, as being their countrymen, the peppermint the Cape Portland call theirs, and the Swanport claim the honeysuckle. (402)

These narratives are not only significant for Aborigines. As Nicholas Thomas suggests in his reflective essay in the *Companion*, *Friendly Mission* constitutes a rich yet accessible resource for the development of national narratives, which should be placed alongside the journals of James Cook. Ironically, if Tasmanian Aborigines figure at all in Australia's defining story, it is through their 'removal'. Plomley continued throughout his life to argue that Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct; angrily rejecting assertions by their descendents of continuing culture.⁵ This neatly reflected Robinson's project which, while attempting to protect Aboriginal lives, did little to preserve their culture. Rebe Taylor's *Companion* essay recognises this and explores its powerful influence on later work by Rhys Jones, who further contributed to the mythology of Tasmanian extinction. While Robinson worked harder than most in Van Diemen's Land at the time to protect Aborigines, he actively discouraged cultural continuity, seeking instead to instil in his captives the qualities of a British agrarian class. Ironically, without Robinson's efforts it is likely that Aboriginal culture would have become more dissolute in the confused colonial social landscape of the time, decimated as it already was by the impact of introduced disease, slavery and active killing by colonial roving parties. Of course, these same processes were at play across the British Empire and the *Companion* supplies a fascinating account by Elizabeth Elbourne of the parallels between Van Diemen's Land and the Cape Colony.

Ultimately, it was not simply the efforts of Robinson in gathering together the survivors of the Black War that facilitated the continuation of Tasmanian

3 While *Friendly Mission* is the most voluminous publication recording interaction with Aborigines at the time, other journals of the period such as those by Jorgen Jorgensen and Gilbert Robertson are also informative.

4 Current doctoral research by Aunty Patsy at the University of Tasmania retraces Robinson's journey through contemporary Aboriginal perspective and analysis.

5 Julie Gough – personal communication.

Aboriginal culture. Rather, it was the survival of their children, dispersed across the Bass Strait islands and quietly co-existing with sealers and other settlers away from the reach of the colonial administration that provided a well-spring of oral tradition and knowledge for today's Aboriginal community. The work of Plomley in publishing Robinson's journals in 1966 has functioned to enrich knowledge and understandings that Aboriginal families themselves maintained. Most significantly, it has provided a chaotic encyclopaedia that increasingly serves to supplement the revitalisation of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.

I was fortunate to be a member of the Board of Quintus Publishing during the preparation of the new edition of *Friendly Mission*. As someone with a vital interest in the influence of Plomley's work on those of us descended from the people whose world he described, I saw an obvious and irresistible opportunity. Just as collectors of the first edition of *Friendly Mission* understood that the volume could not be complete without the accompanying supplements later published by the Tasmanian Historical Research Association, the Board was quick to agree that an accompanying title, which critically explored the immense consequence of Plomley's work for both historians and Aborigines, was a necessity.

Like Ian Andersen, the construction of my own identity as a contemporary Aborigine had been enormously influenced by what I had read in *Friendly Mission* and I was critically aware that my cultural peers, both academic and lay, were similarly engaged. Andersen's contribution to the *Companion*, in which he revisits his earlier discussion of hybridity and the influence of racialising discourses on identity, articulates this better than most. Through a reflective relationship with his own Tasmanian Aboriginal identity, Andersen focuses on the 'enduring legacy' of Plomley, in providing 'a path back into history' (76) for the Tasmanian Aborigines whose continuing existence Plomley strenuously denied.

The decision by the Plomley Trust to republish *Friendly Mission* created a rare opportunity to assemble an authoritative commentary—a guide to the significance, flaws and profound influence of *Friendly Mission* on how Tasmanian Aborigines are perceived and how we perceive ourselves. To acknowledge this, the *Companion* was conceived by the publisher to harvest the scholarly perspectives that had accumulated since *Friendly Mission*'s publication in 1968, and at the same time present a profound Aboriginal voice that could richly illustrate the Aboriginal community's critical engagement with the document and its consequences.

Sadly, the opportunity for the editors to respond to the latter goal has been largely missed, limited by the very thing that coloured both Robinson's and ultimately Plomley's work. Like them, Johnston and Rolls seem to have been

reluctant to step back from the impulse to mediate the Aboriginal story through their own familiars in order to argue their own position. Rather than empowering Aborigines to rally our own voice on this matter, the editors insisted on orchestrating the Aboriginal response themselves by drawing Aboriginal contributions from among colleagues and family members associated with the University's Centre for Aboriginal Education—of which Rolls is a Director.

The contributors mentioned thus far provide an important overview of current scholarly perspectives. However, apart from Andersen, the perspective is from outside of Aboriginal cultural experience. The *Companion* was meant also to engage with the diverse critical thought and analysis of Tasmanian Aborigines themselves. And while the essay by Andersen is an important one, it is alone in its ability to converse on like terms with the assembled non-Aboriginal scholars who dominate the collection. This is not to say that Aborigines should be obligated to contribute within the language and methods of academe, but as all other contributions proceed from this standpoint, there is a collective sense created in the *Companion* that somehow we might not have been willing or able to participate in the conversation.

The essays by Tasmanian Aborigines Rodney Dillon, Wendy Aitken and Sharon Dennis provide poignant personal perspectives, but seem cursory alongside the more lengthy, discursive essays of other contributors. The consequence is failure to provide a compelling cultural presence for Aborigines in the volume that adequately acknowledges our capacity to participate in rigorous discourse. Rodney Dillon's observation that Robinson's writings 'highlight a soft representation of history' (145) could just as easily be a reflection on the editors' construction of Aboriginal voice—the *Companion* softens the vigour of intellectual debate that could otherwise have been harnessed in its pages—suffering unnecessarily from the absence of critical Tasmanian Aboriginal writers who could easily have been engaged in the project if they had been more open to collaboration on this project. Heather and Gaye Sculthorpe, Patsy Cameron, Jim Everett, Michael Mansell and Julie Gough are just a few Tasmanian Aborigines who have well-established credentials to participate. Most disappointing is that the opportunity for such collaboration was offered, but refused.

The particular selection by Johnson and Rolls of Aborigines to contribute to the *Companion* attests more to the 'hostile environment' that Andersen describes as surrounding our search for 'representational integrity' (60), than it does to any willingness by the editors to engage with Tasmanian Aboriginal intellectuals beyond the boundaries they have imposed on the *Companion*. Too many of the Aboriginal writers appear to be included in order to support the editors' reference to Lowenthal's explanation of heritage as the stuff of 'imprecise impression and sketchy surmise' (18). In this respect, Johnston and Rolls share much in common with the naïve grasp of Tasmanian Aboriginality that Andersen observes of

Nicholas Shakespeare. They appear to be ‘out of their depth’ (73) and resort instead to arguing contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality ‘more ... as a realm of faith than of fact’ (18).

Friendly Mission then, is a document of significant weight, not only for Tasmanian history, but for Australia’s national narrative. As McPaul observes, it is ‘integral to contemporary debates across diverse areas of scholarship and society’ (152). Plomley’s defining work is the most evocative account of the Aboriginal culture of the island in existence, distilling the history of a people from the drama of a religious crusade with mercenary credentials. It offers a flawed encyclopaedia on which observers have based their analysis and critique of Aboriginal culture and history, and from which Aborigines themselves have drawn to inform the dynamic and fluid process of cultural continuity and revival. The great significance of *Friendly Mission* is that much of our collective ‘knowing’ of Tasmanian Aborigines is conditional upon its selective records—left by a single observer whose project it was to reduce a people to victimhood and impose, as their sole salvation, his zeal for the abandonment of their ancient culture and its replacement with the values of industry and Protestantism.

Ironically (or perhaps not), the *Companion* suffers from a similar malady. A compelling field of non-Aboriginal scholars offer an authoritative summary of the value and importance of Robinson’s contribution. Yet the unique opportunity to engage with critical Indigenous thought for which the project was originally conceived is mostly missed. This flaw is not apparent to McPaul and could hardly be expected or even discerned by most readers. But it is very clear to those of us who are participants in the continuing story of Aboriginal Tasmania; an experience of oppression and control that has been exerted since British sealers arrived in Banks Strait in 1797. Through its selective assemblage of Aboriginal voice, the *Companion* intimates a scenario in which Tasmanian Aborigines have paid the price of Robinson’s success. We are presented as insubstantial in our apparent unwillingness to engage in critical discourse, instead offering what McPaul describes as ‘contemplative’ ‘offended’ or ‘playful’ commentaries, coinciding neatly with Lowenthal’s argument of imprecision. In this way our cultural response is characterised as personal—little more than faith—constructed to serve imagination and a desire for privilege. As such *Reading Robinson* is a project that lacks sympathy for the intrinsic validity of contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal culture - something that the descendants of those who are portrayed in Robinson’s journals hold as self-evident. I suspect that the editors are content with this outcome and Plomley, if he were still alive, would be most approving.

Greg Lehman was the founding Head of Riawunna, Centre for Aboriginal Studies at the University of Tasmania. He left the university in 2003 and is currently Manager of Aboriginal Education with the Tasmanian Department of Education. Greg's recent work includes an essay in Robert Manne's Whitewash (Black Inc. 2003), and Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina's anthology Heartsick for Country (Fremantle Press, 2008).

Works Cited

McFarlane, Ian. *Beyond Awakening: The Aboriginal Tribes of North West Tasmania*. Launceston: Fullers Bookshop, 2008.

McPaul, Christine. 'Reading Between the (colonial) Lines.' *Australian Humanities Review* 48 (2010): 149-52.

Plomley, N.J.B. *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834*. Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966.

Pybus, Cassandra. *Community of Thieves*. Port Melbourne: Minerva, 1991.

Reynolds, Henry. *Fate of a Free People: A Radical Examination of the Tasmanian Wars*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1995.

—. 2000; *Why Weren't We Told?* Ringwood: Penguin, 2000.

Ryan, Lyndall. *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1996.