

5. Idle men: the eighteenth-century roots of the Indigenous indolence myth

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One of the most devastating and enduring myths about Indigenous people is that they are “lazy”, “indolent”, “slothful”, “erratic” and “roving” and simply ‘don’t want to work’.¹ In their historiographic study of Indigenous labour history Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore urged historians to ‘come to terms with the popular racist assumption that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders did not work’.² Many have challenged this myth by examining diverse aspects of Australia’s colonial history. Some have claimed that Indigenous people were given little incentive to work, sometimes receiving pitiful rations or brutal treatment, while others have uncovered little-known histories of Indigenous workers.³ It has also been argued that Western forms of labour were incommensurate with the Aboriginal ethos of communality, or that Indigenous employment was unwanted because the settler-colonial ‘logic of elimination’ sought to ‘replace the natives on their land’ rather than exploit their labour.⁴ While these approaches all shed light on important facets of Indigenous labour history, they do not fully redress the Indigenous indolence myth. In order to do so, we need to explore the first European perceptions of Aboriginal people’s industriousness and ingenuity.

William Dampier recorded his frustration at his failure to extract ‘some service’ from the Aboriginal people he discovered in the north-west coast of Australia in 1688, in what is the first detailed Western account of Aboriginal people. The English buccaneer hoped that these ‘miserablest people in the world’ would prove themselves useful as his ‘new Servants’ and carry his water barrels back to the boats. The Europeans gave the friendlier of the Aboriginal men ‘ragged’ old clothes in the hope that this ‘finery would have brought them to work

1 Broome 1994: 216; Office of the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1994.

2 Curthoys and Moore 1995: 2.

3 Broome 1994: 217–218, 220.

4 Reynolds 1990: 87–95; Wolfe 2001: para 5.

heartily for us', and then placed six-gallon barrels on their shoulders, gesturing that they should be carried. Unfortunately the Aboriginal men just 'stood like statues ... and grinned like so many Monkeys', leading Dampier to believe that the 'poor Creatures do not seem accustomed to carrying Burdens'. They not only appeared ignorant of the practice, but even seemed to reject the concept of work, for they 'put the clothes off again and laid them down, as if clothes were only to work in'.⁵ Dampier's account of the Aborigines' 'unfitness for labour' provided the foundation for the elaborate and influential eighteenth-century discourses on Aboriginal idleness and ignorance which underpin the enduring myth that Indigenous people are unduly indolent.

Eighteenth-century explorers witnessed many different examples of Aboriginal people's labours, although these were almost exclusively limited to that concerning basic survival, such as obtaining food and seeking shelter. They described and illustrated various Aboriginal manufactures, such as weapons, tools, and assorted canoes and dwellings, as well as their methods for hunting and fishing. To the European eye these represented the full extent of the Aboriginal people's industriousness and ingenuity, and their evaluations of these were overwhelmingly derogatory. It was not uncommon for the Europeans to view them as a 'stupid and indolent set of people' or 'ignorant and wretched'.⁶ However, the most damning appraisals were reserved for Aboriginal men, who were almost universally seen as oppressive tyrants who exploited their women's labour.

These perceptions were not solely determined by Aboriginal men's actual labours or lack thereof, but instead reflected eighteenth-century ideas about the nature of so-called savage societies' 'arts and industry'. Enlightenment thinkers had pondered the reasons why some societies seemed not to have progressed to the same civilised state as Europeans, and assumed that for the most part it was because, as the Comte de Buffon said of the North Americans, 'they were all equally stupid, ignorant, and destitute of arts and industry'.⁷ Although this is a somewhat crude and idle conclusion in itself, eighteenth-century philosophers expended great energy explaining savage man's apparent indolence and ignorance, elaborating theological, physiological, and environmental causes. Their ideas on labour and land use were inevitably influenced by imperial and commercial interests, as slavery and colonisation shadowed their discussions of Indigenous industry.

The explorers' observations of the Aboriginal men's labour were unusually uniform compared to their accounts of other Indigenous practices, and belied

5 Dampier 1998: 221.

6 Bowes Smyth 1979: 57; Furneaux 1961: 735.

7 Buffon 1950: 4.

the complexity of eighteenth-century ideas about industry and intelligence. This chapter will examine the explorers' accounts of Aboriginal men's contribution to the procurement of food, their purported economic reliance on women, and the insights into their ingenuity revealed through their manufactures, and consider how these representations reflected the European myth of Indigenous indolence and ignorance.

Enlightenment discourses on savage indolence

By the eighteenth century, Western attitudes to labour especially that involved in food production regarded it not only as an activity necessary for survival, but also a sign of Christian piety. Late in the previous century, John Locke pronounced that 'God and his Reason commanded [man] to subdue the earth, ... and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour'.⁸ This belief persisted, and at the close of the century was echoed by Thomas Robert Malthus, who held that 'The supreme Being has ordained, that the earth shall not produce food in great quantities, till much preparatory labour and ingenuity has been exercised upon its surface'.⁹ He did not suggest that obtaining food was the sole aim, but instead proposed that to work was a virtue, claiming that 'Evil exists in the world, not to create despair, but activity', so in order to avoid it we must 'exert ourselves'.¹⁰ Such efforts, according to Malthus, encouraged ingenuity and inaugurated the march towards civilisation, for he speculated that 'had population and food increased in the same ratio, it is probable that man might never have emerged from the savage state'.¹¹

Piety was not considered the only reward for such physical exertions, however, for according to Stuart Banner, it was believed since antiquity that 'the invention of agriculture ... gave rise to property rights in land'. To illustrate this point he draws on Virgil and Ovid: 'It was only when "Ceres first taught men to plough the land" ... that land was first divided. When there were "[n]o ploughshares to break up the landscape"... there were "no surveyors [p]egging out the boundaries of estates"'.¹² As many historians have shown, notwithstanding some significant challenges regarding the rights of Nomadic peoples, this belief endured into the late eighteenth-century.¹³ It is best exemplified by the Swiss jurist Emmerich de Vattel, who, according to Bruce Buchan and Mary Heath, maintained that 'agriculture was an "obligation imposed upon man by nature"'. Vattel argued that 'peoples who subsisted on the "fruits of the chase" without

8 Locke 1963: 321–341.

9 Malthus 1926: 360.

10 Malthus 1926: 395.

11 Malthus 1926: 364.

12 Banner 2005: para 16.

13 Reynolds 1987.

cultivating the soil “may not complain if more industrious Nations should come and occupy part of their lands””.¹⁴ Thus savage peoples’ failure to till the soil was not only construed as a sign of their indolence but also as evidence that they did not possess property rights.

Other European thinkers looked beyond the Bible and international law for explanation of Indigenous indolence, drawing instead on ancient ideas concerning the climate, environment and bodily humours. According to historian Roy Porter, ‘humoral medicine’, originating with Hippocrates in the fifth century BC, ‘stressed analogies between the four elements of external nature ... and the four humours ... whose balance determined health’.¹⁵ These bodily fluids also corresponded to four temperaments, which the Greeks had aligned to different national characters, perceiving themselves as superior to both the phlegmatic northern Europeans and choleric North Africans.¹⁶ In his eighteenth-century taxonomy of mankind Carolus Linnaeus also attributed humours to particular ‘races’, but this time ascribed the phlegmatic humour to *Homo afer* instead. Thus, Africans became ‘crafty, indolent, [and] negligent’, while *Homo Europaeus* was now sanguine – ‘gentle, acute, [and] inventive’.¹⁷

Historian of medicine Mark Harrison argues that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century belief that climate determined constitution was a return to the Hippocratic theories which divided climates into healthy and unhealthy, with those which were hot and wet deemed to be debilitating.¹⁸ This conception of the torrid zones, or tropical climates, as deleterious to one’s constitution was also favoured in the eighteenth century, with Montesquieu being perhaps its greatest exponent. He explored the effects of climate on societies in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), drawing inspiration from humoral theories, physiological studies, and anecdotes about newly discovered lands.¹⁹ Such research allowed Montesquieu to claim authoritatively that people from colder climates were more industrious than those from hotter environments. He posited that ‘Cold air contracts the extremities of the body’s surface fibers’, which then ‘increases their spring’, whereas ‘Hot air’ does the opposite, so ‘decreases their strength and their spring’. ‘Therefore’, Montesquieu claimed, ‘men are more vigorous in cold climates’.²⁰ This ostensibly physiological evidence also suggested that the indolent tropical body was inherently lacking in ingenuity and intelligence, for its physical debilitation was believed to enervate the body’s ‘spirit’.

14 Buchan and Heath 2006: 8–9.

15 Porter 1997: 9.

16 Porter 1997: 57.

17 Linne 1806[1735] I: 9.

18 Harrison 1999: 34.

19 Harrison 1999: 92–94.

20 Montesquieu 1989[1748]: 231.

Consequently, in the torrid zones, Montesquieu speculated, there would be 'no curiosity, no noble enterprise, no generous sentiment; inclinations will all be passive there; [and] laziness will be happiness'.²¹

Montesquieu also appeared to endorse the Atlantic slave trade by suggesting that 'servitude will be less intolerable than the strength of spirit necessary to guide one's own conduct'.²² Immanuel Kant echoed this belief, stating that 'All inhabitants of the hottest zones are exceptionally lethargic', and, perhaps in a nod to slavery, claimed that for some 'this laziness is somewhat mitigated by rule and force'. His environmental thesis also addressed colonisation and conquest. In his praise of the 'inhabitants of the temperate parts of the world', he included that they 'work harder' and are 'more intelligent', and reciting various exemplars, claimed that 'they have all amazed the southern lands with their arts and weapons', which is 'why at all points in time these peoples have educated the others and controlled them'.²³ Not all of Kant's inquiries into Indigenous ingenuity were so ostensibly considered, however, for at other times he looked no further than skin colour for explanation, observing of a 'Negro' slave, 'this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid'.²⁴

Another possible explanation for the savage man's indolence and lack of inventiveness was the European belief that he forced his women into lives of toil and hardship. Kant wondered 'In the lands of the black, what better can one expect than what is found prevailing, namely the feminine sex in the deepest slavery?'²⁵ Malthus similarly claimed that the 'North American Indians', like 'most other savage nations', exploited their women, and moreover, that this enslavement was worse than any produced in Western society. He claimed that here women were 'much more completely in a state of slavery to the men, than the poor are to the rich in civilised countries'.²⁶ These diverse Enlightenment discourses on savage indolence, particularly the notion that women were kept in a state of domestic slavery, captured the imagination of the Europeans who explored Australia in the late eighteenth-century and haunted their accounts of Aboriginal men's labours.

At the expense of the weaker sex

Over time, the explorers pieced together more of the Aborigines' daily routine through combining their occasional observations with speculations on what

21 Montesquieu 1989[1748]: 234.

22 Montesquieu 1989[1748]: 250.

23 Kant 1997[1900–1960]: 64.

24 Kant 1960[1764].

25 Kant 1960[1764].

26 Malthus 1926: 41–42.

remained unseen. Unaware of the secret and sacred nature of Aboriginal people's engagement with the arcane world, and ignorant about the basis of their laws and customs, the Europeans witnessed a life which they considered utterly bereft. The First Fleet officers thought that they merely eked out an existence; Judge-Advocate David Collins never saw them to 'make provisions for the morrow', and thought that they 'always eat as long as they have anything left to eat, and when satisfied stretch themselves out in the sun to sleep'. He 'observed a great degree of indolence in their dispositions' and suggested that they would continue to slumber 'until hunger or some other cause call[ed] them again into action'.²⁷

Marine Lieutenant Captain Watkin Tench had the same opinion, believing that it was only 'the calls of hunger and the returning light' which roused the Aboriginal man 'from his beloved indolence'. He concluded that 'one day must be very much like another in the life of a savage', admitting that 'in their domestic detail there may be novelty', but asserted that 'variety is unattainable'.²⁸ Lieutenant-Commander Pierre Bernard Milius, second pilot on Baudin's *Naturaliste*, simply attested that the Port Jackson Aborigines' natural tendency was laziness.²⁹ The Aboriginal men's lassitude, the explorers decided, was 'at the expense of the weaker vessel the women' who were seen to fish for hours from their canoes in Port Jackson, or diving the cold and treacherous Tasmanian waters for shellfish.³⁰

In both Tasmania and on the mainland the Europeans were struck by the seeming inequity in the distribution of labour. D'Entrecasteaux's sailors 'noticed that the men did nothing, and left everything for the women to do'.³¹ Moreover, the explorers thought that the women would suffer at the brutal hands of the idle men if they did not feed them. In Port Jackson Collins alleged that if the women returned from their canoes 'without a sufficient quantity to make a meal for their tyrants, who were asleep at their ease, they would meet but a rude reception on their landing'.³² It was this seeming injustice which marred the Tasmanian Aboriginal men in the eyes of d'Entrecasteaux's crew. In all other respects the Frenchmen considered the islanders' society to be an ideal exemplar of the state of nature, so they quickly sought to eradicate this blemish, and rectify the women's treatment.

On their third visit with a Tasmanian group at Port du Nord (North Port, Recherche Bay), d'Entrecasteaux's men finally saw how the women prepared

27 Collins 1975: 499.

28 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 258.

29 'Leur penchant naturel qui est l'indolence'. Milius 1987: 48.

30 Collins 1975: 499. See also Banks 1998: 129; Péron 1975[1809]: 194–196.

31 Raoul 1993: 306.

32 Collins 1975: 499.

their meals. First they stoked a fire for cooking, as well as adjacent fires which they could use to dry and warm themselves after returning from the icy waters. The women then dived into the sea, picking 'crayfish, abalones, and other shell-fish' with a small stick, and carried them back to shore in a woven bag they had hung around their necks. After returning to the beach they cooked their catch, 'distribut[ing it] to their husbands and children', and then kept 'renew[ing] this exercise until the appetites of the whole family [had] been satisfied'.³³

This was the first time that the Frenchmen had witnessed this 'most arduous domestic work', and they were absolutely horrified by it. Gunner Jean-Louis Féron sympathised with the 'extraordinarily thin' women, and considered that this 'tiring work' was too much for 'so delicate a sex'.³⁴ 'It gave us great pain', botanist Jacques de Labillardière passionately asserted, 'to see these poor women condemned to such severe toil'. He even worried that they might be 'devoured by sharks, or entangled among the weeds that rise from the bottom of the sea'.³⁵

D'Entrecasteaux's naturalists used signs to 'communicate to the men that this pain should be spared' the women, but had great difficulty in comprehending the men's reply, although they assumed that the Aborigines had understood their interrogation. The Frenchmen at first misconstrued the Indigenous men, and believed that they had claimed that diving 'would kill them'. These ostensibly rational men of science would not accept that 'leaving the fishing to the women [was] the result of some superstitious ideas' so continued with their interview, and then deduced from their gestures that the men considered that their 'sole occupation consisted of walking about' or resting.³⁶ Although this was the first time they had witnessed the women's labours, and therefore they could not be sure that it exemplified their domestic routine, the Europeans completely accepted the men's apparent answer because it tallied with their notions of domestic slavery in savage societies.

While acknowledging the Enlightenment premise that 'among all savage peoples the work must devolve upon the women', the chivalrous explorers refused to allow this to continue in Tasmania, so 'often entreated their husbands to take a share of the labour at least, but always in vain'.³⁷ Trying another tactic, the Frenchmen thought a technological innovation might alleviate the women's burdensome toil. Labillardière deduced from his brief observations that 'they had no fish-hooks', so 'gave them some of [theirs], and taught them how to use them'. Unlike their later counterparts, d'Entrecasteaux's men did not realise that the Aboriginal Tasmanians, unlike the mainland Aboriginal people, refused to

33 D'Entrecasteaux 2001: 144.

34 Féron 1993: 287.

35 Labillardière 1800: 309–310.

36 D'Entrecasteaux 2001: 144; Féron 1993: 287.

37 Labillardière 1800: 309–310.

eat vertebrate fish, so naively ‘congratulat[ed them]selves at having supplied them with the means of diminishing one of the most fatiguing employments of the women’.³⁸ Fortunately for their sense of chivalry, they did not stay in Tasmania long enough to realise that this ostensible improvement was also ‘in vain’.

Despite the explorers’ general consensus that the Aboriginal men were exceedingly indolent, and their explicit claims that the men did little more than lie around and sleep while their women toiled away as exploited drudges, their accounts are actually peppered with detailed descriptions of the men arduously fishing and hunting. The Europeans had mixed opinions as to the effectiveness of these practices: a small number appreciated the level of skill and patience the Indigenous methods demanded, while most were not above laughing at their seemingly rudimentary techniques, equipment, and scant rewards. None of the explorers, however, recognised these activities as work. Historian Alan Frost contends that Lockean thought had rendered European conceptions of labour (in the early stages of society at least), as exclusively defined by that involved in ‘domesticating animals or ... maintaining an agriculture’.³⁹ Since neither James Cook, nor any of the other explorers ‘saw one Inch of Cultivated land in the whole Country’, they had already decided *a priori* that the Indigenous men were indolent.⁴⁰ Consequently, we have to look past the explorers’ editorial incursions which explicitly claim that the indigenes were lazy in order to excavate their varied impressions and evaluations of the Aboriginal men’s labours.

Fishing was the activity that the explorers recorded in the most detail because it was an occupation which they could observe from the safety and comfort of their boats. Along coastal areas on the mainland it was noticed that ‘fish [were] their chief support’, and that ‘Men, women, and children [were] employed in procuring them; but the means used [were] different according to the sex’.⁴¹ Many of the First Fleet officers focused on the women’s fishing tasks because they often did this alone in their canoes, so it was an opportunity for the European men to approach the women away from the purportedly jealous eyes of their husbands.⁴² However, there are many descriptions of the men fishing, including an extraordinarily detailed account by Tench, which takes the form of an imagined narrative of a typical day in the life of a savage.

Tench begins his account with the Aboriginal every-man waking from his slumber and setting off towards the rocks where he could ‘peep into unruffled

38 Labillardière 1800: 313. Aboriginal Tasmanians apparently stopped eating fish approximately 4000 years ago, although there is much conjecture over why. Davidson and Roberts 2009: 28–29.

39 Frost 1990: 72.

40 Cook 1955–1967 I: 396.

41 Collins 1975: 461.

42 Ann McGrath has explored some of these accounts in her analysis of the First Fleet officer’s depictions of their own chivalry. McGrath 1990: 189–206.

water to look for fish'. Finding some, he would then 'chew a cockle and spit it into the water' as bait for any unwary prey, and then aim his fish-gig to strike when the opportunity finally arose. 'Transpierc[ing]' his fish with the spear's barbs he would then drop the weapon, allowing the fish to float to the surface buoyed by the wooden shaft, and then haul it towards him. 'But sometimes', Tench noted, 'the fish [had] either deserted the rocks, ... or [were] too shy', so the fisherman would have to employ other means to catch them.

On these occasions the man would launch his canoe, travelling into deeper waters where he could 'dart his gig at them to the distance of many yards' and was 'often successful' in catching mullets or other smaller fish. Tench advised his readers that 'these people suffer[ed] severely' when prevented from fishing, for they have

no resource but to pick up shellfish, which may happen to cling to the rocks and be cast on the beach, to hunt particular reptiles and small animals, which are scarce, to dig fern roots in the swamps or gather a few berries, destitute of flavour and nutrition which the woods afford.⁴³

Tench's meticulous and unusual ethnographic account provides fine details on the Aboriginal men's different methods for obtaining food, and reflected his appreciation of the degree of skill they possessed in catching fish. It also illustrated that, contrary to British claims, the men were not completely indolent and also contributed to the family economy in various ways.

Surgeon George Worgan's account goes even further, for he observed that after the men finished spearing fish from the rocks, having 'caught enough for a Meal, and [starting to] feel hungry', they would then 'call the Women on shore', and upon their return, the men would 'haul up the Canoes' for them. His account even suggests that the men contributed to the cooking, for after mentioning the men's courteous conduct he stated that '*They* then gather up a few dry Sticks, light a fire ... and broil their Fish'.⁴⁴ Collins described a similar incident in which Bennelong prepared the meal. He observed the man's sister and wife fishing from a 'new canoe which the husband had cut in his last excursion to Parramatta' for her, while Bennelong, who had been looking after his sister's child, met them to haul the canoe ashore. He then sat on a rock and 'prepar[ed] to dress and eat the fish he had just received', while his sister slept and his wife ate 'some rock-oysters'.⁴⁵

43 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 260. Collins also documented the range of food sources they ate to the Britons' 'wonder and disgust', such as 'large worms and grubs' which a European servant of his 'often joined them in eating' and assured the judge-advocate that 'it was sweeter than any marrow he had ever tasted', and eels which they caught in traps 'at a certain season of the year'. Collins 1975: 461–463.

44 My italics. Worgan 1978: 16–17.

45 Collins 1975: 492–493.

These accounts of the Aboriginal men's involvement in fishing and other daily labours should sit somewhat uncomfortably with the Europeans' explicit claims that the Indigenous men were indolent. Yet because they are mostly description their implication that Aboriginal men did not shy away from work and actually contributed to their family economies is only implicit and has unfortunately eluded many scholars. Norman Plomley simply asserts that 'the women were wholly concerned with food gathering' and that they were 'completely subservient to their men', and Colin Dyer uncritically recites the explorers' accounts of the men's laziness and 'ill-treatment of the women'. He even concludes that such treatment 'gave rise' to the nineteenth-century explorer Dumont D'Urville's claim that the Aboriginal women 'can only find pleasant the lives they lead with the Europeans who treat them far better'.⁴⁶ And finally, in examining Collins' aforementioned account of Bennelong and his family, Inga Clendinnen admits that it 'is indeed a charming scene', but warns against 'sentimentalis[ing] it', because it counters her thesis that the Aboriginal men possessed a 'contest culture', so were 'very' violent towards the women. While she unquestioningly accepts the explorers' descriptions of Aboriginal violence she is sceptical about this pacific episode, speculating that had 'Baneelon's women returned empty-handed, we have to assume that the scene would have been less pretty'.⁴⁷ Yet, it is not only modern scholars who have ignored these implicit accounts of the Aboriginal men's labours and contributions to the family economy. It seems the explorers themselves were also blind to the contradictions between their descriptions and appraisals, because they were so influenced by Enlightenment philosophies on savage indolence. This tendency is most apparent in their speculations on Aboriginal hunting practices.

Due to the brief nature of the majority of these expeditions' sojourns in any one place, very few of the explorers actually witnessed the Aboriginal men hunting during the period.⁴⁸ Perhaps because it was a strictly codified practice, as suggested by Collins' account of the *Yoo-long Erah-ba-diang* ceremony, or that the foreign observers were an impediment to a successful hunt, so the Aboriginal men only went out when the strangers were far away. Consequently, the Europeans had to rely on conjecture to understand how the Aboriginal men hunted the exotic and shy animals found in the Australian countryside. The kangaroo in particular interested the explorers because it was the largest animal they discovered, and they had found it to be especially fast and difficult to catch.

All of the explorers at various times noted the Aborigines' use of kangaroo skins in their manufactures, so their possession of these hides would suggest

46 Plomley 1983: 206; Dyer 2005: 153–156.

47 Clendinnen 2003: 159, 162–163.

48 For descriptions of hunting from a later period see Dyer 2005: 67–71.

that they must have been successful in hunting this elusive quarry. During his interviews with the Tasmanian Aborigines Labillardière had been shown an animal skin pierced with two holes 'which had been made apparently with the point of a spear'. On seeing one of the men demonstrate throwing this weapon, the botanist deduced that 'they launch it with sufficient force to pierce the animal through and through', so happily accepted that the men were competent huntsmen.⁴⁹ However, notwithstanding the drudgery of the women, these particular Frenchmen held the local Aboriginal society in high esteem, so easily accepted that the Aborigines had a high degree of proficiency in their long established customs and practices. Oddly, such logic was not employed by all of the explorers.

The First Fleet surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth was highly critical of the Aboriginal men. While acknowledging that 'Sometimes they feast upon the Kangaroo' he claimed that they were 'too stupid & indolent a set of people to be able often to catch them'. This hypothesis could only be rationalised by his assumption that the British were by nature superior marksmen, so when they discovered that the animals were 'so extremely shy that 'tis no easy matter to get near enough even to shoot them', he concluded that the Aboriginal men must fare comparatively worse.⁵⁰ John Wilby, midshipman on the *Adventure*, Cook's companion ship on his second voyage, came to a similarly tenuous conclusion about the Aboriginal Tasmanians' hunting ability.

In February 1773 the *Resolution* and the *Adventure* were separated due to the bad weather experienced in Antarctic waters, so the latter set course for the rendezvous point in New Zealand and on the way landed briefly in Tasmania. During their stay at Adventure Bay the Britons saw signs that the place was inhabited, but failed to encounter a single person. However, this lack of contact did not prevent them from describing the Indigenous people. Just by observing the few material items discovered, Wilby immediately assumed that the Aborigines 'have nothing to Live on but Shellfish'. Like Bowes Smyth, his conjecture was based on his fellow Britons' limited success in shooting game, because he found that 'the Birds, what few there are, [were] so shy, that [it was] difficult to get a Shot at them'.⁵¹

The tenuousness of their claims is illuminated by examining an account by Worgan, who had observed the Europeans' same difficulty in shooting game, but came to the opposite conclusion. Not long after arriving in Port Jackson the surgeon listed the various 'Water Fowls' that the British had killed, but noted that only 'one Black Swan has likewise been shot'. Apparently there were

49 Labillardière 1800: 300.

50 Bowes Smyth 1979: 57–58.

51 Wilby 1961: 151 n.

'Many of these', but the shooters had 'sometimes go[ne] out for a whole Day, and not [been] able to get a shot at a single Bird'. Worgan decided that the swans were 'extremely shy, as indeed may be said of all the animals here' and, in contrast to Bowes Smyth and Wilby, surmised that this was because 'they [were] harassed by the Natives'.⁵² These contradictory claims based on similar evidence illustrates the Europeans' limited understanding of the Aboriginal practices, and the extent to which some of the explorers had been swayed by the prevailing Enlightenment beliefs about savage societies. Their faith that such peoples must be completely divorced from the so-called civilised led some of the explorers to propose preposterous explanations about Aboriginal hunting methods.

Bowes Smyth, who had considered the Port Jackson men to be 'too stupid & indolent' to spear kangaroos, still had to explain how they managed to obtain the hides, so the imaginative surgeon proposed an alternative method. The First Fleet officers had noticed that many of the trees had 'regular steps chop'd at abt. 2 foot asunder in the Bark' and had pondered their purpose. From merely observing the trees, Bowes Smyth speculated that 'they mount these' carrying 'large stones', and then passively 'lie in ambush till some Kangaroos come under to graze' and then suddenly 'heave the stone upon [the animals] & kill them'.⁵³ His wild theory was undermined by later observations that the trees 'were notched' by the 'people of Port Jackson' so they could 'ascend [them] in pursuit of opossums'.⁵⁴

The largely baseless assertions that the Aboriginal men were lazy and exploitative of their women were determined *a priori* by the contemporary philosophers' disquisitions on the indolent savage, and later historiography illustrates that such perceptions lingered long into the next centuries. While such appraisals were certainly disagreeable and unfair, it was the explorers' damning criticisms of the Aboriginal men's ingenuity and intelligence which had more serious implications.

Their general powers of mind

The explorers, having established in their minds that the Aboriginal men were indolent, then had to investigate the truth of theories such as Montesquieu's which suggested that savage people's sluggishness would enervate their minds. Some immediately assumed that this was the case. Milius posited that the Port Jackson Aborigines were immersed in the most profound ignorance, and William Anderson, surgeon on Cook's third voyage, claimed that:

⁵² Worgan 1978: 21.

⁵³ Bowes Smyth 1979: 57–58.

⁵⁴ Flinders 1814: 46.

With respect to personal activity or genius we can say but little of either. [The Aboriginal Tasmanians] do not seem to possess the first in any remarkable degree, and as for the last they have to appearance less than even the half animated inhabitants of Terra del Fuego.⁵⁵

Yet, others, such as Tench, tried not to be so prejudiced, and instead adopted a more judicial approach. He noted that some of 'their manufactures display ingenuity, when the rude tools with which they work and their celerity of execution are considered'.⁵⁶ Consequently, most explorers decided that the Aboriginal men were completely ignorant and lacked ingenuity, or else conceded that their industry was tolerable when taken into appropriate consideration.

Given the difficulties in communicating without a common language, ascertaining Indigenous men's intellectual acuity was no easy task, and the explorers could only do so by examining either the ingenuity of their manufactures or how they reacted to European technology. De Gérando instructed the Baudin expedition to learn about the savages' industries by describing their methods used in 'the construction of huts, and the making of clothes', and ascertaining if 'they know metals' and the use of fire. He also recommended that 'some efforts [should] be made to make [the savages] set about [their manufactures] better', in order to gauge how quickly they could learn new techniques and therefore become civilised.⁵⁷ While these specific instructions were only given to one expedition, this method seems to have been intuitively used by all of the voyagers, irrespective of whether or not they actually encountered any Aboriginal people.

As stated earlier, the *Adventure* landed in Tasmania in 1773 after being separated from the *Resolution*. Tobias Furneaux, the captain of the ship, is described by the editor of Cook's journals, John Cawte Beaglehole, as possessing an 'incuriosity' which prevented him from being a great explorer, because he readily abandoned the question of whether or not Tasmania was geographically connected to the mainland.⁵⁸ Yet, his 'incuriosity' is more evident in his failure to try and meet any of the Aborigines, especially since the British considered that it was 'very remarkable that no European [had] ever seen an Inhabitant of Van Diemen's Land – & it [had been] more than 130 years since it was first discovered'.⁵⁹ Although Furneaux did not meet any Aboriginal people, he did not let this fact prevent him from appraising their industry and intelligence.

While the explorers described a range of tools, weapons, wares, watercrafts and fish and eel traps made by the Aboriginal people, it was their shelters

55 'Ce peuple est encore plongé dans la plus profonde ignorance'. Milius 1987: 48; Anderson 1967: 786–787.

56 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 255.

57 De Gérando 1969[1800]: 96.

58 Beaglehole 1961: xxxv, lxxviii–lxxix.

59 Burney 1975: 39. In actual fact, unbeknownst to the English, the French explorer Marc-Joseph Marion-Dufresne had encountered Tasmanians a year before. Beaglehole 1961: lxxix.

which captured their attention because the hut's seemingly makeshift nature suggested that the indigenes were nomadic. Further, for the likes of Furneaux and his crew, dwellings were almost the only Indigenous manufacture they witnessed, so the Europeans simply had to make the most of describing them. Consequently I will limit my discussion here to the explorers' discussions of the Aboriginal habitations.

In examining the huts Furneaux discovered that they were made from a tree bough which was 'either broke or split and tied together with grass in a circular form [with] the longest end stuck in the ground, and the smaller part meeting in a point at the top, and covered with Ferns and bark'. He thought that the huts was 'so poorly done that they will hardly keep out a showr [sic] of rain', so concluded that 'their houses seem'd to be built but for a few days' only, and that they 'wander about in small parties from place to place in search of Food and are activated by no other motive'. Further, he 'never saw the least signs of either Canoe or boat', so it was 'generally thought they have none', and that they were 'quite ignorant of every sort of Metal'.⁶⁰ Based on these brief observations of their material culture, Furneaux surmised that the Aboriginal Tasmanians were 'a very Ignorant and wretched set of people'.⁶¹

The captain was not alone in his disparaging assessments of their dwellings. His crewmate, James Burney, thought 'their Huts ... ill contrived'; when Cook set foot in Tasmania on his third voyage he referred to them as 'mean small hovels not much bigger than an oven'; and even Baudin who was often relatively measured in his evaluations, considered them 'the most miserable things imaginable'.⁶² Similarly, at Port Jackson Collins claimed that their 'habitations [were] as rude as imagination can conceive ... affording shelter to only one miserable tenant', and Bowes Smyth labelled them 'miserable Wigwams'.⁶³ And on the west coast in Eendracht Land, north of Shark Bay, Péron found some semi-circular huts 'made of shrubby plants' which he considered 'crude', but 'none the less the most finished examples that [they] had occasion to observe in New Holland'.⁶⁴

The explorers were somewhat surprised by the poverty of the Aborigines' buildings, because, according to Furneaux, they were 'natives of a country producing every necessity of life, and a climate the fairest in the world'.⁶⁵ Evidently, he had expected that such ignorance could only be found in the 'torrid zones', as hypothesised by many Enlightenment philosophers. Lieutenant

60 Baudin also noted that the Tasmanians appeared 'to have no knowledge of iron and its usefulness. They did not attach the slightest importance to the nails that [they] wanted to give them and returned them to [the French] as serving no purpose', but he refrained from judging them on it. Baudin 1974: 350.

61 Furneaux 1961: 735.

62 Burney 1975: 38; Cook 1955 I: 396; Baudin 1974: 345.

63 Collins 1975: 460; Bowes Smyth 1978: 57.

64 Péron and Freycinet 2003[1824]: 138.

65 Furneaux 1961: 735.

John Rickman of the *Discovery*, the companion ship on Cook's third voyage, was similarly perplexed by the Aborigines' ignorance and lack of industry despite Tasmania's hospitable climate. Noting that 'when Nature pours forth her luxuriant exuberance to cloath this country with every variety', it was very 'strange' to the Europeans that 'the few natives [they] saw were wholly insensible of those blessings'. Instead of taking advantage of their fertile environment, they 'seemed to live like those beasts of the forest in roving parties, without arts of any kind, sleeping in summer like dogs, under the hollow sides of the trees'.⁶⁶ The Britons' allusions to the natives' ostensible animality betrayed their utter contempt that the Aborigines could, in their eyes, waste such a bounteous land. Furneaux and Rickman were so confounded that they did not even speculate on any possible reasons for this, although, fortunately for the modern reader, others did.

In Port Jackson John Hunter noticed that the Aborigines' 'ignorance in building, [was] very amply compensated by the kindness of nature', so understood that they had little need for industry. To prove this he even went so far as to make the extraordinary claim that one of nature's gifts was the 'remarkable softness of the rocks, which encompass the sea coast, as well as those of the interior parts of the country', so they did not have to erect comfortable dwellings.⁶⁷ Perhaps these, and similar ethnographic accounts describing the ostensible absence of arts and industry amongst savage societies in temperate climates, led Malthus to counter the claim that it was only the torrid zones which induced ignorance and apathy. In 1798 he proposed that 'In those countries, where nature is the most redundant in spontaneous produce, the inhabitants will not be found the most remarkable for acuteness of intellect'. Consequently, Malthus affirmed, 'Necessity has been with great truth called the mother of invention'.⁶⁸ Believing that the 'savage would slumber forever under his tree unless he were roused from his torpor by the cravings of hunger, or the pinchings of cold', Malthus claimed that it was necessities such as 'procuring food, and building himself a covering' which forced the savage to 'form and keep in motion his faculties'.⁶⁹

A similar thesis was embraced by Péron in his attempt to understand why the aforementioned huts of Eendracht Land were, in his esteem, uniquely superior to any others found in New Holland. He acknowledged that so 'much effort and care' in their construction 'would seem at first to indicate a more advanced state of civilisation' of these people, than those in other parts of the country. However, he claimed that such a position would be wrong, for he contended that the huts' superiority was instead 'the consequence of a deeper misery and

66 Anonymous 1781: 43–44. Cook similarly noted that they 'move from place to place like wild Beasts in search of food'. Cook 1955 I: 396.

67 Hunter 1968[1793]: 40–41.

68 Malthus 1926: 358.

69 Malthus 1926: 357.

more pressing need'. Péron elaborated that '[h]owever accustomed the native may be to the inclemencies of the atmosphere and the seasons, he can never be absolutely insensible to them', so to this end he would seek out ways to minimise his discomfort, even if he could not completely eradicate it. The Frenchman pronounced that the 'very efforts that he will make to achieve this end will always be in fairly exact proportion to the discomfort that he experiences'.⁷⁰

The Shark Bay climate was very erratic, for Péron noticed that a 'fresh, very dry morning [gave] way to a burning day which ends, in turn, in an excessively damp, cold night'. So while he accepted that the Aboriginal Tasmanians lived 'in a colder climate', the 'vicissitudes' of Eendracht Land ensured that it was worse. He believed the native had to 'guard himself' by 'building shelters, disposed in such a way as to furnish salutary shade during the day and an essential refuge from the cold and damp at night'.⁷¹ Although he does not explicitly say as much, Péron's thesis countered Montesquieu's proposal, because Péron believed that those natives 'so near the tropics' possessed more ingenuity than those in the more temperate climes.⁷² Of course his thesis only encompassed Indigenous people, and did not compare all people who lived in temperate climates, such as Europeans.

The other method the explorers had for investigating the Aboriginal men's intellect was to gauge how they reacted to the ostensibly superior European manufactures and technology. They pompously displayed their weapons, musical instruments, bottles, clothes, and trifles, anticipating that the Aboriginal people would admire and covet them. Often they were disappointed by the lacklustre Indigenous reaction. However, by showing the Aboriginal men their tools they not only looked for acknowledgment of their ostensible superiority, but were keen to ascertain whether or not savage man could understand the tools' purpose, and adopt their use for themselves. The explorers ethnocentrically presumed that if the savages could recognise that the European wares were of course superior, and immediately eschew their own technology in their favour, that this would signal that the Aborigines were in fact intelligent.

Anderson, who like Labillardière also failed to realise that the Aboriginal Tasmanians did not eat vertebrate fish, was surprised that 'They were even ignorant of the use of fish hooks' because they did not seem to 'comprehend the use of some of [the Britons'] which [they] were shown'. Their 'indifference [and] general inattention' to this equipment (which would have enabled them to procure food they did not actually eat), was taken by Anderson as 'sufficient proofs of [their intellectual] deficiency'.⁷³ In the European mind, this level of

70 Péron and Freycinet 2003[1824]: 140.

71 Péron and Freycinet 2003[1824]: 141.

72 Péron and Freycinet 2003[1824]: 140.

73 Anderson 1967: 787.

unresponsiveness did not bode well for the Aborigines. On the same voyage Cook decided that this 'kind of indifferency is the true Character of [the Tahitian] Nation', for he was dismayed to realise on his third voyage there that 'Europeans have visited them at time for these ten years past, yet we find neither new arts nor improvements in the old'. With some indignation he exclaimed 'nor have they copied after us in any one thing'.⁷⁴

Yet some of the explorers did find that the Aboriginal men would copy them, and demonstrate their comprehension of the Western tools. The very first time Alexandre d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau, captain of d'Entrecasteaux's *Recherche*, met with a group of Aboriginal men in Tasmania he showed some of them 'the use of the axes, saws, knives, nails, etc.' and he noticed that 'they understood very quickly'.⁷⁵ One man, who appeared to be the 'head of the household', and was greatly esteemed by the Frenchmen as 'a very intelligent man', quickly grasped the utility of the axe, and immediately 'cut down several trees with a dexterity which many Europeans would not equal'.⁷⁶ The men seemed 'so very eager in desiring the objects' especially the axe which, in his opinion would be the most beneficial to them, that d'Hesmivy d'Auribeau thought they exhibited 'surprising intelligence'.⁷⁷ While the French assessments of the Aboriginal Tasmanians' intellects were certainly more complementary than those of the British, they were no more ethnographically reliable, and still largely determined by European prejudices. In fact Tench railed against both kinds of viewpoints in his disquisition on the Aboriginal men's 'general powers of mind'.⁷⁸

'Ignorance, prejudice, [and] the force of habit', said Tench, 'continually interfere to prevent dispassionate judgement'. To illustrate this he reported hearing 'men so unreasonable as to exclaim at the stupidity of [the Aboriginal] people for not comprehending what a small share of reflection would have taught [the officers] they ought not to have expected'. At the same time, Tench also lambasted those who 'extol for proofs of elevated genius what the commonest abilities were capable of executing'.⁷⁹ Had he been aware of the views of d'Entrecasteaux's men, he might have included chopping wood as an example of these 'commonest abilities'. He pronounced that the Aboriginal people as a nation 'would certainly rank very low, even in the scale of savages' if one was measuring 'general advancement and acquisitions', and that 'a less enlightened state ... can hardly exist', when considering that they were 'strangers to clothing', felt the 'sharpness of hunger', and were 'ignorant of cultivating the earth'.⁸⁰ However,

74 Cook 1967 III Pt 1: 241.

75 D'Hesmivy d'Auribeau 1993: 280.

76 Raoul 1993: 305.

77 D'Hesmivy d'Auribeau 1993: 280.

78 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 252–254.

79 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 252.

80 Yet, he did admit he had met individuals in Port Jackson who 'possess a considerable portion of that acumen, or sharpness of intellect, which bespeaks genius'. Here he considered Arabanoo, Bennelong and

Tench argued, gauging Aboriginal reactions to European wares was a somewhat limited approach in understanding the indigenes' intelligence, for, by doing so most Europeans were not able to 'discriminate between ignorance and defect of understanding'.⁸¹

The fact that the Aboriginal people ran an 'indifferen[t] and unenquiring eye' over the European artworks and manufactures presented to them during tours of the British houses, should not, according to Tench, have been considered 'proofs of [their] stupidity and want of reflection', because such items were 'artifices and contrivances' not familiar to the Aborigines, so of no consequence to them. However, he claimed, when they saw objects which related to their world, such as 'a collection of weapons of war' or 'the skins of animals and birds', the Aborigines 'never failed to exclaim' or to 'confer' with one another, wondering if the 'master of that house' was a 'renowned warrior, or an expert hunter'. Thus Tench believed that such recognition on their part indicated that they did not have a 'defect of understanding', but were instead merely 'ignorant' about these foreign things.⁸² To conclude his lengthy disquisition Tench tackled the thorny question of agriculture.

Evidently, some of the British could begrudgingly accept that savage societies did not cultivate the earth, but expected that upon being introduced to it, the indigenes would immediately recognise agriculture's superior benefits, and enthusiastically embrace it. Like Cook, the only explanation some Europeans could devise for Indigenous people's failure to adopt subsistence farming, was that they were too indifferent and intellectually deficient to do so. Tench addressed this view when he admitted that, 'it may be asked why the same intelligent spirit which led [the Aborigines] to contemplate and applaud the success of the sportsman and the skill of the surgeon did not equally excite them to meditate on the labours of the builder, and the ploughman'. Tench had already acknowledged the contemporary consensus that all 'savages hate toil and place happiness in inaction ... Hence they resist knowledge and the adoption of manners and customs differing from their own'. So, in response to the question of agriculture he pronounced that 'what we see in its remote cause is always more feebly felt than that which presents to our immediate grasp both its origin and effect'.⁸³ Tench rationalised that, like Europeans, the Aborigines were attracted to activities which produced immediate benefits, and agricultural harvests, which could not be reaped until the distant future, were hardly an enticing prospect.

Colby, whom, as we have already seen, Tench often engaged with intellectually, and had been both charmed and challenged by their different characters. Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 253.

81 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 253.

82 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 253–254.

83 Tench 1996[1789,1793]: 253–254.

Tench's lengthy examination of the Aborigines' 'powers of mind' and the nature of their industries incorporated European assumptions about savage indolence, but not in an exclusively uncritical way. Unlike most of his contemporaries he did not seek to quickly confirm Enlightenment theories on the inherent lassitude and intellectual deficiencies of savage peoples. Tench believed their daily lives and labours to be simple, but recognised the pragmatism of their indifference to the ostensibly superior European modes of subsistence and technology. While the contradictions in the explorers' editorial incursions and descriptions of the Aboriginal men's indolence, combined with the flimsily substantiated speculations on Aboriginal methods of procuring food and constructing their dwellings, reveal the extent to which the explorers were influenced by the Enlightenment philosophies on savage indolence and ignorance, disquisitions such as Tench's are even more illuminating. His thesis suggests that the explorers could engage with the theories rather than just parrot them, and, on occasion, see the intricacies of Indigenous societies and mount complex arguments to explain them. Unfortunately Tench's sophisticated interpretation of Indigenous industry was an isolated example then, and even today remains a remarkably nuanced and considered disquisition.

Conclusion

The European explorers recorded many examples of the Aboriginal men's labours including how they procured food and constructed their shelters and tools. Their depictions of the men's bodies employed in these diverse actions illustrate that the men were very energetic in their daily lives. The accounts display the Aboriginal men's agility, dexterity, perseverance, and strategy in hunting and fishing, their ingenuity and pragmatism in building their dwellings and making their wares. Yet, the explorers' prevailing opinion concerning this range of activities and qualities was that the men were simply indolent, ignorant, and brutal.

The consequence of these theories was that Indigenous people were constructed *a priori* as unduly indolent and ignorant. In an age of slavery and imperialism, savage peoples were perceived as undeserving of their bounteous land and freedom for they did not practice agriculture so could not make productive use of them. Such ideas must have been at the forefront of the explorers' minds when they recorded their impressions of the Aboriginal men's labour for it dominated their explicit evaluations. However, at times they presented alternative views, and even sophisticated and nuanced critiques of European civilisation and ways of thinking. So the explorers' journals are far richer textual sources on eighteenth-century European ideas and mores than much of the historiography reveals, and presents a more complex, multifaceted picture of Aboriginal industriousness that counters the enduring myth of Indigenous indolence.

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