

The polemics of eating fish in Tasmania: the historical evidence revisited

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Introduction: the Westlake Papers

The Westlake Papers form a rich but almost untapped source for Tasmanian Aboriginal history, culture and language. Now housed in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, they were created by amateur scientist Ernest Westlake during his journey to Tasmania in 1908–1910 to collect Aboriginal stone artefacts. Central to the collection are the notes Westlake made in interviews with 95 Tasmanians – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – about the lives of the traditional indigenes.

This paper examines two persistent assertions made by Westlake's interviewees: in this first part, that the traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal people did eat fish with scales and, in the second part, that they could make fire. Both these assertions have been strongly and repeatedly contested by scholars since the late 19th century.

The Westlake testimonies that traditional Tasmanians ate scale-fish directly contradicts not only historical evidence, but also unrefuted archaeological evidence of the non-presence of fish bones in shell middens across Tasmania from about 3000 BP on. While archaeologists remain divided as to the reason, they concur that modern Tasmanians stopped eating scale-fish at about this time. This article raises questions about the certainty of this conclusion by taking into account early historical sources that document scale-fish eating and that corroborate both the Westlake Papers and contemporary Aboriginal testimonies.

This evidence in the Westlake Papers was not used by archaeologist Rhys Jones, who first demonstrated a non-presence of fish bones in excavated shell middens, or later by NJB Plomley, editor of *The Westlake Papers* (1991), because Westlake's informants were considered to be too distanced by time and change to be reliable witnesses to pre-settlement Aboriginal culture. This article reassesses this evidence in the light of more recent historiographical shifts, in which Tasmanian Aboriginal people are acknowledged as a living community rather than as an extinct race. In so doing, the opinions of Tasmanian Aboriginal people on fish eating are included for the first time in this long debate.

Further, this article suggests several possible explanations for the continuation of fish eating without bones being deposited in excavated middens: that after about 3000 BP Tasmanian Aborigines began to deposit their waste bones differently, in a way

that left no trace, and/or ate fish only in certain parts of the island and/or ate less scale-fish. There is no conclusive evidence for any of these possibilities, and so the question of fish eating in traditional Tasmania must remain open. Certainly, Tasmanian Aboriginal people ate fish from about the late 1830s. If this was a newly adopted practice, then it needs to be recognised as an important addition to the many adaptations made to their traditional culture in response to colonisation.

I begin with an introduction to Ernest Westlake and his visit to Tasmania, before describing his Tasmanian papers and discussing their value as a source for traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.

Who was Ernest Westlake?

Ernest Westlake was born in Hampshire, England in 1855 to evangelical Quaker parents. In contrast to these origins, he became a scientist dedicated to advancing the theories of Darwinian evolution. Studying at University College London from 1873–1875, he was awarded certificates in geology and mathematics, and later joined the Geologists' Association and the Geological Society of London.¹ Westlake became a skilled geologist, whose work included the prehistory of Hampshire and the chalk beds of southern England. He did not join the academy and published little. Many of his projects were less than orthodox, including attempts to prove the phenomena of ghosts and dream predictions. Indeed, Westlake was considered an eccentric in his time: a vegetarian who often travelled by bicycle and who, on his return from Tasmania, successfully established an alternative boy scouts' movement called the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry. The Order still exists today, and it is in fact for this achievement that Westlake is best remembered.²

It was Westlake's geological interests, however, that inspired his journey to Tasmania in 1908. Four years earlier he had taken a cycling holiday in the Cantal region of France and stayed for two years, excavating 100,000 geological specimens, 4000 of which he brought back to England.³ Westlake considered these French specimens to be the work of human ancestors dating from the Miocene Epoch, two million years ago. He was one of a number of scientists who, from the mid-19th century, were convinced by the artificial manufacture of 'Eolithic' stone artefacts which were found in a wide range of early Quaternary and Tertiary sites across Europe. Others were sceptical, arguing that 'eoliths' were rocks broken by natural processes, which is the general consensus today. The eolith debate was, however, a fundamental one in shaping the discipline of archaeology at the time.⁴

After returning from France, Westlake saw a display of Tasmanian Aboriginal stone artefacts at the British Museum and was so struck by a perceived similarity to his

1. Delair 1981: 133; 'Ernest Westlake's application form to join the Geological Society of London', 10 March 1879, Geological Society, London; WJS 1923: lxii.

2. Edgell 1992.

3. Westlake 1982: 20; Westlake 2000: 18–19. Aubrey Westlake states the holiday occurred in 1904, while Edgell (1992: 8) gives the year as 1906. See also Westlake 1956: 3–15, 4; Delair 1981: 141. Aubrey Westlake writes that his father was told by the French Government that 'he was removing the soil of France' (Westlake 1956: 4); Westlake, 2000: 19; Westlake 1982: 28. Edgell states that Westlake chose 4000 stones to take home (Edgell 1992: 11–12).

4. For excellent summaries of the eolith debate, see Grayson 1986: 77–133 and Roe 1981: 214–220.

eoliths that he immediately decided to travel to Tasmania to form his own collection of stone artefacts.⁵ Westlake assumed he was comparing the products of two extinct races at the same stage of evolutionary development, but separated by millions of years and thousands of miles. Westlake was neither the first nor only eolithologist to detect similarities between European eoliths and Tasmanian stone implements,⁶ but he was the first to go to Tasmania to form his own collection, and it remains the largest single collection of Tasmanian stone artefacts – a total of 13,033.⁷

Rhys Jones, who examined Westlake's Tasmanian artefacts in the 1960s, concluded that Westlake helped lay 'the foundations for Tasmanian field archaeology'.⁸ Westlake never published his Tasmanian or French findings, but, after his death in 1922, WJ Sollas, J Reid Moir and Donald Baden-Powell examined his eoliths and each was convinced of their artificial manufacture.⁹ From 1923 Henry Balfour, Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, made a long study of the Tasmanian artefacts and concluded that 'the so-called "Eolithic Tasmanian" is a pure myth' and that the Tasmanians had reached the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic level of human evolution.¹⁰

Reading the Westlake Papers

During the two years he spent in Tasmania, Westlake sought not only thousands of stones, but also anthropological information about the people who made them. He read an enormous number of historical records in the Hobart Archives office, filling 20 exercise books with dense notes. But it is Westlake's interviews with 95 Tasmanians that form the core of the Westlake Papers and make it a unique and rich collection. Westlake did not write down his questions, but, gauging from the answers, he was consistent in what he wanted to know: how did the Aborigines make fire? Did they eat fish with scales? How did they cook, climb trees, make stone implements? What language did they speak?

5. Westlake wrote in a letter to Margaret and Aubrey Westlake, 4 January 1909: 'I knew the moment I saw the few Tasmanian things in the British Museum that my proper course was to come here and all has turned out as I expected.' See also Westlake 2000: 20; Westlake 1976: 27–29. Edgell 1992: 9.

6. General-Lieutenant Pitt Rivers wrote to Edward B Tylor on 7 August 1898 that his 'Tasmanian flints' were 'exactly' like eoliths found by Benjamin Harrison (Tylor Papers, Pitt Rivers Museum, hereafter PRM). Aimé Rutot (1908: 104–109; 1907: 3–46) asserted in a vehement debate with sceptics that if his eoliths needed further proof then it could clearly be found 'in the Tasmanians, whose stone artefacts were perfectly eolithic in form'; Grayson 1986: 101, 131; Daniel 1952: 230–231. Fritz Noetling, amateur Tasmanian collector, concluded that the Tasmanians used 'Eolithes', which he defined as naturally broken stones used as tools (Noetling 1907: 2, 5). Noetling made Westlake aware of Rutot's and Max Verworn's comparative work with Tasmanian and European artefacts in a letter (18/11/1908, Westlake Collection [hereafter WC], Pitt Rivers Museum).

7. The Westlake Collection of Tasmanian artefacts was first catalogued by Pitt Rivers Museum Curator Henry Balfour in the 1930s from which an electronic database was created in 2001. Notes relating to the stones' original localities must have been made by Westlake as they were collected in the field, and some of this information must have accompanied the stones when they were transferred to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1923. However, these notes have not been relocated.

8. Jones 1971: 39.

Westlake spoke to three groups of Tasmanians: the white settlers and their descendants, the children of Aboriginal woman Fanny Cochrane Smith around the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and the descendants of Aboriginal women and their sealer partners on the Bass Strait Islands. The first group makes up the largest number of Westlake's interviewees. They come from all over the state and from all walks of life: publicans, politicians, farmers, storekeepers, clergymen and their wives. The elderly share personal memories of settlement, while the others pass on stories they have heard. While there are variations in detail, the informants are apparently knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture, as Westlake generally spoke to people recommended for their reputed knowledge. They were often people who had lived near, or with Aboriginal people, such as on the early frontier or near the last government mission for Aborigines at Oyster Cove.

Around the D'Entrecasteaux Channel Westlake interviewed seven of Fanny Cochrane Smith's 11 children – Frederick, Joseph, Tasman, William, Sarah Miller, Mary Miller and Flora Stanton and also Fanny's grandson, Augustus Smith. The Smith descendants gave Westlake much information about traditional foods, hunting, traditional words and fire making, but in less detail than the Bass Strait Islanders. However, they did tell him, at length, about traditional forms of communication using spirits and intuition to learn about sickness, death and danger.¹¹

In the Bass Strait Westlake took notes from seven 'half castes': Henry Beeton, Philip Thomas, his sister Nancy Mansell, John Maynard, a 'Miss Maynard', and Harry Armstrong and his wife Ida – Henry Beeton's daughter.¹² With the exception of the latter three, who were third generation Islanders, these Aboriginal Islanders were born in the 1830s to Tasmanian Aboriginal women and white ex-sealers. These interviews with the Islanders offer the most detailed, and arguably the most important, evidence in the Westlake Papers for scale-fish eating and fire making.

These interview notes have long been overlooked. Rhys Jones studied Westlake's collection of stone tools in Oxford and read his notebooks long before Plomley edited them, as demonstrated by his reconstruction of Westlake's interview questions in his 1971 PhD thesis: 'Did the Tasmanians know how to make fire, did they have edge ground axes'.¹³ Since Westlake did not write down his questions, Jones must have deduced them from the answers given. In those responses Jones would have found evidence to directly challenge his assertions that modern Tasmanian Aborigines neither

9. WJ Sollas, who had been sceptical of eoliths wrote, in the third edition of his book *Ancient Hunters*, that Westlake's eoliths 'are the work of an intelligent being' (1924: 98). J Reid Moir, President of the Museum of Natural History in Ipswich studied the Westlake eoliths from 1937 and wrote an extensive, but unpublished paper; correspondence between Aubrey Westlake and Moir, 1937–1939 (WC, OUMNH). Donald Baden-Powell of Oxford University studied the collection from 1953 and also wrote a detailed unpublished paper (correspondence between Aubrey Westlake and Baden-Powell, 1937–1969, WC, OUMNH).

10. Balfour judged that the Tasmanians were more closely correlated to the 'post-Mousterian culture-phase, to wit the *Aurignacian*' (1925: 3–14). By 1939 Henry Balfour had drawn 12,000 of the Westlake artefacts, with 5000 sketches in fine detail. He had also completed an extensive paper, 'Stone Implements of the Natives of Tasmania', but died that year and, due to the war, the paper was never published.

11. Westlake, 'Notebook 6': 56–58, 62–63, 71, 74–75, 80–81, 119.

ate scale-fish nor made fire. However, Jones remained confident of his thesis and did not include these contrary sources. This is probably because he did not consider the informants to be reliable witnesses of traditional Tasmanian culture, having been interviewed more than a century after first settlement.

NJB Plomley, the editor of the 1991 *The Westlake Papers*, held this opinion. He concluded that Westlake's interviews with the 'half castes', as he persisted in calling them, demonstrate that they 'knew nothing of the way of life of their Aboriginal mothers ... the Aboriginal language has clearly been lost, as well as almost everything else'.¹⁴ Plomley considered too that Fanny Cochrane Smith 'knew nothing of the Aboriginal way of life and clearly had no wish to learn anything ... this is clear from Westlake's enquiries'.¹⁵ This harsh and arguably inaccurate position is adopted with an eye only to what has been lost from traditional Aboriginal culture, rather than as evidence of its continuity. The recent colonial past had undoubtedly influenced Westlake's interviewees: the settler descendants often spoke of the Aborigines in ways that attempted to justify or silence the colonial past; the Aboriginal descendants, on the other hand, display detailed knowledge about their traditional culture, while acknowledging their way of living had undergone substantial changes as a result of colonisation. Westlake was acutely aware of the cultural changes and was angered by the lack of interest in Aboriginal history by many white settlers.¹⁶ Westlake did not deem the 'half castes' he spoke to be 'natives'; these he considered to be extinct. 'They are dead and their knowledge has died with them', he wrote to his son, and their loss was, Westlake believed, a great blow to science. 'The destruction of the Tasmanians was the most serious and irreparable loss that anthropology had ever sustained'.¹⁷

12. No first name was given for 'Miss Maynard', but Plomley suggests she is 'probably one of John Maynard's daughters' (Plomley 1991: 38–43). If Plomley is correct, then it was possibly Miss Eva Jane Maynard. While John Maynard had several daughters, according to Tindale (1953: 47, 50), only Eva, who was 23 in 1909, was still an unmarried 'Miss' when Westlake arrived. Plomley excludes Ida and Harry Armstrong from his list of 'half castes' in *The Westlake Papers*. It seems that Plomley finds nothing in Westlake's notes that he considers attributable to Mrs Armstrong. While Westlake does not always indicate exactly whether it is Mr or Mrs Armstrong who is talking to him, some notes in which she is referred to indicate she was participating in the discussion, for example, Westlake, 'Notebook 4': 13–14. However, this does not explain why Plomley excludes Harry Armstrong. While Westlake describes Harry as a 'Half Caste 50–60' (years of age), Plomley indistinguishably lists him among the white Flinders Islanders Westlake spoke to as a 'farmer' (Plomley 1991: 38); Westlake, 'Notebook 4': 88. Tindale listed Armstrong as a 'quarter-caste', explaining that his mother, Jane Foster, was a 'half-caste' born in 1815 to a white father and that her mother was a 'full blood' Australian (mainland) Aboriginal woman whom he doesn't name (Tindale 1953:27, 38). Perhaps Plomley excluded Armstrong because he was not of Tasmanian Aboriginal descent?

13. Jones 1971: 36.

14. Plomley 1991: 8.

15. Plomley 1991: 8.

16. Westlake wrote: 'It apparently never entered into any white mans [sic] head that the few Blacks in Tasmania were more important to human progress than the whole white population ... because they had *not* progressed. So this incomparable opportunity of studying this stage of human progress arrested a hundred thousand years ago was lost' (Notebook 4: 120).

17. Letter to Margaret and Aubrey Westlake, 12 December 1908, WC, PRM: f. 51.

Westlake showed his anthropological findings to Baldwin Spencer in Melbourne, on his way back to England. He was surprised when Spencer told him that the Royal Anthropological Institute should be 'glad' to publish his Tasmanian findings,¹⁸ though he himself 'felt some doubt whether he would approve the publication of such sweepings'.¹⁹ Westlake regarded the information he gathered as 'sweepings' because they were not observations of an undisturbed Aboriginal culture, as the anthropological thinking of his time demanded. Despite such reservations, it is unlikely that Westlake would have entirely agreed with all of Plomley's criticisms of his interviews. He wrote, for example, of the late Fanny Cochrane Smith in this way to his children:

I should like to have known her ... besides for what she could have told me about the stone implements, about which she seems to have known as much or nearly as much as the natives.²⁰

Having been warned by a fellow collector that the 'half castes' knew nothing of stone tools and by several north coast locals that they were a 'shy' people who would tell him little, Westlake nevertheless went to the Bass Strait expecting very little.²¹ Westlake was, however, surprised by the wealth of detailed information he was given about the preparation and consumption of traditional foods, the making of stone tools and of fire, as well as lists of traditional words.²² He wrote to his children from Cape Barren Island:

I am very well satisfied to have come here, and it shows ... that there is much more to be found out than one expects to be found out if one makes the effort to get things at first hand.²³

By contrast, when ethnologist Norman Tindale visited Cape Barren Island in 1939, 20 years after Westlake, he initially concluded 'that not one word of native origin ... survives from the past', but a few days later, when Cliff Everett gave him the words of the traditional Wallaby Song, Tindale corrected his original note.²⁴ Ten years later, Everett explained to Tindale, again on Cape Barren Island, why his people had kept their traditional culture silent: 'under the influence' of Philip Thomas (whom Westlake had interviewed), who was 'bitter about the treatment meted out to his mother's people, not one word of the Tasmanian languages was given to whites although much was known'. Thus the 'secret side of their life' was never revealed.²⁵ Everett told Tindale of how in 1908 – a year before Westlake arrived – a party of researchers had offered

18. Letter to Margaret and Aubrey Westlake, 27 February 1909, WC, PRM: f. 69v.

19. Letter to Margaret and Aubrey Westlake, 16 June 1910, WC, PRM: f. 258.

20. Letter to Margaret and Aubrey Westlake, 22 May 1910, WC, PRM: f.240v. Westlake assumed Fanny Cochrane Smith was a 'halfcaste', as Roth had declared her to be on the basis of her hair type and facial features. But, born in 1831 or 1832 to Tanganutura and Nicermenic on Flinders Island, Fanny defended her 'full blood' status until her death (Pybus 1991: 184).

21. Collector JV Cooke had met a 'half caste' – most probably Henry Beeton – who told him that he had 'never seen flints' (Westlake, 'Notebook 3': 43). The references to 'shy' Islanders can be found at Westlake, 'Notebook 3': 63–70.

22. For a compiled transcription of Westlake's interview notes with the Aboriginal Islanders see Taylor 2004, Appendix 2: 363–388.

23. Letter to Margaret and Aubrey Westlake, no day given, February 1909, WC, PRM: f. 67v.

24. Tindale, 1936–1965: 95. Tindale's research resulted in his 1953 publication.

25. Tindale, 1936–1965: 117.

Islanders five shillings a word, but they would not yield any language. Tindale supposed that expedition had been led by ornithologist Arthur HE Mattingley.²⁶

How was it, then, that Westlake was able to record so much information and language, including Aboriginal words from Philip Thomas himself, only a year after Mattingley's visit? Cape Barren Islander Buck (Brendan) Brown suggested to me in 2003 it was simply 'his personality', and fellow Islander Jim Everett agreed.²⁷ Did Westlake's eccentric nature inspire trustworthiness among Cape Barren Island society? Was it the time he took to talk to the Islanders in lengthy interviews? Whatever the reason, Westlake gathered more information about traditional Aboriginal culture from the Islanders than any researcher of his time.

I argue that Westlake's Aboriginal interviewees should be considered not as mere 'half castes' able to offer only a few 'sweepings' from their ancestors' times, with an emphasis on loss, but as complex and intriguing informants in their own right. Their testimonies demonstrate not only the adaptability of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, but also the endurance of their traditions through time and space. The difference between how I read the Westlake papers and how Plomley and Jones previously read them is due to a historiographical shift that occurred in the late 1970s. Since the shift, which stems largely from the work of Lyndall Ryan, it is now widely accepted within the Australian academic community, at least, that Tasmanian Aborigines have a valid and authoritative right to tell their own history and interpret their own culture.²⁸ This historiographical shift was concurrent with, and indeed enmeshed in, the archaeological debate about why Tasmanian Aboriginal people dropped scale-fish from their diet in the late Holocene. In its first blush the 'fish' debate was easily simplified into one of Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural regression versus progression, and in turn into one of Aboriginal near-extinction versus survival. More recently, archaeologists Tim Murray and Christine Williamson have reflected that linear models of regression or progression do not necessarily explain the cultural dynamism of Tasmanian Aboriginal society in the late Holocene.²⁹ To extend this perspective into the post-colonial era, Tasmanian Aboriginal culture has neither wholly disappeared nor has it merely 'survived'. The story is made far richer and more complex by concentrating on those things that have continued – genealogies and traditions like hunting, mutton birding, language and shell-necklace making – and on those things that transcend time and history – land and spirit.³⁰

Nowhere in the archaeological debate on scale-fish eating have the testimonies of post-colonial Tasmanian Aborigines – whether Westlake's interviewees or living peoples – been considered. This article examines this evidence in the context of other available sources on fish eating.

26. Tindale, 1936–1965: 121.

27. Taylor, 2003 'Notebook 3, Tasmania': 45–46; 2003 'Notebook 4, Tasmania': 4, 6.

28. *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (Ryan 1981, 1996) was the first history of colonial Tasmania that ended with recognition of the Aborigines' survival.

29. Murray and Williamson 2003: 319.

30. Greg Lehman writes that 'our true culture is where we stand – on our land' (Lehman 1994: 89). Jim Everett writes that Tasmanian Aboriginality can be seen as a 'philosophical set of rules that are manifested in customary cultural practices, set in a belief of the Great Spirit which compromises our Spiritual All' (Everett 2000: 2).

Eating fish

The archaeological debate

When Rhys Jones began his fieldwork at Rocky Cape in 1963 he was the first professional archaeologist to carry out research in Tasmania. His findings of a non-presence of scale-fish refuse in middens from about 3000 BP onwards were soon corroborated by later excavations. Archaeologists were quick to concur that the Tasmanian Aborigines stopped eating scale-fish from this time, but the question of why they stopped became a long and significant debate within Australian archaeology.³¹ Jones' reasoning was perhaps the most provocative. Seeing no ecological reason – the fish had not disappeared from the sea – Jones concluded that the people had chosen a 'grossly maladaptive strategy' as a result of being a small population isolated from new ideas for millennia. The benefits and skills of catching fish were, therefore, 'forgotten' within a few generations.³²

Jones found from his sequencing at Rocky Cape and other sites that bone-awl making had also ceased. Seeing no logical connection between the bone tool and not catching fish, Jones went on to propose, without any supporting archaeological evidence, that the Tasmanians had also lost the ability to make fire and had ceased to use boomerangs, hafted and ground-edge axes and barbed spears as part of their tool-kit. These tools had been used in southern mainland Australia before the end of the Pleistocene, but they did not appear to be manufactured in Tasmania at the time of colonisation. 'The world's longest isolation', he concluded, had created 'the world's simplest technology'. How long could this small population have survived? He asks:

Even if Abel Tasman had not sailed the winds of the Roaring Forties in 1642, were they in fact doomed – doomed to a slow strangulation of the mind?³³

These famous words have haunted Jones' career, although it is often forgotten that it was a question that he was posing.³⁴ But it was perhaps their resonance with the film *The Last Tasmanian* that made them so controversial. Tom Haydon's 1978 docu-film featured Jones as narrator telling a story of the Tasmanian Aborigines beginning with the idea of cultural regression and ending, after a bloody chapter of colonial genocide, with their total extinction.³⁵ Movie-goers concluded that the Aborigines 'were going to die out anyway'. Tasmanian Aborigines, whose political struggle for recognition was just beginning, were outraged. Within the academic community, Jones found confirmed opponents.

31. Jones 1971, 1978; Bowdler 1977, 1979, 1980; Lourandos 1968; Horton and Vanderwal 1984. Colley and Jones write (1987: 67–71) that 'it is a striking fact that no Tasmanian site post-dating 3500 BP has produced any fish remains beyond the odd individual bone' and cite the following references: Ranson 1980; Geering 1982; Bowdler 1984 [1979].

32. Jones 1978: 44–46; Jones 1987: 38; Jones 1977: 196; Jones 1977b: 343.

33. Jones 1977: 196–197, 202–203.

34. Taylor 2004: 297, 298–299.

35. *The Last Tasmanian* (Haydon 1978) was directed and produced by Tom Haydon who conceived the film with Jones in 1976. Haydon purposefully presented the film as his interpretation of Jones' 'view of Aboriginal Tasmanian archaeology, anthropology and history'. It was sub-titled, 'A search by Dr Rhys Jones' (Haydon 1979: 12–14).

Archaeological responses to Jones' work were often entangled within the contemporary politics of Tasmanian Aboriginal survival. Archaeologist Sandra Bowdler put forward a case that, during the late Holocene, far from having regressed, the Tasmanian Aborigines had progressed, going so far as to state that in time they 'would not have strangled at all, but recolonized the mainland ... and defied those who would put them at the bottom of the ladder'. Ryan repeated Bowdler's words in *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, placing the idea of Aboriginal progression in late Holocene Tasmania within a thesis of post-colonial Aboriginal survival.³⁶ Ryan also reflected – in an oblique reference to Jones – that the older, pseudo-Darwinian idea that the Tasmanian Aborigines had been 'too low on the scale of humanity' to survive invasion was recently 'enlarged to the belief that ... the Tasmanians ... would have died out anyway'.³⁷ Bowdler accused Jones of having a theory of Tasmanian pre-history that 'derives from 19th century social Darwinism and 20th century biogeography'.³⁸

Neither reading of Jones' work was wholly accurate. To men such as John Lubbock, EB Tylor and WJ Sollas, whose ideas were commensurate with Darwinian models of human evolution of the latter half of the 19th century, the Tasmanians represented one of the lowest levels of human development.³⁹ While Jones did not challenge this notion entirely, he did, however, argue that it had not always been so. 'Here, for the first time, was archaeological evidence not only of primitiveness, but of the probability of degeneration', as Tim Murray puts it.⁴⁰

Jones' theory of regression did have strong echoes with early Darwinians, such as Francis Galton and Cesare Lombroso, who argued that certain environments can cause regressive characteristics among humans.⁴¹ For most evolutionist anthropologists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, the Tasmanians either were locked in an Eolithic or Palaeolithic stasis or were potentially on the verge of progress. The idea of regression was for them, as Murray notes, 'a much harder idea to historicize on the world scale'. However, Murray sees an inherent contradiction in Jones' argument: if the Tasmanian Aborigines regressed because of isolation, could they also be in stasis

36. Bowdler 1980: 339; Bowdler 1979: 451; Ryan 1996: 44.

37. Ryan 1996: 2.

38. Bowdler, 1980: 335. In her critique of Jones' 1978 chapter, Bowdler suggests that Jones was sympathetic to scholars who were commensurate with Darwinian theories of evolution (Bowdler 1980: 336). Jones was, however, critical of one such scholar – WJ Sollas – and his explanation of why the Tasmanian Aborigines did not eat fish (Jones 1978: 21; Sollas 1911: 76).

39. This assessment was not only made by study of the Tasmanians' material culture. Their geographic position also played a role. With the Tierra del Fuegians, the Tasmanians occupied the most southerly regions in the late Pleistocene, considered by colonising Europeans to be the 'ends of the earth'. When early evolutionists concluded that humans first populated the world in a state of primitive savagery, the Tasmanians were logically considered to be of the oldest and thus simplest people, having been neither replaced by more modern people nor having managed to find an environment in which they would have become more sophisticated. See also Gamble 1992: 712–720.

40. Murray 1992: 730–743.

41. Turnbull 2000. Seeing echoes of early Darwinian theories of migratory patterns in Jones' work, Clive Gamble asks 'what more likely than the difficulty of a group at the uttermost ends of the earth to keep in its collective consciousness the ideas for survival?' (Gamble 1992: 717).

because of isolation? Murray thus concludes that in effect Jones is perpetuating 19th-century ideas.⁴²

More broadly, archaeologists sought positive and strategic reasons for the cessation of scale-fish from the Tasmanian diet. Bowdler suggested that fish had never been a central part of the wider Tasmanian Aboriginal diet since it was only the Rocky Cape and Sister's Creek sites that had revealed significant numbers of fish bones before 3000 BP.⁴³ With Harry Lourandos, Bowdler also considered that Aborigines had used bone awls to make fish nets, so that dropping them along with fish was a natural consequence, not indicative of a broader degeneration.⁴⁴ Harry Allen proposed that giving up fish may have been sensible, since the cooler climate from about 5000 BP may have given Aboriginal hunters cause to 'concentrate their energies on more profitable foods'.⁴⁵ Ron Vanderwal's Louisa Bay research supported this, indicating that after 3000 BP Aborigines were using, for the first time, watercraft to access nearby Maatsuyker Island to hunt fatty seals, muttonbirds and protein-rich shellfish.⁴⁶ For David Horton this indicated a possible seasonal pattern, with the coast providing rich winter food and the inland, leaner summer food. Since a club and watercraft were only needed to hunt seal or muttonbirds, and since boomerangs would have been of little use to hunt wallabies or possums in a dense Tasmanian forest, Horton argued that the 'simplest tool kit in the world' was a 'result of refining that tool kit to meet the needs of the Tasmanian environment'.⁴⁷

In the decades following Jones' work, archaeological research has revealed a Tasmania during the late Holocene that was, in Steve Brown's words, 'increasingly dynamic, innovative and ... varied'.⁴⁸ Aboriginal people were seen to be expanding into previously unused or abandoned parts of Tasmania including Freycinet Peninsula, the central highlands, the west coast and, after 2500 BP, Hunter Island, off the north coast of Tasmania.⁴⁹ Brown suggested that they had developed new trade networks, involving stone and possibly ochre and shell, and constructed varied stone arrangements. He found that they introduced rock engraving across the newly settled north-west and mid-west coast, with designs of circles, ovals, dots, straight and curved lines.⁵⁰ Jones' own work revealed that Aboriginal people made increasing use of firing practices to open up and manage inland vegetation, and, as Murray and Williamson point out, even he acknowledged that after 2500 BP the Tasmanians 'expanded their social and cultural universe'.⁵¹

This picture of a dynamic Aboriginal culture in late Holocene Tasmania appears to be confirmed in pictures of early colonial Aboriginal life. It is well documented how

42. Murray 1992: 738.

43. Murray and Williamson 2003: 317.

44. Bowdler and Lourandos 1982: 124–125; Murray and Williamson 2003: 317.

45. Allen 1979: 4.

46. Vanderwal 1978: 107–126. The evidence of this hypothesis was presented in more detail in Vanderwal and Horton 1984.

47. Horton 1979: 33.

48. Brown 1991: 98.

49. Brown 1991; Bowdler 1979, 1984.

50. Brown 1991: 98, 103.

51. Jones 1969; Murray and Williamson 2003: 319.

Aboriginal people quickly made use of dogs in their traditional hunting practices, learned how to handle and maintain guns, made clothes using European cloth and needles, used glass and ceramic to make traditional implements, and rust in lieu of ochre for their painting.⁵² Julia Clark, reading the journals of GA Robinson, portrays a rich and creative Tasmanian culture in which they choreographed dances and composed songs about encounters to make sense of their changing world.⁵³ They took up several new food sources: flour, tea, sugar, tobacco, potatoes and hitherto little-eaten freshwater mussels.⁵⁴ Is it possible that scale-fish was another of these new foods? Or was it, as Aboriginal people maintain (and as will be outlined below), an older continuing tradition?

'we never saw any fish bones'

In *The Aborigines of Tasmania* Henry Ling Roth concludes that 'the Tasmanians did not eat fish'.⁵⁵ They speared fish for sport, and ate shellfish in abundant quantities, but they never ate fish with scales. Roth quotes George Lloyd who apparently 'hunted' with the Aborigines in the 1820s and wrote: 'I never saw them capture an edible fish excepting of the shelly species.' Roth also refers to James Erskine Calder who, in describing the mission settlement at Flinders Island (in operation from 1832–1847), wrote: 'No other fish would any native of Tasmania ever touch ... they would rather starve'.⁵⁶

Among the journals of French and English explorers of Tasmania from 1772–1802 are earlier references that may point to a lack of fish in the Aboriginal diet. Captain William Bligh wrote in 1792 of finding abandoned campsites with heaped remains of mussels, oysters and crayfish, but 'we never saw any fish bones'. Echoing Bligh, Rossel, a member of D'Entrecasteaux's expedition, wrote in 1793 that 'we perceived ... no debris of fishes'.⁵⁷ During Captain James Cook's 1777 voyage, crew member W Anderson wrote at Bruny Island that the Aborigines 'refus'd some Elephant fish which were offer'd them with a sort of horror as if they never did or were afraid to eat them'.⁵⁸ Cook himself wrote after offers of scale-fish netted by his men at Adventure Bay were refused:

we cannot suppose but that people who inhabit a Sea Coast must have ways and means to catch fish altho we did not see it ... Either fish is plenty with them, or they did not eat it, for they absolutely rejected all we offered them; but I think the first the most probable.⁵⁹

Similarly, during Captain Nicholas Baudin's voyage along Tasmania's south coast in 1802, the Aborigines refused offers of scale-fish. Baudin wrote that the people 'made signs that they did not eat fish, but only shell-fish or crustacea'. The French considered the Aborigines 'amazed to see people eating fish'.⁶⁰

52. Reynolds 1995: 39–46; Murray and Williamson 2003: 320–322.

53. Clark 1987: 67.

54. Reynolds 1995: 46–47; Murray and Williamson 2003: 322.

55. Roth 1899: 101.

56. Roth 1899: 88.

57. Rhys Jones studied these early explorers' journals closely (Jones 1978: 15–16, 18). Bligh's quotation inspired the title for this section partly because it was a subtitle in Jones 1978: 18.

58. Jones 1978: 16, 17–18; Roth 1899: 88.

59. Jones 1978: 17.

These journal entries support the archaeological consensus on fish eating, but they are not without their ambiguities. Jones, however, is bold and confident in his reading. He concludes that 'the absence of fish from a diet of a coastal people staggered Cook, who could scarcely believe the evidence'.⁶¹ But was Cook 'staggered'? It seems the captain was not entirely convinced by the absence of evidence. Jones concludes, from Baudin's expedition, that the Aborigines considered fish 'not classified as food for humans'. How is Jones so sure that this was what the Aborigines were thinking? Indeed, how sure could Baudin be about the 'signs' Aboriginal people made or why they seemed 'amazed'?

The refusal by Aborigines of scale-fish offered by white explorers is not definitive evidence that they never ate them. In his 1793 journal *La Billardière*, who accompanied the D'Entrecasteaux expedition, describes how his party had invited some Aboriginal people to eat some oysters and lobsters they had just cooked on a fire:

but they all refused, one excepted ... At first we imagined that it was yet too early for their meal-time; but in this we were mistaken, for it was not long before they took their repast.⁶²

La Billardière explains that the Aborigines then sat down to eat the same kinds of shellfish, but that their food was 'much more roasted than what we had offered them'. Is it possible that the fish offered by Cook and Baudin were refused for reasons other than that they never ate scale-fish?

Beyond the early exploration sources, there are also several significant references to fishing in the journals of GA Robinson. Robinson recorded many instances of the Aborigines eating 'fish', but the journal's editor, Plomley, is confident that when Robinson uses the word 'fish' he always means shellfish. Plomley cites one instance in Robinson's journal that supports this presumption: camping one night at Wanderer River in 1833, Robinson describes how the Aboriginal women he was travelling with made fishhooks of bent pins, then attached lines of thread, dug up worms as bait and caught trout from the river. 'This was a fine amusement for them', he wrote, 'although they do not eat this kind of fish'. Robinson and his son, however, enjoyed the trout as well as a large 'lobster' caught for them, of which he wrote, 'the natives are fond of this fish'.⁶³

In 1968 Betty Hiatt (now Meehan) wrote a substantial two-part article, 'The food quest and the economy of the Tasmanian Aborigines', in which she states that 'this is perhaps the clearest statement in Robinson's journals that the natives did not eat bony fish'.⁶⁴ Hiatt's conclusion is seemingly confirmed by an earlier entry in Robinson's diary from 1829, where, having cooked himself some perch and rock cod for breakfast on Bruny Island, Robinson notes: 'With great difficulty persuaded the natives to partake of some'.⁶⁵ Is it possible, however, that, like the Aboriginal people who refused the

60. Jones 1978: 17.

61. Jones 1978: 17.

62. *La Billardière* 1800: 306.

63. Plomley 1966: 719.

64. Hiatt 1968: 113. Jones also refers to this episode as further evidence that the Aborigines did not traditionally eat fish (1978: 19).

65. Plomley 1966: 58.

shellfish from La Billardière, that they did not particularly like freshwater trout, nor liked the way Robinson had cooked his fish?

There is a third direct reference to scale-fish in Robinson, in which he was being chased by a group of 'wild blacks' whom he had enraged by convincing four of their young women to join him on his mission. The pursuit took him over a river, which he managed to cross, leaving the 'wild blacks' on the other side. The father of one of the young women raged and brandished his spears and waddies. His people called out that they would give Robinson dogs in return for the women so they could 'get plenty of kangaroo and wallaby'. They then told Robinson 'when I got those people to the island I should feed them on fish, and mimicked the pulling up of the fish with a line'.⁶⁶ Jones concludes from this scene that the Aboriginal people 'who had ... entered the Government settlements had become "fish eaters" – a term of abuse'.⁶⁷ The term 'fish eaters' is Jones' own invention, and his interpretation is interesting, but it is not exactly clear what the gesture of fishing meant. Were they mocking the eating of fish, as inferior to kangaroo and wallaby, or were they mocking the catching of it with a line, rather than a spear, as a peculiar European trait?

Jones reflects that from the 'more than half a million words' that make up Robinson's field diaries, with 'hundreds of descriptions of hunting and gathering episodes, documenting scores of different vegetable and animal foods, there is not a single description of fish being eaten in the bush'.⁶⁸ Hiatt also argues that:

There is not one observation in the Tasmanian literature describing an Aboriginal man, woman or child preparing, cooking or eating scale-fish; nor to scale-fish remains in or near hearths, houses or dilly bags; nor to specialized fishing equipment of any kind.⁶⁹

This 'absence of evidence', writes Hiatt, 'fits in well' with Jones' discoveries of a sequential absence of fish bones at Rocky Cape.⁷⁰ Jones concurred: 'while negative evidence is always dangerous, I consider this silence to be highly significant'.⁷¹

'we had seen them procure fish'

The early Tasmanian historical record is not, however, entirely negative or silent on the question of scale-fish in the traditional Aboriginal diet. There are several early sources that do suggest the traditional Tasmanian Aborigines ate fish with scales. During his 1802 exploration of Tasmania, Baudin reported how on a calm night one of his boats had gone fishing. The men returned and reported seeing 'several natives a little way off on the shore. They also were fishing with torches'.⁷²

66. Plomley 1966: 36, 791, 653.

67. Plomley 1966: 653; Jones 1987.

68. Jones 1978: 18.

69. Hiatt 1968: 113.

70. Hiatt 1968: 114.

71. Jones 1978: 15–16.

72. Considering that a gift offered by Commander Hamelin of stingray was seemingly accepted by Aborigines while other gifts of scale-fish were not, Plomley wonders if the Aborigines were fishing for stingray by torch light (McFarlane 2002: 13; Plomley 1983: 206).

Early explorers often used the term 'fishing' when they were referring to Tasmanian Aboriginal women diving for shellfish. But, as Ian McFarlane observes in his PhD on north-western Tasmanian Aboriginal society, in the case of the night fishing, 'there is little doubt' that the Aboriginal people Baudin's men saw, 'abroad at night with torches, were fishing for scale-fish and not involved in any underwater activity'.⁷³ It is unlikely they would dive for lobster and abalone in the dark. Since the Aborigines were 'also' fishing using light, it suggests they were catching fish using a similar technique.

The Aborigines may have speared the scale-fish they had lured to the shore, a skill it appears they certainly possessed.⁷⁴ Roth noted that the Aboriginal people had speared fish 'for sport'. Jones agrees that they used spears to catch stingrays (skates) and possibly eels. He cites an entry in Robinson's journal in which the Aborigines looked to the clear night sky and told him how 'they call the black spot in the Milky Way or Orion's belt a stingaree and say the blackfellows are spearing it'. Jones also points out another entry in which Robinson writes of 'walking along a sandy ocean beach' when one of his travelling party 'speared what was probably an eel'. Jones concludes that 'Tasmanian Aborigines both knew about and were capable of spearing eels and rays, but again there is no mention that these formed part of their diet'.⁷⁵ However, Emmanuel Hamelin, Commander of the *Naturaliste*, one of the two ships in the Baudin expedition, offered Aborigines a stingray and found 'it seemed to please them'. The following day, Hamelin found the stingray on the same beach with its liver removed. Hamelin remembered how he had seen stingrays with their livers removed at Shark Bay, on the western coast of Australia.⁷⁶

A second reference in the French records to fishing is in the 1793 journal of La Billardière. Walking through the Tasmanian bush, La Billardière reached an inland lake and,

perceived through the trees a number of natives most of whom appeared to be fishing on the borders of the lake ... The men and youths were ranging in front nearly in a semi circle: the women, children and girls were a few paces behind.⁷⁷

A few days later, during a fire-side meeting, the French offered Aboriginal people a range of gifts. Among them were fishhooks. La Billardière wrote 'from the manner in which we had seen them procure fish, we had reason to presume that they had no fish hooks'.⁷⁸ The French hoped the gift would alleviate the need for the women to dive for

⁷³. McFarlane 2002: 13.

⁷⁴. James Holman writes, in his 1834–35 *Voyage Around the World*, that 'at one period the Tasmanian Aborigines repair to the coast, and trust for their subsistence to their expertness in spearing the finny tribe'. However, Hiatt discounts Holman as a 'gossip reference' from a 'general work with no direct observations' (Hiatt 1968: 113–114). The lack of 'direct observations' might be explained by the fact that Holman was blind. Roth too dismisses Holman's description in light of other contrary references, although he states in his bibliography that Holman's 'information is considered reliable (Roth 1899: 88, xciv).

⁷⁵. Jones 1978: 19. George Lloyd (1862) describes a stingray hunt carried out in Tasmania for 'sport', using 'barbed spears' and 'tomahawks'. Jones, who states that neither tools were used by the Tasmanians, assesses that Lloyd had 'confused or embellished his memory' (Jones 1978: 19–20).

⁷⁶. McFarlane 2002: 12–13; Plomley 1983: 205–206.

⁷⁷. La Billardière 1800: 295; Jones 1978: 16.

shellfish and abalone. Was La Billardière assuming that they dived because they did not know how to catch scale-fish, or because of the way he had seen them catch fish in the lake? Jones considers it is the latter, concluding that La Billardière's notes are 'sufficient evidence that some shoal, brackish, or freshwater fish were indeed part of the diet of these southeastern Tasmanians'.⁷⁹ It is an admission that directly contradicts his assertion, made in the same article, that there was 'not a single unambiguous reference to fish or to any technology associated with fishing' in the sources of Tasmania's early explorers.⁸⁰

'mistake that Blacks did not like scale-fish'

Westlake had read Roth's *The Aborigines of Tasmania* before going to Tasmania and was aware of his conclusion that the Tasmanians never ate scale-fish.⁸¹ But when he posed this idea to several of his interviewees, almost all disagreed. In 1909, Charles Smith of Launceston, said it was '*altogether wrong* to say that [they] never eat fish with scales'. His wife recounted how her father-in-law had seen Aborigines catch fish in the 'rivers which were alive with fish'. Mrs Smith also thought 'they would get these scaley fish all along the sea coast'. Mr Smith added: 'I've heard my dad say many a time how he has seen them covered in scales.'⁸² Also in Launceston, former school teacher on Cape Barren Island, Edward Stevens, who said he had spent time 'with the blacks' when he was a child, told Westlake it was a '*mistake that Blacks did not like scale-fish*' [emphasis in original].

In January 1910, in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, Westlake met Robert Harvey, the storekeeper at Lovett, who thought fish was 'one great food' for the Aborigines, and adding he 'would have heard if [they] didn't eat scale-fish'.⁸³ However, Hobart Police Magistrate Bernard Shaw told Westlake what the late Charles Meredith had told him: 'that on the east coast natives never ate scale-fish tho' they were very abundant there.' Shaw qualified that Meredith 'had noticed this himself at a whaling station where he was stationed'. But some time after returning from Bass Strait, Westlake met Shaw again, who admitted that 'Meredith on the avoidance of scale-fish is all right for what its worth – he was a highly intelligent man – but *possibly* due to fish being offered by a white' [emphasis in original].⁸⁴

Edward Stevens also told Westlake that 'the Blacks [as regards refusing to eat fish] refused to eat anything offered them fearing that because a white man killed it there might be danger in eating it'.⁸⁵ If this was so, could it explain why Aboriginal people

78. La Billardière 1800: 313.

79. Jones 1978: 16.

80. Jones 1978: 15. At one point Roth questions his own conclusion on fish eating, but not convincingly. In response to John West's account in his 1852 *History of Tasmania* of Aboriginal people warning settlers that the toad fish was poisonous, Roth ponders 'but can such a warning imply that they did eat scaled fish?' (Roth 1899: 88).

81. Edgell claims that Westlake had read the 1890 edition of Roth's *The Aborigines of Tasmania* 'even before touching foot on Tasmanian soil' (Edgell 1992: 10).

82. Westlake, 'Notebook 4': 101.

83. Westlake, 'Notebook 6': 97.

84. Westlake, 'Notebook 2': 9; 'Notebook 4': 116.

85. Westlake, 'Notebook 3': 63–65.

did not accept fish from Cook or Baudin's men? Was it a fear of explorers, rather than a loathing of their gift, the reason the scale-fish were refused?

Fish traps

The Westlake papers also point to the possibility that Tasmanian Aborigines caught fish using fish traps and spears. Mrs Holmes told Westlake that Aborigines caught scale-fish with spears after making 'a small enclosure where fish would come in near shore [and they] drive stakes in [and] interlace boughs, [and] when the tide went out fish would be stranded'.⁸⁶ This is the only reference in Westlake's notes to a fish trap, and a wooden one at that. There are, however, other sources to suggest that Tasmanian Aborigines traditionally used stone fish traps.

McFarlane examined several stone fish traps that were possibly built and used by Aborigines on the north coast. Jim Stockton, in a 1982 paper, lists the places on the north coast where fish traps have been located: Rocky Cape, Sisters Beach, Boat Harbour, Summerset, Cooee, Burnie, Penguin, Hawley Beach and Low Head, as well as Cooks Beach on the Freycinet Peninsula on the east coast.⁸⁷ The traps are all of a simple design, consisting of a wall of boulders which is flooded at high tide leaving the fish stranded at low tide. Stockton, however, considers the traps to be European in origin: he cites a letter from Edward Bennett of the north coast in 1878, in which he discusses two traps recently built and used by settlers near Leith, and his own correspondence with a local, Mr G Paine, who claimed to have built several traps near Burnie in the 1950s.⁸⁸ McFarlane points out that, when Jones first examined the Rocky Cape trap in 1963, he initially considered it may have been Aboriginal, but soon concluded it was of European design after establishing the sequential absence of fish bones in the nearby middens and after being told locals had rebuilt the trap walls.⁸⁹ However, further osteological studies of Jones' Rocky Cape data have revealed a greater number of fish species than he had first realised, including types that, according to Jones, could not have been speared. He considers that these fish might have been caught using 'baited-box' or 'tidal' fish traps.⁹⁰

Moreover, McFarlane points to the fact that settlers at Sisters Beach were adamant that the nearby trap was built prior to their arrival. McFarlane is also the first to document a large fish trap at Table Cape, which he notes is a long way from the nearest early settlements and situated next to middens and an Aboriginal walking track. Retired farmer, Mr A Percy, told McFarlane how he remembered seeing his father turn the middens over with a horse and plough when he was a child. Would excavations of the Table Cape middens expose fish bones?

86. Westlake, 'Notebook 5': 8.

87. McFarlane 2002: 13–14; Stockton 1982.

88. Stockton 1982: 107–109. The letter Stockton is referring to can be found in Bennet 1980: 119–216.

89. McFarlane 2002: 14–15.

90. Jones 1995: 427–428; Colley and Jones 1988: 336–436. Note that Jones does not reconsider the contemporary Rocky Cape fish trap he had dismissed in 1963 nor does he consider that the Aboriginal people may have used fish nets at Rocky Cape, as suggested by Bowdler and Lourandos (1982: 124–125).

'fire fetches up all the fish'

While more than a century had passed between the observations made by the early French explorers and the interviews Westlake recorded with Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the Bass Strait, there are some clear consistencies between the two sets of records.

On Cape Barren Island, in February 1909, Philip Thomas told Westlake that he remembered, 'as a child', accompanying his mother at Cape Portland, and seeing the fires lit on the sea shores to attract the fish so they could spear them. Afterwards they would rake the fire down, roast the fish upon it and, when they were cooked, lay them upon the grass, peel off the skin and lift the flesh from the entrails and bones. Westlake spoke to Thomas again on his second day on Cape Barren Island, and Thomas again remembered the fires on the beaches from his childhood, 'fire fetches up all the fish', quoted Westlake, 'like birds come to light'. Thomas also remembered that they not only speared the fish, but also knocked them out of the water with waddies, or 'nellies'. Two days later, on 21 February, Westlake again spoke with Thomas, and this time he explained which fish they caught – 'brim' from the sea and black fish from the river, for he said they also made the fires along riverbanks. Thomas told Westlake that his mother's people ate 'fish with large [and] small scales; but did *not* eat fish *without* scales (barring eels) as they were considered poisonous' [emphasis in original].⁹¹

Thomas's testimony appears to echo what Baudin's men reported in 1802: that Aboriginal people were using 'torches' to catch fish on the beach. It also remembers a traditional way of cooking food on open fires, reaffirming the possibility that, once roasted, the fish remains were burnt, and/or washed away by the next tide. This cooking method was also confirmed by Mrs Holmes of Launceston, whose grandfather had lived in Tasmania since 1808, mostly on the north coast. She told Westlake she had been told how the Aborigines speared fish, and that 'all fish, [and] shell fish too, [were] roasted'.⁹² Mr Davis, in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, also told Westlake that the Aborigines cooked their fish on a flat stone, kept hot by a fire burning underneath it.⁹³

Other Aboriginal Bass Strait Islanders confirmed much of what Thomas told Westlake. Henry Beeton said: 'I've *seen* them eat fish with scales ... blue head and parrot fish wouldn't eat fish with no scales (except eels). Not eat the goana fish – eat king fish (few scales) like barracuta'.⁹⁴ This mention of eels corroborates the account of one of Robinson's party spearing an eel. Harry Armstrong said that the Aborigines 'speared black fish ... eels ... brim', in the rivers. In the sea, they speared 'flat head, flounder, blue head, parrot fish ... sharks' and 'stinging rays' – the latter echoing Hamelin's account. While Armstrong did not think that fish swam *towards* light, he did find it 'paralyzes fish' such as 'cod, barracootas, garfish, mullet', and had 'seen cod picked out of the water'. He agreed a torch could have been used to spear fish, since he would hold a flash lantern with one hand and pick out the fish with another when in his boat. Armstrong added with emphasis: 'on the islands they *ate* fish with scales'.⁹⁵ John Maynard

91. Westlake, 'Notebook 3': 70, 73, 77, 87.

92. Westlake, 'Notebook 5': 8.

93. Westlake, 'Notebook 6': 28.

94. Westlake, 'Notebook 3': 86.

95. Westlake, 'Notebook 4': 12.

told Westlake that the Aborigines 'used to wade and spear fish, as Flinders [sic], when tide was out'.⁹⁶ Henry Beeton told Westlake how Aboriginal people, 'caught with the line after [they] got with the white people'.⁹⁷ In 1939 Tindale noted from Cliff Everett on Cape Barren Island that 'fish were speared in shallow water and eaten'. Everett added that he 'knew that white men believed the Tasmanians did not eat fish', indicating that, despite this belief, they in fact did.⁹⁸

The Aboriginal Islanders whom Westlake interviewed, like Everett 20 years later, insisted that fish were a part of the traditional Aboriginal diet. Beeton's statement suggests that Aboriginal people had eaten fish before 'got with the white people'; they only changed how they caught fish after they arrived. This appears to confirm the reason La Billardière gave Aboriginal people fishhooks. It also reaffirms the ambiguity of the story in Robinson's journal in which the angry Aboriginal men were mimicking catching fish with lines.

There appears to be little doubt that the Aborigines ate fish after the establishment of the Flinders Island mission in 1832. In addition to the statements made by Westlake's informants, Roth notes that GA Robinson's nephew, James Young, whom Westlake met on Green Island, told James Backhouse Walker that the Aborigines ate parrot fish and blue fish when they lived on the settlement.⁹⁹ Roth also notes how the early Tasmanian historian, James Bonwick, claimed the Tasmanian Aborigines had fishhooks made from shells, but assumes that Bonwick must have been referring to the 'Flinders Island period'.¹⁰⁰

There remains the possibility that the Tasmanian Aborigines learnt to eat fish from sealers, who were working Bass Strait from the early 19th century, and/or by Victorian Aboriginal women, such as Harry Armstrong's mother, who were brought to the Bass Strait by the sealers.¹⁰¹

With such a fusion of cultures on the islands of the Bass Strait from about the 1810s, it might appear that Tasmanian historical material post-1840s can yield little reliable information about pre-contact Aboriginal culture. Hiatt writes that she 'used little of the material' regarding Aborigines on the islands for her article since by then their culture 'must have been disrupted' and 'disintegrated'.¹⁰² The memories of Philip Tho-

^{96.} Westlake, 'Notebook 3': 74.

^{97.} Westlake, 'Notebook 3': 86. Fanny Cochrane Smith's children and acquaintances told Westlake how she caught fresh water trout by 'tickling' the fish, although they wondered if this was a traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal method or rather one learned from her husband who was from Kent, England, where the practice was used. See interviews with Tasman Smith, Westlake, 'Notebook 6': 56; Mrs Sarah Miller, Westlake, 'Notebook 6': 122-123; and Mr Davis, Westlake, 'Notebook 6': 31.

^{98.} Tindale 1936-1965: 119.

^{99.} Roth 1899: 101; Westlake, Ernest, Letter to Margaret and Aubrey Westlake, 23 February 1909, Box 2, Folder 2a, ff. 68-68v, WC, PRM.

^{100.} Roth 1899: 101.

^{101.} In his introduction to *The Westlake Papers*, Plomley writes: 'One large cause of error and confusion is the description of Australian Aboriginal customs and artefacts as Tasmanian. With the mixed-blood community of the Furneaux Islands this is understandable because some of the original women allied to the sealers were mainland Aborigines' (Plomley 1991: 7). Plomley also believes that white Tasmanians confused mainland and Tasmanian Aboriginal customs in Westlake's interviews.

mas, however, date to a time and place of less disruption. He was a child at Cape Portland in the 1830s, where his mother, Nimarana, was born around the turn of the 19th century.¹⁰³ His account is consistent with the observations of fishing with torches by the Baudin's crew members in 1802, which, like La Billardière's observation of the family group fishing by the lake, predate English colonisation. These consistencies are echoed by contemporary Tasmanian Aborigines a century later.

'I grew up eating scale-fish'

In *Crossing the Strait*, the catalogue of the 1999 exhibition of Aboriginal art and artefacts at the Wollongong City Gallery, Aboriginal Cape Barren Islander 'Buck' Brendan Brown writes:

In respect of Tasmanian men's fishing activities ... there is actually an archaeological argument that Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples did not eat fish, which is hog-wash ... I grew up eating scale-fish as a large part of my diet all my life. There are fish traps throughout Tasmania ... This evidence is ignored by archaeologists.¹⁰⁴

When I went to Cape Barren Island in April 2003, Islander Chris Mansell also told me that he thought the Tasmanian Aborigines traditionally used fish traps.¹⁰⁵ Buck Brown told me that he and his father often made spears from branches to harpoon fish, sometimes scorching the timber with fire to harden it.¹⁰⁶ Another Islander, Morton Summers, also told me that he fished with spears made from sticks found in the bush.¹⁰⁷ Chris Mansell said three-pronged metal spears were popular for catching flounder today.¹⁰⁸ One elderly Islander said it was common to 'sharpen up a stick' or to make a metal spear with 'a couple of bits of wire', adding that his brother had once made a floundering spear from a hayfork.¹⁰⁹ The same man said that lamps made from tins of fat were used to attract the fish when he was younger, while Chris Mansell said that he was told how fires were once used for that purpose, but not any more.¹¹⁰ Is it possible that Islanders' recent recollections remember a method of catching scale-fish observed by Baudin's men almost two centuries before?

Conclusion

There are several possibilities that may explain the non-presence of fish bones in excavated middens from about 3000 BP. The first is that during the dynamism of the late Holocene, Tasmanian Aboriginal people changed where they ate fish and/or how they cooked it, with the result that fish were cooked on beaches and riverbanks where the bones were potentially all burned and/or washed away. McFarlane considers the possi-

^{102.} Hiatt 1968: 101.

^{103.} Tindale 1953: 55.

^{104.} Brown 2003: 31.

^{105.} Taylor 2003 'Notebook 4, Tasmania': 4.

^{106.} Taylor 2003 'Notebook 3, Tasmania': 48.

^{107.} Taylor 2003 'Notebook 4, Tasmania': 7.

^{108.} Taylor 2003 'Notebook 4, Tasmania': 4.

^{109.} Taylor 2003 'Notebook 4, Tasmania': 50–50v.

^{110.} Taylor 2003 'Notebook 4, Tasmania': 50, 4. McFarlane (2002: 13) also writes that 'fishing with the use of torch light and spears is still a common method of catching fish such as flounder in Tasmania today'.

bility that fish bones may have been foraged by sea birds and land animals such as Tasmanian devils.¹¹¹

Another possibility is that Tasmanian Aboriginal people ate less scale-fish after 3000 BP, leaving far fewer fish bones and an increased chance that those remains left would not be found. McFarlane also suggests that midden sites may have changed their purpose over time: Rocky Cape may have become, after 3000 BP, a transit stop where Aborigines chose to catch only seals, abalone and crayfish 'during their temporary stay'.¹¹² It is, however, noteworthy that the West Cape, and other 'donut middens' that have been excavated are evidently more than mere transit camps but have revealed no fish bones. Yet another possibility is that regional cultural differences across Tasmania may have meant that fish were eaten only in some places by certain groups rather than the cessation of fish eating across the whole island.

Jones describes the Tasmanian Aboriginal people as belonging to 'the same culture', despite having five languages, nine tribes and many more 'bands' and 'hearth groups'.¹¹³ A thesis arguing for the negative impact of long-term isolation must necessarily imagine the Tasmanian Aborigines as a mono-cultural population. Such is the case when arguing for Tasmanian Aboriginal stasis or progression. But how accurate is this presumption? If, as Murray and Williamson suggest, the dynamic changes of late Holocene Tasmania were not necessarily bound to any linear model, is it also possible that these changes were not simultaneous and uniform across the island? Jones has also noted regional differences in hunting and diet: the north-western Aboriginal people did not use any watercraft, but knew of their use from the people of the south-east coast. The east coast Tasmanians did not eat penguins but south coast Tasmanians did. Within groups, individuals did not eat certain foods for various reasons. It was from this regional and personal 'prohibition and sanction' Jones found the 'explanation as to why the Tasmanians stopped eating fish'.¹¹⁴ But why should regional or personal differences explain a single island-wide phenomenon?

Jones concluded from La Billardière's account of Aborigines fishing at a lake, that those south-eastern people probably included some freshwater scale-fish in their diet. Did other Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples also include some scale-fish in their diets? Has the sampling of archaeological sites been wide enough? Archaeologists have concurred that they have: excavations revealing a non-presence of fish bones have been conducted in a satisfactory number of different places and thus the cessation was island-wide. But could further excavations – such as near the fish trap at Table Cape, noted by McFarlane – expose fish bones?

This argument for a dynamic and diverse Aboriginal Tasmania, like the mono-cultural model, offers little positive evidence. It is a problem generic to studies of pre-contact Tasmania. As Murray and Williamson note, this has made it 'relatively easy for historians, anthropologists, even archaeologists to construe Aboriginal Tasmania to suit

¹¹¹. McFarlane 2002: 15.

¹¹². McFarlane 2002: 15.

¹¹³. Jones 1974: 330.

¹¹⁴. Jones' references for other Tasmanian Aboriginal prohibitions are: watercraft unknown in northwest (Plomley 1966: 399); penguins not eaten on east coast (Plomley 1966: 267); a woman who would not eat wombat (Plomley 1966: 899); Jones 1978: 44–45.

their needs' – needs that have included a wide range of academic theses and political ends.¹¹⁵ It is important, therefore, to consider that no definite conclusions about the millennia Aborigines lived in Tasmania before colonisation can easily be drawn using sources dating from, or being interpreted within, the last two centuries. But do Aboriginal testimonies offer a potentially longer view of the past? Colonisation brought about rapid and devastating change for Tasmanian Aboriginal people, but aspects of their traditional culture have remained. For historians, archaeologists and anthropologists hoping to paint an accurate picture of pre-contact Tasmanian Aboriginal life, the lack of certainty about these continuing traditions, and whether they might have been adapted since colonisation, makes dealing with sources such as the Westlake Papers problematic.

When scholars such as Hiatt, Jones and Plomley were working on Aboriginal Tasmania in the 1960s and 70s, they theoretically solved this problem by drawing a chronological line across the Tasmanian historical record: sources dating from after the 1840s, when the Tasmanian Aborigines were living either on the Government mission or in the sealing communities in the Bass Strait, were deemed unreliable and predominantly excluded.¹¹⁶ Robinson's field journals of 1829–1834, however, were interpreted by these scholars as a 'reliable' first-hand witness account.¹¹⁷

When Hiatt, Jones and Plomley began their ground-breaking work on Tasmanian Aborigines, it was a given, as it had been since the late 19th century, that those people were extinct.¹¹⁸ But these scholars were working on eve of a major shift away from the idea of extinction to that of a living Tasmanian Aboriginal community. For this reason it is arguably no longer plausible to exclude all Tasmanian historical sources post-1840s, in particular those sources that include the voices of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. While, there may be no assurance that these people are 'right' in their assertions of continuing traditional practices, there is equally no guarantee that they are 'wrong'.

Moreover, the belief that a pre-contact Aboriginal culture can be discovered and known from early historical sources is theoretically problematic. No historical record can provide an unfiltered window onto the past. As Greg Denning observes, the moment 'at which cultures were purely native, unchanged by intrusion' is a moment 'that *historically* has never existed'. Tasmanian Aborigines entered the written record post-contact. Everything about them is bound up 'with the historical reality of the intruders who saw them, changed them, destroyed them'.¹¹⁹ The explorers' journals tell us as much about the authors as they do about what they saw. Robinson's journals, while an unequalled source on Tasmanian Aboriginal society, show us that world through the eyes of one man. How we read these sources is also historical; the conclusions we draw from them exist within a historiographical context.

These limitations are not unique to the written record. The excavations that revealed missing fish bones, like the stone artefacts that Westlake collected, live within the interpretive constraints of the archaeological discipline of the time. Presumed to be

¹¹⁵. Murray and Williamson 2003: 329.

¹¹⁶. Jones 1974: 319–321; Plomley 1966: 35; Hiatt 1968: 101.

¹¹⁷. Hiatt 1968: 100; Plomley 1966: 35; Jones 1974: 320–321.

¹¹⁸. Jones 1974: 318–319; Plomley 1966: 11.

¹¹⁹. Denning 1980: 37–42.

another vantage point on pre-contact times, archaeological evidence is no less historical.

Tasmanian Aboriginal people may not be restricted by such boundaries. There has been no one or set point at which they have stopped being Aboriginal. Colonisation did not create an entirely impenetrable boundary to traditional life; their cultural memory, direct or inherited, has the potential to span to the time before colonial disruption. Tasmanian Aboriginal people may offer a unique vantage point to their past; it is a possibility that should not be ignored.

It is not only scholarly to include Tasmanian Aboriginal testimonies about their traditional culture, it is also respectful. To exclude them for their possible unreliability is to potentially deem these modern Aborigines inauthentic and to effectively silence them. Once the Aboriginal testimonies in the Westlake Papers and the contemporary accounts are included in the long 'fish' debate, doubt is cast on the archaeological consensus on a total cessation of scale-fish eating in Tasmania. I am not suggesting that these oral accounts precede the substantial contrary historical or archaeological evidence, only that no conclusive answer be given to the question of traditional scale-fish eating in Tasmania. Further, that if scale-fish eating is a traditional practice that has continued into modern times, then it must be acknowledged as an important example of Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural endurance. If, however, scale-fishing was adopted after settlement, then it must be recognised as another adaptive response to colonisation.

While it is possible that the traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal people ate fish with scales, I argue, in the second part of this paper, that there is little doubt that they could make fire.¹²⁰

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¹²⁰. To be published in Volume 32, *Aboriginal History*, 2008.

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